

## BOOK REVIEW

*The House of Augustus: A Historical Detective Story.* By T. P. WISEMAN. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. xvi + 245. Hardback, \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0-691-18007-6.

The *Domus Augusti* looms large in the historical imagination of the Roman city.<sup>1</sup> Excavated between 1958 and 1984 and restored at great cost in time for the bimillennial celebrations of Augustus' death in 2014, the Casa di Augusto is a popular site for tourists and a crucial landmark in Rome's ancient topography.<sup>2</sup> It is, however, as Wiseman argues, neither the site of Rome's first emperor nor the home of Augustus. These two central strands, a challenge on Augustus as an emperor, and the positioning of his residence, provide the core to what is a dynamic and imaginative volume. Not every argument is successful, and the image of Augustus presented here can (and perhaps should) be challenged, but that does not diminish the importance of this work or indeed the persistent, unrelenting questions that abound within.

The book is divided between ten chapters, each tackling different aspects of the archaeology and history of the Palatine and of Augustus. This is however a detective story, as much as historical writing, and Wiseman appears a dogged and unrelenting investigator, seeking the truth and examining above all else the contemporary voices. Wiseman is a perfect fit for this role, which feels in parts like a hybrid of Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse, Agatha Christie's Poirot (with perhaps a hint of Miss Marple) and Poe's C. Auguste Dupin. Wiseman is a scholar unafraid of asking difficult questions and making judgements that run counter to received wisdom.<sup>3</sup> His work compels strong reaction and encourages us to revisit how we have reached our conclusions and how we seek to know the ancient world. The case Wiseman is making here is two-fold. First, that Augustus was not Rome's

<sup>1</sup> See for instance <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/the-digital-reconstructions-bringing-roman-ruins-to-life/> & <https://parcocolosseo.it/en/marvels/the-house-of-augustus/>

<sup>2</sup> On this see Penelope Goodman's research for *The Commemorating Augustus* project: <https://augustus2014.com/>

<sup>3</sup> E.g. *Remembering the Roman People* (2009), *Remus: A Roman Myth* (1995), *The Myths of Rome* (2004), *Unwritten Rome* (2008) and *The Roman Audience* (2015).

first emperor, but instead a *popularis* leader who freed the Republic from the control of the oligarchy. Thus he is a champion of the people and savior of the Republic rather than its destroyer. Second, that what we believe to be the location of his house on the Palatine cannot be where he lived, but instead that his home can be found on the site where the Flavian palace was constructed.

This detective work is grounded in forensic analysis, a close and detailed reading of ancient perspectives (the various witnesses) and the misconceptions of other investigators (historians and archaeologists). The arguments presented are persuasive and the clear and readable prose very carefully guides the reader towards Wiseman's perspective. This is most clearly seen in Chapters 1, 2 and 9, and these serve as a good guide to the principles at work within this volume. In the opening lines of Chapter 1 we are confronted with the crime the detective has been called in to solve, the crucial misinterpretation prevalent in our understanding of the Republic and its transition into Empire: "the simple-minded idea that the Roman republic came to a sudden end in the civil wars of the forties BC, and that what followed was the imperial monarchy" (1). The best way of challenging this is to "take seriously what the ancient sources say about it," because they "are uniquely authoritative and well-informed, consisting as they do of the writings of contemporary participants" (1). The focus on primary evidence (Cicero, Hirtius, Sallust, Livy, Appian, Suetonius, Josephus and Augustus himself) allows Wiseman to create an alternate image of late Roman republican political culture and the political relationships of the principate. The *optimates* are not the republic at all but a degenerate distortion of its core principles. With Tiberius the message and purpose of Augustus as a *popularis* was replaced by someone who acted and behaved as an *optimatus*. The narrative of emperorship begins then not with Augustus or Tiberius, but instead when the Praetorians first chose an emperor in AD 41 (14). This chapter is pro-Caesarian and engages with Cicero in such a way as to devalue the position of the *optimates*. It is a good example of close source reading and the importance of contemporary voices, and encourages a more nuanced image of the republic and the power of the people that upholds the edifice of government.

Chapters 2 and 8 are useful illustrations of how Wiseman challenges received wisdom and scholarship. In chapter 2 he disputes the very foundations of the Casa di Augustano/Palazzo di Ottaviano: "[i]t is a remarkable story of misinterpretation, overconfidence, and wishful thinking" (28). He first engages with Cicero again, here for the well-known line "*odit populus Romanus privatam luxuriam,*

*publicam magnificentiam diligit*.<sup>4</sup> Questions of personal morality, wealth and service to the *res publica* defined the later Republic. Against this backdrop Wiseman creates an Augustus that is channelling the will of the people and behaving in the manner of a *popularis*. Wiseman then exposes the many issues surrounding defining and identifying the palace of Augustus, shifting between detective and prosecution lawyer. Carandini, Coarelli, Hall, Carettoni, Zanker, Iacopi and Tedone are all brought to the stand, and their arguments and observations dismissed and exposed in due course.<sup>5</sup> Although the prose here is cutting, it nonetheless reinforces how the belief in the current position of Augustus' home is built on unsupported and dubious foundations. The same tack is seen in chapter 8, where Wiseman turns to the mistaken belief in the original orientation of the Temple of Apollo.<sup>6</sup> As Wiseman writes: "Archaeologists, and historians who believed them, have been culpably content with Rosa's unfounded assumption that the Apollo temple faced south-west." Rosa here is Pietro Rosa, who excavated the Palatine for the Emperor Napoleon III in 1865 (e.g. 122-128). The forensic focus allows Wiseman to expose once gain the tendency on the part of scholarship to accept rather than challenge the received wisdom, and to look again more closely at the contemporary voices (Ovid). Each of these three chapters provides a clear and focused rationale for Wiseman's arguments, and deconstruct received wisdom, while creating a new image of Augustus, the late republic and the physical topography of the palatine.

