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Imperial Pretensions: The Building and Rebuilding of the Early Roman Empire in Suetonius

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“May it be my privilege to establish the Republic in a steady and safe position, and receive from this the fruit that I seek; but only if I may be called the author of the best possible state, and carry with me the hope when I die that the foundations I have laid for the Republic will remain unshaken.”

Augustus

In hindsight, it is easy to define periods of time. Historians can simply create a block from any number of years, name it, and make it seem distinct from the times before and after. Yet for the people whose lives intersected different eras, the borders may not have seemed so clear. It is important to understand what changes they perceived, and how those perceptions changed over time and from person to person,

1 Suet. Aug. 28.2: “Ita mihi salvam ac suspitem rem p. sistere in sua sede liceat atque eius rei fructum percipere, quem peto, ut optimi status auctor dicar et moriens ut feram mecum spem, mansura in vestigio suo fundamenta rei p. quae iecero.”
so that historians may know the true extent of the change. The classical tradition holds that the Roman Republic existed from 509 B.C.E. to 27 B.C.E., and that the Roman Empire existed from the end of the Republic until 476 C.E. In this paper, I try to erase those definite lines in time, and examine how the Romans themselves perceived the political change from Republic to Empire.

Even by the time the events of Suetonius’ *De vita caesarum* begin, Rome had long been an established Mediterranean power. However, it was not a perfectly organized political entity, and, on several occasions after the end of the Punic Wars, domestic turmoil necessitated the restructuring of the Roman government. Two instances of that turmoil presented themselves in the period deemed the Early Empire, during the reigns of Augustus (previously Octavian) and Vespasian, respectively. Suetonius records the attempts of both men to create an ‘optimi status.’ However, I find it necessary to present the historical context of these reigns before an analysis of Suetonius’ opinions of them.

The transition from Republic to Empire (the time periods as defined by modern classicists, rather than the forms of government) left Octavian as the only senior official. The *Lex Titia* of 43 B.C.E. had stripped all of the consuls, praetors, and tribunes of their *imperium* in that year, and most who were affected were killed in the following fifteen years of war anyhow. After Antony’s death, Octavian styled himself ‘Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus,’ cementing his attachment to his great-uncle, and took it upon himself to right the ‘ship of state.’ Likewise, the extant society over which Vespasian presided was in need of restructuring. After his victory in the civil war of 69 C.E., Vespasian took several steps to revitalize the nation, using the powers outlined in the *lex de imperio Vespasiani*, a senatorial decree. However, he had an opportunity to build an entirely new government, and did not take it, opting instead to follow, almost exactly, Augustus’ framework. Vespasian is thus an excellent proxy for Augustus, as Suetonius’ opinions on the later emperor can most certainly be applied to the earlier. The difference between the two efforts, the building and rebuilding of the Principate, is not how they were undertaken, but the political treatment with which Suetonius relays them to his reader. Whereas Augustus’ restructuring is presented as a continuation of the Republic, Vespasian’s is shown to be starkly imperial. However, Suetonius’ choice of language in both emperors’ biographies makes it evident that the two were, in fact, very similar when it came to building (in Augustus’ case) and rebuilding (in Vespasian’s) the Principate. Suetonius’ diction thus

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2 Hammond (1933, p. 84). See also Strasburger (1939, RE 7a.519).

betrays his recognition that Augustus’ new government was an autocratic departure from the Republic, while his own judgments, which only occasionally enter the text, show his happiness with the Principate.

The state that Augustus inherited after his victory at Actium was marred by competing factions and a corrupt, petty, selfish Senate. In order to rectify this situation, Suetonius notes, Augustus legally “received power over morals and laws for all of time, and, by this law, although without the title of censor, he nevertheless took the census of the people.”

Despite the seeming illegality of this action, Suetonius presents it in Republican terms. Augustus had not usurped the powers of the censorship; rather, he had been given them by a legitimate decree of the Senate, still the ultimate lawmaking body. The use of the word *recepit*, “received,” alone makes the process appear more far less imperial. An Emperor would not have to “receive” powers, he could simply take (*cepit*) them. In fact, it is reminiscent of a Republican *Senatus Consultum Ultimum* being issued to a person for life. During his first census, Augustus undertook a *lustratio* and “restored it (the Senate) to its previous limits and distinctions” by removing those he deemed unfit and adlecting new members, including several *homines novi.*

Again, Suetonius makes this seem perfectly Republican—it would not be to the benefit of an autocrat to restore another powerful body to strength—but Augustus was not behaving like an Emperor. Instead, he was carrying out the task legally given to him by the Senate itself. Suetonius’ approval of this action is never in doubt: Augustus fixed a Senate that was “swelled by a disgraceful and disordered mass.”

