

AUGUSTUS AND THE STARS

LEWIS (A.-M.) *Celestial Inclinations. A Life of Augustus*. Pp. xvi + 538, ills. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Cased, £81, US \$125. ISBN: 978-0-19-759964-8.

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The title of this fascinating monograph is slightly deceptive. L. offers not so much a biography of Augustus as an astronomically focused historical narrative of Roman politics during the lifespan of Octavian/Augustus (63 BCE – 14 CE). More specifically, L. promotes a cosmic reframing of key political events. Leading Romans are seen to make use of ‘celestial display’ – the manifestation of divine support in the form of planets, luminaries and associated constellations visible in the sky – to lend cosmic authority to their own endeavours. In the case of Octavian/Augustus there is also a broad development in strategy, from taking advantage of celestial display on pre-determined dates, to actively choosing dates, uncluttered by other associations, that offer the greatest opportunity for personal celestial celebration. For this (future) Emperor astrology is more than just sporadic political expediency, but a life-long intellectual investment: he is an individual with keen knowledge of the stars from his early days and one who practises accurate timekeeping and monitors the skies on a regular basis.

In making the cases for celestial display, L. consults not only a vast array of ancient evidence but also advanced astrological computer programs that allow for a reconstruction of the visible sky on a specific ancient date, a tool that is especially useful in discussions of *geniturae*, such as those of Agrippa (pp. 142–8) and Octavian (pp. 147–53).

The opening chapter, on Octavian’s birth, demonstrates how L.’s careful attention to political and historical context, and judicious use of ancient sources and modern astronomical sky maps, can lead to fresh insights. Arguing for the historicity of Nigidius Figulus’ famous call, on learning the birth of Octavian, that a *dominus* had been born to the world, L. depicts a diligent *mathematicus* who takes his cue from the observable and presiding presence of the ‘master’ planetary deity Jupiter on that very day as well as from the ancestral connection between this deity and the newborn (Jupiter → Venus → Caesar → Octavian’s mother, Atia). Nigidius Figulus, then, is the first Roman to press astronomical observation into the service of political commendation.

So begins a book that is full of illuminating new readings. L. makes an interesting case for an important pedagogical role of Cicero’s translation of Aratus: along with other study aids, and accompanied by direct observation of the stars, Cicero’s translation may have provided an effective introductory ‘curriculum’ in observational astronomy for Octavian from 46 BCE (pp. 101–15). Wading into the debate about the identity of the *sidus crinitum* witnessed in 44 BCE at the *ludi* honouring the recently deceased Caesar, L. discards the popular notion of an (unexpected) comet in favour of a specific bright star, Altair of Aquila. Rather than taking advantage of a chance occurrence, then, Octavian carefully organised the games (for September) to coincide with the appearance of a star that has close associations with his/their ultimate Olympian ancestor, Jupiter; moreover, located as it is within the Milky Way, the star assists the conceit that Caesar’s immortal soul has been transported to a celestial abode (pp. 155–89). Octavian’s curious ‘Banquet of the Twelve Gods’ is interpreted as a Saturnalian treat, for household slaves, that offers a jovial means of showcasing the would-be Emperor’s celestial support (pp. 241–50). Perhaps most ingeniously, L. offers a radical new reading of the Tellus relief on the Ara Pacis Augustae. Taking account of the nature, scale and

relative positioning of its various figures, L. argues that the relief exhibits, albeit subtly, the sort of celestial display that would have been visible in the sky in September, a month special to Augustus particularly in view of his birthday (pp. 357–61).

Overall, L. wrings the most celestial potential from the combined forces of ancient material and modern astronomical sky maps, and it is up to the individual to assess the level of plausibility. For example, with regard to activities surrounding temple dedication, it is quite possible to imagine that the choice of date is influenced by foreknown stellar positioning: that Caesar's celebratory stroll the day before dedicating the temple of Venus Genetrix (25 September 46 BCE) might have been orchestrated to make political use of the visibility of supporting planetary deities, Venus, Jupiter and Saturn (pp. 79–82); or that the dates of Octavian's three triumphs in August 29 BCE were chosen to take advantage of both existing festal associations (Hercules) and the visible presence of heavenly bodies pertinent to any story of the west's triumph over Egypt (pp. 291–2). It may be more difficult to imagine such calculating manoeuvres during the uncertainties of war. The idea that Caesar made political mileage out of the visibility of the planetary Venus on the days of the battles of Pharsalus (9 August 48 BCE) and Thapsus (6 April 46 BCE) strikes me as less secure, especially in view of Caesar's marginalisation of the supernatural in his military writings and the negative sign of Caesar's illness on the date of the latter battle (pp. 55–88).

The book is written in an accessible style and regularly opts for fullness to embrace a wide readership: there is, for example, useful discussion of Augustan poetic circles (p. 6), Roman time-keeping practices and calendrical inaccuracies (pp. 9–12), and the intricacies involved in astronomical observation (pp. 26–31). Indeed, L.'s decision to fill, with detailed narrative, chronological gaps between discussion of politically motivated celestial display, can make this book feel at times like a regular political narrative of the late Republic, albeit one particularly alert to its supernatural elements and elite moments of astronomical observation. This may strike some readers as a little onerous. For example, the detailed narrative of the Catilinarian Conspiracy and its aftermath (pp. 37–43), while very useful, may not be entirely necessary to set up the main argument: that Cicero is the first leading Roman to use celestial display for personal political ends, consciously advertising (the planetary) Jupiter – in his speeches, choice of meeting location, rhetorical gestures and post-humous *De consulatu suo* – to justify his controversial actions against the conspirators.

This is an important, engaging and detailed reassessment of key events from the late Republic and early empire. One does not need to buy into all the readings offered here to be convinced that the complex array of constellations visible in the sky on any one day may have played a much greater role in the staging of Roman political gesture than is usually acknowledged.

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