A date with Augustus

It is less than a year now until Tuesday 19th August 2014: the two thousandth anniversary of the death of the first Roman emperor, Augustus. At the University of Leeds, the Commemorating Augustus project is taking the bi-millennium as an opportunity to explore Augustus’ legacy from AD 14 to 2014. A conference next year will bring together academics from a broad range of disciplines to explore responses to Augustus from his immediate successors to the present day, from the Old World to the New, and from politics to popular culture. The aim is to achieve a clearer understanding of past receptions of Augustus so that we can then re-evaluate him for ourselves in the 21st century.

But a major anniversary like Augustus’ bi-millennium can be expected to reach well beyond the corridors of academia. One exhibition in the Italian town of Formia is already making the most of the Augustus connection; another will follow in Rome this autumn; and the Commemorating Augustus project is working towards a third in collaboration with Leeds Museums for summer 2014. This article explores the phenomenon of anniversary commemorations and the ways in which Classicists have used them to attract interest in the subject. It also offers tips for getting the best value out of Augustus’ bi-millennium in the classroom, and previews a JACT INSET day on Augustus scheduled for November.

Wormholes into the past

Anniversary commemorations are so deeply embedded in modern western culture that we rarely think to question them. Major recent and current examples include the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee and bicentenary of Dickens’ birth in 2012, the 150th anniversary of the London Underground and 50th anniversary of Doctor Who in 2013, and the centenary of the First World War in 2014. But why are they so popular?

At the root of the phenomenon is the feeling which anniversaries create of being close to past, best seen in the popular phrase ‘on this day in history’. Widely used by newspapers and websites to announce lists of historical anniversaries, this phrase actually conflates two different concepts: this day and this date. In reality, ‘this day’ is a unique moment in the present which cannot be repeated. But our calendar system depends heavily on the use of repeated cycles: the days of the week,
the dates of the month, the months of the year, and the years of a century. This means that similar dates are repeated.

When we compare a particular date and its anniversary – say, 19th August AD 14 and 19th August 2014 – the difference between them can appear deceptively minor. Of the three elements which make up our dating system, only the year is different; and even that includes two of the same numbers. Most of us also know that our planet occupies the same position in relation to the sun on both dates. Together, the two factors generate a sense of time progressing along parallel, or perhaps concentric, tracks, so that we pass within touching distance of a certain date in the past on a similar date in the present. Although ‘this date’ is not really ‘this day’, the allure of the anniversary is that it seems to function like a wormhole, offering us an easy short-cut into the past.

**Ancient anniversary culture**

The same sort of thinking worked in antiquity too. People in the ancient world certainly thought of time as cyclical, as is clear from their habit of depicting Aion, the god of time, with a zodiac wheel representing the year. The ‘on this day’ concept also appears in texts. Take Tacitus on the aftermath of Augustus’ death:

> ‘Then followed talk of Augustus himself. Many wondered at trivial points: that the same day [idem dies] should have been the time when he first assumed imperium and the last of his life, or that he should have ended his days at Nola in the same house and room as his father Octavius.’ (Annals 1. 9. 1)

Augustus actually assumed imperium for the first time in 43 BC and died in AD 14, in each case on the calendar date which we now call August 19th. But as Denis Feeney has pointed out, Tacitus’s Latin literally describes these two occasions, fifty-six years apart, as idem dies – the same day. If anything, this is even stronger than our concept of ‘on this day in history’. And although Tacitus is cynical about it, calling the coincidence ‘trivial’, the passage still reflects a wider cultural fascination with anniversaries. Romans clearly considered it natural to treat them as a cue for thinking about the relationship between the present and the past.