Vespasian does not receive the same “Republican” treatment as Augustus, yet Suetonius still presents his actions as parallel. Where Augustus “received (*recepit*)” the powers of the censor, Vespasian simply “assumed (*suscepit*) the censorship.” This seemingly benign change of language demonstrates a key point: later Romans saw Vespasian’s actions as censor as those of an autocrat. Yet Suetonius’ description of Vespasian’s actions seem the same as his description of Augustus’. He tacitly admits that Augustus, despite his Republican pretense, was an autocrat as well. Both men

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4 Suet. *Aug.* 27.5: “*Recepit et morum legumque regimen aequo perpetuo, quo iure, quamquam sine censurae honore, censum tamen populi...egit.*” For an ancient commentary on the *Senatus Consultum Ultimum*, see Cic. *In Cat.* I.3-4.

5 Suet. *Aug.* 35.1: “*ad modum pristinum et splendorum rededit.*”

6 Suet. *Aug.* 35.1: “*affluentem...deformi et incondita turba.*”

7 Suet. *Ves.* 8.1: “*suscepit et censorum.*”
certainly exercised the same power the same way when it came to the Senate. Vespasian held a “review of the Senate” during which he “expelled those unworthy of the title and adlected the most distinguished.” Suetonius draws a clear parallel between this *recenso* and Augustus’ earlier *redegit*: both men conducted an assessment of the Senate, reforming the order by expelling bad Senators and replacing them with their own candidates. Jones (2000) adds in his commentary, “the precedent was established by Augustus” and presents a convincing argument based on Cassius Dio 55.31.2 that an Imperial-directed *lustratio* was necessary for Augustus to both establish his rule and claim continuity with the Republic. Yet Suetonius does not present either Augustus’ or Vespasian’s *lustratio* as motivated by politics or revenge. Both certainly were—Augustus expelled every one of Antony’s appointees and Vespasian Galba’s, Otho’s, and Vitellius’. Instead, he presents the cleansings positively, as necessary for the sanctity of the Senate and the security of the state. Contrast this with Suetonius’ negative portrayal of Domitian’s vengeful, murderous *lustratio*, and one certainly gets the feeling that Augustus and Vespasian behaved well.

Both Emperors feared that the provinces and allies, sensing infirmity within Rome, would try to leave the Empire. Augustus sought to rectify the situation by tightening the Roman grasp. He applied his belief that Rome could be better governed by a single person to the provinces. Suetonius relates, “the stronger provinces, those which could be governed neither easily nor safely by yearly meetings, he took for himself.” This was unprecedented. At the time, Augustus was still a standing consul in Rome. In order to gain such power, he made a deal framed in pseudo-Republican terms, in which he laid down his consulship and, as Hammond (1933) summarizes, “received *proconsulare imperium*, which was not to be laid down upon his entering the *pomerium*, and was superior to the *imperium* of the proconsul or propraetor in every province.” There is no better example of Augustus trying to maintain the continuity of the Republic or of Suetonius’ presentation thereof;

8 Suet. Ves. 9.2: “*recenso senatu…summotis indignissimis et honestissimo…allecto.*”
9 Suetonius (2000, p. 73).
10 Suet. Dom. 10.2: “*Complures senatores, in iis aliquot consulares, interemerit; ex quibus Civicam Cerealem in ipso Asiae proconsulatu, Salvidienum Orfitum, Aciilium Glabrionem in exilio, quasi molitores rerum novarum, ceteros levissima quemque de causa; Aelium Lamiam ob suspiciosos quidem, verum et veteres et innoxios iocos.*”
11 Hammond (1933, p. 27).
12 Suet., Aug. 47.1: “*Provincias validiores et quas annuis magistratuum imperii regi nec facile nec tutum erat, ipse suscepit.*”
13 Hammond (1933, p. 17).
the bastardization of Republican terms is very prevalent in the pertinent passages. The practical outline of these new powers shares almost no resemblance with any Republican office, yet, despite the obviously extra-legal nature of Augustus’ actions, Suetonius presents him as acting within his role as consul, and then proconsul. In this scope, Augustus took control of the provinces and “deprived them of their liberty.” Despite the harsh language, Suetonius’ approval is once more evident. He excuses Augustus by noting, “but they were on the path to ruin through their lawlessness.”

