

The evolution of perspectives on Augustus' Principate in Roman First Century Authors



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Summary

This thesis addresses the problem of the characterization of Augustus' rule in modern literature. While he is commonly referred to as an emperor, many historians also emphasize the Republican framework he worked in. This is strange, since the title of emperor implies autocracy, while the institution of a republic does not. To combat this incompatibility of terminology to institution, this thesis returns to the original views of Roman writers about Augustus' rule. By analyzing the works of Velleius Paterculus, Suetonius and Tacitus and comparing them to Augustus own views of his rule as present in the Res Gestae, an overview of the evolution of their perspectives on Augustus' rule is presented. This is effected by defining external influences which may have shaped their views and assessing the perspectives on Augustus' rule present in their individual works. Results indicate that all three writers see Augustus as part of the Republic, although Suetonius and Tacitus agree that the form of the Republic did change. Their terminology did however not carry the connotations of autocracy. When viewing Augustus' rule from a Roman first century's perspective, the term princeps is a much more viable title. More research should be done with respect to later works, since those works might be responsible for the evolution of Augustus from princeps to emperor.

Introduction

Augustus has always occupied a special place in Roman history. Most historians will in fact agree that he was one of the most influential leaders in all of Roman history. It was under his leadership that the Roman Republic changed into what we would now call the Augustan Principate. The most famous historian to promote this view has been Ronald Syme in his *The Roman Revolution*. He characterizes the Augustan Principate as an oligarchy, functioning as the 'binding link between Republic and Empire.'¹ Syme's message is clear: the Augustan Republic was a republic only in name, a construct to obscure the realities of power. This aspect of Augustus' rule has become the focus of historians after Syme. This has resulted in many suggestions as to how Augustus' rule should be named: was he an oligarch, a monarch, an emperor, a *princeps*? As evidenced by the large number of books that name Augustus as the first emperor, the preference has gone to the label of Emperor.²

While these historians are thus all united in viewing Augustus as the first emperor, they do have to admit that this title can be a bit paradoxical when reviewing Augustus' view on his role as leader. In the words of Alston: "In January 27 B.C., the monarchy stabilized its political position through a series of acts that culminated in the first emperor declaring that he had restored the Republic."³ How is it possible to refer to one person in three different sorts of government; the monarchy, the empire and the republic? This ambiguity is not only present in Alston's work. In *Augustus: Introduction to the Life of an Emperor*, Galinsky is also unable to work around this problem. While naming Augustus emperor in his title, he then goes on to argue

¹ Ronald Syme, *The roman revolution*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002),vii.

² Examples are Galinsky's *Augustus: Introduction to the Life of an Emperor*, Shotter's *Augustus Caesar* and Clark's *Augustus, The First Roman Emperor*, but there are many more.

³ Richard Alston, *Rome's revolution: death of the republic and birth of the empire*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

that the changes introduced by Augustus included ‘the continuance of the *res publica* and its (unwritten) constitution, mechanisms, and offices. These were not abolished but morphed into what we might call Constitution Plus, meaning the added, leading role of Augustus.’⁴ The uncertainty about what to call the leadership of Augustus is caused partly by our modern perspectives. Syme’s characterization of Augustus’ rule as leader of a party was influenced by his views on the Fascist leaders of his day.⁵ Galinsky has to call Augustus an emperor, because his power cannot be reconciled with our views of a republic. It is because of this uncertainty that I would like to turn to the original sources and analyze what their perspectives are on the nature of the rule of Augustus. It is their views that should lead us in the characterization of his rule.

Augustus himself made sure to stress his role within the Republic: after restoring peace in the Republic, he transferred power back to the Senate and from then on held no more power than any other of his colleagues.⁶ Augustus argues that he merely completed the task that he set out to do with the triumvirate, namely restoring the Republic to its former state of peace and glory. Much of his outward appearance was centered on Republican virtues, like *pietas*, through his role as priest and later *Pontifex Maximus* and *bellum iustum*, just wars through old rituals. With this, he started a cultural program to “heal” Roman society and return it to its former glory by constructing new buildings and restoring old ones.⁷ He also limited access to the Senate to raise its prestige. All these reforms seem to be motivated by some Republican ideal. Although most historians now agree that this must have been a tactical move to please the Senate and the people, it seems that Augustus still believed in the idea of the Republic. The goal of this paper is thus to see how, why and if this image of Augustus as functioning within the Republic as princeps has changed into Augustus as an emperor.

Methodology

For this purpose, I will focus on the three Roman writers that have shaped our modern viewpoint: Velleius Paterculus, Suetonius and Tacitus. Although he is less known than the other two writers, Velleius Paterculus was roughly contemporary with Augustus (he was born in 19 B.C.E). This makes him an important addition to this study, since he provides us with valuable insights about how Augustus’ followers saw him.⁸ Suetonius is interesting, because he lives in a different stage of the Roman Principate. His work is also interesting because it is biographical, which allows him to go into more details about Augustus’ life. Tacitus was chosen here because of his attitude towards the Principate. An analysis of his work should yield both an explanation for his negative attitude and perhaps for the changing perspective on the role of the *princeps*. These sources together represent an overview of the changing terminology concerning

⁴ Karl Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction to the Life of an Emperor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), 59.

⁵ W. Eder, ‘The Augustan Principate as Binding Link’ in: *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1990), 71-122, 76.

⁶ Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 35, Loeb translation.

⁷ Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 101.

⁸ Although a fervent supporter mostly of Tiberius, Velleius writes as positively about Augustus as he does about Tiberius.

Augustus' rule. I restricted the analysis to first century writers, because the Principate was still developing in this period and views on its merits and flaws were changing with it.

The analysis will be conducted as follows: first, the background of the writer will be discussed, since this gives us an indication on why the writer wrote his piece and what underlying motives are at play. This means that we will look at the time of writing, the position of the author within the Roman Empire and his political affiliations. Secondly, the written source will be analyzed at length. This I have divided into two parts: the first part will deal with the work as a whole. This part will contain an analysis of the genre, the structure and the sources. The second part will deal with the terminology employed to refer to the position of Augustus. Are they generally positive or negative? Is he referred to as a *princeps* within the Republican framework, as Augustus would have wanted, or is he seen as an autocrat? Are there different words which would hint at how his position was perceived? These are all the questions that we need to take into account to gain insight in the development of the terminology of Augustus' role. Finally, the results of this will be used to discuss their influence on recent historians. This will then show that our views do not come from nowhere: they are shaped by Roman literature.

It is necessary to start with how Augustus presented himself to his contemporaries, so that we have a clear point of reference. We will first look at RG.1, where Augustus refers to the period before the Second Triumvirate. This is interesting as much for what is mentioned as for what is not. Secondly, I want to explain why the Triumvirate is hardly ever mentioned in the *Res Gestae*. Finally, I want to review RG.34, because this paragraph highlights Augustus' goal behind the *Res Gestae*: he wanted to show that he functioned within the Republic.

Augustus and the *Res Gestae*

From the battle of Actium onwards, Augustus seems to have had a clear view of his role and how to present himself to the people of Rome.⁹ He took care to show that he never aspired to be an autocrat and that he wanted to restore the old Republic.¹⁰ This chapter will briefly explain how he did this by reviewing some of the political maneuvers mentioned in his own summary of his life, the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*. The *Res Gestae* was written by Augustus at the end of his life, as a summary of his achievements. It is therefore extremely biased. However, since it describes how Augustus wanted to be seen, it is a good starting point to review Augustus' representation of his own political role.

As Marc Antony rightly said when he was faced with his new political enemy: Augustus owed his authority to the name of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar.¹¹ Using this name and the money he got from Caesar's will, Augustus succeeded in recruiting several legions, most of which were Caesar's veterans, now loyal to him. With the support of these soldiers, he was able to exert influence on Rome's politics. Augustus himself refers to this as follows:

⁹ I will be referring to Augustus only as Augustus, because I want to describe how he viewed his position at the time of writing the *Res Gestae*. It would be confusing to jump back and forth between Octavian and Augustus, although I am fully aware that he only got the name in 27 B.C.E., as a token of honor bestowed upon him by the Senate after returning the provinces in that year as part of the First Settlement.

¹⁰ Suet.*Aug.*53.

¹¹ Alston, *Rome's Revolution: Death of the Republic and Birth of the Empire*, 122.

