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978-0-521-76797-2 - Augustus: Introduction to the Life of an Emperor

Karl Galinsky

Excerpt

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FROM VELITRAE TO CAESAR'S HEIR

Childhood and adolescence, synonymous in our times with “formative years,” did not arouse nearly the same interest in Roman biographers as in their modern counterparts. Concern with developmental psychology was slim at best; just as most characters in ancient literature are presented as fully formed while their different facets are being illuminated, so Roman art generally depicts children as little adults. Reliable information about Augustus’ early life, therefore, is scant and centers on some basic data, such as his birth, and on noteworthy events like the funeral oration he gave in Rome, at an early age, in honor of his grandmother Julia. In addition, and as could be expected in light of his later prominence, there is a goodly number of accretions, most dealing with miracles and portents – there was a public for those – that were clearly later inventions.

AUGUSTUS GETS A “LIFE”

As always, there is the proverbial exception. That in this case is the biography by Augustus’ contemporary, Nicolaus of Damascus, written perhaps around 20 BC. Nicolaus, a highly educated Greek, was not only an extremely versatile author but also a close adviser to Herod the Great and involved in several diplomatic missions, and it is likely that he met Augustus on one of these. The full title of his work is significant: *On the Life of Caesar Augustus and His Agōgē*; *agōgē* connotes upbringing, education, and direction. Given the stature and impact of Augustus, we might expect such a work to be a bestseller, but such was not the case. In fact, it is not cited by any ancient author and owes its survival, which is only partial, to a Byzantine ruler of the tenth century AD. He had it excerpted and then excerpted again: the various passages, sometimes shortened, were assigned to fifty-three subject categories, such as “Virtue and Vice” and “Conspiracies against Kings.” The *Life*, such as we have it in its reassembled state, breaks off amidst the events

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a few months after Julius Caesar's death. Even so, the main significance of Nicolaus' work is that it was based, to a great extent, on the autobiography that Augustus, always the innovator, wrote not late in his life, but in his mid-thirties. Entitled *De vita sua*, it is another work from antiquity that has not survived. Suetonius, for one, used it but does not cite from it directly anywhere in his *Life of Augustus*.

Nicolaus' *Life*, then, is by far the most complete account of Augustus' early years, but how trustworthy is it? "Leave no superlative behind" seems to have been one of Nicolaus' unspoken maxims as his treatment of the young Augustus is panegyrical and then some. Discernibly, it reflects the tenor of Augustus' own *Vita*: a recurring theme is the emphasis on the justness of his actions that needed to be demonstrated after a gruesome thirteen years of civil war, if only to instill confidence in his abilities now that he was sole ruler. But especially when it comes to Augustus the child and adolescent, it is impossible to tell where Augustus' *Vita* leaves off and Nicolaus' begins. Nicolaus may have decided to lay things on yet more thickly. The result is that the youngster emerges as a paragon whose probity was never impeded, even by a cherry tree.

Still, we can use Nicolaus' work judiciously because some topics, such as the influence of Augustus' mother, the young man's respect for his teachers, and his sickliness, sound authentic. There is ample middle ground for us between a lapidary summary of the unchallenged data and a fulsome recital of Nicolaus/Augustus. The result may not be enough for psychohistory, which is not necessarily a drawback, but the future emperor's background readily contributed to shaping his mentality and some of his attitudes and actions.

Augustus was born on September 23 – some scholars have recently argued for September 22 (see Box 1.1 with Fig. 1) – not as Augustus, a name with which he was honored by the Senate in 27 BC, but as Octavius. This followed Roman custom: the family he was born into was that of the Octavii and, as was often the case, the first (and as it turned out, only) son also was given the father's first name, Gaius (abbreviated C.). The family was not from Rome but from Velitrae (modern Velletri), a small town in Latium about 25 miles southeast of the capital. It may well be that Octavius was actually born there, although other sources place his birth at Rome, not far from the Palatine where he came to live as emperor; that version may reflect the attempt to associate him with Rome from the cradle. Similarly, Rome won the battle of one-upmanship for the physical presence of the birthplace: in the capital, the house that was shown as his birthplace was made into a shrine whereas all that tourists in Velitrae got to see was a pantry-sized room in the family's suburban villa. There can be little doubt, however, that some of Octavius' upbringing did take place in small-town Velitrae.

