Lorsch
Collection Latomus 8 (1997)
ed. C. Deroux

# An *omen* of *Diuus Augustus* : Portent of Triumph or Divinity ?

In his *Vita Diui Augusti*, Suetonius recounted many omens presaging Octavian's greatness and enduring happiness. Among these omens was a dream of the future Octavian's father Octavius, one that supposedly occurred when Octavius was governor of Macedonia and his son a child of three : *Atque etiam sequenti statim nocte uidere uisus est filium mortali specie ampliorem, cum fulmine et sceptro exuuiisque Iouis Optimi Maximi ac radiata corona, super laureatum currum bis senis equis candore eximio trahentibus* (1).

Commentators on Suetonius have postulated that the images contained in Octavius' dream reflect the regalia of a triumph or the iconography of Jupiter. G. Schuckburgh, for example, writes "the scepter, *tunica picta*, and *palmata* (i.e. the *exuuiae*) [were] taken from the Capitol for the use of the magistrates (consul or praetor) celebrating a triumph ... The laurelled chariot and the white horses are also prognostics of a triumph" (2). J. Carter states that "apart from the thunderbolt, these [images] are all the attributes of Jupiter Optimus Maximus which were adopted for the day of his triumph by a triumphator" (3). J. Westcott and E. Rankin argue in a similar vein (4).

It is true that many of the dream's symbols parallel the imagery of a triumph, but commentators to date have been unable to reconcile certain aspects of the dream with this rite. Neither can all the dream's symbols be equated with the iconography of Jupiter. Therefore, I argue in this paper that although some of the dream's symbols individually would have reminded Roman readers of a triumph or of Jupiter, collectively the symbols would have suggested something quite different,

(1) SUETONIUS, *Diuus Augustus* 94, 6.
(2) G. SCHUCKBURGH, *C. Suetonii Tranquilli Diuus Augustus*, Cambridge, 1896, p. 163.
(3) J. CARTER, *Suetonius Diuus Augustus*, Bristol, 1982, p. 202.
(4) J. WESTCOTT and E. RANKIN, *De Vita Caesarum Libri I-II*, Boston, 1918, p. 361.

namely a "super-triumphator" who displayed certain attributes that the figure of *Diuus Augustus* borrowed from the god Sol. I also argue that the conjunction of these images is too closely knit to be due to mere chance. Instead the dream shows signs of being a deliberate, almost literary invention, one designed with a specific purpose in mind — and that is the enhancement of Tiberius' power through the suggestion that the deification of his predecessor was divinely preordained.

Perhaps the best way to discover the true significance of the dream's imagery is to divide it into its separate components and examine each individually. These components are :

1) Octavian is seen as more than mortal in appearance (*filium mortali specie ampliorem*).
2) The thunderbolt (*cum fulmine*).
3) The scepter (*sceptro*).
4) The other *exuuiae* of Juppiter.
5) The radiate crown (*radiata corona*).
6) The chariot decorated with laurel (*laureatum currum*).
7) The twelve white horses (*bis senis equis candore eximio trahentibus*).

The first of these elements, Octavian's appearance as *mortali specie ampliorem*, belies those commentators who argue that the dream's imagery is purely triumphal in nature. Such an image immediately suggests that Octavian is in effect immortal ; it has nothing to do with triumphal imagery. The placement of this image, coming as it does at the very beginning of the dream, sets the tone for the rest of the dream's imagery, and alerts the reader to the possibility that the dream is not to be viewed as an omen of Octavian's triumph, but as a sign of his kinship to the gods.

The second symbol, the *fulmen*, reinforces this view, as a thunderbolt never appears in triumphal scenes. While the *triumphator* traditionally bore the *sceptrum Iouis*, no literary or pictorial evidence suggests that a *triumphator* ever carried an image of a thunderbolt (5). The thunderbolt, instead, was one of Jupiter's traditional attributes, one never shared with mortals (6). Therefore, the thunderbolt found in Octavius' dream

(5) H. S. VERSNEL, *Triumphus*, Leiden, 1970, p. 63.
(6) See C. THULIN, *Jupiter* in *R.E.* I, 19, 1917, p. 1130 for a list of ancient references.

can only have signified some special connection between Octavian and Jupiter. Most probably it would have suggested to a Roman that the emperor was to be seen as a mortal endowed with divine characteristics as no mere man could hope to bear the god's insignia and live (7).