At the age of nineteen, on my own initiative and at my own expense, I raised an army by means of which I restored liberty to the republic, which had been oppressed by the tyranny of a faction. For which service the senate, with complimentary resolutions, enrolled me in its order, in the consulship of Gaius Pansa and Aulus Hirtius, giving me at the same time consular precedence in voting; it also gave me the *imperium*.¹²

This piece of text from the *Res Gestae* gives a good indication on how Augustus had learned to present himself during his life. There are two aspects of the text which I want to highlight here, which highlight the general tendency of the *Res Gestae*. First, whenever Augustus is talking about positions he gained within the Republic, he always refers to them as being given to him as an honor. In this particular passage, he explains how he became propraetor by helping the Senate to defeat “the faction”, by which he probably means Anthony, who he helped defeat at Mutina. He does, however, fail to mention that these honors were granted to him at sword point, after he had taken over Rome with his legions. Of course, he had not forgotten. But the moment he had defeated his last opponent at Actium, Augustus knew that he had to wipe clean the bad he had done under the name of Octavian. As Galinsky remarks in reference to this paragraph in the *Res Gestae*, ‘the passage is notable as much for what is left out as for what is set in bronze and stone.’¹³

That brings us to the second point. Throughout his life Augustus was keen on presenting himself as the restorer of the Republic. He does not once refer to his position as that of an autocrat. On that front he had definitely learned from the assassination of his adoptive father. In the *Res Gestae* he refers twice to having restored the Republic: once in RG.1 as can be seen above, and once, more implicitly, in RG.34, which will be discussed below. While the *Res Gestae* is thus a summation of his achievements, Augustus seems to want to prove himself to be a proponent of the restoration of the Republic. Interestingly enough then, in the *Res Gestae*, the party with which he tried to restore the Republic by law is mostly skipped over. It is to this period that I want to turn now.

In 43 B.C.E., Augustus joined forces Marc Anthony and Lepidus to form the Second Triumvirate to reorganize the state after the civil war, according to Republican principles. Their powers were even confirmed by the *comitia* and were written down in the *Lex Titia*.¹⁴ This was a major step in his career, yet the only thing he remarks about the Triumvirate in the *Res Gestae* is that ‘in the same year, moreover, as both consuls had fallen in war, the people elected me consul and a triumvir for settling the constitution.’¹⁵ The fact that he does not want to dwell on the Triumvirate shows that this was not a period that he wanted to be remembered by. He does implicitly refer to the end of the Triumvirate, in 28 B.C.E, where he relinquished control of the republic and gave it back to the Senate and the people of Rome.¹⁶ This first agreement on the position of Augustus within the now restored Republic between the Senate and himself in 27 B.C.E. is usually called the First Settlement. In this agreement, multiple arrangements were made to fit the *princeps*, who was now the most powerful man of Rome, into the framework of the Republic. This was not an easy task. To quote Eder, ‘it was now primarily the responsibility

¹² Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 1. All translations which are given in this paper are taken from the Loeb Classical Library.

¹³ Karl Galinsky, *Augustus. Introduction to the life of an emperor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), 31.

¹⁴ Eder, ‘The Augustan Principate as Binding Link’, 92.

¹⁵ Aug.RG.1.

¹⁶ Aug.RG 34; Dio.*Roman History*.53.2.

of the senate to reformulate the relationship between the *res publica* and the man who had formerly possessed total power.¹⁷ Augustus himself describes the First Settlement as follows:

In my sixth and seventh consulships, when I had extinguished the flames of civil war, after receiving by universal consent the absolute control of affairs, I transferred the republic from my own control to the will of the senate and the Roman people. (...) After that time I took precedence of all in rank, but of power I possessed no more than those who were my colleagues in any magistracy.¹⁸

At first glance this paragraph presents a timeline which shows how Augustus obtained his powerful position within the Roman Republic. Cassius Dio even argues that the events of 27 B.C.E were carefully orchestrated by Augustus, with the eventual goal of establishing a monarchy.¹⁹ Turpin, however, argues that both Dio and modern writers have been misled by the seemingly correct chronology of the storytelling. He suggests instead that Augustus wanted to focus here on the honors bestowed upon him on January 27 B.C.E. The first sentence provides background information as to why he had been given these honors.²⁰ This means that Augustus is not referring to real power when he says that he took precedence of all in rank, but to his *auctoritas*.²¹ Here Augustus again refers to Republican values. His focus on *auctoritas* means that he still wanted to present himself as a Republican and thus that the Republic was indeed restored under his rule.

The honor of which he might have been the most proud would probably be the title of Augustus. Dio tells us that Augustus actually had the desire to be called Romulus, but refrained to be called this because of the associations to kingship the name brought with it.²² Munatius Plancus then suggested the name Augustus, because it would be a new title, but an honourable one.²³ This title made sure that he indeed would be seen as *princeps* among the other senators, instead of being seen as a ruler over others.²⁴ It is telling that Augustus closes his account here. The only other event he mentions is that in 2 B.C.E. he got honored with the epithet *pater patriae*, which was also a republican title of which he was very proud. It seems that for Augustus, the Republic was indeed restored to its rightful owners in 27 B.C.E and that with the help of the senate he found his place in it. According to Augustus, he was no more than the first man in the Roman Republic.

It is good to take into account the fact that the *Res Gestae* probably presents Augustus' idealized view of his position within the Republic. It was to be placed on his mausoleum for everyone to read, and he wanted to be remembered for all the good he had done for the Republic. However, there is no need to label this as pure propaganda. There is a good chance

¹⁷ W. Eder, 'The Augustan Principate as Binding Link', 104.

¹⁸ Aug.RG.34.

¹⁹ This debate between Maecenas, Agrippa and Augustus is most certainly made up by Dio, who is in the first place driven by the desire to show where the Roman monarchy came from. William Turpin, 'Res Gestae 34.1 and the Settlement of 27.' *The Classical Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1994): 427–37, on 429.

²⁰ Idem, 432.

²¹ Idem, 435. Because I have to be concise here I cannot go through Turpin's full argumentation, but it should be said that his arguments overall are quite convincing. Besides, this text being the summary of his achievements as *princeps*, it would be strange to end on the note that he had acquired total power.

²² Dio.53.16.7.

²³ Suet.Aug.7.

²⁴ Eder, 'The Augustan Principate as Binding Link', 116.

that Augustus actually believed that the Republic was worth saving and that his rule was simply an attempt to both restore the Republic to its former glory and find his own place in it as *princeps*.²⁵ There is no way to be sure as to what his motives exactly were.

However, in this chapter I have tried to argue that Augustus used the *Res Gestae* to present his rule as Republican and that he should be seen, according to himself, as functioning within the Republican framework. What I also hoped to show here is that he describes his rise to power in Republican terminology. His position was granted to him on the orders of the senate and while he had more power than anyone else, he presents himself as simply one amongst equals.

So far we have looked at how Augustus presented himself in his autobiography, the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*. While this gives us a good overview of how Augustus wanted to be seen, it can not be seen as representative for the perception of his rule. We will therefore now turn to his contemporary, Velleius Paterculus, to gain an understanding of how others would have seen Augustus' Principate.

Velleius Paterculus and Augustus

While less known than other writers of his time, like Livy or (somewhat earlier) Sallust, Velleius Paterculus is interesting because his work contains the transition between the Principate of Augustus and the reign of Tiberius. I want to start by discussing what we know of his life and his career, and how this might have influenced his writing.

Velleius' Life and Career

He was born around 20 B.C.E. and lived at least until 30 C.E, the latter date being the year he completed his work.²⁶ This means that, while he lived a good proportion of his adult life under the reign of Augustus (he was around 34 years old when Augustus died in 14 C.E.), he only knew the peace of the Augustan Republic. He had not lived through the civil wars or experienced the proscriptions of the Second Triumvirate. Instead, he was born in the exact period Augustus would have liked to be remembered by and this may have influenced his view of Augustus and his successor.

Almost everything that we know of Velleius' career comes from his own work.²⁷ He took great pride in his achievements and he never fails to mention when he made a promotion.²⁸ His career is a good example of the path an equestrian officer might take.²⁹ His first recorded

²⁵ Eder, 'The Augustan Principate as Binding Link', 108.

²⁶ The exact dates of his birth and death are uncertain. This date of birth has been put forward by Sumner on account of the minimum age requirement for becoming a quaestor. According to the *lex municipia Malacitani*, this minimum age was set at 25. Velleius tells us he became a quaestor in 6 C.E., which means he would be born around 20 B.C.E.

²⁷ Tacitus also mentions a Publius Vellaeus serving as legionary legate in 21 C.E., which might be the same Velleius, since his praenomen is uncertain, but he was probably in Thrace at the time. *Tac. Ann.* 1.39

²⁸ J.C. Yardley and Anthony A. Barrett, *Velleius Paterculus, The Roman History*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 2011), xv-xvi.

