

"Based on a critical discussion of selected Latin inscriptions that you consider significant, discuss how Latin epigraphy contributes to our understanding of the Augustan era."

It is sometimes said that inscriptions when studying antiquity are just as important as documents when studying modern history.¹ It can also be said that classical antiquity would have been more difficult to understand without epigraphy and inscriptions. This is because when the inscriptions are put into their cultural context they are able to demonstrate their contribution to history.² The reason why epigraphy is of central importance when it comes to the studying of both Roman and Greek history is because there is an unusually high number of inscriptions in both Latin and Greek.³ Although there is a huge amount of epigraphy, no more than ten percent of people in most parts of the Graeco-Roman world were literate.⁴ This leads to the question of who were the inscriptions meant to be read by when the literacy levels were so low.⁵ Even though the inscriptions are seen as being of central importance, because the evidence from the epigraphy is often fragmentary, it can be difficult to construct evidence that is intelligible and not misleading.⁶ However, fortunately the inscriptions can be more understandable when put into the context of literature and archaeology.⁷

¹ Bodel 2001: 1

² Bodel 2001: 1

³ Millar 1983: 80

⁴ Bodel 2001: 15

⁵ Bodel 2001: 15

⁶ Millar 1983: 82

⁷ Millar 1983: 82

Epigraphy was particularly popular within the Augustan era. This is why Latin epigraphy is able to help us understand the Augustan era more. Augustus reshaped epigraphy because of the example he set in Rome. Therefore Augustus established a pattern and standards to follow.⁸ This quickly spread throughout the Roman empire of the time from people following the example of their first emperor Augustus.⁹ Augustus changed the epigraphic culture of Rome to use inscriptions as a way of spreading Augustan ideology nationwide.¹⁰ Although epigraphy had been used early on during the 1st century BC, during the reign of Augustus the Romans started to ship strong white marble to Rome which was easier to carve than other materials. This did of course help the popularity of epigraphy to spread through Italy, Europe and Africa.¹¹ The inscriptions this essay is going to explore are helpful when it comes to understanding more about the Augustan era using sections of the Res Gestae and a variety of coins.

Theodor Mommsen has referred to the Res Gestae as the "queen of inscriptions".¹² The Res Gestae is a biography written by Augustus himself and was an extremely long inscription which had been inscribed on bronze pillars. The Res Gestae provides a self portrait of the first princeps of Rome, Augustus, as he wished himself and his achievements to be remembered.¹³ The Res Gestae was first published after the death and deification of Augustus and there was originally only one copy which was in Rome. The senators, however, wanted it copied so that people who lived outside of Rome could view it and read all about

⁸ Bodel 2001: 7

⁹ Bodel 2001: 7

¹⁰ Bodel 2001: 7

¹¹ Bodel 2001: 7

¹² Eck 2003: 2

¹³ Eck 2003: pg 2

their great emperor.¹⁴ There is evidence that the Res Gestae had been copied in Ancyra. This is because the text had been inscribed on the walls of the temple to Roma and Augustus in both Latin and Greek. Although the Res Gestae might be one-sided and biased because it is all seen through the eyes of Augustus, it is of course possible to learn a lot about the Augustan era from the Res Gestae. This can be shown from the first section of the Res Gestae which states "I successfully championed the liberty of the republic when it was oppressed by the tyranny of a faction"¹⁵ "giving me imperium"¹⁶ "ordered me as a propraetor".¹⁷ Even though it may be biased and one-sided, it is useful in giving the reader information about how Augustus came to Rome and managed to gain power at "the age of nineteen".¹⁸ This shows that the Res Gestae helps us to understand more about the Augustan era because the information it gives us about his arrival in Rome and his rise to power.

