Res Gestae Divi Augusti, chapter 26 [1]

See Augustus, *Res Gestae divi Augusti* (General Background) [2] **for the historical context of the *Res Gestae*.**

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Eulogy / Panegyric / Elogium.
Original Location/Place: Rome, Ancyra, Antioch in Pisidia, Apollonia, Sardis.
Date: 14 CE
Language: Latin, Greek

Category: Roman

Commentary: The extent of Rome's expansion in the world is the subject of eight chapters (26-33) towards the end of the *Res Gestae*. They read almost as a literal account of Augustus's actions, and represent the claim that he had brought the whole world under Roman rule, exceeding and surpassing the achievements of all military generals – but particularly Pompey and Alexander the Great – that had come before him. These eight chapters evoke the ends of the known world, listing fifty-five geographical names, many of which would have been unknown to most, and reiterating the statement made by the monumental heading to the text, that Augustus "made the world subject to the rule of the Roman people" (*orbem terrarum imperio populi Romani subiecti*) (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 36). This achievement is given specifically in the context of Augustus's personal role in the campaigns and conquests, the imperialist tone of which is somewhat at odds with the instructions supposedly given to Tiberius upon Augustus's death not to expand the frontiers further (Tacitus, *Annals* I.2.4; Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 218-9). If Augustus had already achieved to subject the world, orbem terrarum, then there was no need to expand further. But of course the Romans knew that there were territories outside their realm. So there is a tension between an ideological claim on the one hand and a realistic policy on the other.

The opening statement of chapter 26 makes clear the tone and intentions of this section; the deliberate use of a first-person verb, "I extended" (*auxi*) implies the personal nature of the expansion under Augustus, exaggerating the military achievements won by the emperor himself (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 219). The text states that the territory extended under Augustus's leadership was in "those provinces…which had neighbouring peoples who were not subject to our authority" (*omnium provinciarum…quibus finitimae fuerunt gentes quae non parerent imperio nostro*), but Peter Brunt and John Moore have noted the vagueness of this statement, which could not have easily been checked by its readers (Brunt and Moore, *Res Gestae*, p. 70). Jean Gagé believed that the particular territory held in mind here by Augustus was the annexation of Galatia bordering on Asia (25 BCE) and of Judaea from Syria in 6 CE, but Peter Brunt and John Moore have suggested an alternative view, that Roman 'expansion' into these vassal kingdoms was only considered complete when they had been brought under direct Roman administration, rather than by indirect control through the placement of client-kings (Gagé, *Res Gestae*, p. 127-8; Brunt and Moore, *Res Gestae*, p. 70).

The campaigns in Gaul and Hispania, which form the subject of 26.2 were certainly tangible expansions, however, with both provinces subjugated and reorganised in the ten years after Actium (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 220). 'Gallia Narbonensis' (Languedoc and Provence) had been under Roman control as 'Transalpine Gaul' for many years, but the campaigns into the interior between 31-27 BCE made way for Augustus's own military advances in 27-25 BCE, after which the territory was redistributed (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 220). 'Hispania' had proven a tricky province to hold under Roman occupation; although parts of it had been under Roman control since 218 BCE, a large section of the northwest and mountainous regions remained unmanageable in the first century. Many campaigns had been led against the tribes here, including one by Augustus against the Cantabri in 26 BCE, which was claimed as one of the great victories that led to the closure of the gates of Janus in 25 BCE, even though the province was not properly supressed until Agrippa overcame the Cantabrian rebels in 19 BCE (Livy, *History of Rome* XXVIII.12.12). A further offensive from Augustus was necessary, between 16 and 13 BCE, after which the province of Hispania Ulterior was split into Baetica and Lusitania, in the former of which a gold statue representing the personification of the province was set up in honour of Augustus in order to celebrate his pacification of the region (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 221). The campaigns in Gaul and Hispania had required Augustus's personal involvement, but the same cannot be said for the description of the subjugation of Germania that follows here in 26.2. Between 12 and 8 BCE Tiberius and Drusus the Elder made successful expeditions against the German tribes, which resulted in the conquest of most of their territory and triumphal honours being awarded to them (see

Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* II.97.3-4, although exaggerated). From 8 BCE the Romans continued to advance, until Domitius Ahenobarbus crossed the Elbe and made peace with the Germans beyond it in 1 CE, for which he too received triumphal honours (Tacitus, *Annals* IV.442). Further pushes into German territory continued over the next seven years, but the *Res Gestae* does not, unsurprisingly, refer to the disaster that occurred under the leadership of Varus in 9 CE, during which three legions were lost at the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest (Velleius Paterculus, *Roman History* II.117-120;Tacitus, *Annals* I.3, I.10, I.43, I.55-71, II.7, II.41, II.45; Suetonius, *Augustus* XXIII; *Tiberius,* XVII-XVIII). Ronald Ridley has noted that this omission is to be expected, and simply represents Augustus's 'selective' approach to his reign; there was no way to spin the loss of three legions as a 'great achievement,' and so the entire encounter was excluded (Ridley, *Emperor's Retrospect*,p. 196-203). There is a further, significant reason for mentioning these expansions; 'Ocean' was believed to be the mass of water that surrounded the inhabited part of the ancient world, with a western extremity marked by the Pillars of Hercules at 'Gades,' or Cadiz. This was said to be the point at which Alexander the Great had intended to conquer the Phoenicians (a plan which came to an end because of his sudden death); by mentioning the western edge of the known world, at Gades, Augustus is demonstrating that his territorial expansion went beyond that achieved by Alexander, a fact which ties the conquest of these three provinces together (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 222; Scheid, *Res Gestae*, p, 70). Not only has Augustus emulated Alexander by subduing new parts of the world, but he has also surpassed him; by drawing such implicit comparisons between the achievements of two men, Augustus emerges not only as Alexander's equal, but his better, completing the project of expansion in the West that Alexander did not live long enough to see (Nenci, *Introduzione alle guerre persiane*, p. 290-8).