Certainly anniversaries were widely celebrated in the ancient world. Annual religious festivals in particular were like milestones marking out a pathway through the year. The ancients also regularly commemorated the foundation-days of cities, the accession of kings and emperors, the dates of major battles, and (in the Roman world at least) birthdays, death days and wedding anniversaries. Most were annual events, but longer cycles also operated. One of the best-known is the four-year Olympiad. Another, celebrated by Augustus himself, was the ludi Saeculares, held once every saeculum (the longest span of human life, reckoned at either 100 or 110 years). This particular festival even gave rise to an ancient millennial commemoration under Philip the Arab in AD 248. Philip proclaimed that his ludi marked one thousand years since the legendary foundation of Rome in 753 BC, and minted coins bearing the legend ‘miliarium saeculum’ (‘the thousand-year age’).

**Classical anniversaries today**

For Classicists, the anniversaries of ancient events are a powerful means of engaging people whose interest they have attracted, as well as enthusing those already studying the subject. Most of us are already adept at spotting these opportunities, of course, and there is a long-standing tradition of Classicists making the most of anniversaries. But this does depend on knowing when they fall. Here, the internet has made it easy for subject advocates to share this information. N.S. Gill of the About.com Ancient and Classical History site has created a calendar of dateable ancient events, so that users can look up the relevant anniversaries for any date they choose. David Meadows also posts a regular ‘This day in Ancient History’ feature on his RogueClassicism blog (web addresses are at the end of this article).

In 2010-11, the 2500th anniversary of Battle of Marathon inspired some good specific examples of how anniversaries can support and promote the study of Classics. During this period, a team sponsored by the Bristol Institute of Greece, Rome and the Classical Tradition played on the link with modern racing by running the city’s half-marathon to raise money for Classics for All. Meanwhile, the Marathon2500 Project brought together scholars from across the globe to create an international series of free public lectures and podcasts aimed at inspiring interest in Greek history. Many schools also used the opportunity as a basis for school trips to Greece and classroom projects on the ancient Greeks and their sports.
Commemorating Augustus: bi-millennial ideas from 1938

So how can we make the most of Augustus’ bi-millennium? One place to start looking for ideas might be the late 1930s, when academics, museums, politicians, newspapers and schools across the world joined in commemorating Augustus’ other big anniversary: the bi-millennium of his birth on 23rd September 1938.

The biggest commemorations by far were held in Italy, where the contemporary Fascist government organised an extensive programme of events in the run-up to the bi-millennium. These included two major archaeological projects: one to clear Augustus’ Mausoleum of later buildings, and another to excavate and reconstruct the Ara Pacis Augustae. There was also a year-long exhibition called the Mostra Augustea della Romanità (roughly, ‘Augustan exhibition of Romanness’), a set of commemorative stamps, and a series of scholarly publications. Collectively, these events were intended to enhance Mussolini’s public profile by association with Augustus, and to inspire patriotic feelings among the Italian people.

But they were not the only events held to mark the bi-millennium of Augustus’ birth. One of the goals of the Commemorating Augustus project is to uncover the full range of commemorations held in 1938, through research into contemporary newspapers, archives, and Classical society proceedings. Already this has shown that marking Augustus’ bi-millennium was far from the preserve of Fascist Italy. In fact his birth was commemorated at over fifty different events worldwide, across western Europe, America and Australasia. These events tended to present Augustus as a bringer of peace after civil wars, a founding father of what was to become modern Europe, and the creator of a unified and coherent empire-wide culture: all understandable interests in a world still recovering from one war while fearing the outbreak of a second.

In America especially, Classics students and their teachers marked Augustus’ bi-millennium with songs, poetry readings, essay competitions, drama performances, lectures, dinners and exhibitions. A group of Californian high school students donned Roman dress for a formal dinner, followed by sketches depicting ‘the contributions of Romans to modern times’. Some art students in Minnesota made a commemorative plaque, while two schools embraced modern technology by putting on radio shows: one in Detroit, broadcast to the general public, and another in Indiana, broadcast to friends and parents within the school. The description of the latter from The Classical Journal in 1938 is worth reproducing in full:

‘The program, written by the students themselves, and based chiefly upon Suetonius and the Res Gestae Divi Augusti, began with the “Man on the Street,” who interviews a number of persons, including Agrippa, a young man who has just been freed from an unjust charge by the passing of a vestal, and a lady on her way to a dinner party in the palace of Augustus. Through these persons the audience is given interesting side-lights on the character and habits of the emperor. The “Man on the Street” presents each person interviewed with a ticket to a performance of one of Plautus’ comedies.

