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The Dark Side of Augustus' 'Imperial Image'

Christopher Burden-Strevens

Often celebrated as Rome's most successful emperor, Augustus is traditionally credited with ending civil war, establishing the principate, reforming the army and economy, and ushering in an era of prosperity and monumental building. Here, Christopher Burden-Strevens looks at the darker side of Augustus' golden-boy image.

After defeating Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, Octavian became the last man standing at that time who could claim authority over Rome's legions. He held this position for the next 45 years (until his death in 14 AD), making him Rome's longest-reigning emperor, although he never used that word to describe himself. Augustus transformed Rome during this period. According to the biographer Suetonius, he turned it from a city of brick into a city of marble, commissioning massive structures such as the original Pantheon, his Mausoleum, the Altar of Peace, and the Forum of Augustus, built to house the temple of Mars Ultor. These projects were part of a deliberate programme to shape his image as the 're-founder' of Rome after a century of civil war, developing a coherent visual language that celebrated a new golden age of peace and prosperity following the crisis of the Late Republic.

The Golden Boy

In his autobiography, the *Res Gestae* ('My Achievements'), composed just before his death and which was originally carved onto bronze pillars for all to see, he claims:

"Wars, both civil and foreign, I took upon myself across the whole world, by land and sea. And when I had won them, I gave mercy to all citizens who asked me for forgiveness." (Augustus, *Res Gestae* 3)

Thus Augustus positions himself as the re-founder of Rome. He is even better than Romulus, who murdered his own brother Remus; rather than killing citizens of kindred blood, Augustus chooses to give his enemies mercy (*clementia*). Rome's golden age was set.

At least, that is what Augustus himself wanted us to think. This message also found poetic expression in Virgil's *Aeneid*, which tells the story of a refugee prince of Troy who flees to Italy after the Greeks destroy his city. It is Aeneas' destiny to found the town in Italy where Romulus will one day be born. Of course, the poem has as much to do with Augustus' own imperial image as it does with Rome's founding myths:

"This is the man – here he is! – who you've so often heard promised to you: Augustus Caesar, son of a god, who will found a new golden age in Latium, in the fields which Saturn once ruled..." (Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.790–794.)

But how much of this should we take at face value? Perhaps such carefully constructed image-making was necessary precisely because the reality was more complex – and often unpalatable. This is the *princeps* as he wanted to be remembered. But there is a darker, hidden side to his regime that is detectable today only in fragments. And they paint a very different picture.

Hero or Villain?

To begin with, there were clearly competing narratives of how Augustus came to power. No one disputed that he took power in the civil war against Mark Antony – but was he the hero of that story, or the villain? A case in point is the siege of Perugia in 41 BC, when (astoundingly!) Mark Antony’s wife Fulvia took up arms against Augustus, still called ‘Octavian’ at this early stage of his career. When the city finally fell and Mark Antony’s faction was (temporarily) defeated, the question for Octavian was what to do with his surrendered enemies. The historian Appian records that Octavian treated the prisoners with the utmost kindness and mercy, commanding that all be spared (Appian, *Civil Wars* 5.48). This is the ‘Augustan’ version of the story. But compare this with Suetonius:

“After the capture of Perugia he took vengeance on many, meeting all attempts to beg for pardon or to make excuses with the one reply, ‘You must die.’ Some write that he took three hundred prisoners and sacrificed them on the Ides of March”.
(Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 15.1)

There is simply no way to reconcile these fundamentally contradictory images of Octavian the merciful peace-bringer, or Octavian the butcher. We also know from Suetonius that his enemies published pamphlets and letters mocking and accusing him for his crimes. The most shocking of these tell us that Augustus dined richly (dressed as the sun-god Apollo!) while the people of Rome starved. The ‘anti-Augustus’ version of events at Perugia belongs to that same tradition: a whole body of literature which treated Augustus’ ‘golden age’ as a sham of iron and rust. Suetonius names numerous contemporaries of Octavian in his early days who attacked him vigorously in their writings.

