

Review

ANNE-MARIE LEWIS, *CELESTIAL INCLINATIONS: A LIFE OF AUGUSTUS*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. 538, illus. ISBN 0197599648 (hbk). £81.00; 9780197599662 (ePub); 9780197599679 (eBook).

The thesis of this book is not new: Augustus exploited the stars in constructing his image. But Lewis' methodology is fundamentally flawed. Historiographical scholarship is routinely overlooked in favour of a naïve historiography which takes sources such as Suetonius as accurately representing 'real' events. For instance, when L. discusses the story of Nigidius Figulus' prophecy at Octavian's birth (Suet., *Aug.* 5), she assumes the words of Nigidius are quoted *verbatim* by Suetonius. She asserts, 'Ancient sources ... clearly viewed the prediction that Nigidius Figulus delivered at the time of the birth of the son of Gaius Octavius as historical' (24). This tendency to interpret ancient texts as unmediated fact is coupled with wilful, sometimes erroneous, readings of sources. Consider her interpretation of the famous opening of Cicero's *De consulatu suo*:

Principio aetherio flammatus Iuppiter igni
vertitur et totum conlustrat lumine mundum
menteque divina caelum terrasque petessit...

L. claims that this passage gives 'a literary and accurate record presented by the Muse Urania, in chronological order, of Cicero's observation of the celestial sphere during the year 63 BC' (46–7). She interprets Cicero's Jupiter as the *actual planet* moving through the sky: 'The planet Jupiter glowed with light, turned around, and confined itself in a celestial orbit' (46). She associates her interpretation with Theogenes' birth-prophecy: 'The view that a planet was the celestial manifestation of an Olympian deity appears to have been behind the pronouncement made by Nigidius Figulus on the day of Octavius' birth, and it had become common by the time the *De Divinatione* was published in 45 BC'. No evidence is presented as to whether identification between god and physical planet was common at this time. Furthermore, L. ignores the Stoic background to these lines, not least their connection with Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*. Jupiter allegorises the Stoic Zeus, the spirit permeating the universe. This passage is *not* simply a record of celestial observation.

L's interpretations are driven by a desire to see all evidence as referring directly to actual sky-maps. However, the sky maps given are *modern* reconstructions which use anachronistic nomenclature and numeration. For example, L. claims that 'a diagram that replicates the appearance of the *genitura* of Octavius that Theogenes may have displayed on his astrological board can be created' (fig. 5.2, 149). There is little about this diagram that 'replicates' any ancient *genitura*: it is a *modern* diagram, with degrees and minutes in Hindu-Arabic numerals, very *unlike* the horoscope (*POxy.* 235, illustrated on 136) which L. gives as its parallel. L.'s tendency towards 'cartographical' interpretation is not limited to textual evidence. A similar operation is performed on the *Gemma Augustea* (409–11).

The book gives itself an air of consistency by repetitively citing its own formulations as though they were fact. L.'s argument works on a scheme of symmetry between the supposed routes to celestial afterlife taken by Julius Caesar, and Augustus. This is exemplified by L.'s re-interpretation of the *sidus crinitum* (comet) that appeared at Caesar's funeral games in 44 B.C.E. as the star she anachronistically names 'Altair in Aquila'. The argument is illustrated by the sky map (177), combined with a reading of Servius *ad Ecl.* 9.47, which L. again treats as straightforwardly historical. A table (174) is confidently headed 'Ancient Sources Supporting the Identification of the *sidus crinitum* as the Star Altair in Aquila'. The use of such headings for this and other tables is not merely sloppy; it puts a cast of certainty on a speculative argument.

L. argues that, while Altair conveyed Caesar's soul to heaven, 'Zubeneschamali in Libra' (again anachronistically named) is his final resting place (219, 272, 296, 403, etc.). This argument is based on readings of a series of texts, the lynchpin of which is the proem to *Georgics* 1. Sweeping away preceding scholarship, L. re-interprets this passage as an invocation, *not* of Octavian, but of *Julius Caesar*. The justification is that Virgil 'would have been [emphasis added] unwise to speculate at this time about the early death and journey to the heavens of the soul of the young Octavianus' (210). L. goes on to adduce *Met.* 15.746–50, where, apparently, 'Ovid is describing how Caesar's soul has moved from the Milky Way, to which it had originally been conveyed by

Altair in Aquila into the *sidus novum*: that is, into the newly named constellation Libra and, more precisely, into one of the stars in Chelae (Libra), its *stella comans*.⁷ To achieve the connection with Zubeneschamali, L. argues that *comans* at *Met.* 15.759 means not ‘hairy’, but ‘bright’, and Zubeneschamali is the brightest star in Libra. None of this is what Ovid actually says.

Not only is Caesar made to effect a double translation, but the same pattern is mapped onto Augustus: ‘The soul of Augustus, like that of Caesar, journeyed first to the heavens — that is, to the Milky Way ..., and like the soul of Caesar it did not stay permanently in the Milky Way’ (405). L. argues, counter to scholarship, that Augustus’ resting place was not Capricorn (cf. German., *Arat.* 558–60) but rather Virgo, adducing Manilius 4.763–8:

Virgine sub casta felix terraque marique
est Rhodos, hospitium rectori principis orbem,
tumque domus vere Solis, cui tota sacrata est,
cum caperet lumen magni sub Caesare mundi.

She glosses: ‘[Virgo] received into its care the light of the great world (*lumen magni ... mundi*) under the rule of a Caesar (*sub Caesare*)’ (407), meaning that Virgo received the soul of Augustus. But her translation is wrong. The passage is actually about the rule of zodiacal constellations over specific places on earth (Housman 1950, vol. 4 pp. xii–xvii), and the complement of *hospitium* is not Virgo, but Rhodos: Rhodos is sacred to Virgo and was the home of the ‘sun’ in the person of Tiberius when he lived there. The passage does *not* mean that Virgo received the soul of Augustus.

These and many other examples act as a cautionary tale about giving credence to poor scholarship apparently legitimised by a smattering of ‘science’.

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