

T.P. Wiseman, *The House of Augustus – A historical detective story*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780691189086

In this ‘historical detective story,’ T.P. Wiseman investigates the archaeological and textual evidence for the Palatine house-temple complex of Augustus and calls for a reconsideration of the history of the Palatine, Roman myth, and the nature of the principate as a whole. The reader is primed to expect a different version of Rome’s first emperor already in the first few pages, where Octavian is replaced by the young Caesar, and Augustus becomes Commander (imperator) Caesar. This redefinition sets the stage for Wiseman’s most revolutionary arguments, that Augustus was not an Emperor and that we should not consider the lavish archaeological remains on the Palatine as his palace.

The first chapter, ‘Understanding Augustus,’ gives a historical overview of the politics of the late Republic and the role of ‘young Caesar’ in it. Wiseman primarily utilizes contemporary primary sources, especially Cicero, in presenting a political landscape dominated by the oligarchic *optimates*. The champion of the Roman People, in contrast, was Gaius Julius Caesar, whose rule was ‘conspicuously humane’ (p.4) and whose actions shaped the young Caesar’s political outlook. In painting the young Caesar as an agent of the Roman People, Wiseman reminds us that ‘it is important, if uncomfortable, to remember that Cicero was killed legally. The Roman People set up the triumvirate, by a tribunician law’ (p.6). The proscriptions were meant to re-establish the *res publica* and the triumvirs ‘acted with a ruthlessness that reflected the People’s anger’ (p.6). Who exactly the Roman People were and how they made their unified voice heard, however, remains an open question throughout the text.

The second chapter, ‘History and Archaeology,’ presents the key piece of evidence that this depiction of the young Caesar relies upon, Suetonius’ description of Augustus’ domicile on the Palatine, ‘as the no less modest house of Hortensius, which was distinguished for neither space nor elegance...’ (Suet. *Div.Aug.* 72.1). This characterization lies in stark contrast to the typical late Republican aristocrat, whose propensity towards private splendor was famous. Wiseman regards the archaeological remains currently labelled the Houses of Augustus and Livia not as a palatial residence but as the structures Augustus razed in order to construct the Temple of Apollo. In criticizing the archaeologists who have identified the house as Augustus’ as not taking into account the historical context of his early reign, Wiseman details the site’s excavation history and the persistent misinterpretation of a temporary ramp as a permanent feature that connected the domestic space to the temple. This ramp has been a central part of the interpretation of the space as a combined sacred-domestic context, an assertion which lies at the center of P. Zanker’s interpretation, which has become canonical, that the buildings were reminiscent of a Hellenistic Palace and emblematic of a similar approach to governance and authority at Rome. Wiseman

rejects all of these ideas along with other reconstructions based on misinterpretations of the evidence and ‘historical guesses’ (p.28).

Chapter Three, ‘The Palace,’ gives an overview of the later history of the Palatine and explains why it is so difficult to understand the stratigraphy of the Augustan age today. The critical moment was 64 CE with the great fire of Rome and the subsequent construction of Nero’s *domus aurea*, allegedly spanning from the Palatine to the Esquiline. Chapter Four, ‘Palatine Prehistory,’ brings to reader to the other extreme by detailing the earliest data we have on the hill itself, including its geomorphology, and relies heavily on the work of A. Ammerman. The chapter rightly points to the establishment of the Forum and the Sacra Via as a key moment in the construction of a true Roman community.

Chapter Five, ‘Palatine Legends’ traces Rome’s early foundation stories and the role of the Palatine hill within them. Wiseman argues that the myth where Heracles founds Rome is the earliest and highlights the connections between the Julian clan, Vergil’s *Aeneid*, and Augustus’ building activity on the Palatine. Chapter Six, ‘The Romulus Paradigm,’ engages with a myth more fully localized on the Palatine, that of Romulus, and especially with the spaces associated with Rome’s first king, his hut (or Faustulus’), the auguratorium, the temple of Jupiter Victor, and ‘Roma Quadrata.’ Each one of these Romulean spaces is hotly contested in both interpretation and location, and Wiseman here has expertly brought together the sources and made a convincing argument for how Augustus’ temple of Apollo alluded to and interacted with each of them.