²⁹ Ronald Syme, 'Mendacity of Velleius Paterculus', *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (Spring, 1978), 45-63, on 45.

service was as a military tribune in Thrace in 2 B.C.E. It is possible that he met Gaius Caesar while stationed there, because when Gaius went East in 1 B.C.E., Velleius followed him.³⁰ After the death of Gaius in 4 C.E., he went on to serve under Tiberius as *praefectus equitum* in Germania. As mentioned earlier, he was chosen to become quaestor in 6 C.E., but the Pannonian Revolt caused him to be sent there as *legatus Augusti*.³¹ Velleius tells us that from 4 C.E. until 12 C.E. he served under Tiberius and perhaps his adoration of the man was developed in this period.³² In 14 C.E. he and his brother were both elected to the praetorship and it seems that from then on he spent his time in Rome, as part of the Senate.³³ Perhaps he did hold command outside of Rome between 14 and 30 C.E., but he does not mention any appointments after his election to the praetorship.³⁴

This career path might have influenced his work in several ways. First, his association with both Augustus and Tiberius had been beneficial. He served under Tiberius for nine years, during which he dutifully followed him around the Roman world. This might suggest that the two had built up a close connection, if only as commander and serving officer. Indeed, the bond between soldiers and their commander can be strong, as shown by Velleius himself, who describes soldiers being in tears when Tiberius rejoined them as their commander.³⁵ Velleius tells us that in these nine years, he 'was a spectator of his [Tiberius] superhuman achievements, and further assisted in them to the extent of my modest ability'.³⁶ He was also part of the triumph celebrated by Tiberius in 12 C.E.³⁷ To top all this, he and his brother were both nominated to the praetorship, first by Augustus, and when he died by Tiberius.

Secondly, he had been both a soldier and a senator. These occupations imbued him with different values, which influenced his outlook on the world. While Connall deals with this in great detail, I would like to highlight the main result of this mixed background. Connall argues that, while as a senator he wanted to applaud the values of the Principate, his military character could not always fully agree, which results in some internal tensions within the work.³⁸ An interesting example is the passage about the closing of the doors of Janus. The temple of Janus would only be closed during times of universal peace. According to Augustus, this had happened five times: two times before his birth, three times during his own life.³⁹ However, Velleius writes the following:

³⁰ Yardley and Barrett, *Velleius Paterculus, The Roman History*, xv

³¹ Robert T. Connall, 'Velleius Paterculus: The Soldier and the Senator.' *The Classical World* 107, no. 1 (2013): 49-62, on 50.

³² Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History*, 2.104.3

³³ Connall, 'Velleius Paterculus: The Soldier and the Senator', 50. This is, of course, not true when we accept that the Vellaeus mentioned by Tacitus is the same person. Sumner also supports this interpretation.

³⁴ After 30 C.E., the year the work was probably completed, we do not know what happened to Velleius due to lack of sources.

³⁵ Vel.Pat, 2.105.4

³⁶ Vel.Pat, 2.104.3

³⁷ Vel.Pat, 2.121.3

³⁸ Connall, 'Velleius Paterculus: The Soldier and the Senator', 53. His appointment as senator does not seem to have influenced his perspective on the rule of the *princeps*. He does not show the same distaste for the *princeps* that Tacitus would show a century later.

³⁹ Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 13.

It is a strong proof of the warlike character of our state that only three times did the losing of the temple of the double-faced Janus give proof of unbroken peace: once under the kings, a second time in the consulship of the Titus Manlius just mentioned, and a third time in the reign of Augustus.⁴⁰

Two things stand out here: first, Augustus mentions closing the doors of the temple three times, while Velleius writes he closes them only once. While this might just be negligence on the part of Velleius, it might also have to do with the fact that they have a different perspective on the act. While Augustus in his *Res Gestae* focuses on the peace he created, Velleius is referring to the temple of Janus to prove that the Romans are a warlike nation. For Velleius, the creation of peace is not a virtue at all.⁴¹

It should be clear then that there were three main aspects of his background that have influenced his work: his time of birth, his close association with both Caesars and his career as both a senator and a soldier. It is now time to draw our attention to the actual work. In the next section, I want to discuss several aspects of the work which might have influenced its portrayal of Augustus.

*The Roman History*⁴²

The most obvious aspect of the work I want to discuss first is its topic. While it is often called a history of Rome, it is much broader than that. Especially the first book, most of which is unfortunately lost, consisted mostly of Greek and Roman history, from the fall of Troy to the fall of Carthage in 146 B.C.E. The second book, with which we are concerned here, continued from the fall of Carthage to 30 C.E. Here the focus lies heavily on Roman history, which is not so strange considering both the dominance of Rome on the world stage at that time and Velleius' extensive knowledge on the events of his own lifetime. Despite the eventual focus on Rome, Yardley and Barrett therefore categorize the book as a "universal" history.⁴³ This stands in great contrast to the criticisms of for example Ronald Syme, who called Velleius a "government writer", a propagandist for the imperial government.⁴⁴ Syme believed that Velleius was writing for the government. However, most of the book is dedicated to earlier periods in history. Also, there is no hint of foreshadowing in his treatment of these earlier periods.⁴⁵ His treatment of Tiberius and his relatives must be seen in the light of his personal experiences under Tiberius and the support Augustus and Tiberius generally had from the equestrian order, since they did so much for the advancement of this group.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Vel.Pat. 2.28.3-4. All translations in this paper are those provided by the Loeb Classical Library.

⁴¹ Connall, 'Velleius Paterculus: The Soldier and the Senator', 58-59.

⁴² The title of the work is actually unknown. Velleius simply calls it *opus*, the work. This particular title was given to it by its first editor, Beatus Thenanus.

⁴³ Yardley and Barrett, *Velleius Paterculus, The Roman History*, xxvi

⁴⁴ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, (Oxford 1939), 393.

⁴⁵ Yardley and Barrett, *Velleius Paterculus, The Roman History*, xxvii

⁴⁶ Loeb Classical Library, *Velleius Paterculus, Compendium of Roman History*, (Harvard University Press 2020) Introduction, x.

The work as a whole seems to have been dedicated to Marcus Vinicius, consul in 30 C.E. This does explain why Velleius refers to multiple dates as happening X amount of years before his consulate. Throughout the text, he also highlights the deeds of the ancestors of Vinicius and sometimes even addresses him as if speaking directly to him.⁴⁷ Secondly, it would also explain his obsession with brevity, which he repeatedly alludes to. If he started when Vinicius was elected consul designate, he would have had at most a year to complete his whole work.⁴⁸ This would explain, at least according to Velleius, why he does not dwell on the details of the proscriptions of the Second Triumvirate, where he simply points out that it was two against one and therefore Octavian was not to blame.⁴⁹

As a final note I want to point out an observation made by Yardley and Barrett, which might be the most important aspect of the work for our purposes. They write:

His *opus* makes clear that for all that we may tend, under the influence of Tacitus' view of the period, to look upon the Augustan settlement as a dramatic turning point in history, from Velleius' perspective, events followed a natural course, and that Augustus' role was not so much to discard a venerable system of government as to expunge from it the corrupt and tainted elements.⁵⁰

In his work, Velleius presents the course of events in a continuous flow. He notes no changes in government, no restriction of freedom and certainly no Roman Revolution as Syme would have it. With this view on his own history in mind, it might be easier for us to understand why he would describe Augustus as he does.

Until now, we have reviewed aspects of Velleius' life and work and how they may have influenced his perception of the role of Augustus and his successor. To get an idea on his view on Augustus' role in the Roman world we will, in the next section, look at how his style influences the reading of his text. Secondly, we will review Velleius' perspective on the state: does he think himself to be living in a republic, or an empire? Finally, the titles he uses to address Augustus will be discussed.

The text

When reading through the *opus* quickly, it is not very strange that Syme referred to it as government propaganda. Velleius' descriptions of both Augustus and Tiberius are almost exclusively positive, at worst neutral. However, for reasons discussed before, it is more likely that his descriptions are a mix between his enthusiasm for both Caesars and his stylistic choices. Loeb library explains: 'All the colours of the poet and the rhetorician are applied with lavish hand where he aspires to fine writing: rhetorical questions, exclamations, and even apostrophe; rhetorical rhythm, laboured antitheses, glittering epigrams, sometimes far-fetched,

⁴⁷ Idem.

⁴⁸ There are historians who believe he began writing earlier, because of the scope of the work. It might be that he simply injected his praises of Vinicius at a later time. It is also possible that he simply knew earlier than 29 C.E. See Woodman(1975), 280-82 and Steffen (1954), 2.

⁴⁹ Vel.Pat., 2.64-67. Most of his description consists of lamenting the death of Cicero and the lack of loyalty to the proscribed.