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BOX 1.1. AUGUSTUS' BIRTH SIGN:
WHY CAPRICORN?



Figure 1. *Denarius* minted in Spain, ca. 17–15 BC. Hirmer Fotoarchiv 2001.613R, Hirmer Verlag, Munich.

Augustus was born on September 22 or 23. His sun sign, therefore, was Libra. Why, then, does Capricorn appear as his birth sign on coins, gems (such as the Gemma Augustea; cf. Box 5.8), glass pastes, and architectural decorations? That was, to be sure, his moon sign, but there is hardly any evidence from antiquity that people, let alone rulers, adopted that norm. And yet all of our ancient sources, including Augustus, hold to the September date, even Suetonius (*Aug.* 94.12), who states that Capricorn was his birth sign. One explanation for this seeming inconsistency is that after the calendar reform of Julius Caesar, Augustus' birth retroactively would have fallen around the winter solstice and, therefore, in the sign of Capricorn.

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Another solution is that Capricorn denotes the time of Augustus' conception, reckoned by one ancient authority as taking place 273 days before the birth date. That might work, even if we allow for the fact, obvious to any parent, that hardly any child arrives on the predicted day; but this kind of reckoning is also very rare, although it was used in connection with Romulus' birth and, for that matter, Augustus' association with Rome's founder. The basic answer, in Tamsyn Barton's apt formulation (1995, 44), is that "accurate dates of birth were not essential to the enterprise of the ancient astrologer.... [T]he astrologer was quite prepared to look for a horoscope appropriate to the circumstances of the client." The popularity of Capricorn is a paradigm of the Augustan era because it was polyvalent – it could mean different things to different people just like "liberty" in politics, Vergil's poetry, or the Altar of Augustan Peace. Besides the possibilities above, Capricorn signified luck; in fact, in the September 22 horoscope Capricorn, though not the sun sign, controls the principal "point" or "lot," that of fortune. Further connotations include rule over the west and even revenge (via the murder of Osiris that was avenged by Horus) on the murderers of Julius Caesar.

In the end, the Augustan Capricorn is the equivalent to a logo in a modern advertising campaign. It is typical, too, that its representations are not heavy-handed and leave room for play and whimsy (cf. the chubby Cupid and the squashed snout of the dolphin by the feet of the hallowed Prima Porta Augustus statue; see Box 3.4). The coin above, minted in Spain between 17 and 15 BC, is a good example: the Capricorn holds a globe in his spindly front legs and a cornucopia pivots on his back.

Main sources

T. Barton, "Augustus and Capricorn: Astrological Polyvalency and Imperial Rhetoric," *Journal of Roman Studies* 85 (1995) 33–51.

A. Schmid, *Augustus und die Macht der Sterne* (Cologne 2005).

It is an experience he had in common with most inhabitants of Italy; as it turned out, he comprehended their sensibilities much better than did most city politicians and his ultimate victory, as Sir Ronald Syme rightly emphasized, was the victory of the nonpolitical classes of Italy, at least in

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great part. While there is no “typical” Italian town – Pompeii tends to be overrated in that respect – Velitrae’s history was not isolated but shared in a spectrum of vicissitudes, characteristics, and peoples that were central to the making of Italy. To begin with, Italy did not consist of “Italians,” let alone Romans. Instead, it was an aggregation of several peoples, tribes, and ethnicities, each with their own culture and language. The Volsci were one of these. They founded Velitrae even though the Latins later claimed to have done so. At any rate, soon after 500 BC it became part of the Latin League of some thirty cities of which Rome was one, only to see itself conquered by the Romans a few years later. Unrest, however, continued, until the Romans lowered the boom in 338 BC, razing Velitrae’s fortifications and forcibly relocating the city fathers and their families “to the other side of the Tiber,” certainly quite a distance in those days. Like many others, the city became a *municipium* under Roman control and its men could not vote. That changed after the Social War (90–88 BC) when all of Italy seceded over this very issue and it is only from that point on that Italy became more Roman.

