1 Best of Emperors or Subtle Tyrant?

Augustus the Ambivalent

PENELOPE J. GOODMAN

Introduction

The bimillennium of Augustus' death on 19 August 2014 was marked by well over a hundred events in at least eighteen different countries.[1] The extent of these commemorations attests considerable ongoing interest in Rome's first emperor, as does a regular stream of scholarly publications, to say nothing of bottled beers, rap albums or references in think-pieces on politics and business.[2] Nor should we be surprised to see this interest expressed through anniversary commemorations, which are a popular and well-established means of engaging with the past.[3] The anniversary of a death, though, does more than simply remind us that a historical figure once existed. In marking the end of a past individual's life, it also marks the end of their contribution to their own narrative, and the beginning of appropriation, critique, idealisation, use, abuse, reworking and reimagining by others. Augustus' bimillennium in 2014, then, not only reminded us of the man himself and his life, but also marked the accrual of two thousand years of his posthumous receptions.

As this volume demonstrates, these two thousand years have produced a great deal of material, yet to date it has attracted little systematic scholarly attention. Chapters and articles addressing individual examples appear relatively frequently,[4] but only two aspects of Augustus' reception history have received the fuller treatment possible in monographs or edited volumes: the so-called Augustan age literature of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England, and the association between Mussolini

[1] '2014 events', Goodman 2014.
[2] Beer: Caesar Augustus Lager/IPA hybrid produced by Williams Bros. Brewing Co. Rap: *Augustus Caesar* by Jay Carteré, released 2013. Politics: comparison with Vladimir Putin in Williamson 2014. Business: how Augustus became the second-richest individual of all time in Smith 2016.
[3] Connerton 1989; Johnston 1991; Quinault 1998; Feeney 2007: 138–66; Jordanova 2007.
[4] Recent examples include Huet 1999; Boyd 2008; Strong 2011; Conca 2012; Goodman 2012; Scully 2013.

and Augustus in 1930s Italy.[5] As yet, no broad overview of Augustus' reception history has been published.[6] This is in stark contrast with the treatments of Nero by Elsner and Masters, of Julius Caesar by Maria Wyke and of Elagabalus by Martijn Icks, each of which explicitly sets out to trace and explore changing views of and responses to their subjects across different periods and cultures.[7] These publications succeeded in identifying major themes in their subjects' reception histories, tracing their ongoing influence and demonstrating the potential for Caesar and Elagabalus especially to be seen in radically different lights depending on the interests of their observers. The result is that further work on specific receptions of these persistently popular figures can now be situated within a well-established framework. Likewise, work on Nero, Caesar or Elagabalus as historical individuals can also benefit from a better understanding of the relationship between scholarly approaches towards them and their wider reception history, and of the culturally situated character of both. For Augustus, however, equivalent work has not been available.

This volume represents a step in that direction. It arises out of the 'Commemorating Augustus' conference held in Leeds over the very date of the 2014 bimillennium, which brought together scholars working on receptions of Augustus in a range of periods across the two thousand years from his death to the bimillennium itself. It is not a survey or an encyclopedia, and cannot claim to offer a comprehensive or exhaustive treatment of the very many receptions of Augustus which have been transmitted to the present day, and which of course already do not include every single response ever conceived or expressed during the past two thousand years. But, like the original conference, its remit is to explore a broad cross-section of receptions, the relationships between them and the insights which they produce. Some of the key questions which have informed the collection include: what has 'Augustus' actually signified to the many people who have emulated, appropriated, reimagined and reconfigured him? Why have they wanted to engage with him at all? Which have been the most influential receptions of Augustus, and why? When and why have people reacted against the views and understandings of earlier eras? Why

[5] Both discussed in more detail below.

[6] A Latomus volume entitled *Augustus through the Ages: Receptions, Readings and Appropriations of the Historical Figure of the First Roman Emperor*, edited by Marco Cavalieri, David Engels et al., had not yet been published when I submitted this manuscript. However, its imminent appearance underlines the scholarly appetite for focused work on Augustus and his receptions. I expect it to be a valuable complement to the present volume.