⁵⁰ Yardley and Barrett, *Velleius Paterculus, The Roman History*, xxxv.

and excessive hyperbole.⁵¹ Let us look at an example from the text to show that, while at first glance his descriptions might seem over the top, they are actually a result of this interesting mix of style and enthusiasm. This next fragment is the description of the birth year of Augustus:

No slight prestige is added to the consulship of Cicero by the birth in that year—ninety-two years ago—of the emperor Augustus, who was destined by his greatness to overshadow all men of all races.⁵²

When seen in isolation, the comment on Augustus overshadowing all men cannot be seen as anything other than adoration and the term “excessive hyperbole” does certainly not overstate the matter. However, apart from the fact that in Velleius’ perspective Augustus did much to earn this title, there is more to it. When put in the context of the rest of the chapter, this comment is not much more than a passing remark on the birth of Augustus. He is, after all, talking about Cicero’s consulate and the ‘ushering in of the time of some other great men’.⁵³ This use of exaggeration, which does not limit itself to the descriptions of Augustus and Tiberius, has given critics reason not to trust the history as told by Velleius.⁵⁴ However, while he exaggerates, he does represent the voice of the equestrian order and should therefore not be discarded.

With this in mind, let us move on to Velleius’ description of the state under Augustus. He gives an overview of the achievements of Augustus after he had defeated Marc Anthony and ended the civil wars:

There is nothing that man can desire from the gods, nothing that the gods can grant to a man, nothing that wish can conceive or good fortune bring to pass, which Augustus on his return to the city did not bestow upon the republic, the Roman people, and the world. The civil wars were ended after twenty years, foreign wars suppressed, peace restored, the frenzy of arms everywhere lulled to rest; (...) The old traditional form of the republic was restored.⁵⁵

First, Velleius proclaims the old traditional republic to be restored on the return of Augustus. He goes on listing all the good things that were the result of this, such as the return of agriculture, respect for religion and freedom from anxiety. He therefore sees the return of Augustus as the end of a tumultuous age, not as the start of a new one. Secondly, his descriptions of the achievements of Augustus are remarkably close to Augustus’ *Res Gestae*. It seems that he takes his chances here to praise Augustus on the virtues he would have liked to be remembered by. At least it shows the influence his primary sources had on his work, although he does not always agree with them.⁵⁶

⁵¹ *Consulatui Ciceronis non mediocre adiecit decus natus eo anno divus Augustus abhinc annos lxxxii, omnibus omnium gentium viris magnitudine sua inducturus caliginem.*

Loeb Classical Library, *Velleius Paterculus, Compendium of Roman History*, Introduction, xvi.

⁵² Vel.Pat., 2.36.1. Velleius himself does not call Augustus an emperor, but Loeb translates *princeps* in this manner.

⁵³ Vel.Pat., 2.36.1-2.

⁵⁴ See for example Ronald Syme, ‘Mendacity in Velleius.’ *The American Journal of Philology* 99, no. 1 (1978) 45–63.

⁵⁵ Vel.Pat., 2.89.1-3

⁵⁶ There are multiple influences of other authors to be spotted, for example Pompeius Trogus (see Yardley 2003). Velleius himself mentions Cato and Hortensius.

Apart from this description of the restoration of the republic, Velleius' use of titles also shows that he did not see Augustus or Tiberius as working outside of the republican framework. His most used term to describe their position is of course *princeps*. He uses *dux* just once to describe Octavian's command of his fleet at Actium.⁵⁷ *Dominus* is not used at all. It is hard to say what kind of associations he had with the term *princeps*, but there is a chapter on Tiberius which might be helpful to give an indication:

There was, however, in one respect what might be called a struggle in the state, as, namely, the senate and the Roman people wrestled with Caesar to induce him to succeed to the position of his father, while he on his side strove for permission to play the part of a citizen on a parity with the rest rather than that of an emperor[*principem*] over all. At last he was prevailed upon rather by reason than by the honour, since he saw that whatever he did not undertake to protect was likely to perish. He is the only man to whose lot it has fallen to refuse the Principate for a longer time, almost, than others had fought to secure it.⁵⁸

Again, there are two interesting comments in this fragment. First, Velleius contrasts the will of Tiberius to be on par with the rest of the citizens with the role of *princeps*, where he would be the most prominent of them all. It is therefore clear to Velleius that Augustus stood above everyone else, since he describes here the fact that Tiberius was in doubt whether to accept the position that his father had held. This would provide evidence that the use of *princeps* does mean a special role for Augustus and Tiberius. While this was most certainly the case, it is interesting that Velleius does not seem to think that this was anything new. This is illustrated by the last sentence, where he refers to the fact that Tiberius was the only man who has refused the position of *princeps* for a longer time than others who had fought to secure it. This phrasing would be weird if the title had carried a special meaning for only Augustus and Tiberius, because the sentence implies that there have been multiple others, not just one. It seems therefore that Velleius does not seem to think the position of Augustus and Tiberius to be something new.

In this chapter, I have tried to show Velleius' perspective on the role of Augustus in the Republic, by showing how his background has influenced his views and why he wrote the *opus*. Because of his close association with both Caesars and his equestrian background, he can only have seen them in a positive light, something which is demonstrated throughout the chapter dedicated to these two *principes*. Also, although his adoration is dressed in hyperboles, his views should be treated in the same light as other Roman writers. Finally, through analysis of the terminology used to refer to Augustus and Tiberius, it is shown that Velleius did not think that the position of Augustus and Tiberius was unprecedented, and thus that he sees no political break between the age of Augustus and previous times. In the next chapter, we will look at a different Roman author, Suetonius, whose work will be analyzed in a similar way as done here.

Suetonius and Augustus

As we are concerned here with Suetonius' view on Augustus, we will mainly focus on the second part of that work, the *Life of Augustus*. However, as I will discuss below, the *Lives*

⁵⁷ Vel.Pat., 2.85.3

⁵⁸ Vel.Pat., 2.124.2

should definitely be seen as a whole, meaning that the individual biographies are all interconnected. Before continuing with our analysis, I first want to quickly discuss how the passing of a century between Velleius and Suetonius might have influenced the views Romans had about the Principate of Augustus.

The First Century

The most obvious “change” between the time of Velleius and that of Suetonius is the fact that the Principate had aged and that its flaws had become apparent. While Velleius still lived in a time of prosperity under Augustus and partly under Tiberius, the period thereafter had seen *principes* as Caligula, Nero and Domitian, who did not manage to impress the people of Rome favorably. Suetonius claims that even Tiberius was already a bad ruler, writing about his death:

The people were so glad of his death, that at the first news of it some ran about shouting, "Tiberius to the Tiber," while others prayed to Mother Earth and the Manes to allow the dead man no abode except among the damned. Still others threatened his body with the hook and the Stairs of Mourning, especially embittered by a recent outrage, added to the memory of his former cruelty.⁵⁹

The experience of both good and bad rulers would probably have changed people’s views of the imperial family and such blind admiration as Velleius had for Tiberius is not present in Suetonius.⁶⁰ He seems to be aware that all men have both condemning and redeeming qualities, a theme that runs throughout his work.⁶¹ A second aspect of this is that the institution of the Principate had had time to settle. While Augustus had held a special position in the time of Velleius, his position was a prelude to many other *principes* after him. These men all filled their office in their own way, in the process changing the position of the *princeps*. Especially under Domitian there was little freedom left for senators and equestrians.⁶² Suetonius could thus draw on experiences of the Principate that were not available to Velleius. We can now turn to the circumstances of Suetonius’ life, which would also have affected his perspective on Augustus’ Principate.

Suetonius’ Life and Career

As Baldwin notes in the opening sentence of his chapter on Suetonius’ life: ‘the career of Suetonius Tranquillus, in terms of genuine evidence, is a depressingly finite topic.’⁶³ As a result, Suetonius’ date of birth is unsure. It is usually dated to around 70 C.E. but estimates

⁵⁹ Suet. *Tib.* 74.1

⁶⁰ Pliny the Younger did write favourably about Trajan in his *Panegyric in praise of Trajan* after his appointment to the consulship.

⁶¹ Barry Baldwin, *Suetonius*, (Amsterdam: A.M. Hakkert 1983), p.214.

⁶² On Domitian’s autocracy, see Brian Jones, *The Emperor Domitian*, (London: Routledge 1992), in particular pp. 161-162.

⁶³ Baldwin, *Suetonius*, 1.

vary.⁶⁴ Said date is mainly based on Suetonius' reference to himself as *adulescens* twenty years after Nero's death and as *adulescentulus* around the time of Domitian's Jewish tax.⁶⁵ Suetonius seems to have been born in a family of relative wealth and he must have enjoyed an education which provided him with rhetorical and literary tools, as evidenced by the career upon which he embarked once an adult. He tried first to start a career in advocacy⁶⁶, and then started to perform duties associated with someone belonging to the equestrian order. In neither career he seems to have been successful.⁶⁷ During this time, he probably also filled some minor military posts, as Pliny secured a military tribunate for Suetonius around 101, although Suetonius seems to have transferred it to a relative.⁶⁸ During Trajan's reign he was appointed to the *decuriae iudicium*, serving as a juror for legal cases. He must have then climbed the administrative ladder in Trajan's service, serving first as a *studiis*, then as a *bibliothecis* and finally under Hadrian as *ab epistulis*.⁶⁹ In these positions, he must have gained access to the imperial library, so he is likely to have had access to sources that other writers might not have had. He was also deeply familiar with the *Res Gestae*, which is a topic that will be discussed in more detail below.