Chapter Seven, ‘Commander Caesar and his Gods’ details the early years of Augustus’ rise to power, emphasizing his cooption of Julius Caesar’s legacy to maintain the loyalty of the soldiers, and his attempts to secure evidence of the approval of the gods, namely Apollo and Diana. The chapter ends with Horace’s *carmen saeculare*, which was likely performed in the piazza in front of the temple and evoked many of the other buildings and spaces on the Palatine.

Chapter Eight, ‘The Temple and the Portico’ is the most substantial chapter, and the one that engages most with the archaeological record of the temple of Apollo. Here, Wiseman returns to the long history of excavation at the temple and the surrounding areas. The amount of faith that subsequent scholars have put into extremely poorly preserved and documented archaeology should be seen as a note of caution for many other famous sites in Rome. Wiseman’s re-evaluation of later interpretations underscores the value of taking up old excavation reports and making use of legacy data. Following the analysis of A. Claridge, Wiseman argues for a version of the temple facing NE (instead of the canonical SW), with a portico running behind and on the sides, an assertion which more closely matches descriptions of the temple in Vitruvius and Ovid. In his argument, the ‘House of Augustus’ and the ‘House of Livia’ were among the houses destroyed for the construction of the temple,

a conclusion supported by A. Claridge's analysis of the elevation of the houses and their state of preservation.¹

Chapter Nine, 'Palatine Poets,' argues that contemporary literature was performed in this space and that allusions to temples and other surrounding features confirm the spatial configuration proposed in Chapter Eight. Horace, Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid are martialed in this cause with myriad connections to Apollo, Jupiter Victor, augury, Evander, etc. The final chapter, 'A Miscarriage of Justice,' brings the reader through the excesses and optimate nature of the rest of the Julio-Claudian family to show how later authors, especially Tacitus, Gibbon, and Syme could have gotten Augustus, and the nature of the *domus Augustana*, so wrong. Here, Wiseman sums up the main goal of the book: 'the premise of the whole argument – that Commander Caesar, who became Caesar Augustus, was the champion of the Roman People against an oppressive oligarchy.'

Much of Wiseman's argument rests on Suetonius' description of Augustus' house as humble, but Suetonius, despite his alleged access to many primary documents, did not see the house for himself, and living in a post-Neronian Rome, likely had a skewed idea of what a humble residence for an emperor looked like. The arguments in a recent article (which appeared after the book went to press) by A. Raimondi Cominesi provides a more measured interpretation of both the textual and material sources.² Raimondi Cominesi argues for an allusion to Hellenistic palatial complexes, but one with a house that was cast as (though likely not truly) a modest home with Republican symbolism. This reflects an outward attempt at appearing to maintain traditional Republican practices while simultaneously privately consolidating monarchical power.

Ultimately, the new plan of the temple of Apollo on the Palatine facing North-East and the assertion that the luxurious residences called the House of Livia and the House of Augustus were never their long-term dwelling places are both convincing. The actual *domus Augustana* was probably destroyed in 64 CE and will never be known to us. How these new archaeological interpretations should impact our view of Augustus (or Octavian), however, is still up for debate.

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¹ Claridge, A. 2014. 'Reconstructing the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine Hill in Rome,' in C. Häuber, F.X. Schütz, G.M. Winder (eds). *Reconstruction and the Historic City. Rome and abroad – An Interdisciplinary Approach*. München, pp. 128-152.

² Raimondi Cominesi, A. 2018. 'Augustus in the Making: A Reappraisal of the Ideology behind Octavian's Palatine Residence through its Interior Decoration and Topographical Context,' *Latomus* 77, pp. 704-735.