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Augustus: The Eternal Emperor

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Augustus, the founder of the Roman Empire in 27 BC, was a thoroughly ambiguous man: At once a republican and an autocrat, a conqueror and a peacemaker, he was the inventor of a tradition who governed like a sphinx. A biography has just come out that emphasizes the topicality of his reign.

Review of Frédéric Hurlet, *Auguste. Les ambiguïtés du pouvoir*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2015, 296 p., 24, 90 €.

Augustus has always discouraged his biographers. From Velleius Paterculus, his contemporary, to Claude Nicolet (1930-2010), a specialist in ancient Rome, many renounced writing the life of the first Roman emperor. For Augustus, who was a master of ambiguity, has largely eluded historians: He was a sphinx, and he governed as such. At most we can say he was the man of the "permanent coup" who took care not to define the regime he helped to establish.

Another emperor, Julian the Apostate (4th century AD), who was as unpredictable as his distant predecessor, characterized Augustus in these words: "His color changed like that of the chameleon, in turns pale, red, black, brown, and dark, and then charming like Venus and the Graces; he wanted to have eyes as piercing as the rays of the great Sun, such that nobody could withstand their gaze."[1]

The emperor often changed faces, but also names: He was born Octavius, became "Octavian" after his adoption by Caesar, and then "Augustus" by decision of the Roman Senate. With him, duplicity was embodied in power: He was at once a republican and an autocrat, a conqueror and a peacemaker, as well as the inventor of a tradition.

The Unsettling Topicality of Augustus

The tortuous itinerary of this head of state ideally lends itself to a mirror narrative such as the one offered to us by Frédéric Hurlet, professor at University of Paris X Nanterre and author of this new biography. Against those who would like everything to stop at the great man's death, the book affirms, in the strongest terms, that the posterity of Augustus's myth is as important as that of his reign strictly understood (27 BC to 14 AD).

The reader of today, living in France in 2016, will be struck by the topicality of Hurlet's Augustus. At the end of the civil wars, the Romans, too, experienced a "state of emergency" that was extended to the point of dissolving into institutions:[2] This was the coup de force of January 27 BC, which gave the emperor exceptional powers, while preserving the façade of traditional political forms.

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[1] Julien, *Symposion*, IV, 309, AC, quoted in F. Hurlet, *Auguste. Les ambiguïtés du pouvoir*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2015, p. 156.

[2] J. Rich, "Making the Emergency Permanent: *Auctoritas*, *Potestas* and the Evolution of the Principate of Augustus," in Y. Rivière (ed.), *Des réformes augustéennes*, Rome, 2012, pp. 37-121.

Add to this the fact that, under the principate of Augustus, the Romans saw the division of Italy into eleven major regions. This reflected an administrative rationalization and a policy of geographical expertise closely linked to the development of taxation.

Lastly, like the French, the subjects of Augustus were bombarded with discourses on the "social fracture"—the *dissensio*—which the emperor claimed to have fixed. His government was presented as a return to the good old days, and indeed to the golden age. The closing of the doors of the temple of Janus in 29 BC, a gesture announcing the end of the wars, was intended as such, as was the construction of the Altar of Peace between 13 and 9 BC. Augustus boasted that he had restored harmony—the universal consensus—among citizens.

A Twelve-Year-Old Tribune

Fortunately, like any good history book, Hurlet's does not merely consist in an analogy with the present. Roman antiquity is disorienting and unsettling. This is one of its great anthropological virtues. Indeed, how can one not be surprised by the critiques leveled at Augustus's family origins?

Some of his political enemies recalled that he was merely a banker's son. Today, such form of disqualification would fail. Among the Romans, on the contrary, banking was a commercial activity that betrayed the "bourgeois," namely, he who cannot rely on the income of large agricultural estates to maintain his lifestyle.

The Roman aristocracy also thought it had found a perfumer, a baker, and many other occupations deemed shameful in Augustus's family line. What is more, the homeland of this lackluster family was the small town of *Velitrae* (Velletri today): a place at the end of the earth, a wild land! And yet it was just forty kilometers from Rome.

Initially, then, Octavius/Augustus was a man with no qualities—or almost none. Yet his mother, Atia, had the good idea of giving birth to him in a highly symbolic place (p. 27): in a house located on the Palatine Hill, where Rome was founded by Romulus. This coincidence was soon exploited by the future head of state, who claimed to be re-founding the Roman city. Octavius was an early orphan, but also a precocious adolescent, one able to pronounce in an open forum, at the mere age of 12, a funeral oration for his grandmother Julia (p. 35).

His great-uncle, who was none other than Julius Caesar, appreciated him. Augustus's youth rapidly took a martial turn. The civil conflicts that raged throughout much of the 1st century BC forced Octavius to take a position, all the more so since he was part of Caesar's family. Thus Augustus summed up, to his own glory, how he rushed into these internecine wars: "At the age of 19 on my own responsibility and at my own expense I raised an army, with which I successfully championed the liberty of the Republic."[3]

The Republic to the Benefit of One Man

The central issue of the period was precisely the future of this *Res publica*—its avowed agony and its offsprings. The Republican regime born five centuries earlier had changed shape to the point of no longer being itself. With Augustus, the Republic was perpetuated to the benefit of one man. All known institutions were left untouched, except that they were emptied of part of their substance. Augustan politics was the opposite of a clean slate (see, in particular, the pages on the "co-regency," p. 145 ff.).

The emperor continued to control the Republican game, but obscured its workings.[4] He pretended not to wish for the immense *auctoritas* that was conferred on him. He claimed to be saving that which could be saved. He compromised with a Roman oligarchy worn out by the civil wars. And the majority of his faction followed him.

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[3] *Res Gestae divi Augusti*, 1, 1.

[4] On the theme of *Res publica restituta*, see F. Hurlet, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77.

Since no Roman jurist, no "constitutionalist" has given it a name, how might one define this new Augustan state, which was destined to last until 476 AD? It is here that the third part of the book ("The Metamorphoses of the Augustan Myth"), devoted to covering a variety of historiographical interpretations, becomes most interesting. Hurlet shows the difficulties presented to the Moderns by this institutional monster known as the imperial regime.

In *On Sovereignty* (2009 [1576]), Jean Bodin wanted to believe that popular sovereignty had been preserved in the principate. As for Montesquieu, he turned Augustus into a monarch who "gently" conducted the Romans to "lasting servitude." Theodor Mommsen (1817-1903), the best nineteenth-century specialist in Roman history, saw in the government of Augustus a diarchy, that is, a sharing of power between the emperor and the Senate, a bicephalous state. More recently, Ronald Syme (1903-1989) described the emperor as the leader of a "syndicate" at the head of an authoritarian regime, one that concealed only with great difficulty its key actors—namely, an oligarchy reluctant to share power.

Although this new biography of Augustus does not—fortunately—provide a definitive answer to the mystery of the Augustan regime, it has the great merit of tackling a historical character that has exhausted his exegetes, as Velleius Paterculus sensed he would.[5] For Augustus was an unusual head of state, who all his life looked for successors (as these died one after the other) to continue the imperial "experiment," until he finally settled for his stepson Tiberius.

Augustus is that prince whose image was fossilized in the course of his reign, as the beautiful set of pictures in the center of the book forcefully shows. In the statuary, on the minted coins, and finally forever, there remains a man with a calm and inscrutable face, an eternal thirty-year-old who took power and never surrendered it again.

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[5] Velleius Paterculus, II, 89, 6: "To tell of the wars waged under his command, of the pacification of the world by his victories, of his many works at home and outside of Italy would weary a writer intending to devote his whole life to this one task."