The message that is conveyed by the inscriptions show that Augustus was not only the first man among many, but also the first to be a monarch, the sole ruler of Roman society.¹⁹ Augustus liked to show how proud he was of his titles. This can be seen by the way that all of his titles were used by Augustus on inscriptions "Imp(erator) Caesar Divi f(ilius) Aug(ustus) co(n)s(ul) XII tr(ibunicia) pot(estate) XVIII pontifex maximus"²⁰. This translates roughly to Emperor Augustus, the son of the deified Julius Caesar, power of the tribunes for

¹⁴ Eck 2003: 1-2

¹⁵ Aug. Res Ges. 1.1

¹⁶ Aug. Res Ges. 1.2

¹⁷ Aug. Res Ges. 1.3

¹⁸ Aug. Res Ges. 1.1

¹⁹ Eck 2003: 112

²⁰ Figure 2

the twelfth time Pontifex Maximus for the eighteenth time. This shows that not only was Augustus proud of his titles but he was offered the same titles and honours for multiple years in succession. The Res Gestae can be seen as offering a personal account of the years between 44BC to 14AD because it presents information about his political and financial achievements within these years.²¹ But these honours and titles are not just mentioned in the Res Gestae but in other places as well such as a coin showing Augustus becoming triumvirate which has inscribed upon it "tresviri rei publicae constituendae consulari potestate" which can be translated to triumvirate for constituting the res publica.²² A further example of Augustus being honoured by the Roman people is shown in the Res Gestae when he was "named Augustus by decree of the senate"²³ and his house was "publicly wreathed with bay leaves and a civic crown was fixed over [his] door".²⁴ This point can be backed up by another coin, this time representing Augustus' civic crown.²⁵ The fact that Augustus had been presented with so many important honours and titles shows that Augustus really was a person of the people because of the amount of epigraphic evidence available to prove all of these honours.

However, the epigraphic evidence from the Augustan period is not just the Res Gestae. Coins were minted to commemorate important recent events. This can be shown through a coin showing a comet commemorating the comet that the Romans believed was Caesar going to join the gods.²⁶ Sometimes coins were even used as political propaganda for

²¹ Eck 2003: 133

²² Figure 1

²³ Aug. Res Ges. 34.2

²⁴ Aug. Res Ges. 34.2

²⁵ Zanker 1998: MuM Auction 43 no.271

²⁶ Zanker 1998: MuM Auction 28 no. 253

instance there is evidence of coins supporting Marc Antony as well as Augustus.²⁷ This shows that coins were used to remind and inform people in the empire of important recent events. This also contributes to our understanding of the Augustan era because they provide evidence about the events from within Augustan era.

One of the most important coins, however, is a coin commemorating the peace that Augustus and his reign had brought to Rome. It has inscribed upon it "IMP CAESAR DIVI F COS VI LIBERTATIS P R Vindex" which means Emperor son of the deified Julius Caesar protector of the Freedom of the Roman People.²⁸ On the other side it has "Pax" this means peace. This is the reason why Augustus was honoured and appreciated so much by the Roman public and people, because Augustus managed to stop the fighting and bring peace to Rome. With peace came stability and that eventually led to financial stability.

To conclude, I believe that a lot of the evidence from this period is biased because it is all seen through Augustus' view point.²⁹ This leads to the fact that most of the epigraphic evidence that is available is about Augustus or events concerning Augustus. It is important to remember that even though inscriptions do provide one of the most direct links to everyday life within the classical world, we need to be wary of what is not said in the inscriptions.³⁰ By saying this I mean that people during the Augustan period would have been wary of angering Augustus. Therefore, they would try not to upset him because even

²⁷ Zanker 1998: RR4255

²⁸ RIC 476

²⁹ Eck 2003: 133

³⁰ Millar 1983: 81

though Augustus did eventually bring PAX to Rome, before that he also brought civil war and proscriptions during both of which many people died. However, not all the inscriptions are concerning solely Augustus, such as the coin depicting Marc Antony.³¹ Even though the inscriptions during this period may be biased and one-sided it is possible to learn a lot about the Augustan era through its epigraphy. This is because it enables us to learn about Augustus' rise to power and demonstrates how he was viewed by his public through the number of honours he received both of which are shown through the Res Gestae and inscriptions on coins.

³¹ Zanker 1998: RR 4255

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Figure 1-

<http://www.coinarchives.com/a/lotviewer.php?LotID=1165756&AucID=2343&Lot=531&Val=a3764bd784668d12e8b61918030a0fe7> [Accessed: 4th May 2018]



Figure 2- <http://ancientrome.ru/art/artworken/img.htm?id=6813> [Accessed: 4th May 2018]

