

Deconstructing the Monuments: Tacitus and the Mausoleum of Augustus

The emperor Augustus, though not a historian as such, had a profound understanding of how to construct political events into a form a historical narrative through both architectural and epigraphic monuments. In this one way, at least, Augustus shares a resemblance with Tacitus, who took no less care in fashioning his account of the Julio-Claudians than Augustus did in designing for posterity a narrative of his reign. Although Augustus was immediately addressing a contemporary, and often local, audience with his message and Tacitus was reflecting upon past events, both of them were seeking to create an enduring message. This paper will investigate particularly how Tacitus responds to the narrative that Augustus constructed through his Mausoleum and its accompanying *Res Gestae*.

Monuments such as the Ara Pacis, the Mausoleum of Augustus, and the Forum of Augustus and the *Res Gestae* amongst others had an immediate impression and lasting power felt by both contemporaries and succeeding generations (Zanker 1988). From the time Augustus erected these monuments, literary artists strove to emulate and compete with them. Vergil's Shield of Aeneas (*Aen.* 8.608–731) and Horace's literary *monumentum* (*Carm.* 3.30) leap to mind most readily (Gurval 1995; Hardie 1983; Putnam 1973; Woodman 1974). While the literary constructions of Vergil and Horace seem to be a form of positive or admiring competition, Tacitus, in *Annales* 1.1–15 takes a radically different approach to the monuments of Augustus, particularly his Mausoleum and *Res Gestae* (Ralf 1979; Ramage 1987; Hesberg and Panciera 1994; Ridley 2003; Cooley 2009). One could say that Vergil and Horace were seeking to construct literary achievements to stand beside the architectural monuments of Augustus, perhaps even to adorn them further. Conversely, Tacitus constructs not only a historical

narrative that stands in contrast to the monuments of Augustus, but also a political analysis that challenges and deconstructs the monuments of Augustus.

The Mausoleum of Augustus provides the best example. The Mausoleum included inscriptions for those interred within which bestowed honor and respect on the dead by presenting an official version of the person's life from the regime's perspective. Gaius and Lucius Caesar, who were buried in the Mausoleum following their premature deaths, provide a useful example. No doubt, Augustus provided them with honorable inscriptions (*CIL* VI 40360-64). Tacitus, however, suggests that they might have died because of foul play on Livia's part, certainly a suggestion that was omitted from the official inscription (*Ann.* 1.3.2-3). Taken alone, this looks like merely a malicious comment on Tacitus' part, but seen in light of the Mausoleum's inscription it becomes a public refutation of the regime's message. This is but one example of how Tacitus frequently offers versions of events that dispute the account of the Augustan regime. By examining Tacitus' deconstruction of the *Res Gestae* and the Mausoleum of Augustus, I will argue that Tacitus attempts to deconstruct the narrative Augustus sought to create for his reign through his monuments.

Tacitus' deconstruction of the Augustan narrative has significant consequences for understanding the politics of his historical narrative. From time to time, Augustus has been put forth as the type of emperor of which Tacitus would have approved. I contend, based on this analysis, that Tacitus not only disapproved of Augustus, but even held him in particular spite as the founder of the Principate and the public deception Tacitus strove so ardently to expose.

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