

LA POLÍTICA DE LA REVOLUCIÓN DE SYME

The Politics of Syme's Revolution*

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Abstract

This paper explores an aspect of the interplay between Ronald Syme's political outlook and his historiographical trajectory. It proposes to read *The*

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la interrelación entre la perspectiva política de Ronald Syme y su trayectoria historiográfica. Propone una lectura de la obra

This paper is the outcome of a shared reflection on the political and ideological dimension of Syme's work on the late Roman Republic. The sections *Formative Years*, *Looking Outwards*, *Taking Sides*, *Looming Bimillenary*, *History and Prosopography* and *Critical Distance* should be attributed to Eugenia Vitello; the sections *Crucial Reading*, *Loaded Terms*, *Early Readers*, *Regeneration and Apologetic Language* should be attributed to Federico Santangelo. However, we are jointly responsible for the text as a whole. We are grateful to Pedro Barja de Quiroga for the invitation to contribute to this themed issue of the *Revista de Historiografía*, and we should like to thank Mikel Gago and an anonymous reader for their comments on an earlier draft.

Roman Revolution against the backdrop of the wider development of Syme's scholarship. Its goal is to further unveil the complex antinomies that punctuate Syme's intellectual itinerary. We will study his work on the Roman 'political class' in its historical and academic context, under the twofold light of the confrontational fascination he displayed towards the Augustus and his strategy, and his engaged detachment towards contemporary politics.

Keywords

Ronald Syme, Roman Revolution, Late Roman Republic, Augustus, Mario Attilio Levi, Arnaldo Momigliano.

The Roman Revolution en el contexto del desarrollo del trabajo académico de su autor. El objetivo es revelar aún más sobre las complejas contradicciones que marcan la trayectoria intelectual de Syme. Estudiaremos su trabajo sobre la 'clase política' romana en su contexto histórico y académico, teniendo en cuenta, por un lado, la mezcla de fascinación y confrontación que sentía hacia Augusto y sus estrategias, y por otro, su distanciado compromiso con la política de su tiempo.

Palabras clave

Ronald Syme, Revolución Romana, República romana tardía, Augusto, Mario Attilio Levi, Arnaldo Momigliano.

If one takes a cursory look at the twentieth-century historiography on the late Roman Republic, Croce's old saying that «every history is contemporary history» appears especially fitting. Between the lines, almost any major study of the political and social history of the period might plausibly be read as a testimony to the historian's political sensitivities, as well as a reflection on an exceptionally well-documented segment of ancient history.

How Ronald Syme's 1939 *The Roman Revolution* readily became an exemplar of that interplay is by now a well-known story. Yet, a thorough account of the intricacies that encase Syme's political outlook and its impact on his historiographical trajectory remains to be written. This paper will seek to make a contribution in that vein by reading *The Roman Revolution* against the backdrop of the wider development of Syme's scholarship. Our goal is to shed light on the complex antinomies that punctuate his intellectual itinerary, from the military history of the Principate to the *Historia Augusta*, from Tacitus to the Italian and provincial elites. We will discuss his work on the Roman «governing class» in its historical and academic context, under the twofold light of the confrontational fascination he displayed towards Augustus and his strategy, and his engaged detachment towards contemporary politics¹.

Formative Years

Ronald Syme (1903-1989) trained as a Roman historian in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the vision of ancient Rome outlined by Theodor Mommsen in the second half of the 1800s was firmly dominant. Indeed, the key innovation that he eventually brought about in the field of Roman studies may fairly be defined as the ability to break away from the Mommsenian tradition and the dominance of legal and institutional history that had found its main codification in *Römisches Staatsrecht*. Syme resolutely looked elsewhere: his key pursuit was a new integration of political and social history, which recovered and brought to the fore the profiles and the experiences of the members of the Roman and provincial elites, and elected them as the starting point for a wider socio-political investigation. As Syme pointed out, in fact, the historian's task is to look beyond the «façade» of the legal architectures

1. On Syme's political realism see Gradel, 2002 and Santangelo, 2023a, pp. 120-126.

that often conceal the real and living political struggle: a deadly clash between oligarchic forces committed to the conquest of personal power and prestige, rather than the earnest confrontation of deeply held ideals and noble objectives.

In that endeavour, Syme deployed two tools that were nothing short of revolutionary in the historiographical tradition in which he was working: a dry, allusive, 'Tacitean' style, so distant from the rich prose of most of his contemporaries, and certainly much more distinctive²; and a new prosopographical approach to the reconstruction of historical events, which developed the models set by the path-breaking work of Friedrich Münzer in Germany and Lewis Namier in England. This is well-studied, if still somewhat controversial territory. In the Preface to *The Roman Revolution* – the great book he published in September 1939, a few days after the outbreak of World War II (henceforth *RR*) – Syme was ready to acknowledge his debt to Münzer³. That was a pointed statement of solidarity, since that great German scholar had been facing racial persecution for years and was barred from publishing in his country – he would die in October 1942 in the concentration camp of Theresienstadt; and a token of genuine admiration, which no doubt the correspondence between the two men further nourished⁴. Conversely, Syme was always ready to deny any influence of Lewis Namier's *The Structure of English Politics at the Accession of George III*, in spite of the frequent analogies of method and approach that generations of readers have drawn between it and *RR*.

Despite the major impact of *RR*, and the considerable dissent it prompted, the breadth of Syme's historical interests cannot be reduced to his decision to write a history of Rome from 60 BCE to the end of the Augustan age; nor was his choice to write a history of that period an obvious one. His early work had quickly earned him international distinction as a military and administrative historian of the Roman Empire; most of his later production was devoted to Imperial history, even reaching the threshold of Late Antiquity with a series of major studies on the *Historia Augusta*. Since 1928 – when he published his first article, on the Rhine and Danube legions under Domitian – Syme produced a staggering number of publications, especially from the 1950s. His major books *Tacitus*⁵ – followed by the collection *Ten Studies in Tacitus*⁶ – and *Sallust*⁷ stand as powerful illustration of both Syme's interest in ancient historiography and his classical stylistic models of reference⁸. Under a different guise, those interests also informed his work on the *Historia Augusta*, which gained further momentum between the 1960s and the 1970s, with a set of essay collections that rekindled the debate on

2. Toher, 2009; see also Pitcher, 2011.

3. Syme, 1939a. Cf. Birley, 2020, pp. 13, 20.

4. See Birley, 2020, pp. 104-105, 108, 138-142, 147; Zanin, 2021.

5. Syme, 1958a.

6. Syme, 1970.

7. Syme, 1964.

8. Cf. also, in that very period, his notable foray into Greek historiography with the 1960 British Academy lecture on Thucydides: Syme, 1962 = 1991, pp. 72-87.

that text on new and controversial terms⁹: *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta*¹⁰, *Emperors and Biography: Studies in the Historia Augusta*¹¹, and *The Historia Augusta: a Call of [sic] Clarity*¹².

