THE AUGUSTAN PROGRAMME OF CULTURAL RENEWAL AND HEROD

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Abstract

My focus is the Augustan cultural context for Herod’s policies and activities. Specifically, I am providing an update of what we mean today when we speak of the Augustan “revolution” or “programme”.

Both concepts have undergone considerable revision in recent years and are used to encompass more aspects than previously. For Syme, the Roman revolution was mostly a political power play, a bloody military coup engineered by Octavian against the old order. The cultural programme, for what it was worth, took its cue from there and amounted to “propaganda” in literature, art, and architecture. Syme’s emphasis, like that of Tacitus, was on Rome and Italy.

Due to scholars like Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, Nicholas Purcell, and Greg Woolf (I am drawing greatly on their contributions to the Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus (Galinsky, ed. 2005) and, a little earlier, Paul Zanker and even myself, the perspective today is wider and there has been a shift from political to cultural phenomena. Some essential points are:

1. A recognition of the significance of the wider Mediterranean world, and not just Rome and Italy. It was the locus of momentous social change, the legacy of the Roman/Italian diaspora of the previous century (Purcell 2005). Here, as in many other areas, Augustus now is seen not as someone who is starting a trend, but as giving definition and direction to developments that were already well underway. His dealings with Herod can be considered a case in point. They exemplify the reciprocal relationships that were characteristic of Augustus’ interaction with this larger Mediterranean gallery that determined the political outcomes of the age.

2. Less relevant to Herod’s role in the Augustan scheme, power, following Foucault, is now increasingly defined as knowledge. In just about every major area of Roman cultural activity—religion, the determination of time and status by means of the calendar and fasti, public speaking, law, and control over language—power passed from the Roman aristocracy to professionals, who then are conscripted by Augustus. These again were ongoing developments that Augustus shaped rather than created, and it is the loss of that kind of power, and not just political power, that is behind the laments about the “decline” of the Republic. Augustus’ revolution was not only political in character but also cultural.

3. These developments offered new opportunities. While being completely dependent on Rome politically, Herod emerged as a major cultural force. His far-flung sponsorship of building activities beyond Judaea was second only to the Augustan family in the eastern Mediterranean. This was part of the multi-layered phenomenon of “Romanization” and the creation of an Alexandrian oikumene of the Roman nation. It proceeded differently in the east than in the west, and I am assessing Herod’s role in that context.
Herod was a major figure in the Augustan reign, and probably the most dominant one in the east. More is involved than chronological coincidence; besides being a crafty and resourceful political player, he was thoroughly in tune with the cultural developments of the age and, in fact, contributed to them significantly. Ample testimony is his building programmes not only in Judaea, but in Greece and the Greco-Roman east in general.\(^1\) They are ably discussed by others in this volume. Hence, while I will of course refer to them, my focus will be on the Augustan context for Herod’s policies and activities. How does he fit into the overall picture of the Augustan world? Specifically, I would like to provide an update of what we mean today when we speak of the Augustan “revolution” or “programme”.

Both concepts have undergone considerable revision in recent years and are used to encompass more aspects than they did previously. For Sir Ronald Syme, whose *Roman Revolution* (1939) is still an abiding classic, the Roman revolution was mostly a political power play, a bloody military coup engineered by Octavian against the old aristocratic order. The cultural programme, for what is was worth, took its cue from there and amounted to “propaganda”. Syme dealt only with Augustan literature from that perspective—the relevant chapter was entitled “The Organization of Opinion”—but the label quickly crept into discussions of Augustan art and architecture and came to be applied to coinage in particular. Syme’s overall emphasis was an intentional reflection of the political landscape of the 1930s which coincided, among many other things, with the first systematic publication of major numismatic collections such as the British Museum’s; hence the almost axiomatic association between Roman coins and propaganda. Moreover, Syme’s emphasis, like that of his model Tacitus, was on Rome and Italy.\(^2\)

The perspective today is wider in many ways, due to work of scholars like Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, Nicholas Purcell, and Greg Woolf and, a little earlier, Paul Zanker and and even myself. Much of what follows, therefore, will be drawn from the most recent collection of essays on the subject, *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus* (2005), which

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1 Comprehensive listing, with brief discussion, of all of Herod’s buildings in Richardson 1996, 174–96, with tabulation on pages 197–202.

2 For an assessment of Syme from various perspectives see Giovannini 2000 and several of the essays in Raafäub and Toher 1990.