Vespasian, more so than Augustus, had to deal with unrest in the provinces. Suetonius reports, “The provinces, and the city-states, and some of the kingdoms, were in a tumultuous internal state.” Like Augustus, Vespasian assumed sole responsibility for some of the territories and “made provinces of Achaia, Lycia, Rhodes, Byzantium, and Samnos, taking away their liberty.” The phrase “libertate adempta” harkens back to Suetonius’ earlier assessment of Augustus: “libertate privavit,” a connection that illustrates the similar actions of the Emperors. Vespasian receives no Republican justification, as none was required. Vespasian was recognized as the supreme political power in the lex de imperio Vespasiani, which gave him the right to do whatever he felt was best for Rome. However, in the absence of Republican legal terms, Suetonius does provide an excuse. The provincials “had abandoned themselves to every sort of licentiousness and recklessness.” Once again, the similarities and parallels of Augustus and Vespasian are simply too profound and distinct to be coincidental. Suetonius clearly believes Augustus, despite his insistence to the contrary, had imperial pretensions—Vespasian did, and their actions were almost identical. This is not something negative to the biographer, however, and I will touch upon his approval further.

Both men faced times of legal crisis in the wake of their respective civil wars, and both responded with widespread legal reform. Upon Augustus’ restoration of domestic peace, the courts were flooded with civil suits. Seeing that the Republican centumviri, the court of one hundred men, was too large and unwieldy to operate efficiently, made the Decemviri Stlitibus Iudicandi the presidents of that court with

14 Suet. Aug. 8.4: “libertate privavit… sed ad exitium licentia praecipites.”
15 Suet. Ves. 8.4: “et provinciae civitatesque liberae, nec non et regna quaedam tumultuosius inter se agebant.”
16 Suet. Ves. 8.4: “Achaiam, Lyciam, Rhodum, Byzantium, Samnum, libertate adempta…in provinciarum formam redegit.”
17 Vespasian, lex de imperio Vespasiani, 6: “utique quacunque ex usu rei publicae maiestateque divinarum | humanarum publicarum priuatarumque rerum esse | censebit, ei agere facere ius potestasque sit.”
18 Suet. Ves. 8.2: “ad omnem licentiam audaciamque processerant.” Refer back to 14, note licentia.
authority over its proceedings: “the centumviral court, which it had been regular for former quaestors to gather, should be summoned by the Board of Ten.”

The Decemviri Stlitibus Iudicandi had been, during the Republic, the court tasked with determining a person’s status (citizen or peregrinus, freedman or slave, legally bound to paterfamilias or not, etc…). Suetonius does not bat an eye at this reappropriation of Republican bodies for new jobs. He presents it as normal and, more importantly, a continuation of the same “Board of Ten” that had served during the Republic rather than a new decemviral court. This was clearly not an actual maintenance of the Republican court, and Augustus did this without consent, but Suetonius mentions none of this. He is content with portraying Augustus’ programs as continuous with the Republic, as per the first Emperor’s wish, and because, by drawing clear parallels with the imperially-presented Vespasian, he can show that Augustus was truly an autocrat.

Vespasian was faced with an even worse court problem than Augustus. Morgan posits that the cases that built up in the years 68-69 C.E. alone would have taken over thirty years to resolve without Vespasian’s subsequent reforms. To rectify the situation, Vespasian “chose by lot commissioners to restore what had been taken in the war, and to make special judgments in the centumviral court.” Just like Augustus, who had granted the Decemviri Stlitibus Iudicandi the power to preside over the centumviri, Vespasian appointed people to expedite the proceedings of the same court. Here, however, Suetonius keeps up no Republican pretense: the commissioners were never a Republican body. Vespasian simply decided that they were needed, and so created the position. Jones notes, “the commissioners were given special powers” to choose the cases the centumviral court would hear and when, and to force the court into session even on traditional off-days to reach the end of the queue sooner. These special powers were not at all Republican, nor did anyone claim that they were, as Augustus and Suetonius had done with the Decemviri. However, there can be denying the similarities between the Decemviri and the commissioners. Both were tasked with expediting the proceedings of the centumviri, both were given special powers, and both were departures from traditional Republican offices. Yet

19 Suet. Aug. 36.1: “ut centumviralem hastam quam quaesturam functi consuerant cogere decemviri cogeren.”
20 Hammond (1933, p. 43).
22 Suet. Ves. 10.1: “sorte elegit per quos rapta bello restituerentur quique iudicia centumviralia, quibus.”
23 Suetonius (2000, p. 76).
Suetonius does not insinuate that Vespasian’s action was in any way Republican. As Augustus’ was so similar, it must not have been Republican either, and Suetonius’ clearly purposeful connection between the two highlights his belief that the first Emperor was just that.

