"THAT SICKLY AND SINISTER YOUTH": THE FIRST CONSIDERATIONS OF SYME ON OCTAVIAN AS A HISTORICAL FIGURE*

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To my mother

In memoriam

Abstract: Throughout 1934, Ronald Syme published several articles in which he set out his initial ideas about Octavian, the future emperor Augustus. From this early stage of his career, Syme’s discourse would begin to bring into focus the suspicious, cold, calculating and extremely cautious nature of Caesar’s adopted son.

To elucidate this statement, I will discuss the works published by Syme in these years, in particular the one published in 1934 on the Bellum Cantabricum in the American Journal of Philology and his two major contributions to the Cambridge Ancient History, published the same year, on the northern frontiers of the empire in the time of Augustus and in the years from Tiberius to Nero.

Especially important for my purpose is a review by Syme of Mario Attilio Levi’s Ottaviano Capoparte, also from 1934, which has gone unnoticed by most scholars. This text is essential to understanding the “young” Syme before The Roman Revolution.

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My goal is to prove that Syme’s negative attitude toward Octavian does not arise spontaneously in the years 1937-1938, when he was writing *The Roman Revolution*; rather it is a latent and conscious process that began at least four years earlier.

**Keywords:** Octavian, Augustus, Sir Ronald Syme, Roman History.

**Introduction**

1934 is a date of importance in Ronald Syme’s research career. It was a prolific year for his publications, when many of his reviews and articles appeared.

Syme, so far known as an outstanding military historian, was starting to tackle themes in political or, rather, social history. This path runs through *The Provincial at Rome* (hereafter *TPR*) and leads to *The Roman Revolution* (hereafter *RR*). Arnaldo Momigliano, in his detailed review and discussion of *RR*, which he called “the (...) few notes written within a few weeks of its appearance”, published in *JRS* a year after the book came out (on the 7th of September 1939), commented that “it is premature to guess how far Mr. Syme will go in this evolution of a moralist historian from a first-class researcher in military history”\(^1\). Clearly, Momigliano did not know that Syme had been at work several years earlier on *TPR*. Let alone that this work was undertaken to explode the notion, which Momigliano himself had supported, that there was a *ius honorum*. As this monograph shows, Syme had already “evolved”\(^2\). The purpose of the present paper is to study the development of Syme’s thinking in these early years, the first in which he expressed his judgment on Augustus as a historical figure. Many of these pieces were published precisely in 1934. However, other works by Syme from subsequent years will also be taken into account.

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\(^1\) Momigliano (1940) 75. In this review, Momigliano mentions Syme’s review of Levi’s *Ottaviano Capoparte* (77).

\(^2\) See Syme (1999) 13; where Syme insists that there is no “contemporary authority for the expression (...). The term has been used as a veil for ignorance or deception (...). More recently [sc. after Mommsen] certain distinguished scholars, Fabia, Carcopino and Momigliano, have described the action of Claudius as the extension of the *ius honorum* to communities of Gallia Comata”. In Syme (1999) 13 n.6, he cites, besides Fabia (1929) and Carcopino (1934), the English translation of Momigliano’s *Claudius* (1934) 44-45.