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Augustus' Career in Overview: The Res Gestae

Late in the year AD 14 a large parcel from Rome arrived in Ancyra (present-day Ankara), capital of the Roman province of Galatia-Pamphylia in the heart of Anatolia. It was addressed to the provincial governor and had been sent by the consuls – still the highest-ranking officials of the Roman state, at least in name. They informed the governor that after the princeps Augustus had died and been deified, his last will and testament had been read aloud in the Senate. The will included the princeps' own account of his accomplishments and the gifts he had made to the Roman people from his own funds – an account now known as the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (“The Accomplishment of the Divine Augustus”). The consuls reported that, as Augustus had directed, the text of the *Res Gestae* had been engraved on two bronze pillars and placed in front of his mausoleum. This seemed insufficient, however, since the tribute would be limited to Rome. Therefore the Senate had decreed that its contents should also be made known to residents of the provinces, and the recipient would find a copy enclosed.

How the governor carried out the Senate's decree in the short term is not known. Perhaps he summoned the residents of the capital to the theater or the marketplace to hear a

reading of the text translated into Greek. What we do know, however, is that he did not stop there. The governor made sure that the words of the late ruler were widely circulated in his province and ultimately carved in stone. In the town of Ancyra itself, craftsmen inscribed the text of the *Res Gestae* in both Latin and Greek on the walls of a temple to Roma and Augustus. Scholars refer to it as the *Monumentum Ancyranum*, and the historian Theodor Mommsen called it the “queen of inscriptions.”

The text of the *Res Gestae* provides a self-portrait of the first princeps of Rome as he wished himself and his achievements to be remembered. At the age of nineteen, he wrote, he had entered Roman politics abruptly, acting “on his own initiative” and “at his own expense.” As he finished revising the text of the *Res Gestae*, in the seventy-sixth year of his life, he was still the dominant figure on the political scene. The process begun on his own initiative soon received the blessing of the Senate – even though that blessing was coerced rather than voluntary. Even in old age Augustus recalled all the many offices and functions that the Senate and the people had entrusted to him, and provided a detailed list of them. No one before him had attained a comparable position in the Roman state; no one else had achieved so many triumphs or received so many honors.

Having extended the sovereign territory of the Roman people in every direction, Augustus also asserted Roman dominance over peoples whose territories he did not incorporate from astute tactical considerations. Under his leadership the empire attained previously unknown levels of might, stability, and prestige both internally and externally, so that delegations arrived to pay homage from peoples as far away as the Albanians and Iberians in the Caucasus Mountains, and from monarchs in India. The Senate and people of Rome had recognized his unparalleled achievements by devising entirely new honors for him. The Senate granted him the name

Augustus and adorned the entrance to his house with laurel trees and the civic crown. It also placed on display in the Curia Iulia, the chamber where it met, a golden shield engraved with Augustus' virtues: *virtus* (valor), *clementia* (clemency), *iustitia* (justice), and *pietas* (piety; observance of one's duty toward both gods and fellow men). His possession of these qualities was declared the foundation for his exalted rank. Bestowal of the title "father of the country" (*pater patriae*) was the logical consequence and final proof of his supreme position as *princeps*, the first man in the state.

How the inhabitants of Galatia reacted to this self-assessment of their late ruler, we do not know. Much of it was already familiar; they had been told again and again about the superhuman feats Augustus had performed. City officials everywhere in the province had passed resolutions honoring their distant lord and erected statues of him. They had built altars before which residents of the province assembled every year to swear an oath of loyalty to him and his children, promising to protect him even at the cost of their own lives. For nearly 40 years Augustus had represented to the people of Galatia the far-off ruler who demanded taxes but also guaranteed the peace: a figure on a plane above ordinary mortals.

After his death Romans also discussed the extraordinary position he had occupied: his unparalleled thirteen elections to the consulate, his 21 acclamations as *imperator* (victorious commander) and the new honors invented especially for him. About a hundred years later, however, the historian Tacitus dismissed them as superficial, because all these titles, honors, and the long list of tributes and distinctions reflected only outward appearances. Those who paid attention to the actual substance of Augustus' life and career, Tacitus claimed, had come to very different conclusions. They had not forgotten how the man later called Augustus had displayed no scruples in switching sides in the political battles of his youth. They recalled how – without any kind of official authorization – he had recruited

soldiers with bribes, and had obtained his first government post on false pretenses, by feigning to favor the republican cause. His true distinguishing qualities had consisted of betrayal, duplicity toward his political opponents, and brutality toward ordinary citizens, whenever such means served the cause of his relentless striving for power. In the end he had overcome everyone – including Mark Antony and Aemilius Lepidus, his allies in the effort to bring down the republic – by means of deceit. Although peace prevailed afterwards, the cost in lives had been high both at home and abroad; countless Roman soldiers had died in addition to Augustus' political rivals. Only five years before Augustus' death the Romans had suffered enormous losses when the Germanic tribes inflicted a crushing defeat on Varus and his legions in what has traditionally been called "the battle of the Teutoburg Forest" (see below, page 102f.).

Tacitus' account reveals Augustus as a powerful and power-conscious leader – a far cry from the idealized figure of official pronouncements, whose political goals were supposedly determined solely by concern for the welfare of the Roman people. Indeed, the man who emerged from Tacitus' history was in many respects morally repellent, if one were only willing to look beneath the veneer of lofty phrases.

Both critics and loyal partisans agreed, however, that Augustus had been the driving force behind events in Rome for the fifty-eight years prior to his death. Following Caesar's death in 44 BC, he had suddenly entered public life and never again left the political stage. After 30 BC no opponent came forward who could have offered a serious challenge to his hold on power. From that point on Augustus dominated Rome and the empire, both politically and culturally. When he died it was clear to his detractors as well as supporters that the Roman state could no longer survive without the formal structure of monarchical rule that Augustus had introduced. Any attempt to demolish it would have meant civil war, a conflict that could

easily have destroyed Rome's position as the dominant power in the Mediterranean, with no guarantee that the monarchy would not re-emerge at the end of it. As a result, almost everyone was willing to accept the status quo. The path to the creation of the monarchy had been long, and filled with casualties, experiments, and compromises. Paradoxically, so much suffering and uncertainty in the recent past helped to assure the permanence of the new form of rule.