

## REVIEW

SUETONIUS ON AUGUSTUS:  
A NEW COMMENTARY

D. Wardle, *Suetonius: Life of Augustus. Translated with Introduction and Historical Commentary*. Clarendon Ancient History Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 616. Hardback, £100.00/Paperback, £35.00. ISBN 978-0-19-968646-9.

In so far as Greek and Roman history has been traditionally studied through the accounts of the ‘great’ historians, Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Livy, or Tacitus, the ‘historical commentary’ has been and remains one of the principal aids to the study of ancient history. But paradoxically, one of the periods of history regarded as most central to the understanding of the Roman world, the reign of Augustus, has to be approached without the guidance of a historian regarded as ‘great’: Tacitus deliberately started his *Annales* with the death of Augustus, the useful narrative of Cassius Dio is separated from its subject matter by nearly two centuries and has suffered at the hands of epitomators, and Suetonius as a biographer had an agenda different from that of writing ‘history’. If that for long has been an excuse for taking Suetonius less than seriously as a historical source, this prejudice cannot survive Wardle’s admirable commentary. Commentaries on this *Life* there have been before, from Shuckburgh in 1896 to Louis in 2010, including Carter’s helpful edition for the Bristol Classical Press of 1981.<sup>1</sup> But all of these have been brief and light-touch, offering the basic steering necessary for a student. What Wardle offers is at a wholly different scale, with nearly 500 pages of commentary, as well as forty pages of introduction, to thirty-seven pages of text (in translation). At this scale, what he can offer is a great deal more than a commentary on a particular author. Thanks to Suetonius’ compressed style, the biography of Augustus (the longest surviving biography of any classical figure) is packed with information. By unpacking it in detail, the commentary makes itself an indispensable guide to virtually every aspect of the reign.

We may take an example. Suetonius was interested in the public buildings put up by any emperor. Despite Tacitus’ sneering aside on historians (he

<sup>1</sup> E. S. Shuckburgh, *C. Suetoni Tranquilli Divus Augustus* (Cambridge, 1896); J. M. Carter, *Suetonius: Augustus* (Bristol, 1982); N. Louis, *Commentaire historique et traduction du Divus Augustus de Suétone* (Brussels, 2010).

meant the Elder Pliny) who filled up their annals with the dimensions of beams (*Ann.* 13.31), building was a fundamental aspect of imperial government, transforming the face of the imperial capital and the infrastructure of the empire and providing a massive stimulus to employment and the economy. Suetonius devotes two chapters (29–30), a full page in this translation (51–2), to enumerating, however summarily, Augustus' principal buildings. The commentary takes twenty-one pages (223–44) to unpack this account. Suetonius has a way of offering unsubstantiated generalisations. So when he generalises about Augustus' encouragement to other leading men to put up buildings, the commentary offers us a two-page spread of all known triumphs in the 'long reign' (from the triumvirate onwards) and the buildings from spoils associated with them. This does not mean that the commentary will become our principal way into the Augustan building programme: we will want for a topographic point of view Haselberger's *Mapping Augustan Rome*, we will follow Augustus' own listing in his *Res Gestae*, assisted by Cooley's excellent commentary, together with the numerous studies by Zanker onwards of building and imperial ideology.<sup>2</sup> But Wardle will give us rich pointers to the many debates, and judicious summaries of the merits of the arguments. To write his twenty pages of commentary, he has absorbed a vast bibliography, and his presentation is always succinct and to the point.

The scale and density of this commentary mean that few will follow it in detail from beginning to end. But anyone working on the reign of Augustus would be foolish not to consult it on any point relevant to them. And since Suetonius, despite his failure, or rather deliberate refusal, to narrate, touches on virtually every aspect of the reign, this volume will be heavily thumbed. But at the same time one of the structural flaws of such a historical commentary is that, however thoroughly it reports on the up-to-date bibliography, it must necessarily become out-of-date in a field characterized by continuous discussion. Serious students of Augustus will not only need their own copy, but will need to keep it up to date with their own bibliographical annotations. One might yearn for a digital format which would allow of continuous updating: but what author would have the energy to do this much? What Wardle offers is a deeply studied and judicious account of the work of others, rather than a powerful new interpretation of his own. Despite a host of sane observations, it would be hard to say that a radically new perspective on Augustus emerges from these pages; or indeed on Suetonius.