Roman provincial elites were another major front of interest. While they already played a significant role in *RR*, it gained further momentum in the following decades in a short book on *Colonial Elites: Rome, Spain and the Americas*¹³, in a number of contributions on what would now be termed regional case-studies, and in the preparatory notes for full-scale discussions of the relationship between Rome and Umbria and on Etruscan aristocratic families that were found in his Archive¹⁴. The project of a major study on provincial grandees, though, went as far back as the early 1930s: in 1999 A. R. Birley edited the manuscript of that unfinished book under the title *The Provincial at Rome and Rome and the Balkans: 80 BC-AD 14*¹⁵. The last fifteen years or so of Syme's life were marked by a keen return to Augustus and the establishment of the Principate, whose key instances are *History in Ovid* in 1978¹⁶ and the major monograph on *The Augustan Aristocracy*¹⁷, completing and further problematising in several respects the picture produced in *RR*.

Such an original intellectual itinerary – coherent and complex in equal measure – can hardly be harnessed under a few thematic rubrics or understood through the allegiance to an historiographical or methodological tradition. Syme was an eclectic scholar, and his original character was already apparent from the jocular compositions he wrote while he held a scholarship at Oriel College, which are reproduced in G. W. Bowersock's *PBA* obituary – to this day the best introduction to Syme's biography¹⁸. As Birley noted, Syme «was what one may call an autodidact, whose 'intellectual development' derived from his reading»¹⁹. His reluctance to declare his intellectual influences and inspirations was part and parcel of that: as a result, establishing a firm link between Syme and the political and intellectual climate in which he lived and worked is not a straightforward operation. There is no doubt that *RR* is informed by a firm rejection of Fascism and Nazism, and is partly a reaction to the appropriation of ancient Rome by those regimes: the point it makes, though, is of broader import, and takes on the problem of the use of language and violence that those in power deploy.

9. A similar interpretative line was partly put forward in Dessau, 1889.

10. Syme, 1968a.

11. Syme, 1971a.

12. Syme, 1971b.

13. Syme, 1958b.

14. See F. Santangelo's editorial note in Syme, 2016, pp. 10-11.

15. Syme, 1999. The basic coordinates of this intellectual trajectory are sketched in Syme's preface to the Italian edition of *Three Colonial Elites*: an uncharacteristically frank, if brief autobiographical discussion (Syme, 1991, p. x).

16. Syme, 1978.

17. Syme, 1986.

18. Bowersock, 1994, pp. 541-544, who attributes these verses to M. N. Tod: they are in fact by M. C. Bowra, as Birley, 2020, p. 27 points out.

19. Birley, 2016, p. 161.

Syme was distinctively guarded in putting forward overt political statements. He made critical remarks on the Soviet constitution of 1936, and in the mid-1980s he commented in print on the habit of governments to borrow money beyond their means, effectively blackmailing the banks²⁰. Moreover, his correspondence gives some indication that he supported the pro-appeasement candidate in an Oxford by-election in 1938, and that he was happy enough to discuss that campaign with a Fascist sympathiser like Eugénie Strong, just as he was busy working on *RR*²¹. He most certainly was not a man of the Left, but his published work yields no overt evidence for a partisan take on contemporary politics²². That is perhaps unsurprising, in the light of Syme's notoriously reserved character, but is nonetheless remarkable, since his long life ranged far and wide across Hobsbawm's short twentieth century and intersected with some of its key developments. His contribution to the British war effort, probably through complex intelligence work in the Balkans and in Turkey, may well have been major, but it is impossible to say more on the basis of what is currently known. At any rate, as Syme memorably wrote, «[o]ne uses what one has, and there is work to be done»²³.

Looking Outwards

How could a young man whose early work had shown such a strong interest in the study of the military history of ancient Rome, a factual and positivist historian, go on to become the foremost expert on the Roman elites, a great connoisseur of the social history of the Empire, and the most authoritative prosopographer of the Roman aristocracy? To make sense of that shift, it is necessary to investigate the path that led the newly elected Fellow of Trinity College to produce the monograph that was to establish his standing in the twentieth-century historiography on the Roman world: a work based, as he wrote himself, on «education, hard work and accuracy, composition and style, familiarity with politics and human nature»²⁴. From as early as 1929, Syme's life at Oxford was punctuated with a series of trips to Germany and Italy, which displayed and nurtured his emerging interest in social history, historical demography, archaeology, and topography. He also embarked on a project for a monograph on the emperor Domitian that could fairly be defined revisionistic: the Flavian emperor was described as an excellent manager of imperial finances, in stark contrast to the unreservedly hostile portrayal that dominated the scholarly debate²⁵. The 1930s were a period of deep

20. Syme, 1985, 13 = 1988a, p. 704.

21. See the letter from E. S. Strong of 7 November 1938, edited and annotated in Birley, 2020, pp. 124-125.

22. For a sceptical comment on the integration of Britain «into a heterogeneous 'Europe' of a dozen countries that includes Portugal and Greece», see Syme, 1991, p. xiv. Cf. Gradel, 2002, esp. pp. 297-299, who reads *RR* as a statement of dour political disillusion; his remarks on Syme's interest in ancient and modern war profiteers are especially fruitful. See also Walter, 2002, pp. 147-148.

23. Syme, 1968b, 145 = 1979, p. 711.

24. Syme, 1962, p. 42 = 1991, p. 74.

25. Syme, 1930 = 1979, pp. 1-17.

intellectual maturation for Syme, immersed in the lively yet enclosed environment of Oxford which must have deeply touched, if not fully engaged with, even as reserved a character as he was. That is apparent from his own words about life at Trinity, which feature in an interview published by a Chapel Hill newspaper in October 1962 – it is telling, surely, that it appeared in a non-academic outlet, published far away from Oxford:

I was closer to the students from 1929 to 1939. At that time student life was very attractive. The colleges weren't so large. Oxford has about doubled since the war, and a lot of people have to live quite far out. But it used to be a rule that everybody had to live within two and a half miles of the centre of Oxford. The centre is Carfax Tower and the High Street. I was there between two periods, just after the immediate post-World War period, which was the equivalent of the American depression. All the students were discontented and tended to go towards the left. They were discontented with foreign relations. They read Karl Marx. But I didn't really have time to get mixed up in communism²⁶.