[7] Elsner and Masters 1994; Wyke 2006 and 2007; Icks 2011.

have some interpretations of Augustus gone out of favour? How much is responding to Augustus actually about Augustus himself, and how much about either claiming a connection with or positioning against others who have done the same? What discourses has he been used to shape, and how has that process changed him in turn? Ultimately, the intention is to establish a sound context for future work on any given specific reception of Augustus, and to articulate what we can gain from looking at them. This opening chapter thus outlines the overall range and trajectory of Augustus' reception history, indicates where the closer studies offered in the chapters which follow fit within this bigger picture and offers some thoughts about where the collection as a whole takes us.

Augustus in Antiquity

Any study of Augustus' receptions needs to start by recognising the extent of his own self-fashioning. In this volume, Cooley (Chapter 2) explores the careful stage-management of his death, but the behaviour had begun long before. Through military campaigning, political positioning, personal behaviour, family connections, public spectacles, patronage of the arts, and his own written word, Augustus worked to construct not merely one external image of himself, but multiple images tailored to suit different contexts and audiences.[8] To his soldiers he presented himself as a strong general and generous paymaster, to early political rivals as a force not to be trifled with, to his close supporters as a transforming leader with a new and pressing sense of purpose, to the suspicious as a benignly motivated seeker of justice for his father and security for the state, to the people of Rome as a loving father and (on their behalf) world ruler, to the aristocracy as an equal player, to provincials as a stabilising figurehead and a god and to posterity as a model of ideal rule. Politically speaking, the strategy was clearly successful, and if the different guises were sometimes contradictory, Augustus proved adept at negotiating the fault-lines between them, for example in his ostentatious rebranding from stern triumvir to benign *princeps* after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra or his carefully graded policies on divine honours at home and in the provinces.[9] For us now, though, the result is that the human Augustus who once existed behind this behaviour is almost impossible to discern, an effect similar to the

[8] Galinsky 1996: 370–5; Beacham 2005; Levick 2010: 202–50.
[9] Rebranding: e.g. Levick 2010: 63–74. Divine honours: Suet. *Aug.* 52; Dio 51.20.

disjunction between real human beings and constructed star images in the modern celebrity industry, but here multiplied by the distance of two thousand years.[10] As Levick puts it, 'in spite of the quantity of material available about him . . . he remains one of the most impenetrable personalities of the ancient world'.[11]

Nor was Augustus the only constructor of his own image, even within his lifetime. In some cases it can be difficult to distinguish clearly between his self-fashioning and the enthusiastic contributions of his supporters, for example in the choice of coin images.[12] Elsewhere, critical counter-narratives abounded. In the hands of his enemies, he became an inexperienced boy, a coward, a dissimulator, a tyrant and an adulterer; but the urgency of their own agendas means that we cannot take these as descriptions of the 'real' Augustus any more than his equivalents. Meanwhile, most of Augustus' activity, and that of his contemporaries, is now attested only by third-party and later sources, likewise shaped by their own agendas. This means that the study of the historical Augustus is inherently the study of how he has been received by others, both during his lifetime and afterwards. As such, it requires us to engage with the same issues as are likewise posed by much later receptions: for example, the culturally situated perspective and personal experiences of the receiving party, the particular elements of Augustus' multi-faceted public image to which they are responding and the type and extent of information available to form the basis of their response.