In the second part of the program the audience was transferred to the imperial palace on the day before the celebration of the Secular Games. Here the famous Maecenean Circle is in session with the Emperor Augustus. The announcer introduces Maecenas, Horace, Livy, and Augustus. Through the dialogue which they carry on we receive intimate glimpses of these men and their ideas and of the gifts to literature which the age has produced, as well as of the unexpected trend of empire under Augustus. Horace reads a part of his Carmen Saeculare. Thereupon the announcer returns the audience to its local station and one of the students sings several of Horace’s odes. The last part of the program consisted of flashes by Walterius Winchelliust, who informed the audience of a costume party in which royalty impersonated the gods, of changes in the fashions, and of other items of interest. Altogether the program succeeded in making the Augustan Age seem very real and very near to the audience.’

(The Classical Journal, 1938, p. 443)

In short, then, students and teachers had fun commemorating Augustus’ birth. They used the occasion to learn about his career, engage with Augustan literature, improve their Latin, exercise their creative talents and think about how the Augustan age related to their own lives. Several teachers and lecturers also used the opportunity to showcase their students’ work through displays and performances, and generally promote the subject to non-Classicists. Many of these activities could equally well be adapted for the bi-millennium of Augustus’ death, along with further options not available in 1938 like building a website or recording a video.

Commemorating Augustus: bi-millennial ideas for 2014

But we can also go a little further than this for the 2014 bi-millennium. The activities mounted in Augustus’ honour in 1938 – essay competitions, art projects, drama performances – are part of any good teacher’s classroom repertoire. They can be adapted to any occasion, ancient or modern, by simply changing the subject of the essay, project or play. They are certainly good ways to mark the bi-millennium of Augustus’ death; but the anniversary also opens up some valuable pedagogical opportunities which relate more directly to the occasion.

After all, the 2014 anniversary specifically commemorates Augustus’ death: that is, the moment when his worldly career came to a close, and could be evaluated as a completed whole for the first time. This is traditionally a time to look back and reflect on what a person has achieved, as for example in a newspaper obituary. So next year’s bi-millennium invites us to evaluate Augustus in the same way. What do we make of his overall impact on the world in which he lived? Was it beneficial or damaging? How did this vary for different individuals and groups?

These are important questions to ask about Augustus. Over the course of his career he ordered proscriptions, waged civil wars and exiled his own daughter; but also re-established stability.
and security, championed the arts and fostered good administration. All of this provoked varying responses in his own lifetime, and has done so ever since. Petrarch and Erasmus held Augustus up as a model of good leadership, but Edward Gibbon called him a ‘subtle tyrant’ and Syme saw his regime as resting on ‘fraud and bloodshed’. For students today, it can be difficult to make sense of the man as a whole, or to reconcile these different perspectives.

For teachers, then, Augustus’ bi-millennium is a golden opportunity. It is the perfect ‘hook’ for a classroom evaluation of Augustus, allowing students to confront the issues raised by his career and helping them to understand him better. What is more, the ancient sources offer several tailor-made starting-points for this kind of discussion:

• One is trying to answer the question posed by Augustus himself on his death-bed: ‘Did I play my part well in this comedy called life?’ (Suetonius, Augustus 99). Though at first sight simple, this question raises many further issues for debate. For example, ‘well’ from whose perspective? And is good political leadership essentially about putting on a convincing performance?