Syme speaks of a lack of interest in active politics, rather than outright ideological hostility to Marxism. We shall have to come back to this. The years from 1930 to 1933 saw a development of his military and topographical interests, a number of research trips to Germany, and several reviews of works published in those very years by German scholars. After the already quoted article on finances from Domitian to Trajan, in which he argued against the widely held belief that the real economic crisis at the turn of the first and second centuries occurred during the principate of Nerva²⁷, 1931 was marked by the publication of two biographical essays on Seneca and Vespasian for *Menschen die Geschichte machten*, a German reference work on major historical figures across a broad chronological range²⁸. In the same year, he also reviewed the book by F. Stähelin on the Roman provinces, two volumes on the history of Württemberg in the Roman period, and – most notably – W. Rehm's study on the fall of the Roman empire²⁹. In those contributions Syme makes the first references to a view that he would further develop in his later studies on Augustus and the transition from Republic to Empire: an original outlook comes into focus. In 1932, after a short military history essay on the *praefecti castrorum*³⁰, he published a series of articles in the *Oxford Magazine*, written in Tacitean Latin, expressing his distrust of religion and, more broadly, of the contemporary world. Their style, the themes that pervade them, and their pessimistic if lucidly rational conception of historical contingency forebode the critical view that was soon to be applied to the figure of Rome's first emperor in *RR*.

In 1933 Syme's travels continued, and his engagement with German-speaking scholarship grew even stronger. He published a technical discussion of the relationship between Au-

26. Birley, 2020, p. 181.

27. Syme, 1930.

28. Syme, 1931a and Syme, 1931b.

29. Syme, 1931c, Syme, 1931d, and Syme, 1931e.

30. Syme, 1932 = 1991, pp. 18-21.

gustus and the legions³¹, together with the reviews of two important works: E. Swoboda's book on Octavian's relations with the Illyrian provinces, and the volumes produced by *Römisch-Germanische Kommission*, whose Frankfurt headquarters he had visited the year before³². In the same year he also produced his first article with a distinctly prosopographical focus: building on the close reading of a new inscription³³, he reconstructed the trajectories of Marcus Vinicius and Marcus Vinicius the Younger, two members of the municipal elite of Cales³⁴.

The real turning point, though, was 1934: only then, in fact, did Syme's interest clearly shift towards social history and notably the Roman elites of the early Principate. He was invited by John G. C. Anderson – then Camden Professor at Oxford – to serve as one of the editors of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, and started working on the monograph on the provincial elites that he would then shelve two years later, when he started writing *RR*³⁵. Syme's contribution to the tenth volume of the *CAH* has a strong focus on the northern frontier under the Julio-Claudians: Augustus is presented as a character completely lacking in military instinct and ambition, a kind of bourgeois *avant la lettre*³⁶. The early core of a theoretical proposition is put forward. Civil wars entail a twofold threat: on the one hand, they demonstrate to the entire Roman population that the army, with its subversive power, creates the emperor through the support of its commander; on the other, they embody the risk of having a double empire by entrusting the East and the West to two different *imperatores* with the same degree of prestige and the same official command. At the same time, in his unfinished book on provincial elites Syme sought to demonstrate that there was no such thing as a *ius honorum* preventing provincials from gaining access to the Senate and the major magistracies³⁷. The year 1934 is also marked by significant articles and reviews focusing on the figure of Augustus, which stand out in the vast amount of short essays produced in that year alone: a review of E. Groag and A. Stein's *Prosopographia Imperii Romani* – which features an early occurrence of the term «prosopography» and the first assimilation of Augustus' «party» to a modern syndicate protecting only the interests of those who take part in it; an article on Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus and the origins of the province of Moesia, in which military history and biography come together; and a short essay on Augustus' Iberian War, where we find a hostile characterisation of young Octavian's personality³⁸.

31. Syme, 1933a.

32. Syme, 1933b and Syme, 1933c.

33. AE 1929, 166 = EDR073142.

34. Syme, 1933d = 1971c, pp. 26-39.

35. Syme had a notoriously difficult relationship with Anderson's successor, Hugh Last (1884-1957), a firm Mommsenian and a strong supporter of the Rome-centred historiographical approach that was typical of the Oxonian milieu at the time, to which Syme opposed a centrifugal outlook: his own peripheral origins crucially fed into that shift. Last was also an admirer of Mussolini. The significance of the topic considerably exceeds the remit of the biographies of two prominent scholars: Smith, 2012, pp. 306-317.

36. Syme, 1934a and Syme, 1934b.

37. Syme, 1999.

38. Syme, 1934c, Syme, 1934d, and Syme, 1934e.

Crucial Reading

A major shift was enabled by the encounter with a book that put forward an innovative vision of late Republican politics³⁹. In 1934 *The Classical Review* hosted Syme's review of an Italian work that ostensibly did not fall within his interests at the time: Mario Attilio Levi's *Ottaviano capoparte*⁴⁰. It begins with a quotation from the back cover of the volume: «La miglior definizione che di questo libro si può e si deve dare è questa: un libro vivo» – to which the reviewer added a quick rejoinder: «This is the opinion of the publishers, and it may be accepted». Syme then goes on to discuss the book itself, arguing that it critically reviewed certain categories to which modern historiography, both German- and English-speaking, had largely resorted in previous decades. The dominant tendency saw Augustus as the superb organiser, the great peacemaker, and tended to lose sight of the complexity of the period of traumatic transition that had allowed him to emerge as a monarch. During that phase, in fact, young Octavian had displayed far less edifying talents than those often credited to him in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historiography. In this review, for the first time, we see Syme attributing to Octavian quite different epithets from those usually reserved to him at the time. «Sickly and sinister youth» is the first in a series of polemical appellations that he would go on to reserve for the victor of Actium⁴¹.

While some critical remarks are made on Levi's book – especially the tendency to see monarchical intentions in the actions of Mark Antony – its insights into the innovative character of Octavian's leadership are warmly acknowledged. Syme concludes with a forward-looking comment: «Here we have our *Ottaviano Capoparte*. Let us hope that he will soon be followed by an *Augusto Principe*. The bimillenary is fast approaching of the year that witnessed the consulate of Cicero and the birth of Octavian. That Augustus should not then be amply commemorated in his Italy would be neither fitting nor credible»⁴². In fact, Levi had already published a book on the Augustan principate five years earlier, and would not return to the subject until after the war⁴³. Syme was well aware that the Augustan Bimillenary would soon be celebrated in Italy. He clearly saw that the success of Octavian, later Augustus, was rooted in an Italian dimension: significantly, «*Tota Italia*» is the title of one of the most significant and innovative chapters of *RR*⁴⁴. In the assessments with which the review of *Ottaviano capoparte* ends, however, the reference to the forthcoming Bimillenary appears neutral, or indeed conciliatory. The tone would soon change drastically.

