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RELIGION IN SUETONIUS' LIFE OF AUGUSTUS

Summary: Suetonius describes the lives of Caesars according to categories such as antecedents, birth, career, achievements, morals, religion, appearance, and death. In my paper I examine the function of religion in *The Deified Augustus* of Suetonius. Firstly I list the places where phenomena concerning religion appear. Then I analyse the attitude of Augustus towards religions; e.g. he took dreams very seriously, and regarded certain auspices and omens as infallible. Suetonius treats the religious beliefs of Augustus long because he regards them as very important. Augustus wanted to enhance the sacred character of his principate, therefore he acquired membership in several priesthoods.

Key words: life, biography, category, religion, auspice, omen, temple, foreign, rite, deification

1. In *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, Goodyear describes Suetonius' method of writing in this way: "Following an approach to biography used by some of the Alexandrian scholars, Suetonius treats his subjects very schematically, according to divisions and categories such as antecedents, birth, career, achievements, morals, appearance, and death, but with some variations according to the particular subject matter."¹ Goodyear does not mention religion among his divisions, but perhaps he also refers to religion with the word *morals*, although the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines *morals* as follows: "standards or principles of good behaviour, especially in matters of sexual relationships"² Neither does Rolfe, the English translator of Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*, mention religion. Instead, he speaks about "virtues and vices": "Although he aims to be strictly impartial, scrupulously recounting the virtues and vices of the emperors in separate lists, he seems as a rule to pay little regard

¹ *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*. Volume II: *Latin Literature*, part 4: *The Early Principate*. Ed. by E. J. KENNEY. Cambridge 1982, 165.

² *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. Ed. by A. S. HORNBY. Eighth edition. Oxford 2010, 994.

to the source from which his information comes, and rarely makes any personal comment.”³

1.1. Mariano Bassols de Climent mentions the category of religion, “religion y superstición”.⁴ Michael von Albrecht refers to the omens: “Feste Elemente in den Kaiserbiographien bilden auch die Vorzeichen, die Erwähnung der Erotika und die *ultima verba*. Die Nennung von *ostenta*, *omina* und *prodigia* steht in Einklang mit dem Aberglauben der Zeit (vgl. Plin. *Epist.* 1. 18).”⁵

1.2. Albrecht is wrong when he regards the *ostenta*, *omina* and *prodigia* as superstition, because “An omen, in Greek and Roman thought, was a phenomenon or circumstance signifying good or ill fortune in the future, a message sent from the gods.”⁶ However, what concerns gods, belongs to religion. According to my hypothesis, religion was an important point of view for Suetonius in his judgement of the Roman emperors. Therefore, in my paper I would like to examine closely the function of religion in *The Deified Augustus* of Suetonius.

2. Firstly, I list the places where phenomena concerning religion appear. In the Life of Augustus I have found eighteen such places.⁷

2.1. Chapter 1: the Octavian family was distinguished at Velitrae: *Velitris ... ostendebatur ara Octavio consecrata* – “an altar was shown there besides, consecrated by an Octavian”.⁸

2.2. Chapter 5: Augustus was born on September 28, 63 BC: *regione Palati ad Capita Bubula, ubi nunc sacrarium habet, aliquanto post quam excessit constitutum* – “at the Ox-Heads in the Palatine quarter, where he now has a shrine, built shortly after his death”.⁹

2.3. Chapter 6: A small room is shown as the emperor’s nursery near Velitrae: *Huc introire nisi necessario et caste religio est* – “No one ventures to enter this room except of necessity and after purification.”¹⁰

2.4. Chapter 16. 2: Octavian offended Neptune crying out: *etiam invito Neptuno victoriam se adepturum* – “I will have the victory spite of Neptune.”¹¹

2.5. Chapter 18. 2: To extend the fame of his victory at Actium: *urbem Nicopolim ... condidit ... et ampliatio vetere Apollinis templo locum castrorum, quibus fuerat*

³ Suetonius. With an English translation by J. C. ROLFE. In two volumes. Vol. I. Cambridge, Mass. 1964, XVIII.

⁴ C. Suetonio Tranquilo, *Vida de los doce Césares*. Texto revisado y traducido por M. BASSOLS DE CLIMENT. Volumen I. (Lib. I–II). Barcelona, 1964, XLV.