The rest of the book seeks in a similar way to revisit and challenge the image we have of Augustus and the Palatine landscape. The links with Romulus are examined particularly well, the notion of the fire of Nero as "year zero" makes sense and the exploration of prehistory of the Palatine is imaginative and compelling (e.g. Chapter 3, 30-47; Chapter 4, 48-64; Chapter 6, 82-103). In each section Wiseman provides relentless assessment of the evidence, and this naturally leads to a reconsideration of the role of the historian. Are we detectives, seeking the

<sup>4</sup> Cic. *Mur.* 76. "The people of Rome hate private luxury, but they love public magnificence"

<sup>5</sup> E.g. A. Carandini, *Le case del potere nell'antica Roma*, (Rome, 2010); F. Coarelli, *Palatium. Il Palatino dalle origini all'impero* (Rome 2012); J. Hall, *Artifact and Artifice, Classical Archaeology and the Ancient Historian*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); I. Iacopi and G. Tedone (2005-6), "Biblioteca e Porticus ad Apollinis," *MDAI(R)* 112: 351-78.

<sup>6</sup> Anticipated in Wiseman's "A Debate on the Temple of Apollo Palatinus: Roma Quadrata, Archaic Huts, the House of Augustus, and the Orientation of Palatine Apollo." *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 25 (2012): 371-87.

truth? Are we lawyers, investigating and judging the past? The final chapter, fittingly titled "A Miscarriage of Justice" provides a short study of how and why Augustus' image has changed from what Wiseman sees as the genuine contemporary perspective of him as a defender of the people. It is often easy to dismiss the positive interpretations of Augustus from contemporaries as either part of his carefully manipulated public image or, alternatively, as a form of sycophantic praise, empty of value. It is difficult here to know for certain whether contemporaries were genuine in their portrayals of Augustus. The exploration of Tacitus is particularly useful in exploring the reasons behind the Roman historians' support of the *optimates*. The analysis of Tacitus' *Annales* (1.13-2.1) leads Wiseman to view it a "tendentious travesty even more shocking after that virtuous protestation of impartiality" (162-163). The tyrannical image of Augustus is then linked to the image found in Gibbon ("A cool head, an unfeeling heart, and a cowardly disposition, prompted him, at the age of nineteen, to assume the mask of hypocrisy, which he afterwards never left aside"), before at last reaching Syme's *Roman Revolution*. Here Wiseman analyses the Augustus we find in Syme's writing, exposing the enduring legacy and influence of the image first presented in 1939 (165-6). More than this, it feels as though it is the ghost of Syme's interpretation that rests in the shadows of this study. If Wiseman is a detective here, it feels as though Syme was the chief-prosecutor of the historical Augustus.

In the epilogue Wiseman writes that he wants to "present this book as an object lesson in historical method, an indignant rebuttal of unexamined assumptions parroted as facts" (167). This is undoubtedly achieved. It is an excellent example in historical method, and one that presents two important arguments. In one Wiseman is certainly correct. We cannot just believe that something is the House of Augustus because that is what we have been told. His exploration of the site forces us to recognize that here we were quite simply wrong. The second argument, and the more important of them (rehabilitating Augustus), is trickier. Primary sources are the windows into this world, but much like in a detective story or a court drama, these eyewitnesses can and should be challenged. We cannot follow blindly their perspectives and must examine them with great care and precision. Cicero is challenged for his biases, but Augustus and those who write in favour of his position appear somewhat unscathed in the cross-examination. Wiseman privileges the ancient evidence, rightly, but there are moments where he follows them too closely, and it is this that causes pause when considering the validity of his *princeps* as *popularis*. If Augustus is the champion of the people, is this simply how he *wished* to present himself, for political expedience, or was it

instead a genuine belief? If so, is Augustus, as he has said all along, the savior of the republic, defending it against the *optimates* forces that would seek to destroy it: “*Annos undeviginti natus exercitum privato consilio et privata impensa comparavi, per quem rem publicam a dominatione factionis oppressam in libertatem vindicavi*” and “*In consulatu sexto et septimo, postquam bella civilia exstinxeram, per consensum universorum potitus rerum omnium, rem publicam ex mea potestate in senatus populique Romani arbitrium transtuli.*”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Aug, *Res Gestae*. 1 and 34. “At nineteen, on my own initiative and at my own expense, I raised an army by means of which I restored liberty to the republic, which had been oppressed by the tyranny of a faction” and “In my sixth and seventh consulships, when I had extinguished the flames of civil war, after receiving by universal consent the absolute control of affairs, I transferred the republic from my own control to the will of the Senate and the Roman people.”