The *sceptrum* is the first of the dream's images that can justifiably be seen as triumphal in nature. A scepter has always been considered an integral part of a *triumphator*'s regalia. Livy describing Scipio's presentation of triumphal gifts to Masinissa states that the general offered the *scipionem eburneum* along with other triumphal regalia (8). Juvenal in his account of a triumph, writes that the *triumphator* carried the *sceptrum Iouis* (9). Dionysus of Halicarnassus too twice mentions a *sceptrum* in connection with a triumph (10). Yet the scepter also serves to reinforce the dream's divine significance. Traditionally such an emblem was an attribute of Jupiter lent to the triumphator for the day of his triumph (11). Thus, the *sceptrum* in Octavius' dream would have suggested to a Roman audience not only a triumph, but also divinity.

The *exuuiae Iouis Optimi Maximi* strengthen this dual imagery (12). The *exuuiae* were a traditional part of a *triumphator*'s regalia (13). Simultaneously, as the phrase *exuuiae Iouis Optimi Maximi* suggests, they were properly the possessions of Jupiter lent to the *triumphator*

(7) Such a view is well attested to by other ancient literary sources. See HORACE, *Ode* I, 2 ; I, 12 ; III, 5 ; OVID, *Metamorphoses* XV, 858-70 ; *Tristia* V, 2 ; PROPERTIUS III, 11. For modern discussions of this issue see J. R. FEARS, *Princeps a Diis Electus : The Divine Election of the Emperor* (= *Papers and Monographs of the American Academy in Rome* XXVI), 1977, p. 121-129 ; M. M. WARD, *The Association of Augustus with Jupiter* in *Studi e Materiali stor. rel.* IX, 1933, p. 203-224 ; J. M. BENARIO, *Book IV of Horace's Odes : Augustan Propaganda in TAPA* XCI, 1960, p. 339-352 ; M. BELLER, *Juppiter Tonans*, Heidelberg, 1979, p. 70-75.

(8) LIVY XXX, 15, 11-12. See also LIVY V, 41, 2.

(9) JUVENAL X, 38-43.

(10) DIONYSUS HALICARNENSIS, *Ant.* IV, 74, 1 ; V, 47, 3.

(11) See J. KEUNE, *Triumphos* in *R.E.*, 2.3, 1921, p. 368-371 for a full discussion of this connection. Also VERSNEL, *Triumphus* [n. 5], p. 60.

(12) The question of what is meant by *exuuiae* is a difficult one. SCHUCKBURGH, *C. Suetonii Tranquilli* [n. 2], p. 163, suggests that the *exuuiae* consisted of the *toga picta, tunica palmata* and *sceptrum*. VERSNEL, *Triumphus* [n. 5], p. 260-270, argues that the *exuuiae deorum* cannot be the *toga picta* and *tunica palmata* because the magistrates who led the games also wore the *exuuiae*. Instead he wishes to see the *exuuiae* as the *struppi* (images of the gods woven from reeds). VERSNEL's argument seems unnecessarily limiting. There is no reason that the magistrates could not have worn the *exuuiae*, consisting of the *toga picta* and *tunica palmata*, at the opening of the games in what was a religious procession very similar in many aspects to a triumphal parade.

(13) VERSNEL, *Triumphus* [n. 5], p. 260-270.

for the occasion of his triumph. Thus the appearance of the *exuuiae* would have suggested not only Augustus' future triumph, but also his forthcoming divinity.

So far, all the symbols we have examined have been reconcilable with the attributes of Jupiter, if not with the imagery of a triumph. Yet the fifth element, the radiate crown cannot be associated with either of these ; instead it suggests a different divine connection. There is no evidence to suggest that a *triumphator* before the reign of Nero wore such a crown ; instead he traditionally wore a laurel wreath (14). The radiate crown is also never seen as an attribute of Jupiter. The crown in the dream, therefore, cannot signify either a triumph or a connection with Jupiter.

Originally, the radiate crown was part of Sol's iconography — its twelve rays thought to symbolize the Sun's rays (15). At the end of the republican period, for example, Sol appears with a radiate crown on coins minted by M. Cordius Rufus, c. 46 BC, and L. Valerius Acisculus, c. 45 BC (16), while in book 12 of the Aeneid Virgil pictures Latinus, *quadriiugo uehitur curru, cui tempora circum / aurati bis sex radii fulgentia cingunt / Solis aui specimen* ... (17). Perhaps the radiate crown simply signified that Augustus was joined not only with Jupiter, but also with Sol.