An important factor in acquiring these positions was the patronage of Pliny the Younger. Pliny seems to have been an important figure in Suetonius' life. In the collection of letters of Pliny as we now have it, four of them are addressed to Suetonius, while he is the protagonist of two more.⁷⁰ As Suetonius' patron, he promised to postpone a lawsuit after Suetonius had had a bad dream about the lawsuit, he secured for him a military tribunate, the *ius trium liberorum* and he supported Suetonius' literary career.⁷¹ It is important to keep this in mind, because as his patron he might have been able to influence Suetonius' writing. For example, since Pliny seems to have been an admirer of Trajan, this could have prevented Suetonius from criticizing his regime.⁷²

There are thus three aspects that might have influenced Suetonius' perspective on the Principate. First, he came from an equestrian background and does not seem to have been connected to the Senate.⁷³ This is important, because the equestrian order had benefited

⁶⁴ For a discussion on his date of birth, see Baldwin, *Suetonius*, 3-11.

⁶⁵ Loeb Classical Library, Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, Volume 1, (Harvard University Press 2020), Introduction, 2.

⁶⁶ In a letter to Suetonius, Pliny mentions that Suetonius had had a bad dream about an upcoming lawsuit and tells him not to worry, for he had experienced the same thing. See Pliny, *Ep.* 1.18.

⁶⁷ Loeb, *Lives of the Caesars*, Volume 1, Introduction, 3.

⁶⁸ Henry A. Sanders, "Suetonius in the Civil Service under Hadrian." *The American Journal of Philology* 65, no. 2 (1944), 113-23, on 118-119.

⁶⁹ For a description of these offices, see Loeb, *Lives of the Caesars*, Volume 1, Introduction, 4.

⁷⁰ Baldwin, *Suetonius*, 9.

⁷¹ Sanders, 'Suetonius in the Civil Service under Hadrian.', 113-114.

⁷² There is no evidence that Suetonius actually had any criticism on Trajan's regime and he is no subject of the *Lives*, but there seems to be some criticism on other regimes present in the *Lives*, so it is not impossible to think that criticism, albeit veiled, would be present. For Pliny's admiration of Trajan, see his *Panegyricus*.

⁷³ Although the office *ab epistulis* seems to be an important office, up to Domitian's reign it was held by a freedman and can therefore not be associated with the Senate.

greatly under the Principate. They were promoted to high offices under Augustus, as counterweight to the senators. His successors followed this trend. This means that while the power of the senators had been waning, the equestrian order had been given more authority than before. Therefore, he did not share the possible complaints that senators might have had, especially after the reign of Domitian.⁷⁴ Second, past experiences might have had an impact on the general thinking of the Roman people, therefore changing the perspective on the earlier rule of Augustus. In the first years after the civil wars, the new Principate must have been a welcome change, since it was a time of relative peace. However, Augustus' successors, such as Nero or Domitian, made it clear that the welfare of the citizens could be influenced by the arbitrary decisions of a *princeps*. The admiration shown by Velleius could hardly have been possible after these reigns. Finally, the patronage of Pliny and his employment in the imperial office might have affected his use of sources and his outlook on imperial government, as evidenced from his letters.⁷⁵

*The Lives of the Caesars*⁷⁶

Suetonius composed many literary works during his lifetime.⁷⁷ One of the last of these were the *Lives of the Caesars*.⁷⁸ His works contain much information about Roman lifestyle, particularly because Suetonius takes a keen interest in daily life. The fact that he had already done so much research on the Roman way of life, as evidenced by titles such as *On Roman spectacles and Games* or *On the institution of offices*, must have helped him in writing this work.⁷⁹ The *Lives of the Caesars* contains an overview of the lives of the twelve *principes* preceding Trajan. The content of the *Lives* is mainly biographical in nature. Besides trying to present a factual account of each *princeps*' life, he is therefore also interested in the stories that circulated about them. Suetonius' focus is much more on the person behind the *princeps* than on the institution itself.⁸⁰

There are three aspects of the *Lives* that I want to highlight here, since they are of particular importance to my central argument, and because they will give us an idea as to why Augustus is presented as he is and what influenced this decision. First, I want to examine Suetonius' choice to start the *Lives* with Julius Caesar and not with Augustus. This relates

⁷⁴ Although freedom as a whole was restricted under Domitian, it was the senators that seem to have suffered most. Under Trajan the Senate had much more freedom to operate than under Domitian.

⁷⁵ In *Ep.* 5.10 Pliny urges Suetonius to publish a work he is writing. Although he does not give him advice on the work itself in this letter, Pliny's involvement seems clear enough.

⁷⁶ I will discuss the whole collection of the *Lives*, with of course a focus on the *Life of Augustus*. It would be wrong to separate the two, since they are connected in several ways.

⁷⁷ The 10th century Suda lexicon attributes about 9 titles to him, but there are more. Loeb mentions about 18 in total. See Loeb, *Lives of the Caesars, Volume 1*, Introduction, 5.

⁷⁸ For the date of publishing of the *Lives of the Caesars*, see Tristan Power, 'Pliny, Letters 5.10 and the Literary Career of Suetonius.' *The Journal of Roman Studies* 100 (2010), 140-62, on 140. For a list of his other works, see Loeb, *Lives of the Caesars, Volume 1*, Introduction, 5-6.

⁷⁹ See previous note.

⁸⁰ Baldwin, *Suetonius*, 214.

closely to the structure of the *Lives*, which I will also discuss. Finally, I want to review Suetonius' use of sources.

The reason for Suetonius to include Julius Caesar in his list of *Caesars* has to be understood against the background of the re-appreciation of the dictator under Trajan, due to his ambition to imitate Caesar's conquests. After a century of obscurity, Trajan used Caesar's image on imperial coinage and modelled his Equus Traiani on the statue of Julius Caesar on his forum.⁸¹ Pliny also mentions Caesar in a list of composers of light poetry.⁸² Suetonius may therefore have been influenced by both his patron and his ruler alike to include Caesar in his work. Secondly, Caesar presents Suetonius with an opportunity to show how a ruler should not behave. As has been observed before, the *Lives* of the twelve *principes* are all interconnected, not only through a common theme but through the fact that they were created with a clear purpose. Why is this important for Suetonius' portrayal of Augustus? In the first place the inclusion of Julius Caesar means that Suetonius apparently saw Julius Caesar as the first of the *Caesars*, not Augustus. Augustus then is a successor of Caesar. This places him outside the framework of the Republic, since Caesar had proclaimed himself dictator. However, the *Lives* are not simply a chronological treatment of successive rulers, but an overview of virtues and vices of each ruler. Julius Caesar here serves as an example. As Bradley puts it:

Caesar went beyond the limits of what was thought acceptable in the pursuit of political power and so paid a just price. It was not that Suetonius objected so much to *dominatio* (how could he?) as to the abuse of *dominatio*, and therein lies the significance of the biography. If Augustus created the ideal of what was acceptable in the autocrat, Caesar revealed the opposite, and throughout the lives Suetonius of course catalogs *vitia* as well as *virtutes*.⁸³

This brings us to the role of Augustus within the *Lives*. As Bradley rightly notes, Augustus functions as an example for his successors to imitate, for better or for worse.⁸⁴ Indeed, the other *Lives* are constantly compared to their *exemplum*.⁸⁵ This does not mean that the portrait of Augustus in the *Lives* is extremely positive, as it is in Velleius' work. Suetonius tries to show that Augustus tried to run his new Republic to the best of his ability, but that even Augustus had shortcomings, which are duly represented. We will turn to this later.

Finally, I want to briefly note something on Suetonius' use of sources. His offices under both Trajan and Hadrian allowed him to obtain information on the imperial correspondence and other official documents. In the *Life of Augustus*, Suetonius notes his sources on numerous occasions. In discussing Augustus' *clementia*, for example, Suetonius implies that he has seen

⁸¹ Joseph Geiger, 'The First Emperor' in: *Afterlives of Augustus, AD 14–2014*, edited by Penelope J. Goodman, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018) 74–86, on 81-82.

⁸² *Idem*, 82.

⁸³ K. R. Bradley, 'Review Article: The Rediscovery of Suetonius.' *Classical Philology* 80, no. 3 (1985): 254-65, on 264.

