



[Res Gestae Divi Augusti, chapter 34](#) [1]

See [Augustus, Res Gestae divi Augusti \(General Background\)](#) [2] for the historical context of the *Res Gestae*.

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Eulogy / Panegyric / Elogium.

Original Location/Place: Rome, Ancyra, Antioch in Pisidia, Apollonia, Sardis.

Date: 14 CE

Language: Latin, Greek

Category: Roman

Commentary: Chapter 34 of the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* is one of the text's most discussed and well-known chapters. Together with chapter 35, they act as a neat framing device that responds chronologically and ideologically to the opening chapters; the final stages of Augustus' career are discussed, as opposed to his early roles, and the qualities listed in the inscription of the golden shield reflect actions recorded in the opening chapters of the *Res Gestae*, in which he demonstrated *pietas*, justice and clemency (see chapters 1-3. Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 256). Chapter 34 has received the most attention, however, for what Augustus appears to be saying about the constitution of Rome and his restoration of it. There has been much discussion as to the extent to which it represents a political statement, but more recent scholarship (based on the discovery of a new fragment of the text in Pisidian Antioch that clarified an earlier reconstruction of one line) favours the view taken by Walter K. Lacey, that the chapter should be read as the 'capstone of Augustus's achievement', which prefigures the most impressive honour awarded to him in chapter 35: the title of *pater patriae*, "father of the fatherland" (Lacey, *Augustus and the principate*, p. 98).

The chapter opens with the statement that Augustus had brought civil wars to an end (*bella civilia exstinxeram*); these had endured almost without break since the discord between Sulla and Marius in the first half of the first century BCE, and Augustus's success in bringing them to an end was a crucial aspect of his popular support. It is interesting here that the reference to the consulships allows us to date this statement to the period immediately after his victory at Actium, thereby characterising the war with Antony as a civil one. In previous chapters (e.g. 3.1), Augustus had described it as a foreign war, against the foreign kingdom of the Ptolemies as represented by Cleopatra (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 256-7). Following this statement comes the most debated line of the chapter: 'by everyone's agreement I had power over everything' (*per consensum universorum potens rerum omnium*). Theodor Mommsen had originally reconstructed this fragmentary line with *potitus rerum omnium*, giving the translation "having obtained possession of all power" or 'being in possession of all power,' which gave rise to much debate regarding how, constitutionally, this had been possible (for a summary of the different readings and interpretations of this line, see Ridley, *Emperor's Retrospect*, p. 220-7; Scheid, *Res Gestae*, p. 82-6). However, the discovery of the new fragment at Antioch has confirmed that the missing letters should be restored as *potens*, meaning that Augustus is making a more general statement here than previously understood; rather than making a claim about the way he obtained so much power, he is simply stating that following the end of the civil wars, he had full control of everything (Botteri, *L'integrazione Mommseniana*, p. 263). As John Scheid has noted, acknowledging that he held complete power did not mean that it was officially decreed or awarded to him (*Res Gestae*, p. 83). The fact that being all-powerful was by 'everyone's agreement' was another important factor in Augustus's claim to rule; where previously in the Republic it had stood for a formal designation of the Senate's opinion on a matter, it was used by Augustus here in a way that 'transcended constitutional niceties' (Cooley, *Res Gestae* p. 258). As the sole victor to emerge from the conflicts of the Late Republic, his *de facto* leadership was visible and effective, but it was not a position made formal by a change to Rome's constitution. Indeed, the only actual magistracy that Augustus held at this time was the consulship (Millar, *Triumvirate and Principate*, p. 62).

