

F. Haverfield. 1915.

“The Name Avgvstvs.”

Journal of Roman Studies 5: 249-250.

THE NAME AVGVSTVS.

By PROF. F. HAVERFIELD.

On 13th January, 27 B.C. Octavian completed his first attempt to find a constitutional basis for his extraordinary position,¹ and on 16th January he received from the senate the cognomen Augustus, which henceforward remained the personal appellation of the reigning Roman emperors, and, substantially, of them alone. It has been generally recognised that the name was well chosen, but no writer, so far as I know, has offered any positive reason why *it* in particular should have been chosen. Yet some reason is surely needed. Before 27 B.C. the name, though not altogether unknown, does not seem to have served as a Roman proper name. It had not been borne as a cognomen by any republican statesman, or indeed by any historical character or legendary hero. It was an adjective adapted by Octavian. We can, indeed, see how much it had to recommend it to the genius in adaptation. It possessed no political associations of any sort ; it had belonged to nobody before Octavian and recalled no one's peculiar policy or aims. It had been merely an adjective used occasionally, yet not very often, in earlier literature (since Ennius), and, so far as it implied anything at all, implied simply a semi-religious sanctity— 'sancta vocant augusta patres,' as Ovid says.² Thus it fitted singularly well with the half-divinity of the DIVI FILIVS. Just as Augustus, early in his career (40 B.C), had dropped the name Julius and had adapted an appellation (Imp. Caesar, etc.) which marked him off from the ordinary citizens, thereby indicating by the subtle change his great aims and his ambitions, so by the name Augustus he again set himself apart. Still, the name did not lie ready-made to his hand ; we need some reason, beyond its fitness, to explain why his peculiar choice tell on it ; such a reason can, I think, be learnt from coins. The coins of Mark Antony, notably his legionary silver, which must have been issued in great profusion not long before Actium, bear regularly the legend ANT - AVG - III - VIR R • P • C •³ Here AVG. is, of course, short for *augur*. But it is also an obvious abbreviation of Augustus (as already in the Monumentum Ancyranum, that is, before A.D. 13), and, as this silver of Antony must have been

¹ The second attempt was made in 23 B.C. Suetonius no doubt refers to the two in his words 'de reddenda republica bis cogitavit' (*Aug.* 28).

² *Fasti*, i, 609.

³ For examples see Cohen i, p. 41, nos. 26-65.

Among remains of the later empire, for instance in Britain, these legionary issues are not uncommon, they must have been large to begin with, and they seem to have long remained in circulation: see my note in *Archaeologia*, liv, 473 foll.

circulating freely in the Roman world about 28 B.C. it might well have suggested the name Augustus. This would be the more likely since such faint associations as the adjective had possessed in earlier literature were with *augur*; compare Ennius *Ann.* 245 M. (494 V.) 'augusto augurio postquam incluta condita Romast,' and so Servius on *Aen.* vii, 153, 'augusta ad moenia regis,' paraphrases *augusta* by *augurio consecrata*. To take a title which would (so to say) absorb automatically the familiar style of Antony, would well accord with the methods of Octavian.

Once created, the name Augustus never spread.¹ Apart from derivatives ('Augustinus,' 'Augustalis' and the like), it remained almost wholly confined to the actual rulers of the empire. Occasionally, it occurs as cognomen of some unimportant personage whose obscurity kept him safe. The terrors of a prosecution for 'maiestas' no doubt stopped most private persons from adopting it; indeed, it was not till the Renaissance and the sixteenth century that it came to be used by various princes in Germany in some abundance.

¹ The Indices to the *Corpus*, etc, show only about a dozen cases among Roman inscriptions of persons bearing the cognomen Augustus, and not one of these held a position of any social or administrative importance. Most of them, indeed, belong to a tolerably late period in the empire. Some seem to be slaves, such as a man mentioned in a list of A.D. 227 (*C.I.L.* iii, 6150). Several are soldiers, like the praetorian of *C.I.L.* vi, 2605, which is also a latish inscription. But others are earlier; so the tombstone of a certain *Q. Vibius Augustus Raetus mil. coh. II Raet. ann. XXX stip. XIII, h.f.c.* (found at Wiesbaden) was probably set up not long before or after A.D. 100 (Ritterling's *Wiesbaden*, p. 88, *C.I.L.* xiii, 7584). But the tombstone of a German-born soldier,

Fl. Augustus, buried at Concordia, in north Italy (*C.I.L.* v, 8737) must belong to the fourth century or to some such period. An inscription found at Aries, and reported to read GENIO | T IVLIVS | AVGVSTVS on the other hand seems corrupt, and indeed the last word on it is not certain (*C.I.L.* xii, 657). Other bearers of the name seem to have been makers of undecorated Samian. Thus we meet a potter from Westerndorf (*C.I.L.* iii, 6010, 32), and another from the Rhine, who spells his name AVGVSTVS (*C.I.L.* xiii, 10010, 234c), and yet another from the Saalburg (Jacobi, i, 329, no. 202). Augustus may have been a Rhenish or German potter, but if I read Ludowici aright, he is far less common than potters with the derivative names Augustinus, Augustalis, and the like.