39. See Santangelo 2016, pp. 1013-1015 for an earlier statement of the argument put forward in this section.

40. Syme, 1934f.

41. Syme, 1934f = 1991, pp. 1-4.

42. Syme, 1934f, p. 76 = 1991, p. 1.

43. Levi, 1929 and Levi, 1951.

44. Syme, 1939a, pp. 276-293.

Taking Sides

The commitment towards a new socio-political investigation of the Roman elites was followed up in 1935 through a number of reviews, among which that of W. Hüttl's volume on Antoninus Pius stands out⁴⁵. The study of the Triumviral period was further undertaken in the discussions of B. R. Motzo's *Caesariana et Augusta* and F. B. Marsch's overview book on the Roman Republic⁴⁶. In both those pieces Syme pursued what one might term a revisionistic process by rehabilitating the figure of Mark Antony, on whose political work the two scholars had passed impartial judgement. He even went as far as to conclude that Motzo «deserves congratulations and thanks – especially from that small and select company, the friends of M. Antonius»⁴⁷.

Syme's sympathies are already fully formed. In another review published in the same year, he took issue with A. F. Giles, who had defined Augustus as «the most completely successful statesman [...] of the ancient world» in his review of *CAH X*⁴⁸: a critique that he would further develop in *RR* and to which he would return on several occasions during his career, to the point that in 1974 he would go as far as labelling that positive view of Octavian's image as the outcome of «normal Anglo-Saxon attitudes». The English, according to Syme, revered in Augustus «the archetype of the good headmaster, firm and serene, who seldom has to exert the vast authority he holds in reserve»⁴⁹.

1936 was fully in keeping with the previous year's turning point; it may even be defined a transitional period, with the publication of a few reviews with an eminently geographical and topographical focus and three articles, respectively on the Flavian period, on the province of Syria under Nerva, and on the ethnic makeup of the *legio III Augusta* – which marked a brief return to military history in the strict sense of the term⁵⁰. Other pieces are more closely aligned with the new range of interest he had been pursuing since 1934. The discussion of a volume on Latin verse inscriptions by A. B. Purdie reflects his views on the fundamental importance of epigraphy to any historical reconstruction; it also shows hints to an approach to the social history of the lower orders of Roman society and their artistic expression, such as the poetic testimonies attested through the epigraphical material⁵¹. The review of a book by R. S. Conway on Roman religion is also noteworthy, as it is a foray into a study that remained otherwise peripheral to Syme's interests; a few years later, the discussion of an essay on Jupiter by C. Koch marked another interesting exception⁵².

45. Syme, 1935a.

46. Syme, 1935b and Syme, 1935c.

47. Syme, 1935b, p. 148.

48. Giles, 1935, p. 197.

49. Syme, 1974, p. 482 (= 1979, p. 938). According to Smith, 2010, p. 310, the main target of these lines is Last; the notes for two retrospective talks given in 1964 and 1979, and published in Birley, 2020, pp. 191, 193 show that in fact Syme associated John Buchan with the «good headmaster» paradigm. See Santangelo (in press) for a discussion of the British historiography on Augustus in the 1920s and 1930s.

50. Syme, 1936a, Syme, 1936b, and Syme, 1936c. Cf. also García Vivas 2016, p. 132.

51. Syme, 1936d.

52. Syme, 1939b.

Looming Bimillenary

The broad terms of a negative characterisation of Rome's first emperor started coming into focus in 1936, when Syme began writing the book that was eventually to be entitled *The Roman Revolution*, setting aside the project on the provincial elites that was already well underway⁵³. In light of that sudden change of plans, the decision to review a monograph by B. M. Allen on Augustus and one by F. M. A. Wright on Agrippa in *The Classical Review* 1937 is unsurprising⁵⁴. The terms that Syme uses in that piece to refer to the Augustan Bimillenary are quite different from those he had chosen three years earlier in the review of Levi's book: there may well be an echo of his first-hand experience of the celebrations in Rome that year. Moreover, as is well known, the international political scene had changed: in 1937 a significant part of the British establishment had revisited its attitude towards Mussolini's regime. In Italy there had been the proclamation of the Empire (1936) after the conquest of Ethiopia, from which the sanctions of the international community had in turn resulted. Above all, in this period Syme had begun to grapple much more energetically with the problem of the 'Roman Revolution' and its definition as a topic of historical reflection.

The 1937 review of the two books on Augustus is a valuable document of that crucial transition. Syme anticipates an underlying theme of his monograph: the need to talk about the Augustan age by drawing insights from the problems posed by contemporary political reality. It is no coincidence that the notion of a revolutionary outcome emerges for the first time in that short text: «the political and social experience of the present generation [...] should help to reveal the Roman Revolution, the triumph of the faction of Augustus and the establishment of the Principate as something personal, immediate and tangible»⁵⁵.

In *RR*, which appeared after the prospect of any kind of appeasement with the totalitarian regimes of the Continent had ended, there is a stated impatience towards the image of Augustus that had emerged in the cycle of the Bimillenary celebrations. There is, however, one more element at play. Syme himself declared this years later, in an essay to which we shall return below: there was on his part a more general impatience with the use and misuse of words and political terminology by totalitarian regimes. Notably, Syme recognised a direct influence on his historical reflection of the Stalinist Soviet constitution, promulgated in 1936⁵⁶. His interest in political terminology and its deceptions translates in turn into a strong focus on what he called «the realities of power»: his reading of Octavian, and later Augustus, is predicated on that approach. The European revolutions – that of 1922 in Italy, to a lesser extent that of 1933 in Germany, as well as the events of October 1917 and their ramifica-

53. Santangelo, 2016, pp. 1015-1017.

54. Syme, 1937a.

55. Syme, 1937a, p. 194.

56. Syme, 1988b, p. 72 = 1991, p. 335. Syme's earliest acknowledgement of this influence is dated to 1964: see Birley 2020, p. 191. In Syme, 2002, pp. xi-xii, Mellor also points out that by the 1930s Syme was already conceiving a form of historiography on the Augustan time that was finally disjointed by Mommsen's constitutional and legal tradition.

tions – turn into useful heuristic analogies. In the preface to *RR*, Syme himself recognised that the influence of the historical climate in which he produced the book profoundly oriented the questions on which his research hinged, and had an impact on the style he chose to use: «The design has imposed a pessimistic and truculent tone, to the almost complete exclusion of the gentler emotions and the domestic virtues. [...] Its imperfections [*scil.* of the book] are patent and flagrant. It has not been composed in tranquillity; and it ought to be held back for several years and rewritten. But the theme, I firmly believe, is of some importance. If the book provokes salutary criticism, so much the better»⁵⁷.