⁸⁴ Rebecca Langlands, 'Exemplary Influences and Augustus' Pernicious Moral Legacy' in: *Suetonius the Biographer*, edited by Tristan Power and Roy K. Gibson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), 111-129, on 112

⁸⁵ See for instance *Calig.* 25.1

the letters written by Cicero.⁸⁶ He also often refers to stories told about Augustus by others, for example by Marc Antony.⁸⁷ This shows that Suetonius not only included official documents, which might be biased towards Augustus, but also allegations brought forth by his opponents, whether he believed in them or not. There is also no doubt that in all of this Suetonius used the *Res Gestae*.⁸⁸ He was thus familiar with the *princeps* Augustus wanted to be viewed as, but also the one he was in reality.

We have so far looked at general aspects of the *Augustus*, to examine the influences of the genre, structure and the sources on the portrayal of Augustus. We will now turn to the text itself, to see whether there are hints in the terminology on how Suetonius viewed the role of Augustus as *princeps*. First, we will again look at how Augustus is being represented. Secondly, we will discuss the way Suetonius refers to Augustus in the text. Finally, we will analyze Suetonius' view on Augustus' role in the Principate.

The text

We have already seen that for Suetonius Augustus was the example for the *principes* that came after him. In the *Life of Augustus*, Suetonius does not try to correctly portray Augustus' personality, but to use his person to explain a virtue or a vice. This becomes clear when we compare for example *Aug.13.1* and *Aug.21.2*:

He did not use his victory with moderation, but after sending Brutus's head to Rome, to be cast at the feet of Caesar's statue, he vented his spleen upon the most distinguished of his captives, not even sparing them insulting language.⁸⁹

But he never made war on any nation without just and due cause, and he was so far from desiring to increase his dominion or his military glory at any cost, that he forced the chiefs of certain barbarians to take oath in the temple of Mars the Avenger that they would faithfully keep the peace for which they asked⁹⁰

When reading them separately, it does not seem to be about the same person. However, it is Suetonius' goal to list both virtues and vices, as to give an account on how a *princeps* should or should not behave. He uses the lives of the *principes*, in this case that of Augustus to illustrate this. In these fragments, he gives both an example and a counterexample of the virtue *moderatio*. I do not think this is a coincidence. It seems to me then that Suetonius did not care much for representing the "real" Augustus at all; it is only as an example against the other

⁸⁶ *Aug.3.2.: ut epistulae M. Ciceronis extant*

⁸⁷ *Aug.10.4, Aug. 23.1-24.1 and Aug.70.1* are examples, but there are many more occasions.

⁸⁸ Baldwin, *Suetonius*, 133.

⁸⁹ *Aug.13.1*

⁹⁰ *Aug.21.2*

principes that he fulfills his purpose.⁹¹

Interesting is also the fact that Suetonius does not once refer to Augustus by a title. He uses *princeps* only to describe either his successors or other prominent men.⁹² This has to do with his genre, because since it is biographical, he refers to his subjects in third person. His terminology will then yield no proof as to his views about Augustus' position. Suetonius does however make clear his thoughts on the position of Augustus in the state:

He twice thought of restoring the republic; first immediately after the overthrow of Antony, remembering that his rival had often made the charge that it was his fault that it was not restored; and again in the weariness of a lingering illness, when he went so far as to summon the magistrates and the senate to his house, and submit an account of the general condition of the empire. Reflecting, however, that as he himself would not be free from danger if he should retire, so too it would be hazardous to trust the State to the control of more than one, he continued to keep it in his hands; and it is not easy to say whether his intentions or their results were the better. His good intentions he not only expressed from time to time, but put them on record as well in an edict in the following words: "May it be my privilege to establish the State in a firm and secure position, and reap from that act the fruit that I desire; but only if I may be called the author of the best possible government, and bear with me the hope when I die that the foundations which I have laid for the State will remain unshaken." And he realized his hope by making every effort to prevent any dissatisfaction with the new régime.⁹³

As noted by Bradley, Suetonius was not necessarily against imperial government, but against bad government.⁹⁴ That is reflected in this passage. While Augustus did think about restoring the republic, he did not, because he believed the republic would be better off under his personal rule. Suetonius does not outright disagree with him. Instead, he notes that 'it is not easy to say whether his intentions or their results were the better'. So while he recognizes the new rule under Augustus, he at least credits Augustus for his good intentions. He was also aware that while the *principes* had all the power in hands, it did not constitute a monarchy.⁹⁵ However, we may note that after a century had passed, it was now apparent that the rule of Augustus did indeed represent a break with the past and was not a continuation of history, as Velleius would have it.

In this analysis of Suetonius and his *Life of Augustus*, I have tried to show that there were several reasons for Suetonius to have a different perspective on Augustus than Velleius. The passing of a century had a bigger influence than we might expect, since we tend to work in terms of a first century C.E. Due to the fact that Suetonius had more experiences to draw on, his view of Augustus is necessarily a different one than Velleius had. Suetonius could draw on stories about good and bad examples of *principes* and had lived through the reign of Domitian, who ruled as an autocrat. Besides the passing of a century, Suetonius also had a different goal

⁹¹ The contrast with Suetonius' Caesar and especially Tiberius is strong, therefore making the comparison even more potent.

⁹² *Aug.*31.5, *Aug.*66.3, *Aug.*21.2, *Aug.*29.4 and *Aug.*50.1

⁹³ *Aug.*28.1-2

⁹⁴ See footnote 26

⁹⁵ Loeb, *Lives of the Caesars, Volume 1*, Introduction, 22.

than Velleius. He focused mainly on portraying the virtues and vices of the *principes*, to provide an example of good and bad qualities for a *princeps* to have. This also changed his view on the role of Augustus, because he was always thinking in terms of virtue or vice, not necessarily focussing on facts. He therefore presents Augustus as thinking about what is best for the state, as all *principes* should. Because of the difficulty of establishing Suetonius' true view on the role of Augustus, it is fruitful to look at the work of his contemporary, Tacitus, to explore what he has to say about Augustus' role within the Principate.

Tacitus and Augustus

In the opening lines of his chapter about Tacitus' influence on Syme, Toher notes: 'Only two ancient historians, Tacitus and Thucydides, have had a direct and enduring influence on how modern historians understand and write history.'⁹⁶ While it is not the goal of this paper to discuss the influence of Roman authors on modern historians, it is important to keep in mind that Tacitus' views have had an immense influence especially on modern historians, especially through Gibbon and Syme. In fact, Syme's Augustus in *The Roman Revolution* is largely based on the writings of Tacitus. Because of this influence on modern historians, it is worthwhile to analyze Tacitus' perspective on the role of Augustus in the Principate. I will treat Tacitus in the same way as I have done with both Velleius and Suetonius. First, we will establish the facts about his life and career and see what influences these might have had on his views. Secondly, we will look at the work, in this case the *Annals* and analyze any perspectives on Augustus and his rule that can be detected here. Finally, we will discuss the text itself and see whether Tacitus' judgement is positive or negative, but also how he refers to Augustus.

Life and Career

Cornelius Tacitus was born around 56 C.E., during the Principate of Nero. The Cornelius Tacitus referred to in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* might be his father.⁹⁷ Since his father is referred to as the procurator of Belgica and the two Germanies, it is relatively certain he came from a well-to-do, if not wealthy, family. In 77 or 78 he married the daughter of Gnaeus Julius Agricola.⁹⁸ Agricola would later be the subject of one of Tacitus' minor works. His career followed the traditional *cursus honorum*. He was chosen as one of the *Quindecimviri sacris faciundis* around 80, was then elected *quaestor Augusti* in 81 and praetor in 88. In 97 he even rose to the consulship, albeit as one of four suffect consuls of that year. In 112 he was awarded the proconsulship in Asia. This all constitutes a successful career. It is therefore right for Woodman to note that:

⁹⁶ Mark Toher, 'Tacitus' Syme', in: *The Cambridge Companion To Tacitus*, ed. A.J. Woodman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009), 317-329, on 317.

⁹⁷ Plin. *Natural History*.7.76

⁹⁸ All dates are taken from Mathew Owen and Ingo Gildenhard, *Tacitus, Annals, 15.20-23, 33-45: Latin Text, Study Aids with Vocabulary, and Commentary*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers 2013), on 8-10.

Tacitus' smooth progression from office to office – and in particular his relatively early acquisition of a major priesthood and his culminating proconsulship of Asia – bespeak of someone who was more than happy to take advantage of the political opportunities which the system had to offer and whose debt to the emperors listed in the preface to the *Histories* was not inconsiderable. It is thus all the more curious that, as usually interpreted, his treatment of the early empire in the *Annals* represents a general indictment of the system from which he had derived such personal benefit.⁹⁹

Here we have a man who rose to the top with the help of the *principes* that ruled in his lifetime, and yet seems to criticize that institution in his literary works. Tacitus himself knows that he owes much of his career to the *principes*, stating in the *Histories*: 'I cannot deny that my political career owed its beginning to Vespasian; that Titus advanced it; and that Domitian carried it further.'¹⁰⁰ Considering that, why would Tacitus want to discredit the institution that brought him in a position of such prestige? A part of the answer may lie exactly in that position of prestige, his position in the Senate. As noted in the discussion of Suetonius' life, the senatorial order had been declining in power since the establishment of the Principate. The senators now occupied a paradoxical position in the field of power, for on the one hand they governed the empire together with the *princeps*. On the other hand, they were subordinate to the *princeps*, who had to keep the Senate in control and under his influence.¹⁰¹ This paradox might also have been present in Tacitus' thinking. We will explore this paradox further when analysing the text and the structure of the work. First, we turn to the work itself, *The Annals*, to discuss the date of composition, the goal of the text and its structure.