It stands to reason that exposure to all this – life in a small town with its variegated cultural and political history, not to mention its pieties – contributed to Octavius’ perspectives. So did his family, which did not belong to the Roman aristocracy on the basis of either money or descent. There were Octavii in Rome, but their relation to the Octavii of Velitrae is uncertain. Status and snobbery, however, were not prerequisites for comfortable circumstances and Octavius was born into such. His grandfather was a banker and member of Velitrae’s municipal aristocracy and he had no further ambitions, living to a happy old age. His son, Octavius’ father, aimed higher. With the family’s wealth, he met the property qualifications for the senatorial class in Rome and, embarking on the time-honored *cursus honorum* (career path), advanced to the rank of praetor in 61 BC, an office which was just below that of the two highest executives, the consuls. He adhered to the traditional term limit of one year and then was awarded the governorship of Macedonia. On the way, he put down a slave insurrection in southern Italy and achieved even greater military successes in his province that qualified him for a future triumph in Rome. His civil administration also was exemplary; Cicero held him up as model to his somewhat less than exemplary brother Quintus, who was governor of the neighboring province of Asia (mostly today’s Turkey) at the time.

Octavius the father, however, was not to consummate his triumph but suddenly died upon his return, at Nola near Naples in 59 BC. He was some 42 years old at the time. Given the prevailing conditions of health,

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hygiene, and medical knowledge – and that is one of the key differences between the Roman world and ours – the mundane reason was probably some kind of infection. In gross terms, average life expectancy in the Roman empire has been calculated at about 35 years and deaths of fathers and mothers while their children were still in infancy were anything but uncommon (see Box 1.2). Nor was it uncommon for the widowed parent to remarry quickly. Octavius had done so after the death of his first wife, Ancharia, with whom he had a daughter, Octavia the Elder. He then had married Atia and they had two children, Octavia the Younger, born in 69, and Octavious; the latter thus had two older sisters. In 58, Atia married Lucius Marcius Philippus, a member of the Roman nobility, who would be consul in 56.

BOX 1.2. LIFE EXPECTANCY IN ANCIENT ROME

One aspect that makes our world completely different from theirs is the much higher life expectancy we have in modern countries today. In the course of world history, this demographic transition is a relatively recent development that was not attainable until scientific breakthroughs such as those of Louis Pasteur and Alexander Fleming.

While much work has been done of late on life expectancy and mortality in the Roman empire, any precise figures that would apply to that diverse population, which counted in the millions, are beyond the meager evidence that is available. Tomb inscriptions and skeletal analysis will go only so far. By analogy with other premodern populations, life expectancy at birth probably ranged between twenty and forty years, with a major concentration in the lower half of this range. The figures are heavily impacted by the high infant mortality rate in Rome, which has been calculated as 300 out of 1,000.

An additional calculator is provided by the annuity table of the Roman jurist Ulpian (writing in the early third century AD) that can be used as a “life table.” It assumes an average life expectancy at birth of approximately twenty-one years; once you turned ten, you could expect to live another thirty-five years or so. But again, these are not figures applicable to everyone in the empire. Of course, there are examples of considerable longevity, too, such as Augustus and his grandfather.

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The situation hits home, however, when one realizes – and again this is a rough estimate – that at the age of twenty, only one-fifth of Roman women would have a father who was still alive. As one scholar reminds us, “average life expectancy is today usually regarded as one basic measure of quality of life” (Frier 1999, 89). We should not lose sight of these conditions amid the “Golden Age” of Augustus. At the same time, since life was precarious under the best of circumstances, we can understand the relief of the empire’s populace that the additional ravages of decades of civil war were finally over.

Main sources

- B. Frier, “Roman Demography,” in D. Potter, ed., *Life, Death and Entertainment in the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor 1999) 85–109.
T. G. Parkin, *Demography and Roman Society* (Baltimore 1992).