History and Prosopography

While Syme was researching and drafting his first monograph, the prosopographical articles published in the two years immediately preceding its publication served as brief *Vorarbeiten*: short essays and reviews underscore and emphasise the decisive change of course in his historiographical interests, and clearly define his method of investigation. In the review of M. P. Charlesworth's *Five Men. Character Studies from the Roman Empire*, Syme stated an important methodological preference: «not that administrative history does not concern persons and personalities – the study of prosopography yields priceless and exciting results»⁵⁸. In the abovementioned review on Agrippa and Augustus there is a new statement of the historiographical method that he intended to pursue: «[t]he past should be understood for itself, not interpreted according to modern ideas and alien language»⁵⁹. Against that backdrop, Syme stressed the centrality of the study of the Triumviral period to the understanding of the end of the Republic and the new structure assumed by the Roman state with Augustus. In this same year, he also rekindled the polemic against the modern detractors of Antony – which is evident in the review of Lindsay's volume⁶⁰ – and against the most fervent supporters of Augustus. He railed against them in an article on Decidius Saxa for which he was congratulated – despite their disagreement on Decidius' citizen status – by Münzer, where he pointed out that many of the innovations often attributed to the actions of the first emperor were in fact the result of political transformations and processes that had already begun under Julius Caesar: «it is an offence against the facts of history as well as against historical method to argue upon the cheerful assumption that Augustus made all things new»⁶¹. The theme of the inclusion of Italian and provincial elites in the Senate under Caesar is taken up and

57. Syme, 1939a, pp. VIII-IX. Cf. his prediction in a letter to E. Strong of 27 July 1939: «I have written a rather shocking book (568 pp.) about the history of Rome in the period 60 BC-AD 14. Nobody will like it.» (Dyson, 2004, p. 183).

58. Syme, 1937b, pp. 111-112.

59. Syme, 1937a, p. 194.

60. Syme, 1937c.

61. Syme, 1937d, p. 128. On Münzer's appreciation, see the letter of 19 August 1937, edited in Birley, 2020, p. 104.

expanded in a major article of the following year, ‘Caesar, the Senate and Italy’, in which the «revolutionary» period – understood as the period of maximum socio-political transition in the history of Rome, at the end of which the appearance of the Roman commonwealth appeared completely renewed – is also circumscribed to the period between the Gracchi and the rise of Octavian⁶².

The decade between Syme’s arrival at Trinity College and the publication of *RR* thus demonstrates a developing interest in prosopographical reconstruction as a key tool to the study of Roman social history, with special emphasis on the fall of the Republic. This focus, though, remained unavoidably limited by the nature of the literary and epigraphic evidence on which it was based. An investigation into the personalities belonging to the ruling class necessarily neglects the reconstruction of the social mechanisms at work in the lower strata of the population – especially the army and the urban plebs – which in contrast played such a big part in the transformation of the power dynamics and in the drastic decrease in the political weight of the traditional aristocracy.

Loaded Terms

Terminology, and notably the concept of ‘revolution’, warrants especially close attention⁶³. As we have seen, Syme certainly drew this notion from contemporary experience; however, the term had been well established in the historiography on the late Republic at least since the mid-nineteenth century. Theodor Mommsen spoke of revolution, at least from the Gracchi onwards, and in German historiography from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, starting with A. H. L. Heeren, via G. Busolt, C. Cichorius and U. Kahrstedt, the notion of *Revolutionszeit* is consistently deployed⁶⁴. The attempt to look for the source of inspiration for *RR*, or for the use of the term ‘revolution’ in Syme, in the work of Sir John Seeley, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge from 1869 to 1895, is an exercise in over-interpretation⁶⁵.

It is also worth bearing in mind that *RR* had a different working title. We owe this discovery to Christopher Pelling, who in 2014 devoted his Syme Lecture at Oxford to a literary and rhetorical analysis of *RR*, partly based on the study of the variants of the manuscript, now at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, where it was deposited by Syme himself⁶⁶. That text reveals how the working title of the book was *Augustus: Leader and Party*. This could fairly be translated into Italian as «Augusto capoparte»: a felicitous paradox, on which much of the

62. Syme, 1938, esp. p. 1 = 1979, pp. 88-119, esp. p. 88. The opening section of this paper, «Caesar’s Policy and Intentions», offers a remarkable discussion of Caesar’s achievements and agenda.

63. See Santangelo, 2016, pp. 1017-1020.

64. Santangelo, 2021, pp. 371, 402-403, 406-409. In addition to these, Syme also mentions Gibbon’s definition of the fall of the Western Empire as a «revolution»: see Syme, 1950, p. 3 = 1979, p. 205.

65. Loreto, 1999.

66. Pelling, 2015.

historiographical construction proposed by Syme rests⁶⁷. Some decades later Syme claimed that the publisher himself recommended the use of the term «revolution» in the title, and that the 'Ronald – Roman – Revolution' alliteration had seemed attractive to him; as we have seen, the scathing review of Allen's biography of Augustus that Syme wrote in 1937 already explicitly referred to the «Roman Revolution»⁶⁸. Without wishing to put forward a committed view on the reasons that led Syme to embrace it, the use of «revolution» in the 1939 book must be taken seriously: it was not driven by aesthetic or promotional concerns. In this light, it is also worth emphasising a point well known to those familiar with Syme's work: his general intolerance towards models and broad theoretical statements, accompanied by an extraordinary capacity for self-criticism, which enabled him to recognise the limits that precise historiographical and rhetorical choices imposed on the outcome of his research.

One might wonder whether it is legitimate to read *RR* as an anti-fascist book. It was certainly written by a scholar who had developed an attitude of hostility and contempt towards Fascism over the years; however, it is not an overtly *engagé* text, produce to support a case against appeasement. There is no dimension of direct political engagement in that book. It is also necessary not to lose sight of what Syme had to say about the advantages of the system that emerged from the Roman Revolution: a facet of his analysis that often tends to be overlooked. The structure of the first part of the book – the first two thirds, up to chapter 22 – is straightforwardly chronological. We are not dealing with a textbook, nor with an aridly evenemential narrative, but a chronological structure is clearly recognisable. It starts with the so-called First Triumvirate – an expression Syme did not use – until 27/23 BCE; in the last third of the volume it then develops, from chapter 23 to 33, a series of thematic analyses, starting with the concept of crisis and then with the analysis of the so-called «party of Augustus» and its management of patronage, up to the final chapter – «*Pax et Princeps*» – in which an analysis of the merits of the Augustan revolution is developed.