⁵ ALBRECHT, M. VON: *Geschichte der römischen Literatur*. Bd. II. München 1992, 1108.

⁶ *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*. Second edition. Ed. by M. C. HOWATSON. Oxford (1989) 1990, 394.

⁷ For Augustus’ attitude to religion, see KIENAST D.: *Augustus. Prinzeps und Monarch*. Darmstadt 1982, 185–214; GALINSKY, K.: *Augustan Culture. An Interpretive Introduction*. Princeton, NJ 1996, 288–331.

⁸ ROLFE (n. 3) 122–123.

⁹ ROLFE (n. 3) 128–129.

¹⁰ ROLFE (n. 3) 128–129.

¹¹ ROLFE (n. 3) 142–143.

usus, exornatum navalibus spoliis Neptuno ac Marti consecravit. – “he founded a city called Nicopolis ... enlarged the ancient temple of Apollo; and after adorning the site of the camp which he had occupied with naval trophies, consecrated it to Neptune and Mars”¹²

2.6. Chapter 22: The temple of Janus Quirinus, which had been closed twice, *in multo breviori temporis spatio terra marique pace parta ter clusit* – “he closed three times in a far shorter period, having won peace on land and sea”¹³

2.7. Chapter 23. 2: He suffered two severe defeats, therefore *Vovit et magnos ludos Iovi optimo Maximo, si res p. in meliorem statum vertisset.* – “He also vowed great games to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, in case the condition of the commonwealth should improve.”¹⁴

2.8. Chapter 29. 1: He built and restored a number of temples: *forum cum aede Martis Ultoris, templum Apollinis in Palatio, aedem Tonantis Iovis in Capitolio.* – “his forum with the temple of Mars the Avenger, the temple of Apollo on the Palatine, and the fane of Jupiter the Thunderer on the Capitol”¹⁵

2.9. Chapter 29. 5: Several such edifices were built at that time by other people: *a Marcio Philippo aedes Herculis Musarum, a L. Cornificio aedes Dianae, ab Asinio Pollione atrium Libertatis, a Munacio Planco aedes Saturni.* – “the temple of Hercules and the Muses by Marcus Philippus, the temple of Diana by Lucius Cornificius, the Hall of Liberty by Asinius Pollio, the temple of Saturn by Munatius Plancus”¹⁶

2.10. Chapter 30. 2: Augustus restored sacred edifices: *Aedes sacras vetustate conlapsas aut incendio absumptas refecit.* – “He restored sacred edifices which had gone to ruin through lapse of time or had been destroyed by fire.”¹⁷

2.11. Chapter 31. 1: Augustus as pontifex maximus: *quidquid fatidicorum librorum... vulgo ferebatur, supra duo milia contracta undique cremavit.* – “collected whatever prophetic writings, ... and burned more than two thousand of them”¹⁸

2.12. Chapter 31. 3: He increased the number of priests: *Sacerdotum et numerum et dignitatem sed et commoda auxit, praecipue Vestalium virginum.* – “He increased the number and importance of the priests, and also their allowances and privileges, in particular those of the Vestal virgins.”¹⁹

2.13. Chapter 31. 4: He revived ancient rites: *Nonnulla etiam ex antiquis caeremoniis paulatim abolita restituit, ut Salutis augurium, Diale flamonium, sacrum Lupercale, ludos Saeculares et Compitalicios.* – “He also revived some of the ancient rites which had gradually fallen into disuse, such as the augury of Safety, the office of Flamen Dialis, the ceremonies of the Lupercalia, the Secular Games, and the festival of the Compitalia.”²⁰

¹² ROLFE (n. 3) 148–149.

¹³ ROLFE (n. 3) 152–153.

¹⁴ ROLFE (n. 3) 154–155.

¹⁵ ROLFE (n. 3) 166–167.

¹⁶ ROLFE (n. 3) 168–169.

¹⁷ ROLFE (n. 3) 170–171.

¹⁸ ROLFE (n. 3) 170–171.

¹⁹ ROLFE (n. 3) 170–171.

²⁰ ROLFE (n. 3) 172–173.