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

It is useful to pause here and look at the network in which young Octavius was embedded at this point. He may have been *ignobilis loco* (“not noble by origin”), as his later rival Mark Antony would point out with a sneer, but that did not mean he was unconnected. Octavius’ marriage to Atia brought together not only the two leading families of Velitraise and the neighboring town of Aricia but established connections with two of Rome’s most powerful figures: Atia’s mother, Julia, was a sister of Julius Caesar while the mother of her husband Atius was the aunt of Pompey the Great. The Julian clan had been of long standing in Rome; it traced its descent back to Julus, the son of Rome’s mythical ancestor from Troy, Aeneas, whose mother was the goddess Venus. Like other Roman *gentes*, or families, the Julians had had their ups and downs and were somewhat in eclipse by the end of the second century. They regained considerable profile shortly thereafter, only to lose some key members in the civil wars between Marius, with whom they were allied, and Sulla. The family’s most prominent surviving scion, Julius Caesar (born 100 BC), had to go underground during one of Sulla’s persecutions, but the very year of young Octavius’ birth, 63 BC, marked Caesar’s undoubted reassertion on the Roman political scene: he was elected *pontifex maximus* and thereby in charge of the far-reaching apparatus of Roman religion, which was an integral part of the

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Roman state and its politics. At the same time, Pompey, after a series of stunning military victories, was practically Rome's viceroy in the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. He and Caesar joined forces a short four years later along with Crassus, Rome's biggest financier. The so-called First Triumvirate did not suspend Rome's constitution, but it was a power junta that ran the table. The alliance fractured over the next decade amid a great deal of turmoil in Rome and Italy. Returning from Gaul, Caesar crossed the Rubicon in early 49, marched on Rome, and defeated Pompey at Pharsalus in northern Greece in August of 48.

The father figure with whom young Octavius grew up during those tumultuous times, his stepfather Lucius Marcius Philippus, again was anything but *ignobilis*. The *gens Marcia* was one of the most illustrious and well connected in Rome. In the third century, one of its male members had opted for the surname (*cognomen*) Philippus rather than the previous Tremulus, probably in admiration of Alexander the Great, the son of Philip. Lucius Marcius was neither tremulous nor audacious like Alexander but, as a leading member of the Roman senate during perilous partisan struggles, excelled at staying out of harm's way by cautious maneuvering and the wide range of his network. Through Atia, he was connected with Julius Caesar while simultaneously being the father-in-law of the younger Cato, one of Caesar's most relentless opponents. What was self-preservation for him sometimes looked like double-dealing to others, but he was universally recognized for being a careful operator who avoided missteps and prevailed at the end of the day. Not the least of his achievements was that he kept his considerable personal wealth and did not fall victim to the preferred means of political fundraising in Rome during civil wars, the proscription list (cf. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 4, Scene 1).

If, without stretching the point, we want to gauge these various influences on the formation of the future emperor, we can reasonably arrive at the following composite (and we will turn to his mother and teachers shortly). He was at home both in small-town Italy whose mindset he understood full well and in Rome where he could observe politics and the shaky state of the republic first hand. His grandfather's example may have impressed on him the importance of solid finances and their administration while his stepfather showed him how to navigate a minefield and err on the side of caution. The Octavii did not belong to the old nobility and Octavius' father, like Cicero, was one of the many "new men" (*novi homines*) who made their way into the highest echelons of government by virtue of their own efforts. Through Marcius Philippus, however, the young Octavius also had a foot inside the traditional establishment. This diverse background, and the concomitant experiences, were going to serve him well.

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THE INFLUENCE OF HIS MOTHER

He was also served well by his mother. While the legal rights of Roman women seem pale by modern standards – though they were able to make wills, be in charge of businesses, and sponsor building activities – their real power, which was considerable, came by way of what the Romans called *auctoritas*, that is “clout” or “influence” rather than simple “authority.” Unlike statutory power, *potestas*, which it complemented, it did not rest on a body of law or permanent enactments but was far more wide-reaching and dynamic, expressing a material, intellectual, and moral dimension of initiative and superiority. This quality was a traditional attribute of a Roman *mater familias*, and while it was “a cultural thing,” to use a current phrase, it was not a given but had to be constantly validated – thus living up to its derivation from *augēre*, which means to increase or augment, or simply, to keep working at it. The distinction between *potestas* and *auctoritas* was operative in public life, too – the Roman senate, for instance, in contrast to its modern counterparts, was not an upper house with legislative powers but exerted its will through its *auctoritas* – and we will see that *auctoritas* became a pivotal part of Augustus’ rule.