Regardless of the stylistic analysis, for all its considerable relevance, one aspect warrants attention: Syme's «knowingness»⁶⁹. At every stage of the discussion of those characters of the Triumviral period, even the more obscure ones, one gets the impression that the historian has a clear and distinct knowledge of their hopes, ambitions, limitations, and failings, which enables him to draw the most plausible and logical conclusions on why they might have behaved in a certain way or made certain choices. Such «knowingness», admittedly, is partly a rhetorical strategy, and partly a symptom of the degree of control over the evidence that Syme had and was keen to claim.

67. The connection between the two terms is explicitly made in the 1937 review of Allen's book: «One misses an appreciation of Augustus' position as the leader of the party, of the rôle and the deeds of those friends and helpers without whom his career in revolutionary politics and his primacy in the Roman state are alike unintelligible» (Syme, 1937a, p. 195).

68. Syme, 1937a, p. 194.

69. We borrow the term from Pelling, 2015, pp. 227, 235-236. More bluntly, Hölkeskamp, 2010, p. 5 uses the expression «imperious tone» about Syme's attitude towards historical reconstruction and writing.

Early Readers

RR had practically no impact on the Continent in the decade following its publication⁷⁰. Gaetano De Sanctis entertained the possibility of reviewing it in the early 1940s; Plinio Fraccaro recommended it to Emilio Gabba as he was working on his *tesi di laurea*⁷¹. In most of Europe, though, it was read in the slightly revised version of 1952. The war evidently posed serious obstacles to the circulation of books and ideas.

In Britain, on the other hand, the book received a rich discussion by Arnaldo Momigliano a few months after its release: one of those reviews that go on to become as well known as the book they discuss. Much has been said – and speculated – on the role that Momigliano's close relationship with Last played in the background of that piece. Our focus will be on the themes and ideas it explores. While acknowledging the great merits of such an innovative book, Momigliano raises a series of historical and historiographical objections, which may be summed up in this extended quotation:

The Roman Revolution has been reduced to a struggle of factions. It is, therefore, necessary to protest that the Roman monarchy is a product, not of men about whom it is possible to write articles in Pauly-Wissowa, but of obscure people, whether Italians or provincials, whose name is legion. Mr. Syme himself, more than once, has approached the truth: compare p. 53 or, better still, p. 513 where he found the right formula: 'with the Principate, it was not merely Augustus and his party that prevailed—it meant the victory of the non-political classes.' In other words two leading ideas not clearly distinguished presented themselves to the writer: the Revolution as a new oligarchy; the Revolution as the end of a *Roman* oligarchy. The latter was the right one, but the former prevailed. [...] Clientship is not an explanation, it is a manifestation—manifestation of an immense movement of people, who preferred to the freedom of *the others* a government which promised and gave them peace, tolerable justice, an increasing amount of political equality, and fair prospects of a career. The monarch was, inevitably, monarch of everybody. If one considers the Augustan State as the simple result of a triumph of a party, one will never understand that for twelve or thirteen centuries, if not more, that State was the only conceivable State⁷².

Other aspects were also singled out for criticism: for example, Syme's indifference to spiritual or religious developments, a topic that he himself had raised as an important element in the discussion of Levi's book a few years earlier. Momigliano also commented on an important point of periodisation: a discussion of the so-called Roman Revolution should have started with the Sullan age, rather than with the so-called First Triumvirate. There is in fact a good deal of useful material on the Eighties of the first century BCE scattered through *RR*, and Syme would later return to that period in three essays – on Sulla's abdication, the *pro*

70. See Santangelo, 2016, pp. 1020-1027.

71. Polverini, 2022, p. 74; Polverini, 2016, p. 26.

72. Momigliano, 1940, pp. 75-80, esp. 78 and 80 = 1966, pp. 407-416, esp. 412 and 416.

Roscio Amerino, and M. Aemilius Lepidus, composed in the mid-1940s, and never published during his lifetime⁷³. The narrative section of *RR*, though, starts in earnest from 60 BCE.

At the end of the review, Momigliano raises the problem of the attitude of the groups that are labelled as «non-political classes» in *RR*: a concept that is not precisely defined and is no less arbitrary than the notion of the individual on which one can write a Pauly-Wissowa entry, but can be identified with a good degree of approximation with the pool of those who were not part of the senatorial elite and did not aspire to join it⁷⁴. According to Syme, these groups accepted the new regime because it ensured stability on a number of fronts, and guaranteed, first and foremost, peace. However, the point of view of the non-political classes is not found in the literary record, which reflects the opinions of the more «vocal» sectors of the elites. The point of view of Cicero or Sallust, then, is evidently that of circles which find it difficult to adapt to a new political context. As one begins to grapple with the sources, it becomes clear that they predominantly reflect elite perspectives. This, however, does not negate two essential points: there were many aspects of continuity between Republic and Principate, and the first century BCE did not merely present a picture of destruction.

Regeneration

Syme never responded directly to Momigliano's review, but he did return to the age of the 'Roman revolution' at various stages of his later work. He first did so in the early 1950s, when he was invited to deliver a Todd Lecture at University of Sydney, entitled *A Roman Post-Mortem. An Inquest into the Fall of the Roman Republic*. In that discussion, the analysis of a political process is likened to the dissection of a corpse. The statement of intent with which the essay opens is of exemplary clarity: «[w]hen a war has been lost, a political system overthrown, or an empire shattered and dispersed, there is certain to be a post-mortem inquiry, and the discussion is seldom closed with the decease of the survivors»⁷⁵. These words were written in 1950; two years earlier India had gained independence. Britain had emerged from the Second World War as one of the victors, but having essentially lost its empire. Syme's early reference to the debate that must follow the end of an empire is likely to entail a degree of contemporary relevance. The development of the lecture, though, is firmly focused on Roman issues. Syme aims at describing how the Romans of the late Republic and early Principate were reconciled with the end of the republican regime and of political freedom. He makes several significant observations: for instance, he argues that the Republic for a good part of its history had been anything but republican and that, on the other hand, Caesar Augustus had established a regime that was as new as it was sophisticated: its sophistication was based precisely on the fact that it was not a fully monarchical arrangement. There were lines of continuity that had allowed some, in the transition from Republic to Principate, to

73. Syme, 2016, pp. 56-110.

74. For a fuller exploration see Santangelo, 2023b.

75. Syme, 1950, p. 3 = 1979, p. 205.

reconcile themselves with the new reality. In Syme's view, a major role should be attributed to the removal of Caesar from much of the Augustan discourse⁷⁶; a thesis that has later been challenged with very strong arguments⁷⁷.