It is possible, however, to see a more precise significance in the inclusion of the crown in the dream. The Ptolemies first incorporated a radiate crown into their regalia to symbolize their divine connection with Ra, the Sun god of the Egyptians. Borrowing this idea, the Roman emperors, from the time of Tiberius onward, used the radiate crown to signify their own and their predecessors' deification. Coins cast in the reigns of both Tiberius and Caligula bear the legend *Diuus Augustus*

(14) VERSNEL, *Triumphus* [n. 5], p. 56-63 ; A. ALFÖLDI, *Insignien und Tract der römischen Kaiser* in *Mitteilungen des deutschen archaeologischen Instituts. Rom. Abt.* L, 1935, p. 38-41. For a more general discussion see K. KRAFT, *Der goldene Kranz Caesars und der Kampf um die Entlarvung des 'Tyrannen'* in *Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte* III/IV, 1952/1953, p. 7-20.

(15) H. P. L'ORANGE, *Apotheosis in Ancient Portraiture*, Cambridge, 1947, p. 61. J. TOYNBEE, *Ruler Apotheosis in Ancient Rome* in *Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Numismatic Society* 6, 1947, p. 138-139.

(16) Stefan WEINSTOCK, *Diuus Iulius*, Oxford, 1971, p. 382. For further numismatic evidence see S. W. STEVENSEN, C. R. SMITH and F. W. MADDEN, *A Dictionary of Roman Coins, Republican and Imperial*, London, 1889, p. 253.

(17) VIRGIL, *Aen.* XII, 161.

over a radiate image of the emperor ([18]). Coins cast during Nero's reign bear images of a radiate Nero himself ([19]). Perhaps the radiate crown in the dream echoes this usage. Such a possibility is particularly compelling, when one considers that the other symbols already discussed are attributes of Jupiter, not of Sol.

The *laureatus currus* is the only element of the dream that is purely triumphal in nature. A laurel-decorated chariot is never part of the iconography of Jupiter. Ancient sources, however, attest to the regular use of such a chariot in ancient triumphs. In Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile*, Caesar, describing the rewards of victory, speaks of *lauriferos currus* ([20]) and Claudian, describing the triumph of Stilicho, also mentions such a vehicle ([21]). At the same time, the chariot in Octavius' dream is pulled by twelve white horses. These horses immediately destroy the suggestion of a purely mortal triumphal scene.

Commentators traditionally have wished to see these horses as an image borrowed from the triumph. Yet this interpretation overlooks the special significance of both the horses' color and number. Imperial *triumphatores* did use white horses in their processions, but such a use was a relatively late innovation, one most probably begun by Julius Caesar ([22]). More importantly, ancient evidence suggests that even this regular imperial usage would have evoked divine images in the minds of a Roman audience.

Four ancient authors refer to the use of white horses in a triumph during the Republican period or earlier. Two of these sources offer little illumination on the import of such a use, but the other two explicitly state their significance. Propertius describing Romulus' triumph merely mentions the hero's employment of white horses ([23]), while Ovid simply credits A. Postumius Tubertus with a similar use ([24]). Livy and Plutarch,

(18) H. MATTINGLY, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, I, London, 1923, p. 130, no. 74-75 ; p. 140-142, no. 141-160. R. A. G. CARSON, *Coins of the Roman Empire*, London, 1990, p. 8-11.

(19) MATTINGLY, *Coins* [n. 18], I, p. 130 ; CARSON, *Coins* [n. 18], p. 13-17.

(20) LUCAN V, 332.

(21) CLAUDIAN XXIV, 21.

(22) See SCHUCKBURGH, *C. Suetonii Tranquilli* [n. 2], p. 163, CARTER, *Suetonius* [n. 3], p. 202 and WESTCOTT and FRANKIN, *De Vita Caesarum* [n. 4], p. 361.

(23) PROPERTIUS IV, 1, 32 : *Quattuor hinc albos Romulus egit equos.*

(24) OVID, *Fasti* VI, 723 : *unde suburbano clarus, Tuberte, triumpho, / uectus es in niueis, Postume, uictor equis.*

however, provide more detail. The former wrote of the triumph of the dictator Camillus : *Aduentus quoque dictatoris omnibus ordinibus obuiam effusis celebratior quam ullius unquam antea fuit, triumphusque omnem consuetum honorandi diei illius modum aliquantum excessit. Maxime conspectus ipse est, curru equis albis iuncto urbem inuectus, parumque id non ciuile modo sed humanum etiam uisum. Iouis Solisque equis aequiperatum dictatorem in religionem etiam trahebant, triumphusque ob eam unam maxime rem clarior quam gratior fuit* (25). The latter described the same triumph, writing : *σοβαρῶς ἐθριάμβευσε καὶ τέθριππον ὑποζευξάμενος λευκόπωλον ἐπέβη καὶ διεξήλασε τῆς Ῥώμης, οὐδενὸς τοῦτο ποιήσαντος ἡγεμόνος πρότερον οὐδ ὕστερον. ἱερὸν γὰρ ἡγοῦνται τὸ τοιοῦτον ὄχημα τῷ βασιλεῖ καὶ πατρὶ τῶν θεῶν ἐπιπεφημισμένον* (26).