• Along similar lines is the senatorial debate on the ‘pros and cons’ of Augustus’ reign sketched out by Tacitus at Annals 1.8-10. Students could be asked to read this text and re-enact the debate, adding their own opinions of Augustus and seeing which side has the most persuasive arguments.

• Or there is the scenario suggested by Seneca’s Apocolocyntosis. In this satire, the emperor Claudius finds himself in the afterlife before a panel of gods tasked with deciding whether he should ascend to Olympus or descend to Hades. In the original work, the deified Augustus is on the panel – but it would be easy to adapt the basic idea and have Augustus up for judgement instead of Claudius. Students could play the roles of different deities: like Apollo singing Augustus’ praises, or Hercules still furious at his treatment of Mark Antony.

These texts preserve an ancient tradition of debate about the impact of Augustus (and other Julio-Claudian emperors). But any attempt to evaluate Augustus today inevitably reflects our 21st-century perspective, and we can get more out of the exercise by being explicit about this. As we saw earlier, part of the appeal of anniversaries is the way they invite us to draw direct comparisons between the present and the past. So classroom assessments of Augustus could include thinking directly about how he appears from a perspective two thousand years later. For example:

• What would we make of someone who behaved like Augustus in modern Britain? Would we cheer him on, or deplore him as a tyrant?
• How do our responses compare with those recorded in the ancient literature?
• And if they are different, what does that tell us about how political power is acquired and maintained – both then and now?

Over to you!

As I hope this article has shown, Augustus’ bi-millennium opens up a wealth of opportunities to promote Classics as a subject, have fun with creative projects, and help students to tackle some of the challenging academic issues which he presents. But of course the ideas suggested here are not exhaustive. Classicists have always been exceptionally creative in their engagements with the ancient world, and JCT readers will doubtless come up with many other exciting and inspiring ways to commemorate Augustus in 2014.

If you mark his bi-millennium with your students, why not write and tell us what you did? We hope to publish a feature on Augustus’ bi-millennial commemorations in a future issue of JCT, and would love to include short write-ups of activities from schools across the country. If you try out any of the ideas suggested in this article, tell us how they worked in practice with your students. And if you come up with other ideas of your own, tell us what you did, why you chose that particular activity, and how it went. Pictures of your events will of course be especially welcome! Please send your reports and / or pictures to office@jact.org, and include the name of your school.

Augustus INSET day

Meanwhile, to support teachers hoping to make the most of Augustus’ big year, JACT will be running an INSET day on Augustus this autumn, covering both historical and literary topics. Interactive workshop sessions will focus on working with primary sources in the classroom, the relationship between Augustus and the poets, and further ideas on how to make the most of the bi-millennium. Dr. Alison Cooley, author of *Re Gestis Divi Augusti: Text, Translation and Commentary* (2009), will also give a plenary talk sharing some of her insights into Augustus’ summary of his own career. Preliminary details are as follows:

Venue: University of Manchester.
Date: Saturday 16th November 2013, 10am to 4:30pm.

Historical topics:
• Suetonius’ *Life of Augustus*
• Augustan coinage
• Augustus the contradiction

Literary topics:
• Augustus and the poets
• Horace, Virgil and Actium

The event is aimed at established, new and prospective teachers of Ancient History and Classical Civilization. Further details, and information on how to register, will be advertised through JACT shortly.

Further Reading

Denis Feeney (2007), *Caesar’s Calendar: ancient time and the beginnings of history*

Karl Galinsky (2012), *Augustus: introduction to the life of an emperor*


About.com’s ‘This Day in Ancient / Classical History’ page: [http://ancienthistory.about.com/library/bl/bl_This-Day-in-Ancient-History.htm](http://ancienthistory.about.com/library/bl/bl_This-Day-in-Ancient-History.htm)


1 ‘Walterius Winchellius’ is, of course, a parody, based on the popular radio journalist Walter Winchell, whose contemporary Sunday night gossip show pulled in around 20 million listeners a week.