That political process had a strong and complex intellectual dimension. Momigliano's critique of Syme's lack of interest in cultural and religious developments requires some qualification; the terminology chosen by the author of *RR* to describe certain political and social processes deserves closer attention than is usually given. In the last sentence of the book Syme states: «*Dux* had become *Princeps* and had converted a party into government. For power he had sacrificed everything; he had achieved the height of all mortal ambition and in his ambition he had saved and regenerated the Roman People»⁷⁸. The latter is a statement that might surprise those who have become accustomed – with good reason – to understanding *RR* as a book that reads Octavian Augustus with a sharp critical eye and portrays him as an unscrupulous terrorist. The use of this kind of language is significant. A quick overview shows that «revolution» and «revolutionary» have a wide range of occurrences in the book; some are very instructive. Even «regeneration» is not a *hapax* to which Syme resorts in the enthusiasm of having completed his masterpiece: it is a clear theme, in fact, notably in the final part of *RR*, where he speaks of «social regeneration», of «programme of order and regeneration», «salvation and regeneration», «moral regeneration», «politics of regeneration»⁷⁹. To be sure, there is no chapter on regeneration in *RR*, but a fuller reflection on the subject may be found elsewhere in Syme's work.

For much of *RR*, Syme shows only a slight interest in legal issues, in part by drawing the consequences of his keen attention to the realities of power. Syme dwelled on the constitutional and legal aspects of the phase of transition from Republic to Principate in a long and fundamentally negative review of a book by Heinrich Siber, in a substantial article on imperatorial nomenclature, and in an essay on the number of *fascēs* with which Roman magistrates surrounded themselves⁸⁰. These essays reveal his attempt to revisit the late Republic by dealing with topics that had been less well covered in *RR*. This ambition may also be seen in the book on Sallust, in which – especially in the introductory chapters – the thesis of the late Republic as a period of political and military expansion and great intellectual vitality is clearly articulated⁸¹. The emergence of a creative and theoretically aware author like Sallust is explained precisely by the intellectual developments of the Late Republic.

Again, some lines of continuity between Republic and Empire clearly emerge from the outlines of two unfinished volumes on Umbria and Etruria, which Syme started in the second half of the 1950s or at the latest in the early 1960s: the project on Umbria ranged

76. Cf. Syme 1939a, p. 317.

77. See esp. White, 1988; cf. Devillers and Sion Jenkins, 2012.

78. Syme, 1939a, p. 524.

79. See the list in Santangelo, 2016, p. 1023 n. 47.

80. Syme, 1946 = 1979, pp. 181-196; Syme, 1958c = 1979, pp. 361-377; cf. Syme, 2016, pp. 255-271.

81. Syme, 1964, pp. 17-18.

from the dawn of the Roman conquest up to the age of Nerva, while the envisaged history of Etruria continued up to Late Antiquity. In the 1960s Syme was also commissioned by an American publishing house to write a small volume on the fall of the Republic entitled *The Triumph of Caesarism*, which was never brought to completion⁸². In the first two chapters of that work – the only ones that appear to have been written – there is a focus on economic and social developments that is nowhere to be found in *RR*. A picture emerges of a scholar who shunned repetition and sought to enrich his historical understanding of the Late Republic by including new standpoints, even as he was even as he was mainly working on other periods.

Apologetic Language

A decade later, between the late 1970s and the 1980s, an attempt to resolve two major themes left open in *RR* took shape: on the one hand, the role of the individual in history, and, on the other, the interest in the attitudes of the «non-political classes»⁸³. The role of the individual in the revolutionary process is clear from Syme's writings on Julius Caesar, both published and unpublished. In the final months of his life, he was working on a book on Caesar of which a few synopses and preliminary notes for the drafting of a few chapters are preserved; none amounts to a complete or continuous text. An outline of that project may be gleaned from a lecture published in 1985 in the *New York Review of Books* – a literary magazine, rather than a scholarly journal: *Caesar: Drama, Legend, History*⁸⁴. In that piece Syme takes issue with Mommsen's choice to focus on Caesar's personality and achievements, and denounces it as «a false view of the late Republic»: as he goes on to restate, «the true subject is the history of the governing class»⁸⁵. The discussion does not seek to provide a potted biography of Caesar, but is an attempt to identify some basic aspects of his career and life – through the lens of Shakespeare, rather than those of Suetonius and Plutarch. The lecture opens and ends with substantial quotations from Shakespeare and expands at length on the analysis of some passages. It offers a stimulating attempt not to decouple the Dictator from the problem of his modern reception: the same outlook clearly emerges in the structure of the unfinished book on Caesar.

The most solid and coherent attempt to grapple with the problems left open in *RR*, however, may be found in the final pages of Syme's last major work, *The Augustan Aristocracy*, published in 1986. Augustus is described as «the young military demagogue» ready to do anything to achieve complete domination over the Roman political scene, and the historian's disdain for the means employed in that difficult task is evident:

82. Santangelo, 2014.

83. See Santangelo, 2016, pp. 1027-1030.

84. Syme, 1985 = 1988a, pp. 702-707.

85. Syme, 1985, p. 12 = 1988a, p. 703. In this vein, Syme notes that Cicero might be suitable for a biographical treatment, while Caesar probably is not.

Caesar Augustus conceded that he had acquired supremacy, '*potitus rerum omnium*' – but it was through a general consensus. The new arrangement renounced less than instant gratitude assumed or the superficial fancied. Mere despotism was a crude and precarious form of government, repugnant to the traditions of a nation that had conquered the world through obedience to 'liberty and the laws'. Legalized authority enabled the ruler to circumvent rivalry, control the channels of patronage, and ultimately ensure a smooth transmission of the power. Against any questioning, Caesar would hardly require anxious thought or help from lawyers. '*Potentia*' now assumed the respectable name of '*auctoritas*'⁸⁶.

The concluding chapter is entitled «Apologia for the Principate»: Syme clearly states in a footnote that those pages were actually written immediately after *A Roman Post-Mortem*⁸⁷. Thirty-six years later, their themes were still worth airing. In fact, the first part of the chapter is a summary of the 1950 lecture; the rest is a development of a discussion in which an attempt is made to explore what arguments the new power put forward to legitimise its existence and to support its virtues, its importance, its qualities. Syme lists ten «heads» of the apologetic discourse constructed by the Principate and its supporters, and – in his view – widely accepted throughout the imperial age⁸⁸:

1. the «make-believe», i.e. the theory whereby nothing had actually changed with the advent of the Principate;
2. the «long development» theory, according to which the new regime is the outcome of a historical and constitutional development that has deep roots;
3. the medical metaphor: Rome is sick, the Principate is the cure;
4. the need for concord and stability;
5. the «imperative need for central authority»;
6. the «magnitude of the Roman empire», which makes central authority necessary;
7. «not despotism»: the Principate is a monarchical regime, but not tyrannical;
8. «constitutional monarchy»: the Principate offers precise constitutional guarantees;
9. the «spirit of government»: beyond the constitutional arrangements, the emperor's attitude is that of an enlightened father, patron and guardian of the commonwealth; ensuring obedience to him is therefore an entirely rational choice;
10. the «doctrine of the middle path»: the Principate understood as a median path between chaos and oppression.