2.14. Chapter 35. 3: He provided that the senators should make a sacrifice before taking their seat: *Quo autem lecti probatique et religiosus et minore molestia senatoria munera fungerentur, sanxit, ut prius quam consideret quisque ture ac mero supplicaret apud aram eius dei, in cuius templo coiretur.* – “Furthermore, that those who were chosen and approved might perform their duties more conscientiously, and also with less inconvenience, he provided that before taking his seat each member should offer incense and wine at the altar of the god in whose temple the meeting was held.”²¹

2.15. Chapter 52: Concerning temples built in his honour: *Templa ... in nulla tamen provincia nisi communi suo Romaeque nomine recepit. Nam in urbe quidem pertinacissime abstinuit hoc honore; atque etiam argenteas statuas olim sibi positas conflavit omnis exque iis aureas cortinas Apollini Palatino dedicavit.*²² – “He would not accept temples even in a province save jointly in his own name and that of Rome. In the city itself he refused this honour most emphatically, even melting down the silver statues which had been set up in his honour in former times and with the money coined from them dedicating golden tripods to Apollo of the Palatine.”²³

2.16. Chapter 59: Temples were built in his honour: *Provinciarum pleraeque super templa et aras ludos quoque quinquennales paene oppidatim constituerunt.* – “Many of provinces, in additions to temples and altars, established quinquennial games in his honour in almost every one of their towns.”²⁴

2.17. Chapter 59: Concerning the temple of Jupiter Olympius at Athens: *Reges amici atque socii et singuli in suo quisque regno Caesareas urbes condiderunt et cuncti simul aedem Iovis Olympii Athenis antiquitus inchoatam perficere communi sumptu destinaverunt Genioque eius dedicare.* – “His friends and allies among the kings each in his own realm founded a city called Caesarea, and all joined in a plan to contribute the funds for finishing the temple of Jupiter Olympius, which was begun at Athens in ancient days, and dedicate it to his Genius.”²⁵

2.18. Chapter 70. 1: Concerning the ‘banquet of the twelve gods’ Suetonius writes: *Cena quoque eius secretior in fabulis fuit, quae vulgo δωδεκάθεος vocabatur; in qua deorum dearumque habitu discubuisse convivas et ipsum pro Apolline ornatum.* – “There was besides a private dinner of his, commonly called that of the ‘twelve gods,’ which was the subject of gossip. At this the guests appeared in the guise of gods and goddesses, while he himself was made up to represent Apollo.”²⁶

3. In Chapter 90 the category of *religion* begins to be explicitly mentioned; that is, Suetonius describes the attitude of Augustus towards religions: *Circa religiones talem*

²¹ ROLFE (n. 3) 178–179.

²² Cf. PEKÁRY, TH.: *Satuae meae ... argenteae steterunt in urbe XXC circiter, quas ipse sustuli. Interpretationen zu Res gestae divi Augusti* 24 (1975). In PEKÁRY, TH.: *Ausgewählte kleine Schriften.* Hrsg. von H-J. DREXHAGE. St. Katharinen 1994, 132–144.

²³ ROLFE (n. 3) 206–207.

²⁴ ROLFE (n. 3) 216–217.

²⁵ ROLFE (n. 3) 216–217.

²⁶ ROLFE (n. 3) 230–231.

accepimus. Tonitrua et fulgura paulo infirmius expavescebat. – “This is what we are told of his attitude towards matters of religion. He was somewhat weak in his fear of thunder and lightning.”²⁷

3.1. Chapter 91. 1: He took dreams seriously: *Somnia neque sua neque aliena de se neglegebat.* – “He was not indifferent to his own dreams or to those which others dreamed about him.”²⁸

3.2. Chapter 92. 1: He took certain omens very seriously: *Auspicia et omina quaedam certissimis observabat: si mane sibi calceus perperam ac sinister pro dextro induceretur, ut dirum; si terra marive ingrediente se longinquam projectionem rorasset, ut laetum maturique et prosperi reditus.* – “Certain auspices and omens he regarded as infallible. If his shoes were put on in the wrong way in the morning, the left instead of the right, he considered it a bad sign. If there chanced to be a drizzle of rain when he was starting on a long journey by land or sea, he thought it a good omen, betokening a speedy and prosperous return.”²⁹