Once Augustus himself had died, the most forceful appropriations and reframings of his legacy came from those who succeeded to the principate he had defined, as well as their cheerleaders, advisers and critics within the wider Roman aristocracy. The Julio-Claudian emperors in particular drew legitimacy from their connection to Augustus, and hence invoked Augustan precedent to justify their own actions, boasted about the parallels between them and occasionally claimed to outdo him.[13] The same dynamics also allowed their critics to score easy points by noting failures to live up to his model.[14] It thus suited both sides to exaggerate Augustus' successes

[10] Dyer 1979.
[11] Levick 2010: 9. On this as a persistent and widely held appraisal, see also Hobden, this volume, Chapter 17.
[12] Levick 1982; Wallace-Hadrill 1986; Levick 1999.
[13] Precedents: Tac. *Ann.* 1.11 (Tiberius); Ober 1982; Cowan 2009; Suet. *Calig.* 16.1. Avowed parallels: Tac. *Ann* 12.11 (Claudius); Suet. *Nero* 10.1. Julio-Claudian responses generally: Levick 2010: 293–9.
[14] E.g. Tac. *Ann.* 1.46 on senatorial criticism of Tiberius for failing to deal personally with the German rebellion of AD 14. On Tiberius and Augustus, see further Vout 2013a.

and achievements while downplaying potential criticisms, and this quickly cemented his status as the archetypal 'good emperor' against whom others should be measured, just as he must have hoped when composing the *Res Gestae*. The results form the context for Cook's study (Chapter 4) of imperial bodies, which explores how Suetonius and others judged the bodies of successive members of his dynasty against that of Augustus: itself a literary construct built on the foundations of Augustus' own self-construction. This is not to say that Augustus' faults were entirely forgotten. The bloodthirsty acts of the triumviral period were clearly remembered and, as Green (Chapter 3) shows, could be evoked in critical tones by Seneca when constructing a persuasive model for the young Nero.[15] Nonetheless, even Seneca held up Augustus overall as a model for Nero to emulate, while his early ruthlessness was commonly excused as the necessary result of his circumstances, and his later moderate stance as *princeps* taken as the 'true' personality he had always wished to exercise.[16] The potency of his established status as a 'good emperor' is clear from the fact that it survived the civil wars of AD 68–9 and the formation of a new dynasty, so that Vespasian still saw the value in taking Augustus' name, rooting his powers in Augustan precedent and even claiming that Augustus had had the original idea for the Colosseum.[17]

Vespasian, though, would in time emerge as an alternative model of the good *princeps* in his own right, along with others such as Trajan, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius.[18] Augustus began to lose his primacy, and indeed Trajan himself showed greater interest in the military archetype provided by Julius Caesar.[19] It was in this context that Tacitus penned the most critical appraisal of Augustus so far, attributed to observers at Augustus' funeral.[20] Here, the list of grievances extends well beyond the cruel actions of the triumviral period which Seneca had noted, to pass judgement on the military disasters, domestic scandals and divine pretensions of Augustus' principate. Indeed, as Geiger (Chapter 5) shows, the same period saw not only the merits of Augustus but even his role as the founder of the principate coming into question, an uncertainty created in the first place by his own deliberately ambiguous political positioning. Nonetheless, all emperors continued to draw authority from Augustus' name, and many, like Hadrian and Septimius Severus, still invited direct

[15] Sen. *Clem.* 1.9.1 and 1.11.1. [16] Vell. Pat. 2.86.2; Dio 56.44.1.
[17] Vespasian's powers: *lex de imperio Vespasiani* (*CIL* VI 930; *ILS* 244). Colosseum: Suet. *Vesp.* 9.1.
[18] Swan 2004: 14. [19] Levick 2009, esp. 217–18. [20] Tac. *Ann* 1.10.

comparisons or sought to emulate him.[21] Senators too could still find him useful as a paradigm of good rule. Dio's account of Augustus can be read in part as an extended invitation to the Severan emperors to follow his example, and late antique emperors were famously hailed with the hope that they would be 'more fortunate than Augustus, better than Trajan'.[22] One, the emperor Julian, even constructed his own Augustus in the *Caesars*, examined in detail by Tougher (Chapter 6). Here Julian neatly articulates Augustus' capacity for self-fashioning by describing him as an ever-changing chameleon, and is particularly interested in his apparent change of personality from dangerous triumvir to 'wise and temperate' *princeps*.[23]