The Annals

Like the other works treated here, trying to determine the date of composition of *The Annals* amounts to guesswork. It is commonly assumed that it was written under the reign of Trajan and that writing began only after Tacitus had finished the *Histories*, which he did in about 110, twelve years after its conception.¹⁰² If he would have begun writing immediately, he would have had eight years to finish the work under Trajan. I have to agree with Birley that, since the *Annals* was both longer than the *Histories* and about a period of time less known to its author, he could not possibly have finished the *Annals* in eight years. It would have taken him at least as much time as the *Histories*, if not longer. This would mean that he wrote the work partly under Hadrian. Why does this matter? To quote Birley:

If, as seems highly probable, Tacitus composed the great bulk under Hadrian, not perhaps completing the eighteen books before the sixth year of that emperor, how far was he influenced by present events?

⁹⁹ A.J. Woodman, *Tacitus: The Annals*, (Hackett Publishing Company 2004), xi.

¹⁰⁰ *Tac.Hist.* 1.1

¹⁰¹ Owen and Gildenhard, *Tacitus, Annals, 15.20-23, 33-45*, 12.

¹⁰² Anthony R. Birley, 'The Life and Death of Cornelius Tacitus.', *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 49, no. 2 (2000), 230-47, on 241-2.

He had chosen not to write of Trajan. But Trajan and the eastern wars might be illuminated by the *Annales*, indirectly yet powerfully - and so might Hadrian.¹⁰³

If the purpose of the *Annals* was to implicitly criticize the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian, this changes our approach to Tacitus. Opening the *Annals*, Tacitus states that he will 'treat a small part (the concluding one) of Augustus' reign, then the Principate of Tiberius and its sequel, without anger and without partiality, from the motives of which I stand sufficiently removed.'¹⁰⁴ Since there are many examples of fragments in the *Annals* which seem to show Tacitus' opinion, his goal of treating the Principate without anger and partiality can hardly have been reached.¹⁰⁵ As I have argued previously, however, Suetonius wanted to use Augustus' life as an example for all *principes*, while it thus seems that Tacitus wanted to express his doubts about the Principate. It is in this light that I believe we must read his account of the earlier *principes*. We will explore this notion further when we come to our analysis of the text. First, I want to briefly touch upon the structure of the work, to begin with the year that Tacitus chose to start his work with. As it happens, the *Annals* was not actually titled this way by Tacitus. The manuscript we have that preserved the opening books, presents it under the title of *Ab excessu divi Augusti*.¹⁰⁶ As this title suggests, the work starts with the death of Augustus. For a work that treats the entire Julio-Claudian dynasty, this is quite an odd place to start. Why exclude Augustus (or Julius Caesar¹⁰⁷)? There are two reasons which seem plausible. Tacitus himself gives us the first:

But, while the glories and disasters of the old Roman commonwealth have been chronicled by famous pens, and intellects of distinction were not lacking to tell the tale of the Augustan age, until the rising tide of sycophancy deterred them, the histories of Tiberius and Caligula, of Claudius and Nero, were falsified through cowardice while they flourished, and composed, when they fell, under the influence of still rankling hatreds.¹⁰⁸

According to Tacitus, Augustus had received enough treatment by others, who were still capable (or allowed) to write decent history under his reign. He may have alluded here to Cicero's letters, or Livy, who wrote a Roman history up until 9 B.C.E, therefore also including a part Augustus' rule. However, there were also plenty of historians in the first century who had written about the other *principes*, Velleius, who dedicated a part of his Roman history to the treatment of Tiberius, being a good example. Did they not write histories satisfactory to Tacitus? Apparently not. Given the way Tacitus portrays Tiberius in his *Annals*, it seems that

¹⁰³ Birley, 'The Life and Death of Cornelius Tacitus.', 242.

¹⁰⁴ Tac.*Ann.* 1.1.

¹⁰⁵ See for example Tac.*Ann.* 1.2 about the weakness of the nobility or Tac.*Ann.* 1.6 for Tacitus' opinion of Livia.

¹⁰⁶ Owen and Goldenhard, *Tacitus, Annals*, 15.20-23, 33-45, 22.

¹⁰⁷ A reason for Tacitus to add Julius Caesar would be the influence of Trajan and Pliny, as it was for Suetonius. The fact that Tacitus does not start there might hint again at a composition date under Hadrian instead of under Trajan, for reasons explained earlier..

¹⁰⁸ Tac.*Ann.* 1.1.

he did not agree with Velleius on the subject of Tiberius' rule. He therefore might have wished to write his own history about Tiberius, to correct the "misinformation" given by Velleius. The point here is that Tacitus must have thought the accounts on Augustus to be satisfactory as they were, even if they were rather positive in comparison, since he does not treat Augustus' rule in the same way as the other Julio-Claudian leaders. This observation brings us to the second reason Tacitus might have started at Augustus' death: he did not actually have a problem with the rule of Augustus, but simply with how the Principate was shaped after his death. Of course, to say that Tacitus was wholly positive about Augustus would take it too far, but I am convinced that, in contrast to the other *principes*, his account of Augustus' rule was rather neutral. I will show this using some examples from the *Annals*. After that, I will show that the reason Tacitus simply could not be positive about any *princeps*, and that this attitude is to be explained by his Tacitus' adherence to the Republican ideals. Finally, I want to survey his use of terminology in referring to Augustus, to establish a full picture of his perspective on the role of Augustus.

Although Tacitus claims his work to begin at the death of Augustus, he does dedicate two paragraphs to his rule all the same.¹⁰⁹ The purpose of these two paragraphs, however, is not to sketch a brief outline of Augustus' rule: his goal is to show how it was possible that the power shifted from the Senate to rulers like Tiberius and later Nero and Domitian. Let us look at some examples that make clear this aim. In *Ann.*1.2., Tacitus tells his reader how Augustus became master of the Roman world:

after laying down his triumviral title and proclaiming himself a simple consul content with tribunician authority to safeguard the commons, he first conciliated the army by gratuities, the populace by cheapened corn, the world by the amenities of peace, then step by step began to make his ascent and to unite in his own person the functions of the senate, the magistracy, and the legislature.¹¹⁰

According to Tacitus, the Roman people got lulled into accepting the rule of one man. The Latin verbs Tacitus chose are proof of this. Tacitus says the world was won over or distracted (*pellexit*) by these gifts of money, corn and peace. In the next sentence, he says that all the opposition ceased to exist (*cecidissent*) through the proscription. However, it also ceased to exist because 'the rest of the nobility found a cheerful acceptance of slavery the smoothest road to wealth and office'. His criticism thus works both ways: Augustus is to be criticized for ending the freedom of the Republic and the populace (especially the nobility) for accepting it. That Tacitus criticism is mainly focused on the waning of Republican ways is made clear by the next fragment, where Tacitus is discussing the consequences of the Augustan rule:

It was thus an altered world, and of the old, unspoilt Roman character not a trace lingered. Equality was an outworn creed, and all eyes looked to the mandate of the sovereign—with no immediate misgivings,

¹⁰⁹ *Tac. Ann.* 1.2-3.

¹¹⁰ *Tac. Ann.* 1.2.

so long as Augustus in the full vigour of his prime upheld himself, his house, and peace.¹¹¹

The consolidation of power in the hands of Augustus made the nobility dependent on the will of the *princeps*, something Tacitus clearly despises. Everyone was *exuta aequalitate*, stripped of equality. As long as they were dependent on Augustus, this was acceptable, because he was a capable leader. However, the fact that he cleared the way for other *principes* after him, who were not able to uphold themselves, needs to be recognized according to Tacitus. It is in this light that I think we should understand Tacitus' inclusion of Augustus in the *Annals*.

It is also in this light that we should analyze Tacitus' perspective on the role of Augustus in the Roman world. Tacitus lamented the fact that the Republic and its morals had faded. However, where Velleius had claimed that Augustus restored the Republic, Tacitus claims the Republic ceased to exist under Augustus. The comment at the end of *Annals* 1.3 exemplifies this view: 'How many remained who had seen the Republic?'¹¹² It is therefore clear that Tacitus did not see Augustus as part of the Republic. What role did Augustus have then, according to Tacitus? He is not particularly clear about this, probably because he thought that his audience would understand. However, there are some references as to the role of Augustus, which we will discuss now.