Section 26.3 deals with the conquest of the Alps under Augustus, which is stated to have been done fairly: "but attacked no people unjustly" (*nulli genti bello per iniuriam inlato*). This speaks to part of the Romans' war ideology, which depended upon the presentation of non-Romans as lawless and barbaric (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 223). By suggesting that the tribes of the Alpine region were behaving in an unruly and savage way, Rome could justify the army's savage treatment of them. However, in this instance, the charge of 'barbarisim' was unfounded; as Peter Brunt and John Moore have pointed out, the behaviour the Romans had found fault with was the taxation of travellers through the mountain pass that they controlled, which was exactly the kind of action the Romans themselves imposed (Brunt and Moore, *Res Gestae*, p. 71).

The final part of chapter 26 is concerned with Augustus's campaigns in Aethiopia and Arabia. The conquests are introduced by the opaque statement that they happened "almost at the same time" (*eodem fere tempore*), which gives, as Alison Cooley has stated, a deliberately "misleading impression about the simultaneity of these two expeditions" (*Res Gestae*, p. 224). The invasion into Arabia likely came first, in 26-5 BCE, with a later expedition in Ethiopia in late 25-24 BCE (Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 225). However, Ronald Ridley believes that the deliberate vagueness with which the order of the two campaigns is presented was to mask the failure of the first mission in Arabia (*Emperor's Retrospect*, p. 203-5). Augustus had attempted, through the then prefect of Egypt, Aelius Gallus, to conquer the kingdom of the Sabeans, by invading along the coast of the Red Sea from Egypt. The sea-invasion was ill-advised and resulted in Augustus stripping Gallus of the prefecture, and the eventual retreat of the soldiers, many of whom died from starvation and fatigue (Strabo, *Geography* II.5.12; XVII.1.46). It is not immediately clear why Augustus attempted the conquest of Arabia; Peter Brunt and John Moore believed it was motivated by "naked imperialism," but others have suggested that it was rather the desire to gain some control of the enormous wealth that moved through the region in the form of gems and spices (Brunt and Moore, *Res Gestae*, p. 1; Sidebotham, *Aelius Gallus*, p. 592). A further proposition might suggest that the invasion had more deliberate intentions, which aimed at Augustus having some influence over the Parthian succession by supporting one heir (Tiridates II) over another, in what would amount to a much larger political strategy by Rome (Ridley, *Emperor's Retrospect*, p. 127-8). The acclamation of Arabia as "Fortunate" (*quae appellatur Eudaemon*) is also interesting here; Augustus was differentiating between the two Arabias – the kingdom of the Sabeans in the south-west and the kingdom of the Nabataeans –, but he uses the Greek name, *Eudaemon*, to characterise the former. This is perhaps a reflection of the lack of familiarity most of the Roman people had with this part of the world; the name *Arabia Felix* had not yet entered common usage, and knowledge of the place, which was said to border *Oceanus*, existed probably only conceptually (Nicolet, *Space, Geography and Politics*, p. 21).

The invasion of Aethiopia (a region just south of Egypt, now close to modern Sudan) a year later was, in any case,

far more successful; under the leadership of a new prefect of Egypt, P. Petronius, the Romans were able to capture several towns, establish a garrison at Premnis and secure the surrender of an Egyptian Queen (see Cooley, *Res Gestae*, p. 225). The kingdoms of Aethiopia had long been seen as inhabiting the very margins of the known world, so Augustus's successful conquest there marked the fulfilment of Rome's expansionist ideology; Jupiter's prophecy in the *Aeneid* that the Romans would have "empire without end" (*imperium sine fine*) was, with the affirmation of this conquest in the *Res Gestae*, now true—Augustus had expanded Roman control to the literal edge of the known world.

Keywords in the original language:

- provincia [3]
- populus romanus [4]
- Gallia [5]
- Hispania [6]
- Germania [7]
- Oceanus [8]
- Alpis [9]
- pacare [10]
- iniuria [11]
- finis [12]
- exercitus [13]
- classis [14]
- terra [15]
- mare [16]
- Aethiopia [17]
- Arabia [18]
- Eudaemones [19]
- amicitia [20]
- iussus [21]
- hostis [22]
- copia [23]
- oppidum [24]
- captus [25]
- Meroe [26]

Thematic keywords:

- Augustus [27]
- Roman conquests [28]
- Gaul [29]
- Hispania [30]
- Germany [31]
- Spain [32]
- Alps [33]
- Roman subjugation [34]
- enemy [35]
- Roman army [36]
- war [37]
- frontier [38]
- fleet [39]
- Africa [40]
- Arabia [41]
- Roman people [42]
- Roman expansion [43]

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