It is to the introduction we might turn for such interpretation, and indeed this does an admirable job in showing the reader how to read this author, the

<sup>2</sup> L. Haselberger et al., *Mapping Augustan Rome* (Portsmouth, R.I., 2002); A. R. Cooley, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge, 2009); P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor, 1988), the latter strangely not cited by W.

way he structures his Lives, and the relationship of this life to the set of Caesars. After a helpful sketch of Suetonius' career and literary productivity, W. assesses his place in the development of imperial biography, concluding that he is 'the key individual in the development of imperial biography among the Romans' with no known predecessors (9). But though Suetonius had no known predecessors, he had a host of successors, including the lost Marius Maximus, and the extraordinary amalgam of imperial lives that goes by the name of the *Historia Augusta*. Here is an area which deserves to be explored in greater depth. Some three centuries after the publication of the *Twelve Caesars*, Ausonius of Bordeaux published a set of epigrams on the theme (book XIV). As he explains in his dedication, they are based on Suetonius. First, *monosticha*, single-liners, on the names of the twelve; then on the lengths of their reigns; then on their deaths; then *tetrasticha*, elegiac quatrains, on each of the Caesars (1–12). That is followed by *tetrasticha* on the next twelve Caesars (*de Caesaribus post Tranquillum tetrasticha*, 13–24). This time he names no author whom he is following; but it is assumed they depend on a second set of twelve lives in imitation of Suetonius, variously attributed to Marius Maximus (consul in AD 223), or by Syme to an *Ignotus*. That will underlie the *Historia Augusta*, though at how many removes we cannot tell. And alarming though the concoction of fact and fiction the *Historia Augusta* presents, it is testimony to the way that the impact of Suetonius was to define how people wrote and thought about emperors.

It is by looking at his imitators we can see the extraordinarily high quality of Suetonius' writing. For this story we may still turn to the valuable essay by Gavin Townend on 'Suetonius and his Influence',<sup>3</sup> including a close analysis of the way at the ninth-century Carolingian court, Einhard made close use of Suetonius, and specifically the life of Augustus, to project Charlemagne as a true Roman emperor. Maybe the later impact of the author lies beyond the scope of an already rich commentary, and yet the citations of the *Historia Augusta* in the course of the commentary (though these do not appear in the index) show that the bizarre lives of later emperors have their relevance. In particular, it would have been interesting to compare the life of Hadrian. This emperor is a shadowy presence throughout the commentary (the index registers no fewer than forty-seven references to Hadrian), and a persistent question is how the tastes, personality, and policies of the emperor whom Suetonius himself served may have impacted on his portrayal of Augustus. At several points, we may gain the impression that the *HA Life of Hadrian* and the Suetonian *Augustus* have uncanny parallels. So there is a 'remarkable similarity' between the accounts of rumours of sexual tastes in the two lives (437), or between the accounts of literary tastes (483) and interest in archaizing (486). There are contrasts too: Augustus never invites freedmen to his table, Hadrian does (462).

<sup>3</sup> G. B. Townend, 'Suetonius and his Influence', in T. A. Dorey, ed., *Latin Biography* (London, 1967) 79–111.