Having established those coordinates, Syme's analytical effort has a further development. All the strategies that enable the apologia of a fundamentally despotic regime rest on

86. Syme, 1986a, p. 2.

87. Syme, 1986a, p. 443 n. 27.

88. For other instances of ten-point lists of major historical themes, albeit with a focus on the Imperial period, cf. e.g. the summary of the benefits of knowing what to do with a list of senators in *More Narbonensian Senators* (Syme 1986b, pp. 20-23 = 1991, pp. 228-231) and the overview of the indicators of political success in the late essay *The Acme of Transpadana* (Syme, 1991, pp. 641-642).

a politically aware and inherently manipulative use of language: «[a] familiar weapon in the arsenals of deception is the oxymoron, combining a pair of elements that appeared to conflict. Thus ‘democratic planning’ to commend a policy, or ‘centralised democracy’ as a system of government. It is no surprise that the Romans tried (or pretended) to effect a union between ‘*libertas et principatus*’»⁸⁹. A little further on, Syme adds that «[t]he language of Tacitus may have some relevance to the pronouncement of some unnamed sage in the recent time: ‘in a true democracy there is no place for a serious difference of opinion on great issues’. The maxim clearly obtains when the issues are defined (or have been decided) by those who hold the power»⁹⁰. Whatever the contemporary resonances of that consideration, reflecting on words and their use brings us back to reasoning about power, its possession, and its use.

One of Syme's last works is a reflection on the problem of oligarchy in Rome, published in 1988 in a French humanities journal, *Diogenes*. Syme returned to the topic by problematising it to a greater degree than any of his previous attempts, and with the clear intention of addressing an audience beyond the scholarship in ancient history. The outcome is not a palinode, but an attempt to give further depth to the theme of oligarchic setups⁹¹. After defending the need to resort to the study of factions and reasserting the fundamental value of the contributions of Friedrich Münzer and Matthias Gelzer – at least for the analysis of certain historical junctions – Syme quickly raises another problem of terminology. He acknowledges how some have disputed the application of the category of «revolution» to the late Roman Republic, and in a footnote laconically refers – with a hint of irritation – to an edited book on the subject that appeared in 1982⁹²:

It was not possible or expedient to hold back classes or groups that had benefited from the Revolution. That term, by the way, has incurred dispraisal or denial from certain scholars who apply standards dictated by modern history or doctrines. Yet a violent transfer had occurred of power and of property, with a new type of government thence emerging. Such are the facts. No valid reason subsists for refusing the name⁹³.

Critical Distance

In Syme's view, understanding the revolutionary process from which Augustan aristocracy emerged implies making sense of the period before and after it: not only the age of the Triumvirate, but the reign of Tiberius Caesar as well, since so much of the evidence comes

89. Syme, 1986a, p. 445.

90. Syme, 1986a, p. 454. Wiseman, 1998, p. 152, implies that the target of these lines is Margaret Thatcher: that seems heavily speculative.

91. Cf. Walter, 2004, p. 141 n. 13.

92. Guarino, 1982.

93. Syme, 1988b, p. 65 = 1991, p. 331.

from Tacitus. In this age of deep transformation of the structures of government, oligarchies as power-groups are the common thread, the nexus linking and guiding the transition – regardless of matters of formality and nomenclature in the forms of governance. This attention to power groupings helps clarify the decades-long development in his attitudes towards the «individual» *par excellence*: the *princeps*.

Syme's approach to Caesar Augustus was always one of open criticism, when not outright hostility. As García Vivas has noted, «en Syme, su concepción del final de la República y del edificio político creado por Augusto, se mantuvo prácticamente inalterable a lo largo del tiempo y por tanto, su opinión negativa sobre el *Princeps* y su asalto al poder no observó prácticamente cambios sustanciales durante el resto de su carrera»⁹⁴. On the other hand, Géza Alföldy noted that «in the course of the years and decades, there is a clear tendency to tone down the harsh criticism given in *The Roman Revolution*»⁹⁵. Syme's earliest thoughts on the figure of Augustus were voiced in 1934, in the article on the Roman wars in Cantabria and Asturias, where he wryly noted that «Augustus did not like taking risks in war»⁹⁶. We begin to see the care with which Syme undertook the analysis of the suspicious, cold, calculating, and risk-averse nature of Caesar's adoptive son. That brief statement is echoed in the review of Levi's *Ottaviano capoparte*, as we saw above: the young heir of Caesar, «that sickly and sinister youth», was at the time of the Second Triumvirate the only figure who rapidly advanced «towards sole and personal power»⁹⁷. In the review of the first volume of the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani* one finds the earliest comparison between the principate of Augustus and a modern cartel: «[i]ndeed the government of Augustus resembles a syndicate rather than a principate. Not that the two terms are exclusive – on the contrary, the one presupposes the other»⁹⁸. The same metaphor was later employed, in closely comparable terms, in the opening pages of *RR*⁹⁹.

Octavian emerges as a gloomy and frail young man, but from his very beginnings on the Roman political scene he also comes across as ambitious and manipulative. «The grandson of a municipal banker», he seems to embody all the negative characteristics traditionally – and with a good deal of stereotyping – attributed to the equestrian order or, by analogy, to the «bourgeois classes» in the broadest sense¹⁰⁰: quest for personal profit and success, calculating mentality, hatred of risk, coldness, and constant drive for social self-promotion. The dividing lines between social and political history turn productively fuzzy. With the passing of time, one finds mellower tones and a clearer acknowledgement of the *princeps*' merits to-

94. García Vivas, 2016, p. 34.

95. Alföldy, 1993, p. 116.

96. Syme, 1934e.

97. Syme, 1934f, p. 77.

98. Syme, 1934c, p. 80.

99. Syme, 1939a, p. 7.

100. Syme, 1986a, p. 39.

wards Rome, but no substantial change in the overall judgement. Not long before his death Syme confided to Alföldy: «I still do not like him»¹⁰¹.

101. Alföldy, 1993, p. 114.

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