AUGUSTAN DISSIMULATION
ARROGATING DESPOTIC POWER THROUGH DECEIT: THE POMPEIAN MODEL FOR AUGUSTAN DISSIMULATIO

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Introduction

It is fairly well-known that Imperator Caesar Divi filius, and his successor, Imperator Caesar Augustus, skilfully used dissimulatio as a political lubricant for acquiring novel or possibly offensive powers and privileges. This particularly applied to the deceptive ploy of disingenuous recusatio imperii as a form of dissimulation to facilitate the repeated extensions of these sweeping powers and privileges. History has shown the overwhelming success of his approach as well as its acceptance by the vast majority of senators, both before and after Actium. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the Augustan way of achieving something through cunning, guile and hypocrisy instead of brute authority or outright usurpation was notably imitated by some of his more seasoned and competent successors, whereas many emperors who failed to follow this model met with untimely deaths.

The main contention of this chapter will be to show that it was par excellence Pompeius Magnus who had already set the historic precedent for these hallmark features of Augustan autocracy and the so-called Principate. There is no doubt that, ever since his return to Rome in 44 BCE, Caesar Octavianus had ruthlessly worked to emulate his adoptive father and restore or complete the great dictator's political program. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the political method Octavianus used to achieve his towering ambition was Pompeian rather than Caesarian, and that this was especially true after the conclusion of the civil wars in 31/30 BCE.¹ After discussing a series of powerful examples of Augustan dissimulation, the second part of this analysis will highlight some strikingly similar and

¹ That Pompeius' great commands provided a source of inspiration for some of the key foundations of the Augustan settlement is widely acknowledged: see, for example, Meyer 1918, and most recently, Hurlet 2006.