Much that emerged from these ancient discourses remained central to Augustus' later reception history. The notion of Augustus as the archetypal good *princeps*, against whom other rulers might be measured, is crucial; but it is equally important that the archetype was contentious from the beginning. Tacitus in fact distils both sides of the argument, so that his funeral crowds first hail Augustus as a patriotic saviour of the state, and then condemn him as a ruthless dissimulator with a disastrous impact.[24] Underpinning both views lie assumptions about Augustus' motivations: either that he was genuinely seeking to save the state from chaos or that he simply wished to acquire power for himself. These positions, which very probably date back to his own lifetime, allow for entirely opposing interpretations of the same career; and since his 'true' motivations will always remain unrecoverable, the debate has persisted ever since. The connection between Augustus and the principate also meant that already in antiquity debates about the one were inherently debates about the other. Thus the same funeral scenes in Tacitus' *Annals* – and of course the rest of the work – can also be read as a debate about whether or not the creation of the principate had been a good thing. Indeed, the disagreements about whether or not he was really responsible for creating it, covered by Geiger, are in essence debates over how to define what a *princeps* is. Different definitions allow room for different opinions over who first matched the criteria: Julius Caesar or Augustus.[25]

[21] Hadrian: Birley 1997 passim but esp. 142–50; Spawforth 2012: 242–70. Septimius Severus: Cooley 2007; Barnes 2008. See also Popkin, this volume, Chapter 16, on later imperial debts to Augustus' Parthian arch.

[22] Dio: Swan 2004: 13–17. Acclamation: Eutr. 8.5.3.

[23] Julian *Caesars* 309a–c.

[24] Tac. *Ann.* 1.9–10.

[25] For the impact of the same debate on nineteenth and early twentieth-century views of Julius Caesar, Augustus and the principate: Turner 1993: 250 and 258–9.

Christianity and the Middle Ages

The emergence of Christianity, and its importance in the post-antique world, caused an incidental reference in Luke's Gospel to grow into a major component in Augustus' reception history. In explaining that Mary and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem in response to 'a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed', Luke cast Augustus as a minor but essential player in the story of the Nativity.[26] From these seeds, early Christians looking for ways to flatter or appease later emperors developed the idea that the empire-wide peace and security established by Augustus were directly connected with the emergence of their religion.[27] In the fifth century, Orosius brought these ideas to their fullest expression in his *Historiae Adversus Paganos*, where he stated explicitly that the worldwide peace and unity achieved by Augustus had been ordained by God so that Christianity could flourish.[28] Sloan (Chapter 7) treats this text in detail, showing how Orosius successfully merged Classical and biblical traditions to reframe Augustus for a Christian context. Meanwhile, a parallel tradition of Sibylline prophecies of Christ's birth provided the basis for stories in which Augustus could be made consciously aware of the divine providence behind his success.[29] These narratives, addressed by both Simić (Chapter 8) and Boeye and Pandey (Chapter 10) emerged during the sixth century, and relate how Augustus established an altar to Christ in Rome after learning from an oracle that a 'Hebrew child' would rule after him.[30]

The idea of a providential connection between the reign of Augustus and the birth of Christ proved exceptionally successful. It is widely attested throughout medieval Europe and was central to the Byzantine understanding of Augustus.[31] It also persisted into the early Renaissance, and indeed has been evoked more recently: for example in twentieth-century Italy, where it was used to suggest that the new and politically expedient relationship between the fascist regime and the Catholic Church rested