In the next line Augustus claims to have transferred the state from his own power into the control of the senate and the people of Rome (*rem publicam ex mea potestate in senatus populique Romani arbitrium transtuli*). Again, this should not be understood as a statement of previous constitutional change, by which he had accumulated so much power, and which he is now in the process of reverting. It was rather a statement indicating his restoration (and generosity?) of constitutional government, in order to distance himself from his triumviral past and its association with potentially unconstitutional measures (Scheid, *Res Gestae*, p. 89; Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 258). The distance was created through a series of reforms to political practice in Rome, which included abolishing several laws and



decrees introduced by the *triumvirs*, restoring traditional practices such as exchanging the *fascēs* (the rods that were the symbol of office) each month with his co-consul, revising the membership of the senate, the age at which magistracies could be held and restoring elections, in measures designed to visibly restore constitutional propriety and return 'control' to the Roman people (see Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LIII.1-2; Cooley, *Res Gestae* p. 259-60). The restoration of 'eighty-two' temples in the city of Rome (see *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* chapters 19-21, esp. 20.4), was a visible restoration of traditional religious policy and practice, which sought to reinstate the ceremonial activity symbolic of 'constitutional normality,' the culmination of which occurred on 13 January 27 BCE when Augustus formally returned control of the provinces to the Roman people in a meeting of the senate (Ovid, *Fasti*, I.589; Strabo, *Geography* XVII.2.25; Lacey, *Augustus and the principate*, ch. 3; Gruen, *Augustus and the making of the principate*, p. 34-5). It is in the Greek version of the text that a more realistic picture of Augustus's transfer of power is presented; *res publica* – the 'state' – is translated here as ??????/kyriêa- 'rights of ownership' – which, as Alison Cooley has said, summons an 'extraordinary image of Augustus' dominance,' that fits with the Greek perception of the position of emperor as one akin to monarchy (*Res Gestae*, p. 260).

On 16 January 27 BCE the name 'Augustus' was granted by the senate. The name, according to Suetonius, was chosen due to its positive religious connotations, having been used previously to describe sacred places or things consecrated with augural rites (Suetonius, *Augustus* 7.2). It was related to the Latin verb, *augeo* – I increase, enrich, exalt, praise – which elicited a sense of authority as well as its religious nature. Although Augustus had previously been keen to take the *cognomen* Romulus, it was abandoned due to its regal associations (Brunt and Moore, *Res Gestae*, p. 77). Above all, the name Augustus evoked a kind of 'superhuman' status (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 261). Livy had used it in his description of Hercules, who was rewarded with divine status because of his services to humankind (*History of Rome* I.7.9); Augustus too had 'served' the Roman people in an extra-ordinary way, and his designation as *divi filius* (son of a god, that is, of the divinised Julius Caesar) made the divine associations implicit in the name Augustus entirely appropriate. The Greek version of the text evokes this sense perhaps more clearly, translating the name as ???????? (*sebastos*), or 'revered'. Although known as a word, this was the first time that Augustus had been used as a name, and it represented, in the words of Meyer Reinhold: 'potent polyvalent implications' (*Augustus's conception of himself*, p. 64). Although the appellation of Augustus is presented first here, it was actually awarded three days after the honours that are next listed in the text: the laurel trees, the 'civic crown' and the golden shield, which were dedicated to him on 13 January 27 BCE (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 261). The laurel trees represented perpetual victory and peace (see Pliny, *Natural History*, 15.39.127; 40.133), and were placed on either side of the doorway to his house on the Palatine hill (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LIII.16.4). Laurel trees had traditionally been planted on either side of buildings of religious significance in Rome, and were particularly associated with Apollo – who was said to have protected Augustus at the battle of Actium, and whose temple stood next to Augustus's house –, through the myth of the metamorphosis of the nymph Daphne (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I.452-567). Apollo was also the god that Augustus claimed to have protected him during the battle of Actium and to have lead him to victory. The cumulative effect of these associations was to turn Augustus's house into a place of religious significance, imbued with religious aura (Alföldi, *Der Vater des Vaterlandes*, p. 68).