Why, then, does Suetonius present Augustus’ efforts as continuous with the Republic? Because, as a biographer and not a historian, Suetonius was not so interested with presenting the facts as he was with getting into the minds of his subjects. Augustus wished himself to be remembered as the protector of the Republic, and wanted his government to be remembered as a continuation of the Republic. He makes this quite clear in the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, the official record of his actions: when the conspirators in the murder of Julius Caesar “…afterwards made war upon the Republic, (Augustus) twice defeated them in battle,” thus presenting himself as defender of the Republic. Later, he asserts, “I did not accept any power offered to me that was contrary to the practices of our ancestors.” Though perhaps out of line with modern, or even classical, historical standards, it would have been an affront to the practice of biography, which the ancients conceived of as a literary form separate from history, for Suetonius to ignore how Augustus thought about (or wanted others to think about) his actions. Thus, the biographer must look for another opportunity to show that, despite the Republican face shown by the *Res Gestae*, Augustus’ Principate was an autocratic government. He finds this in his *Life of Vespasian*.

Suetonius also has a more self-serving motive. An outright accusation of Augustus misrepresenting his actions could have been construed as criticism of the first Emperor and the Principate that he created—a form of government that served Suetonius extremely well. The emperors had established new offices for equestrians, establishing “an equestrian bureaucracy, confident in its new found influence, and contemptuous of the senate which only in name administered the state.” He was wholly part of this Imperial bureaucracy, serving several roles under Trajan before becoming secretary *ab epistulis* to Hadrian. These offices and others like them granted to the equestrian class power and influence formerly reserved for Senators. As a beneficiary of this system, Suetonius had no reason to disapprove of the Princi-

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25 Aug, RG. 2: “et postea bellum inferentis rei publicae vici bis acie.”
26 Aug, RG. 6: “nullum magistratum contra morem maiorum delatum recepi.”
pate. Wallace-Hadrill (1984) notes, “Suetonius had broken free from the senatorial influence of his patron Pliny and wrote as the spokesman of a new generation of civil servants, convinced of the practical advantages of autocracy and free from the traditionalism that hankered after the republic and senatorial government.”

However, even during the Principate, being a member of the equestrian bureaucracy was not always so safe. Often, these Romans were subject to paranoid accusations of conspiracy by the Emperor. So the timing of Suetonius’ life and work must be taken into account. He lived during a relatively stable period, spending his youth and education in Rome under the three Flavian Emperors, and his adult life under the first three Adoptive Emperors. The only Emperor of these six who could have soured Romans on the Principate was Domitian, who, by Suetonius’ own account, was not the cruel man history remembers, for at least the first portion of his reign. However, he looked favorably on Vespasian, so similar to Augustus, and Titus, even referring to the latter as “the love and delight of the human race,” and, although he did not write lives of Nerva, Trajan or Hadrian, all three are generally recognized by ancient and modern texts as, at worst, inoffensive, and at best, the finest Roman Emperor of them all. Thus, it must have been easy during Suetonius’ time for an equestrian to be enamored with the Principate.

Suetonius clearly understood that which modern classicists have accepted; that Augustus was a princeps in the same mold as the later, incontestably autocratic, Emperors. However, in order to do due diligence to the genre of biography, he must dance around this understanding, only making it evident when one contrasts the vita of Augustus with that of Vespasian. Suetonius thus confirms the classicist’s understanding of the political distinctions between Augustus’ government and those governments that had come before. However, it is important to remember that Suetonius is just one author; others, like the historians Velleius Paterculus, who lived during Augustus’ time, and Tacitus, certainly saw things differently. I thus hope neither to confirm nor contradict the accepted line between Republic and Empire, simply to introduce some nuance to its study. The analysis and opinions of Roman writers themselves need not just be considered historical source material, but also arguments one way or another, in much the same vein as modern scholarship.

29 Suet. Dom. 3.2: “Circa administrationem autem imperii aliquandiu se varium praestitit, mixtura quoque aequabili vitiiorum atque virtutum, donec virtutes quoque in vitia deflexit.”
30 Suet. Tit. 1.1: “amor ac deliciae generis humani.”
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