[26] Luke 2:1–5.
[27] Relevant primary sources referenced in Erskine-Hill 1983: 27–45; Burke 2005; Dahlheim 2010: 374–9; Simić, this volume, Chapter 8.
[28] Oros. *Hist*. 6.1 and 18–22.
[29] August. *De Civ. D*. 18.23 reports the Sibylline tradition but does not connect it with Augustus.
[30] John Malalas, *Chronographia* 10.5; *Palatine Chronicle*, chapter 8 (*Vaticanus Palatinus* 227); Schimmelpfennig 1999; White 2004; Burke 2005.
[31] Europe: examples in Erskine-Hill 1983: 38–45; Strothmann 2000: 61–4; Boeye and Pandey, this volume, Chapter 10; Black, this volume, Chapter 11. Byzantine world: Conca 2012; Simić, this volume, Chapter 8.

on an ancient connection between the worldly domain of Rome and the spiritual domain of Christianity.[32] It rests, of course, on nothing more than a temporal coincidence, but that coincidence would not have been so attractive if Augustus had not already been perceived as an archetype of peaceful world rule by the time early Christians needed to defend their place in the Roman empire. Once made, the link also served to strengthen established flattering tropes about Augustus while diminishing critiques. If the establishment of the *pax Augusta* is viewed as God's will, Augustus' rise to power must be characterised as benignly motivated. Thus writers such as Orosius used the ancient sources selectively, following their cues in blaming others for the civil wars and excusing Octavian's involvement as a necessary route to peace, while omitting his crueller actions.[33] Likewise, in narratives which made him consciously aware of Christ's coming, it was essential to portray him as moderate and humble, so that he could recognise and submit to a higher power and thus signal the triumph of Christianity over paganism.[34] In Christian eyes, too, Augustus' monarchy became a positive boon, rather than something to lament as Tacitus had done, since it mirrored 'the one kingdom of God'.[35] Relatedly, and perhaps most importantly, Augustus' ancient self-representation as ruler over the whole *orbis terrarum* (orb of the world) allowed him to be cast as an earthly counterpart to Christ in heaven. The notion of Augustus as *cosmocrator* (ruler over all) is emphasised in Orosius, and recurs regularly in the visual imagery of the medieval era: for example the early twelfth-century Liber Floridus or early fourteenth-century Hereford Mappa Mundi.[36]

All of this was shaped by political agendas and had political ramifications. In particular, the notion of Augustus as *cosmocrator* was of great value to both popes and Holy Roman emperors as they sought to secure and express authority over all of Christendom. It is likely to have informed Charlemagne's acceptance of the title of 'Augustus' from Pope Leo III when he was crowned as the first Holy Roman emperor.[37] Strothmann (Chapter 9) argues that the title evoked not merely the office of emperor but the historical Augustus himself, while Sloan makes the case that both ceremony and title reflected a direct knowledge of Orosius. The effect was

[32] Strong 1939: 148–9; Scriba 1996: 22–5. Cf. Lindner, this volume, Chapter 14, for another twentieth-century take.
[33] Oros. *Hist*. 18–19. [34] E.g. Mirabilia Urbis Romae 2.1.
[35] Eus. *Tricennalia*, 16.6; see Simić, this volume, Chapter 8, for the full passage and further discussion.
[36] Orosius: Latowsky 2013: 23–7. Liber Floridus: folio 138v. Hereford Mappa Mundi: Scully 2013.
[37] Ullmann 1955 (2009): 87–118; McKitterick 2008: 114–18.

to legitimise and strengthen Charlemagne's position as a secular emperor and Pope Leo's position as head of the church in Rome, casting each as *cosmocrator* in his different sphere, and connecting the two in the manner of Augustus and Christ. Indeed, the analogy offered considerable potential for articulating and/or attempting to redefine the relationship between church and state. Strothmann for the Carolingians and Simić for the Byzantine empire show how changes in the use of Augustus as a point of reference relate to evolutions in the balance of power between emperors and the church, as well as between east and west. The same themes intensified with the resurgence of interest in the ancient past seen in the twelfth-century west. By this period, the story of Augustus' altar in Rome had grown to include a celestial vision of the Virgin and Child and become the accepted aetiology for the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli on the Capitoline hill, making it nothing less than the first ever site of Christian worship.[38] As Boeye and Pandey show, this bolstered the power of the papacy during a period of struggles with both the Holy Roman emperors and the newly established Commune of Rome, while Santa Maria continued to be used in the later middle ages as a symbolic setting for declarations of political submission to divine authority. The visual representations of Augustus as *cosmocrator* produced in this period also reflect the analogies in play by depicting him with the iconography usually associated with Holy Roman emperors and popes.[39]