In that light, the frequent mention of his mother in the narrative of his youth and upbringing is not surprising. Atia was an *auctoritas* figure. She involved herself closely in young Octavius’ education, conferring with his teachers, and forcefully stepped in as an adviser even after his assumption of the *toga virilis* in 48 BC – a step that marked the formal beginning of his adult life. When he wanted to join Caesar’s campaign in Africa in late 47, Atia expressed her reservations and Octavius acquiesced. And when, in early 45, he departed for Spain to meet up with Caesar, Atia wanted to accompany him, though he was able to dissuade her. This was not mere possessiveness on her part: her son’s health and constitution were brittle and, as we shall see, he sometimes ignored this weakness at his own peril.

Similarly, Atia immediately contacted Octavius after Caesar’s assassination when it was announced that he was Caesar’s heir. She was concerned about attempts on his life and asked him to seek sanctuary with her and “her entire house,” which can mean various domiciles. Her husband, Philippus, even advised Octavius strongly not to accept Caesar’s will and opt for a quiet life instead. But it is telling that Augustus in this instance of self-stylization, filtered as it may be through Nicolaus’ biography, gives pride of place to his mother. Her *auctoritas* prevails: she sees both the potential for his greatness and glory and the huge risks and dangers that lie ahead. Hence she counsels neither acceptance nor rejection but leaves the choice to her son, being the first, however, to approve that he should take Caesar’s

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name. And she remains a presence up to the point where Nicolaus' account breaks off. The final, decisive juncture comes with Octavius' decision to go to Campania to recruit his private army from among Caesar's veterans. He does not want to initiate her into this plan because, as reported by Nicolaus, he reasons that "her motherly and womanly affections would be an obstacle to his great designs." Instead, he pretends to her that he is merely trying to sell some of his father's properties in the region. He was, however, "not able to convince her entirely."

What matters in all this is not absolute historical accuracy but the portrait Augustus develops of his mother and of their relationship. That alone tells us something about her influence on him. She was a great presence in his life – even Tacitus, who was no fan of Augustus, would praise her for that (*Dialogue of the Orators*, 28.6) – and someone whose advice he took seriously. The same was going to be true, in all respects, of his future wife Livia, Rome's first empress. Nor should we be surprised, therefore, that Augustus was the first Roman statesman to put mothers, and their children, on a public monument, the Altar of Augustan Peace (Ara Pacis; cf. Fig. 20).

EDUCATION

Growing up in an aristocratic household Octavius received a first-rate education. The unusual detail with which we are informed about his teachers again reflects his respect for those who participated in his upbringing. His elementary education in Philippus' household was entrusted to a Greek slave named Sphaerus in close collaboration with the parents – a recipe for success that is anything but a modern discovery. As *grammaticus*, Sphaerus taught the child reading, writing, and arithmetic, along with Greek because aristocratic Romans were cosmopolitan and Greek culture had been adapted and revitalized in Rome for more than two centuries, a synthesis that would reach new heights in Augustan poetry, art, architecture, and religion. Like other aristocrats, Octavius/Augustus never became fluent as a Greek speaker, but he habitually interspersed Greek with Latin in his correspondence and even tried his hand at composing poems in Greek. As for Sphaerus, Octavius freed him and took time out in 40 BC to grant him a state funeral even while being embroiled in an arduous civil war.

In his teens, Octavius' education continued with an emphasis on Greek philosophy and rhetoric. Again, we know the names of the teachers – Alexander may have had Aristotle, but Octavius had a team. His two philosophical teachers, Areios of Alexandria and Athenodorus of Tarsus (the birthplace of the Apostle Paul), prominently represented the leading school of the day, Stoicism, which emphasized, among other tenets, ethical