ROME AND JERUSALEM:
PUBLIC BUILDING AND THE ECONOMY

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Abstract

While Roman influences on Herod, possibly not unconnected with his personal relationships with Augustus and Agrippa, have been recognized in a number of fields, including the political, military, and cultural, little has been done in comparing the economic policies of the King to those of his patrons.

This paper deals with one particular aspect of this issue. It is demonstrated that Herod's building policies, one of the best-known and most often explored aspects of his reign, were deeply influenced by those of Augustus and Agrippa; the emphasis is laid on the economic side of these building activities with special reference to the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem and the employment of large numbers of men in it. Next, the economic aspect of Augustus' large building and restoration projects are reviewed, and their importance in providing more or less permanent employment for great numbers of people as well as contributing to the growth of the economy and to the general prosperity is assessed, and then an attempt is made to compare these achievements with those of Herod. Once the similarity between the two cases is accepted, the Roman and Judaean evidence may reciprocally be complemented. While we lack such sustained reports on Augustan building as we can find in Josephus, Judaea of course is short of the wealth of epigraphic information that can be obtained about Rome. Though this is not a quantitative study, available figures and previous attempts at quantification are adduced in order to form informed guesses about the orders of magnitude involved. In conclusion it will be asked whether these policies of Herod had a comparable influence on his relations with (the silent masses of) his people as had those of the Princeps on his relations with the Roman plebs.

The central part of the Res Gestae Divi Augusti is taken up by three themes: chapters 15 to 18 itemise the largesses of the Princeps to the Roman people, some to the urban plebs, some to those settling in colonies and compensation for the land required for them, and some to help out the Treasury. In chapters 19 to 21.1 Augustus lists the public works, buildings and restorations he carried out during his long rule, followed by an appendage of dedications and remissions of payments.

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1 I have kept the form of the paper as delivered and added only some necessary annotation. It is a pleasant task to thank again the organisers for a judiciously conceived and excellently executed conference. Further, I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of the late Peter Brunt.
by him (21.2–3). The third theme is games and public entertainments (chapters 22 and 23), again followed by a chapter (24) of dedications.² The shared claim, benefactions to the Roman people, is clear and needs no elaboration. Yet for our present concern it is a remarkable feature of this section that the public works are sandwiched between the bread and the circuses, a clear indication of Augustus’ intentions.

Moreover, it has been observed that Augustus gradually monopolised public building in Rome,³ for a time leaving a share to his closest associates, in fact the very same ones who also were the last outside the Imperial family to gain the right to a triumph.⁴ Usually this line of action of the Princeps is seen as one more means of earning the gratitude of the plebs. This may well be so, but it is as well to realise what exactly this involved: in my view the turning of the Princeps into by far the largest-scale employer of the part of the plebs constituted by the “mass of semi-employed, looking for work”⁵ must have played a considerable role in their relations. We all too often tend to assume that ‘bread’, even in the literal sense, meant only the bread rationed to the poor populace of Rome. Yet it has been shown that the frumentationes supplied only a fraction of the corn needed to feed the capital.⁶ The statement of Tacitus (Ann. 1.2) that Augustus seduced the populus by means of the annona is typical for the attitude of ancient historians to economic problems.⁷ But man does not live by bread alone (Dt. 8:3):⁸ the other necessities, or even minor luxuries to go with them, may have been provided, more often than not, by the earnings from more or less casual or temporary employment. This may well have been a no lesser means utilised by the said employer of providing the plebs with ‘bread’ than the rations. In fact, it does not appear absurd to me to juxtapose

² By the way, it will be noted here that our sources provide additional information on the benefactions of Augustus, and that he chose to enumerate only a part of them, emphasising especially those granted to the people of Rome; for an enumeration of some eminent scholars discussing this issue, see Yavetz 1984, 8 (with acute criticism at 8–13).
⁴ In fact Augustus encouraged triumphators to put up public buildings (Suet., Aug. 29.4–30.1; cf. Itgenshorst 2004, 450–1). For a table connecting victories with public building in the Augustan age, see Favro 1996, 83–6.
⁵ Veyne 1990, 394.
⁷ And of some of their less critical modern successors—see the wise censure of both by Brunt 1974, 92; 102.
⁸ Referred to already by both Brunt 1980, 94 and Veyne 1990, 394.