Controlling the Narrative

And what became of these writings? One answer is that the *princeps* burned books. Deliberate book-burning by the state was not been practiced in Rome—until Augustus’ time. Writing ‘offensive’ words became, for the first time, treason (*maiestas*), a dramatic change from the freer age of Cicero just a few decades earlier. According to Tacitus, an author called Cassius Severus was the first to fall foul of Augustus’ ‘literary treason’ laws (Tacitus, *Annals* 1.72). Then in 8 AD the historian Titus Labienus was convicted; his works were burned, and he killed himself. And as early as 12 BC, Augustus was already using his office as *pontifex maximus* (High Priest) to order a search for “spurious” books of prophecies and other quasi-religious texts to be burned. We do not know what their contents were; it is not inconceivable that he used a religious pretext as a screen to destroy all sorts of texts.

Commented [CB1]: Very small change here; I’ve removed the reference to the Sybilline Books altogether. Does this work? You’re right that it assumes way too much, and for me to actually explain why it’s significant I’d need to go into a time-consuming essay about associations, precedent and the story of the books setting the limits of the possible....so no.

In this light, it is possible to see Augustus' attempts to control his public image as a much-needed response to currents of widespread criticism. Censorship or the outright destruction of writings was one way of destroying hostile narratives, but there was also a need to *create* a new and positive narrative. The genius of Augustus' imperial image lies in its ability to both create and destroy traditions simultaneously, asserting control over the future as much as the present.

Fending off plots

The 20s BC were surely the most dangerous time of all for the *princeps*. His regime was young, and we have details – often only hazy ones – of numerous plots against his reign or life that began around this time. This tells us, again, that the narrative of the 'golden age' we have inherited today was not universally accepted. Augustus may have been the longest-lived of Rome's emperors, but that was not for want of his enemies trying otherwise.

A particularly murky event is the trial of Marcus Primus in 23 BC. Cassius Dio records the details at *Roman History* 54.3. Primus was governor of Macedonia, and attacked a neighbouring tribe without the Senate's approval. He claimed, in his defence, that Augustus had instructed him to do so; Augustus denied it. In the end, the trial was a shambles. Many senators on the jury believed Primus' story and voted to acquit him. Some of them were so shocked by what they took to be Augustus' lying that they allegedly formed a plot against his life. And when they also were put on trial for treason, many of the jurymen there voted to acquit them too! It was a public relations disaster for the *princeps*, and a demonstration that many in the Senate were not behind him and did not trust him.

An even more infamous example is the fate of his only daughter Julia. It is well-known that Augustus exiled her to a barren island to punish her for the crime of adultery in 2 BC. This was especially embarrassing because he had introduced new laws to punish adultery and promote traditional family values (the Julian Laws) in 18/17 BC. But the Roman scholar Pliny the Elder suggests a very different reason for her exile: she may have been plotting with one of her lovers to take her own father's life (Pliny, *Natural History* 7.149). We have no way today of verifying the truth of this, but it is an indication that the House of Caesar was not a happy one. What we certainly *do* know is that the case of Julia was all the more reason to mock Augustus for his moralising laws, which attempted to control Romans' private behaviour in a way the state had never done before. To many senators, this must have seemed a strange and even infuriating hypocrisy: Suetonius records that Augustus' own adulterous love-affairs were very well known (Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 69). On one occasion some senators even teased him to his face about them! (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 54.16.)

Having the Last Word

Still, the predominant version of Augustus that most of us remember today is the one that his regime sponsored. Augustus the murderer, the adulterer, the hypocrite, and the book-burner ultimately gave way, over the centuries, to the heroic figure familiar to us from the literary and

material culture of his regime: the peace-bringer of the Ara Pacis, the merciful *primus inter pares* (first among equals) of the *Res Gestae*, and the re-founder of Rome in Virgil's *Aeneid*. In that light, it is somewhat ironic that Virgil may never have meant for his epic to be read. A later source tells us that he left instructions in his will for the *Aeneid* to be burned, and never published. But of course, there was no chance of Augustus putting *that* to the torch.

Commented [CB2]: I've made some small changes here; is this a bit safer now?

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Christopher Burden-Strevens lectures in Roman History at the University of Kent. His teaching ranges from the earliest myths surrounding Rome's 'foundation', to the crisis of the Late Republic, and onward to the age of the Roman emperors. He writes on all aspects of Roman political history and is especially fascinated by what coins tell us about the Roman Empire. He is currently working on a project on the 'culture wars' of Julius Caesar's day, looking at the role played by immigration, citizenship, and 'the foreign' in Roman politics. Outside of the lecture theatre he is an avid 'grand strategy' gamer.