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The Transition of Rome from Republic to Empire

An interpretation in the light of a special aureus of Octavian

Claudio Botrè
and Silvia Hurter

Only rarely can a coin be considered primary evidence of important historical events¹. Such is the case of the aureus of the present note: it was an eye-witness to the end of the Roman Republic. This aureus, struck in 28/27 BC and known in one unique specimen only, bears on the obverse the laureate head of Octavian with a handsome youthful portrait and with the legend IMP CAESAR DIVI F COS VI, and on the reverse Octavian, wearing the toga, i.e. civil dress, seated to left on a *sella curulis*, the special chair which was the prerogative of higher magistrates, and holding a scroll in his outstretched right hand.

The meaning of the scroll becomes evident from the legend LEGES ET IVRA P[opuli] R[omani] RESTITVIT, or P[opulo] R[omano], depending on the interpretation of the P.R., i.e. Octavian restored the laws and rights of the Roman people, or, Octavian gave laws and rights back to the Roman people. The laws and rights in question were of course the ones that had been valid throughout the Republic. The proclamation could not be clearer and more forceful, but, not unlike commitments made before present-day elections, it was not entirely sincere. Far from it, shortly after the coin was struck, in 27 BC, Octavian became sole ruler with the title of *Augustus*; the Republic was dead and the Principate had begun.



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In a recent article on this aureus Rich and Williams present a detailed discussion of the meanings of the Latin word *leges et iura*, quoting several Latin authors². They conclude by proposing that *leges et iura* could mean a «statute». This interpretation is surely correct and statute would be the legislation and customs of the old Roman Republic which were returned to the *Populi Romani*.

It is intriguing that a coin with a message of such importance should have come down to us in a single specimen only. One of the reasons that come to mind is that Octavian himself might have ordered the issue to be withdrawn from circulation. It is in fact one of the last issues to be struck without the title AVGVSTVS, the other being the cistophori with a similar portrait, the obverse legend LIBERATOR P R

1 See W.E. Metcalf, in: E. Togo Salmon Papers II (Ann Arbor, Mich. 1999), p. 1f.

2 W. Rich and J.H.C. Williams, *Leges et Iura P.R. Restituit; A New Aureus of Octavian and the Settlement of 28–27 BC*, NC 159, 1999, pp. 169–213, pl. 10, 1.

VINDEX and the PAX reverse³; this second legend of 28 BC, while praising Octavian, is not as specific as the one of the aureus and therefore, should this proposed interpretation be correct, there was no need to withdraw the cistophori.

It has been suggested that numismatists of the 20th century tend to put too much weight on the propaganda value of reverse legends of Roman coins⁴. This is surely true from the later first century AD on, but we probably should not apply it to the early days of the Principate. The message of Octavian's special aureus is a commitment he made to the Senatorial party and the Roman upper class in 28 BC: after he was named *Princeps Senatus*, he returned all rights, i.e. his power, to the Senate and the Roman People; he also offered complete retirement into private life, an offer which he must have known would not be accepted. However, in the following year a tame Senate not only confirmed the renewal of his consulship (COS VII) and the *Imperium* on all the provinces which were not yet pacified, but also conferred on him the honorific title *Augustus*.

At this point an aureus proclaiming LEGES ET IVRA P R RESTITVIT could become an acute embarrassment and lead to accusations of double-dealing and reproaches of unfulfilled promises (here again comparison with modern politicians is unavoidable), promises never seriously meant to be kept – a good and valid reason to order the withdrawal of this coin from circulation⁵.

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3 RIC I², 476; BMC 691; Cohen 218; CBN 908.

4 See, e.g., I. Carradice, *Coin Type and Roman History, Essays Carson/Jenkins* (London, 1993).

5 A recent Italian biographer calls Augustus outright «The Great Cheat», or «Card-Sharpër», the latter referring to Augustus' well-known passion for cards; see A. Spinosa, «Augusto, il grande baro» (Milan 1998).