Both Plutarch and Livy suppose that the early Romans saw the practice of using white horses in a triumph as sacrilegious. Plutarch suggests that Camillus' white horses caused outrage among the Romans because he seemed to usurp Jupiter's privileges, while Livy compares Camillus' horses to those of both Jupiter and Sol. The employment of white horses by Caesar and his successors must have suggested to a Roman audience that the emperor was semi-divine himself, riding as he did behind the white horses of the gods. The white horses in Octavius' dream would have evoked not only the images of a triumph in Suetonius' readers' mind, but also a sense that the horses' driver was divine.

The number of horses seen in the dream also supports this possibility. Traditionally, four horses drew a *triumphator*'s chariot (27) Ovid in his *Tristia* wrote *Ipse sono plausuque simul fremituque canente / Quadriiugos cernes saepe resistere equos* (28). Livy describing a similar event, wrote : *et exercitus Liuianus deductus Romam uenisset, Neronis deduci de prouincia non potuisset, ut M. Liuium quadrigis urbem ineuntem milites sequerentur, C. Claudius equo sine militibus inueheretur* (29). Thus, the Romans could not have viewed the dream's twelve

(25) LIVY V, 23, 4.
(26) PLUTARCH, *Camillus* VII, 1.
(27) VERSNEL, *Triumphus* [n. 5], p. 63.
(28) OVID, *Tristia* IV, 2, 54.
(29) LIVY XXVIII, 9, 10. For other examples see DIONYSUS HALICARNENSIS II, 34, 3 ; IX, 71, 4 ; CASSIUS DIO XLIII, 14, 3.

horses as reminiscent of a triumph. The image would have suggested at the very least that Octavian was destined for more greatness than an ordinary *triumphator*, who had only four horses.

The number twelve, however, has a more precise significance. Throughout antiquity twelve had special importance as a divine number — the number of signs in the zodiac, the number of major gods in the Pantheon ([30]). Twelve figured from time to time in other *omina imperii* as well : for example, Augustus saw twelve vultures ([31]), while one of Galba's omens involved the discovery of twelve axes ([32]). The number of the horses may simply have reflected this importance and served as a further sign of Augustus' divinely given *imperium*.

Yet the number of horses may have had a more precise significance. The traditional *radiata corona* worn by Sol, and later by *Diuus Augustus*, had twelve rays. Weinstock suggests that the twelve horses of Octavius' dream reflected this fact ([33]). If this is so — and his theory seems plausible — then the number of the horses again would have suggested both Sol and *Diuus Augustus* to an ancient Roman.

On one level Octavius' dream evokes the image of a triumph. But, as closer examination has shown, it also would have suggested other images to Suetonius' Roman audience. Although each element individually seems triumphal in nature, under closer scrutiny, it becomes apparent that each has been embellished to give the impression not only of a triumph, but also of divinity. Augustus is seen not only with the proper accouterments of a *triumphator* — the *exuuiae Iouis Optimi Maximi*, the scepter and the chariot — he also appears as more than mortal and bears the god's thunderbolt, an attribute reserved for the god himself and never shared with mortals. His chariot is drawn, not by four dark horses, but by white horses, and not only by white horses, but by twelve of them, triple the number that drew the chariot either of a god or a *triumphator*. Augustus wears not the traditional wreath

(30) M. H. GOBERT, *Les nombres sacrés et l'origine des religions*, Paris, 1982, p. 100-115.

(31) SUETONIUS, *Diuus Augustus* 95 : *Primo autem consulatu et augurium capienti duodecim se uultures ut Romulo ostenderunt et immolanti omnium uictimarum iocinera replicata intrinsecus ab ima fibra paruerunt, nemine peritorum aliter coniectante quam laeta per haec et magna portendi.*

(32) SUETONIUS, *Galba* 8, 2 : *Non multo post in Cantabriae lacum fulmen decidit repertaeque sunt duodecim secures, haud ambiguum summae imperii signum.*

(33) WEINSTOCK, *Diuus Iulius* [n. 16], p. 69.

of a triumph, but the radiate crown of Sol, a crown often associated with his position as *diuus*. These images combine to suggest not just Augustus the triumphant general, but Augustus the emperor destined for divinity and not only for divinity, but a divinity equal to that of Jupiter or Sol.