In *Ann.* 1.9 Tacitus sums up the positive remarks that 'men of intelligence' had made in reference to the rule of Augustus. Here we are told that 'when Lepidus grew old and indolent, and Antony succumbed to his vices, the sole remedy for his distracted country was government by one man. Yet he organized the state, not by instituting a monarchy or a dictatorship, but by creating the title of First Citizen.'¹¹³ This seems to imply that Augustus tried to do what was best by claiming for himself a position from which he was able to organize the state. The Latin is interesting here, especially the last part: *sed principis nomine constitutam rem publicam*. I just showed that Tacitus thought the Republic had ended with Augustus, so why would he write that Augustus restored the Republic after all? Apart from the fact that Tacitus is probably not stating his own opinion here, the ambiguity has to do with his use of *res publica*.¹¹⁴ He refers to both governments (before and after Augustus) as *res publica*. Of course, *res publica* does not necessarily mean Republic, but can also mean the state or public matters. However, Tacitus makes an interesting distinction between the *res publica* before and after Augustus. As seen above (cf. 59), he laments the fact that no-one was still alive who had seen the Republic. It is clear here that he does actually mean the Republic, as opposed to the state. Interesting in this respect is this next fragment about Tiberius: 'For in every action of Tiberius the first step had to be taken by the consuls, as though the old republic (*vetere re*

¹¹¹ Tac.*Ann.* 1.4.

¹¹² quotus quisque reliquus, qui rem publicam vidisset?, Tac.*Ann.* 1.3. This is my own translation, since I think Loeb's translation does not capture Tacitus' disappointment.

¹¹³ Tac.*Ann.* 1.9., again by Loeb.

¹¹⁴ I cannot go into detail about this not being Tacitus' opinion, but Shotter makes a good case for it. He shows that Tacitus here tries to show the contemporary views about Augustus at the time of his death. See D. C. A. Shotter, 'The Debate on Augustus (Tacitus, "Annals" I 9-10).' *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series, 20, no. 2 (1967), 171-74.

publica) were in being, and himself undecided whether to reign or no.¹¹⁵ Tacitus here explicitly refers to the old *res publica*, as opposed to the one under Tiberius. Although Augustus thus claimed to have restored the Republic, Tacitus shows his disagreement by separating the old, good Republic and the new, “fake” one.

Continuing this line of thought, I want to return to a term that I have intentionally left without explanation in the previous section. In *Ann.* 1.9, Tacitus uses the term *principis nomine*. Opening the *Annals*, he writes that:

Neither Cinna nor Sulla created a lasting despotism: Pompey and Crassus quickly forfeited their power to Caesar, and Lepidus and Antony their swords to Augustus. who, under the style of “Prince,” gathered beneath his empire a world outworn by civil broils.¹¹⁶

Again, instead of referring to Augustus simply as *princeps*, he uses *principis nomine*. We have seen the term *princeps* before, as both Velleius and Suetonius used the term to describe the position of Augustus and his successors. I translated *princeps nomine* before as “in the name of *princeps*”. I think this means that Tacitus wants to stress that, while Augustus and his successors are styled *princeps*, this is just a convenient term to cover up the fact that their rule is as good as absolute. He might have been influenced here by his own life, as he served under Domitian, who wanted to be called *dominus* and thus openly became an absolute ruler. It is very much possible that Tacitus wants to allude to the fact that this was always the case, but was simply hidden behind the facade of the *princeps*.

We have thus seen that Tacitus was very much influenced by his own times in his account of Augustus. Being from the senatorial order and having lived under both Nero and Domitian, he yearned for a return to the old Republic and lamented the fact that it was gone. In his account of Augustus his main goal is to show how the Republic fell into the hands of one man, while the rest of the *Annals* are mostly concerned with why this was a bad thing. His use of *principis nomine* shows his concern about the vanished Republican ideals. Tacitus could not see Augustus without the *principes* of his own days in mind. This also means that he could not present Augustus as being part of the Republic. Although he could not call Augustus a monarch, he effected this by dividing the Republic in two periods: the old, good Republic and the new, “fake” Republic.

Conclusion

In our analysis of the perception of Augustus’ rule we have so far looked at how the individual writers portrayed (their version of) Augustus. Each of these writers had their own goals: Augustus wanted to be remembered as a ruler who obeyed the Republican principles and

¹¹⁵ Tac.*Ann.* 1.7.

¹¹⁶ Non Cinnae, non Sullae longa dominatio; et Pompei Crassique potentia cito in Caesarem, Lepidi atque Antonii arma in Augustum cessere, qui cuncta discordiis civilibus fessa nomine principis sub imperium accepit. Tac.*Ann.* 1.1.

portrayed himself as such. Velleius wanted to show the greatness of Rome by compiling its history. Suetonius needed Augustus as a point of reference to compare the other *principes* to. Tacitus wanted to show how the Principate could have been born out of the Republic. However, while all these writers had their own goals, it is interesting that at the same time they also exhibit some agreement on the character of Augustus, even though we can also spot a development over time. This particular shared attitude is most easily spotted in Velleius, who had lived under the rule of Augustus and had had his support. He called Augustus the one ‘who was destined by his greatness to overshadow all men of all races’.¹¹⁷ For Suetonius, I have shown that Augustus acted as an *exemplum*; this meant that, although Suetonius treats his virtues and his vices, the portrayal of Augustus as *princeps* had to be positive. Finally, Tacitus is not implicitly positive about Augustus, but I have tried to show that his negative attitude is mainly focused on the institution of the Principate and Augustus’ successors, and he gives us at least a neutral account of Augustus’ rule.

From the analysis I have performed in this paper it follows that the adoration that Velleius could still have for Augustus, weakened sensibly over the course of the first century. I have argued (albeit sometimes implicitly) that such a development does not necessarily imply that the Roman perspective on Augustus changed for the worse over time. In my analysis of the backgrounds of the writers I have tried to show that it was in fact mainly the image of the Principate that changed. These Roman writers had experienced different times of the Principate, partly due to the failure of Augustus’ successors and partly due to regrets of lost power. While Velleius grew up in the time of the Pax Augusta and served under Tiberius, who had treated him well, Suetonius and Tacitus grew up under Domitian. By that time, things had changed because rulers like Caligula and Domitian had altered the reputation of the Principate, mainly through their autocratic behavior.¹¹⁸ Suetonius and Tacitus could not, because of their backgrounds, be as positive about the Principate and Augustus in the way that Velleius had been.

With this in mind, what can still be said about the evolution of the perception of Augustus’ rule? Was the transformation of the notion of Augustus as *princeps* to Augustus as emperor already complete when Tacitus wrote his *Annals*? I hope that my analysis makes clear that there was indeed a change in perspective, but I would argue that it was not from *princeps* to emperor, but from *princeps* of the old Republic to *princeps* of the new Republic, the Principate. Velleius could still claim that the old traditional Republic was restored by Augustus. Suetonius believed that Augustus had thought twice about restoring it to its old form, but did not. However, he could still present Augustus as working in a Republican framework, although he knew that the power was concentrated in the hands of Augustus. Tacitus, I have shown, makes a clear difference between the old Republic and the new. He sees the Principate as something inherently different than the Republic. The monarchical (or imperial) view of the Principate is not found in these three authors.

This has consequences for modern scholarship as well: first of all, if we want to present Augustus as he was seen by his contemporaries, we should refer to him as *princeps*. This term

¹¹⁷ See footnote 51.

¹¹⁸ Caligula was the first to style himself *Dominus* and Domitian had continued its use, styling himself *dominus et deus*, while also restricting the Senate’s freedom.

reflects the actual situation better than *emperor* does, since all three writers do claim Augustus to be working in (some sort of) Republic. Perhaps Galinsky was not far off by suggesting the Augustan Republic as some sort of Constitution Plus, where the Republican framework kept existing, with the addition of an influential leader. Secondly, modern scholarship was hugely influenced by Syme's interpretation of Tacitus, which rested on the assumption that Tacitus saw Augustus' rule as autocratic. I have suggested a different way of interpreting Tacitus, which implies that Tacitus was not Republican or monarchical, but somewhere in the middle. This should be taken in consideration if we want to see Augustus in his contemporary context.

There is still much work to be done in analyzing Roman views of Augustus' rule. In this paper, I have focused only on the first century after the death of Augustus, but there are later writers who did much to shape our views, such as Cassius Dio. I would therefore suggest that my line of reasoning is continued to later Roman authors, to see whether the perception of Augustus changes further down the line, to finally represent Augustus as an emperor. It might also be interesting to analyze the term *Caesar* and examine when (or if) this term came to represent the ruler of the Principate instead of *princeps*.

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