Above the doorway, between the laurel trees, the *corona civica* – civic crown – was placed. This crown of oak leaves was traditionally awarded to those who had demonstrated 'conspicuous bravery in saving the life of a fellow citizen' (Brunt and Moore, *Res Gestae*, p. 78; see Pliny, *Natural History*, XXII.4.8). However, by the late Republic this honour had been refigured in recognition of someone whose victory had saved 'Rome'; it had been proposed for Cicero following the Catilinarian conspiracy and a statue wearing the crown had been dedicated to Julius Caesar on the *rostra* in 45 BCE for bringing the civil war to an end (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 264). The crown was most likely awarded to Augustus for the same reason, for bringing to an end the civil wars that had plagued Rome for decades, as he mentions at the start of the chapter, and for saving the lives of the Roman people as a result. The combination of the crown and laurel trees became a long-lasting and far reaching motif, appearing on coins and as architectural decoration in Italy and throughout the provinces (for a list of coins minted with this image, see Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 265; Scheid, *Res Gestae*, p. 90). Augustus appears on the *Gemma Augustea* with the crown, and the image was repeated even on funerary monuments, such as that of the *Augustalis* C. Calventius Quietus at Pompeii, who used it to demonstrate his close affiliation with the imperial cult (tomb south 20, Herculaneum Gate, Kockel, *Der Grabbauten* p. 90-7. See also Alföldi, *De Vater des Vaterlands*, p. 71; Zanker, *Power of Images*, p. 277). Juxtaposed with the award of the laurel wreath and crown is the description of a 'golden shield', dedicated to Augustus at the Julian Senate House. Although the original shield is lost, a marble copy was found in the cryptoporticus of a building in Arles, inscribed with the same qualities listed in the text here (see [Shield of Augustus \(AE 1952. 165\)](#) [3]). The marble version of the inscription has been dated to 26 BCE, when Augustus



was in his eighth consulship, and may originally have been displayed in an area dedicated to imperial worship (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 266). Augustus states here the qualities for which he was awarded the shield, and which were inscribed upon it: valour, clemency, justice and piety (*virtus, clementia, iustitia* and *pietas*). A 'canon' of virtues – wisdom, justice, fortitude and moderation – had been promoted by Plato and Greek philosophers ever since, but the qualities recognised in Augustus did not follow this standard formula. As Alison Cooley has noted, the golden shield offered a new set of virtues that spoke of the pre-eminence of Augustus in Roman society (*Res Gestae*, p. 270). Although the virtues listed are presented as though equally weighted, the martial connotations cannot be denied; the motif of a shield immediately evokes thoughts of battle, and the laurel tree and crown suggested triumphal celebrations, which was complemented by the fact that the shield was displayed in the Julian Senate house alongside a statue of Victory that had been dedicated by Augustus following his conquest at Actium.

The final line of chapter 34 returns to the question of how much power was held by Augustus. He states that he 'excelled everyone in influence, but [he] had no more power' (*auctoritate omnibus praestiti, potestatis autem nihilo amplius habui*). A careful distinction is made here between *auctoritas* and *potestas*; the latter is characterised as actual, legitimate power conferred through the holding of political office, with *auctoritas* rather expressing a kind of personal authority and prestige (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 271). As stated above, Augustus had restored all constitutional propriety to the Roman people, and held no magistracies or positions that were at odds with the 'restoration' of government he had built the security of his rule upon. However, his own personal authority could not be shaken off; it was intrinsic to him and could not be defined by office or titles. As Meyer Reinhold asserted, 'this "authority" did not, in the Roman sense, connote legitimate power, the right to command, but rather esteem for preeminent status and soundness of judgement...it signified a unique ethical-political relationship between himself and all others that was non-transferable. Since this quality was not constitutionally defined, its scope was unlimited' (*Augustus's conception of himself*, p. 63-4).

Keywords in the original language:

- [consul](#) [4]
- [bellum civile](#) [5]
- [consensus](#) [6]
- [res publica](#) [7]
- [potestas](#) [8]
- [populus romanus](#) [9]
- [meritus](#) [10]
- [Augustus](#) [11]
- [corona civica](#) [12]
- [clupeus aureus](#) [13]
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- [virtus](#) [15]
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- [iustitia](#) [17]
- [pietas](#) [18]
- [auctoritas](#) [19]
- [magistratus](#) [20]

Thematic keywords:

- [Augustus](#) [21]
- [civil war](#) [22]
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- [Roman people](#) [25]
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- [virtue](#) [29]
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- [legitimacy](#) [35]
- [personal power](#) [36]
- [reputation](#) [37]

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