We have here a complex relationship, perhaps summed up in Suetonius' personal gift to Hadrian of a statuette of Augustus bearing the obscure name Thurinus, now kept in the imperial shrine (*Aug.* 7, with the comments at 102, casting reasonable doubts on whether the statuette can have been genuine). This incident, so early in the *Life*, puts on display for the reader the intimacy of the biographer's relationship with his emperor; and it also suggests a community of taste between the learned antiquarian and the emperor. It reminds the reader that the author had good reason to know what an emperor and his tastes might be like. But it also suggests that the *Caesars* can be seen as another knowing gift from biographer to emperor: Hadrian will enjoy this read because there was instruction as well as amusement in reviewing the virtues and foibles of his predecessors. The temptation is to detect either manipulation of the material in Hadrian's favour, or the reverse, of implicit criticisms of his shortcomings. But though Suetonius was to be removed in disgrace from his position at court (whether before or after the completion of the *Lives* remains uncertain), it is unlikely any courtier would have risked even concealed criticism. Just as Pliny's *Panegyricus* was a mirror of princes, not only an encomium of Trajan's virtues but a model of what the Perfect Princeps should look like, so the *Caesars* evidently offer a complex set of models of good and bad *exempla*. More than any other life, that of Augustus gets as close to a model of the Perfect Prince as an author who habitually balanced good and bad could permit himself. If Augustus proclaimed that his statues of *triumphatores* in his new Forum as examples by which he and future *principes* should be held to account by the citizens (*Aug.* 31.5), so Suetonius' *principes illustres* were inescapably models for future rulers, and specifically for Hadrian.

The consequence is that it is very tempting to test how far Hadrian actually imitated Augustus, and how far he fell away from his standard. But our knowledge of Hadrian's own behaviour is largely dependent on the *Historia Augusta* life. Suetonius memorably recalls Augustus' efforts to encourage or enforce the wearing of the toga in the formality of the Forum (*Aug.* 40.5). Correspondingly, 'Hadrian attempted to enforce the wearing of the toga by senators and *equites*, except at banquets (*HA Hadr.* 22.2)' (Wardle *ad loc.* 308). But just what is happening here? Did Hadrian enforce the toga because he had read in Suetonius of Augustus' attempts? Or did Suetonius choose to bring out this feature of Augustus because his emperor already did the same, and the knowledge would please him? Or (and this is the worrying suspicion) did the *HA* attribute this behaviour to Hadrian because it was following the literary model of Suetonius, and simply made it up? It is virtually impossible to disentangle the levels of mutual interdependence, but that is why it would be worth saying rather more about the influence of Suetonius, not just on the genre of imperial biography, but on models of self-presentation of rulers, from Hadrian

to Charlemagne. This was as much a gap in my own *Suetonius*, and it is the reading of this commentary that suggests that this is an area to explore further.

When we are offered such a feast as Wardle's commentary, it seems greedy to ask for more. But a merit of this book is that it opens up the Suetonian Life to further study. It makes it possible to offer Suetonius as a set text for courses on Augustus, just as Alison Cooley's commentary of the *Res Gestae* opens up that document. At the same time, it puts a heavy demand on students. The growth of our expectations is marked by the difference in scale and detail between this commentary and that of John Carter (115 pages of commentary to fifty-three of text), just as Cooley's differs in scale and detail from Brunt and Moore of 1970. But are students the audience? The Oxford University Press boasts in its blurb on the back cover that 'the commentary is the first to be accessible to readers without any knowledge of Latin or Greek due to its use of English lemmata ...' By a delicious irony, to explain its accessibility it uses a Greek word, 'lemma'. How many Latin-and-Greek-free students know what a 'lemma' is, the snippet of text which ancient commentators took from a text for their comments? No matter, but this is a commentary not on the Latin text of Suetonius, but on Wardle's sensible translation. Yet there are audiences other than those without Latin and Greek, including scholars and students in non-English-speaking countries, for whom an English translation is not the obvious starting point. Is this the decision of the author or of the Press? At points it might seem that there was an original draft with the lemmata in Latin. Thus on 95, the lemma is 'Augustus was born in the consulship of M. Tullius Cicero and C. Antonius'; the commentary notes, 'With the prominent use of his name, albeit uniquely not the first word in the sentence ...' The reader would need to refer to a text in Latin, not available between these covers, to know that the text was *natus est Augustus* ... It would indeed be difficult to put those words into English without Augustus coming first in the sentence, but for those not initiated into the differences between Latin and English word order, the comment can only be mysterious. The suppression of Latin lemmata may have as much to do with the sales department of the Press as the author's envisaged audience. It might have been kinder to all users to include a Latin text, and find a way to cross-reference the two.

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