Where then does this leave us ? I believe that the imagery found in Suetonius' account of the dream of Octavius echoes not only standard features of a triumph and of the iconography of Jupiter, but also the attributes of *Diuus Augustus*. If so, the story can only have served to strengthen in the minds of a Roman audience the belief that the deification of Augustus was divinely foreordained.

The question then is : which Roman audience ? Was this omen devised by Suetonius himself for some literary purpose ? Or was it devised at an earlier date by a particular imperial candidate to support his own claims ? If the latter, which candidate is the most likely ? Internal and external evidence suggests that Tiberius or one of his supporters is the most probable source for the story.

First, the internal evidence. One element of the dream in particular — the radiate crown — is especially relevant to this discussion. A comparison of this crown with numismatic evidence suggests a possible date for the invention of the dream. Although Julius Caesar is sometimes depicted on ancient coins with a radiate crown, such an attribute is never bestowed upon Octavian until after his death and subsequent deification in 14 AD (34). From that point on, throughout the reign of Tiberius coins portraying *Diuus Augustus* with a radiate crown frequently appear (35). Only a few coins with this image date to Caligula's reign (36), while none remain from Claudius' era. Nero renewed the use of a radiate crown on his coinage, but generally he reserved it for one of his own attributes (37). Thus the numismatic evidence suggests sometime during the age of Tiberius as the most likely date for the dream's invention.

(34) FEARS, *Princeps* [n. 7], p. 236. See also J. R. FEARS, *The Solar Monarchy of Nero and the Imperial Panegyric of Q. Curtius Rufus* in *Historia* XXV, 1976, p. 494-496.

(35) MATTINGLY, *Coins* [n. 18], I, p. 140-142, no. 141-160.

(36) MATTINGLY, *Coins* [n. 18], I, p. 160, no. 88-92 ; p. 238-240, no. 200-206, no. 208-210.

(37) MATTINGLY, *Coins* [n. 18], p. 208, no. 52-60.

Second, the external evidence. Our knowledge of ancient historical events also suggests that Tiberius, or one of his supporters, was the most likely author of the dream. During his lifetime, Augustus was content with the designation *Diui Filius*, and, at least at Rome, actively discouraged any attempts to elevate him to the status of a god (38). By Caligula's reign, the legend and iconography of *Diuus Augustus* were firmly established and needed little encouragement. It was under Tiberius that Augustus' divine status first became institutionalized and it was at this point that it would have needed the most support. Moreover Tiberius more than his successors made use of Augustus' divine reputation to enhance his own power (39).

There is also evidence that Tiberius was not above manipulating omens to further his own interests. Several of the emperor's omens seem designed in answer to specific events. For example, Tiberius supposedly received three *omina imperii* during his self-imposed exile in Rhodes (40). As Bowersock has argued, these three omens were employed as favorable signs by Tiberius' Eastern supporters to counteract Gaius' claims (41).

Thus all of the evidence combines to suggest that the story of Octavius' dream was spread sometime during Tiberius' reign. And I would posit that the story was a deliberate invention devised to enhance the divine reputation of Tiberius' predecessor, the man from whom his power was derived, *Diuus Augustus*.

*Odense Universitet, Danmark.* Robin S. LORSCH.

(38) D. FISHWICK, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West*, Leiden, 1987, p. 152.

(39) FISHWICK, *The Imperial Cult* [n. 348], p. 158-160.

(40) SUETONIUS, *Tiberius* 14 : *ante paucos uero quam reuocaretur dies aquila, numquam antea Rhodi conspecta, in culmine domus eius assedit et pridie quam de reditu certior fieret, uestimenta mutanti tunica ardere uisa est.* — Further examples of this class of omen include : DIO CASSIUS LXI, 2, 4 ; LXV, 1, 4 ; JOSEPHUS, *Bellum Iudaicum* III, 401-402 ; IV, 623 ; TACITUS, *Hist.* V, 13.

(41) G. BOWERSOCK, *Augustus and the East : the Problem of Succession* in *Caesar Augustus*, eds. Fergus MILLER and Erich SEGAL, Oxford, 1984, p. 180-183.