Meanwhile, as in antiquity, Augustus was directly deployed by monarchs, their flatterers and their advisers as a paradigm of secular good rule. Twelfth- and thirteenth-century Holy Roman emperors from the House of Hohenstaufen claimed continuity with the emperors of antiquity and invoked Augustus specifically when fashioning themselves as peaceful rulers of empire, while poets honoured them by proclaiming the parallels.[40] In England the twelfth-century clerk of Canterbury, John of Salisbury, used Augustus in his *Policraticus* to build arguments about the responsibilities of kings, with a particular view to influencing King Henry II.[41] John contrasts Augustus with Nero, for example, using anecdotes from Suetonius to demonstrate that a good ruler listens and responds to criticism while a bad one does not.[42] Like Orosius, on whom he drew

[38] Schimmelpfennig 1999; White 2004; Burke 2005; Boeye and Pandey, this volume, Chapter 10.
[39] Liber Floridus image: Swarzenski 1973: 25; Stroll 1991: 11–14. Hereford Mappa Mundi image: Scully 2013.
[40] Strothmann 2000. [41] Taylor 2006.
[42] John of Salisbury, *Policraticus* 1.7.44–5; cf. Suet. *Aug.* 68 and *Nero* 20 and 23.

extensively, John knew that Augustus had come to power through civil wars, but did not criticise him for it.[43] This may reflect his particular audience, since Henry II had himself come to power through civil war, so that criticising Augustus for the same behaviour would risk antagonising Henry and undermining the value of the *exemplum*. It may also reflect the limited selection of ancient texts now in circulation, which included Seneca, Suetonius and the Augustan poets, but not the opening of Tacitus' *Annals* or Plutarch's, Appian's and Cassius Dio's detailed accounts of the triumviral era. But John did make use of Augustine, in whose *City of God* he would have found Augustus' rise to power characterised as a symptom of Rome's moral decline and the man himself explicitly described as a hypocritical enemy of liberty.[44] John's preference for presenting Augustus as a model of good rule is more likely to represent the ongoing influence of the Orosian providential tradition, coupled with the political realities of the medieval world. Since monarchy was the accepted political norm, striving for sole power was not inherently offensive, and it was more important to encourage moderate behaviour once monarchs were on the throne than condemn their route to it.[45] Thus Augustus' value as an *exemplum* further encouraged the promotion of laudatory anecdotes about him, while discouraging any criticism.

The importance of the connection between Augustus and Christ is also underscored by comparing his status and reputation within the Christian world with that beyond it. A recent survey by König traces a growing interest in Roman history amongst Arabic-Islamic scholars from the seventh century onwards, with a particular step forward in the late ninth and tenth centuries. During this period, the historian al-Mas'ūdī used Jewish, biblical and Greek-language Christian sources to establish a chronological relationship between Roman and Arabic-Islamic history, while a modified Arabic version of Orosius' *Historiae* was produced in Andalusia.[46] Some western European and Byzantine traditions about Augustus were thus transmitted to the Arabic-Islamic world, including the notion that he had been a unifying world-ruler in whose reign Christ was born.[47] In a Muslim context, however, the connection with Christ was far less significant, and most accounts of Augustus are brief and detached, simply outlining his military conquests and chronology. Al-Mas'ūdī, though, does recount one story which casts Augustus in a very different light from the

[43] John of Salisbury, *Policraticus* 1.16.96. [44] August., *De civ. D.* 3.21 and 30.
[45] Strothmann 2000: 60. [46] König 2015: 50 and 96.
[47] König 2015: 96–7, 123, 126 and 137–8.