3.3. Chapter 93: His relation to foreign rites: *Peregrinarum caerimoniarum sicut veteres ac praeceptas reverentissime coluit, ita ceteras contemptui habuit.* – “He treated with great respect such foreign rites as were ancient and well established, but held the rest in contempt.”³⁰

3.4. Chapter 94. 1: Now Suetonius describes the function of omens which concerned the whole life of Augustus: *Et quoniam ad haec ventum est, non ab re fuerit subtexere, quae ei prius quam nasceretur et ipso natali die ac deinceps eveniret, quibus futura magnitudo eius et perpetua felicitas sperari animadvertique posset.* – “Having reached this point, it will not be out of place to add an account of the omens which occurred before he was born, on the very day of his birth, and afterwards, from which it was possible to anticipate and perceive his future greatness and uninterrupted good fortune.”³¹

3.5. Chapter 94. 2–9: These omens are: a lightning had foretold the rule of Augustus; a portent gave warning that nature was pregnant with a king for the Roman people; Atia, mother of Octavian, met a serpent in the temple of Apollo when she became pregnant; Publius Nigidius stated that the ruler of the world had been born; in Father Liber’s shrine he received an omen which was given earlier only to Alexander the Great; as he was lunching, an eagle snatched his bread, then gave it back, and so on.³²

3.6. Chapter 97. 1: His death was made known in advance by signs: *Mors quoque eius, de qua dehinc dicam, divinitasque post mortem evidentissimis ostentis praecognita est.* – “His death, too, of which I shall speak next, and his deification after death, were known in advance by unmistakable signs.”³³ The signs were as follows:

²⁷ ROLFE (n. 3) 258–259.

²⁸ ROLFE (n. 3) 260–261.

²⁹ ROLFE (n. 3) 260–261.

³⁰ ROLFE (n. 3) 262–263.

³¹ ROLFE (n. 3) 262–263.

³² ROLFE (n. 3) 264–271.

³³ ROLFE (n. 3) 274–275.

in the Campus Martius an eagle perched above the first letter of Agrippa's name; at the same time the first letter of his name was melted by a flash of lightning; and so on.

4. Goodyear states: "Pliny attests (*Epist.* 1. 18. 1) that he (Suetonius) was superstitious, and he certainly appears to take omens and prodigies very seriously."³⁴ As we have seen above, an omen for the Romans was a "message sent from the gods". Almost any occurrence might have been a sign: dreams, celestial phenomena, a drop of rain, a sneeze, a stumble, a name or a phrase. Therefore those who "took omens and prodigies very seriously" were regarded by the Romans not as superstitious but as religious.³⁵

4.1. Danielle Porte writes concerning religion in Rome: "Les dieux étaient prodiges d'avertissements en tout genre (*omina* ou *prodigia*)."³⁶ Yves Lehmann emphasizes: "Empiristes, les Romains sont toujours en quête de signes capables de leur révéler la volonté des dieux : avant ou pendant leurs entreprises, ils enregistrent ceux qui se produisent, et, surtout, en sollicitent."³⁷

4.2. So Luca Canali is not right when he declares: "incredibile prodigi in cui nessuno (degli intellettuali s'intende) credeva più da tempo",³⁸ nor is Andrew Wallace-Hadrill right in maintaining that Suetonius "says too little about the religious beliefs of his Caesars, too much about the trivial omens which we regard with contempt".³⁹ But he is correct when he says that "Suetonius himself clearly took prognostication seriously. But, more important, his evidence shows how seriously it was taken by others at every social level, and how deeply embedded it was in imperial culture."⁴⁰

5. Helmut Gugel reveals the structure and function of the category of *religiones* in *The Deified Augustus* (90 – 97. 1–3) in detail.⁴¹ He divides this category into four parts:

1. 90–93 Augustus' Stellung zu Religion und Aberglauben
2. 94. 1–9 Vorzeichen um die Geburt
3. 94. 10–96 Vorzeichen in seinem Mannesalter
4. 97. 1–3 Vorzeichen vor dem Tod.⁴²

From this division of the category of *religiones* it may appear that Suetonius treats "the religious beliefs" of Augustus long because he regards them as very important.

