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Werner Eck, *The Age of Augustus*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider, new material Sarolta A. Takács, Oxford and Melbourne, Blackwell, 2003; pp.166; RRP \$49.95.

Werner Eck's work on the administrative and social history of the Roman Empire, especially *Die staatliche Organisation Italiens in der hohen Kaiserzeit* (Munich, 1979), qualifies him, before all others, to

write a modern biography of Augustus Caesar, first Emperor of Rome, and undisputed master of her Empire from 30 B.C. to A.D. 14. Few rulers have shaped their dominions to their own liking more than Augustus, if only because few have enjoyed such a sustained domination. Attitudes, morals, and even religious observances were dictated from the centre, backed by legislation, and enforced by obsequious vicegerents. The constitutional provisions of supreme power became the last rites of the Roman Republic. Augustus' political settlement remained largely intact for 300 years.

Nevertheless, Eck begins by contextualising Augustus within the hierarchic nature of Roman society, and duly stresses his fortunate connexions. He is right to do so. Augustus' ascent to power began in 44 B.C. with the assassination of Julius Caesar, his great-uncle, who in his will made his eighteen-year-old nephew the recipient of an immense fortune. Even more importantly, the posthumous adoption gave Augustus the name Caesar, which enabled him to rally his uncle's veteran soldiers to his colours. Yet even at this youthful age Augustus was clearly capable of taking breathtaking initiative. His immediate need for cash was relieved by seizing the tribute of Asia, *en route* to Rome, and he was thus able to raise a private army. Of course, both acts were highly treasonable, but that, one would say, does not seem to have ever worried him. We can be sure of that because Augustus himself recorded many of the details of this affair, and many others, in his autobiography, the *Res Gestae divi Augusti* (The Achievements of the Divine Augustus), which, without telling a single falsehood, rationalizes the armed takeover of the state. Eck constantly returns to the *Res Gestae* and teases behind its imposing catalogue of deeds and honours to underline the illegality of much of the Augustan project. His conclusion that the substance of Augustus' power was established on far more than the retention of political office (which nonetheless remained vital) is not new: it was realized by Tacitus no less. Absence of novelty, however, does not make this belief any less correct.

Eck is not afraid to advance other established notions. Throughout the empire Augustus established an elaborate network of clients, whose continued influence at a local level relied on keeping their mighty patron happy. There is also the matter of political associates closer to home. When Eck writes that 'since almost all his political allies and opponents belonged to the Senate, any biography of Augustus must also be a history of the Senate and its members in

those same decades' (p.68), we are returned to Syme and his maxim that the enduring characteristic of Roman politics is oligarchy. It also brings us back to last century's preoccupation with prosopography. Yet once again this is fully justified. Augustus was a poor military commander, an ineffectual martinet rather than a soldier of any real ability, and he relied upon more capable men to deliver *auctoritas* sustaining victories. Eck gives due space to two of these men, Agrippa and Tiberius, and vividly demonstrates how Rome's frontiers expanded at a greater rate in Augustus' time than at any other. The oft-repeated account of the climb to absolute power – the battle of Mutina and the march on Rome; the sodden killing fields of Philippi; the horrors of the proscriptions and Perusia; the isolation of Lepidus; the demonization of Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra and their defeat at Actium – is also recapitulated, but at a fast pace. Themes and ideas remain central.

More recent interpretations also appear to have influenced Eck. Fergus Millar, in *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic* (Ann Arbor, 1998), has asserted that the masses, contumacious or cowed, were of continued relevance to political life. Eck understands this, and points to the fact that Augustus still relied on the people in assembly to prorogue his power. The Emperor also had to deal with popular discontent; in 22 B.C. the *plebs* forced him to take on responsibility for the food supply in the midst of a grain shortage. Furthermore, Eck includes digressions on the Roman aqueduct system and fire-brigade, and includes chapters on the army and provinces. In doing so he moves away from strict biography, but it matters little: the direction of legions and appointment of provincial governors was firmly in the hands of Augustus, whose influence remained supreme until the end.

The Age of Augustus is a fine little book, but criticisms can be made. The language is eminently simple, but occasionally stilted, probably in translation. The compression of content causes some sporadic vagueness; for example, the claim that 'many people dismissed negative reports about him [Antonius] as propaganda' (p.33) raises the question, 'Which people?'. And there is an inconsistency in the use of 'Germany' (p.92) and 'Germania' (from p.99). One also feels that more attention could have been given to marital and sumptuary legislation, and Augustan age literature. The neglect of the latter is particularly puzzling given Eck's interest in propaganda, and in particular the *Res Gestae*, a translation of which is conveniently

included (though students should still be directed to the classic edition of Brunt and Moore). Most seriously, there is a paucity of notation, and few details of the primary sources. Finally, Eck lets Augustus off a little too lightly. The final fifteen years of Augustus' life were filled with financial crises, military disasters, and familial turmoil, and one cannot share the author's opinion that Augustus 'could look back on a complete and fulfilled life' (p.120). Bitterness and disappointment had intervened. Nevertheless, these qualms cannot stop one recommending this book, particularly for the undergraduate or advanced school student.