³⁴ KENNEY (n. 1) 167.

³⁵ HOWATSON (n. 6) 394.

³⁶ PORTE, D.: *La religion romaine traditionnelle*. In *Encyclopédie des religions*. Éd. par J-P. ROSA. Vol. 1. Paris 1997, 189.

³⁷ LEHMANN, Y.: *La religion romaine des origines au Bas-Empire*. Paris 1981, 12.

³⁸ CANALI, L.: *Le vite (indiscrete) di dodici Cesari di Suetonio*. Milano 1997, 5.

³⁹ WALLACE-HADRILL, A.: *Suetonius. The Scholar and His Caesars*. London 1983, 189.

⁴⁰ WALLACE-HADRILL (n. 39) 193.

⁴¹ GUGEL, H.: *Studien zur biographischen Technik Suetons*. Aus dem Nachlaß hrsg. von K. VRETSKA. Wien-Köln-Graz 1977, 36–44.

⁴² GUGEL (n. 41) 36.

5.1. This assumption is corroborated by our list. As we have seen, Suetonius refers to eighteen religious manifestations and deeds of Augustus. For example, he mentions the sainthood or divinity of Augustus, his activity of building and restoring temples of gods, especially of Apollo, his closing of the temple of Janus Quirinus, his vowing of games to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, his office as pontifex maximus, his reviving of ancient rites, the sacrifice of the senators, which was introduced by Augustus, the increase in the number and importance of priests, the temples built by others in his honour, and so on.

5.2. We get an impressive picture of the religious beliefs of Augustus: Suetonius lays great stress on his fear of thunder, on his dreams, on the omens and prodigies he regarded as infallible. He respected the ancient and well established religions, which the others held in contempt, for example the Egyptian and Jewish religions. Jacques Cascou emphasizes correctly that “Auguste est implicitement félicité pour avoir manifesté le plus grand respect pour la religion hellénique et pour s’être fait initier aux mystères d’Eleusis; et pour avoir, à l’inverse, méprisé les cultes égyptien et juif.”⁴³ “Somme tout, dans son appréciation de la pitié religieuse des princes, Suétone est très « romain » et très traditionaliste. Hostile aux innovations et aux religions étrangères non helléniques, surtout quand elles sont orientales, il n’apprécie rien tant chez les empereurs que le respect de la religion nationale et l’hostilité à tout ce qui peut lui porter atteinte.”⁴⁴

5.3. Dietmar Kienast emphasizes that Augustus wanted to enhance the sacred character of his principate, therefore he acquired membership in several priesthoods at Rome.⁴⁵ In doing so Augustus followed the Roman tradition which is summarized by Karl Galinsky in the following way: “The religiosity of the Romans and its importance for their success were connected by Dionysius, Caesar’s and Augustus’ contemporary, and by others with Rome’s very beginnings. Romulus, he writes (*AR* 2. 18. 1), «understood that the good government of cities was due ... in the first instance to the favor of the gods, because its presence makes everything that pertains to humans turn out greater.» One specific manifestation was his appointment, aside from the priests for family cults, of sixty priests for the public cults: «No one could name any other newly founded city in which so many priests and ministers of the gods were appointed from the very beginning» (2. 21. 2).”⁴⁶

5.4. In conclusion, I quote a commentary by John M. Carter, with which I agree: “By reserving to the end of the ‘personal’ section of the work his description of Augustus’ attitudes to the supernatural (90–93), Suetonius prepares the ground for the immediately subsequent account of the signs and prodigies which marked Augustus out as a man who enjoyed the especial favour of the gods (94–96).”⁴⁷ And: “Suetonius

⁴³ GASCOU, J.: *Suétone historien*. Roma 1984, 731.

⁴⁴ GASCOU (n. 42) 732–733.

⁴⁵ KIENAST (n. 7) 185.

⁴⁶ GALINSKY (n. 7) 289.

⁴⁷ Suetonius, *Divus Augustus*. Edited with Introduction and Commentary by J. M. CARTER. Bristol 1982, 200.

firmly establishes the theme of Augustus' imminent deification with the omen of the eagle (97. 1) before launching into the narrative which leads up to Augustus' death (99) and funeral rites (100).⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ CARTER (n. 46) 203.