

Potent Ritual: Supplications in the Augustan Ideological Program

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After Augustus' dramatic triple triumph of 29, the *princeps* turned to other rituals that marked military victories by giving thanks to the gods, including the deposition of laurel, the payment of vows, and gratulatory supplications. Augustus' *Res Gestae* (4) places special emphasis on rituals of supplication by specifying their number (55) and length (890 days), greatly exceeding that of any predecessor. Although supplications stand out as the rare occasion when citizens participated actively in public religion, this ritual has not received the attention it deserves; only Halkin (1966) and Freyburger (1977, 1978) have offered extended treatment. I would like to consider why Augustus emphasized this particular ritual, what its meaning may have been for citizen participants, and the particular nature of the experience that gave it power in a time of change. While supplications better served to maintain the veneer of republican tradition than further triumphs (only three dictators had exceeded this number), at the same time they complemented the Augustan ideology by emphasizing *felicitas Augusti*, victory as a gift of the gods made uniquely and permanently to the *princeps* (Wistrand 1987). Ritual studies offer some insight into this paradoxical relationship between tradition and change. As Kertzer explains (1988:42), "new political systems borrow legitimacy from the old by nurturing the old ritual forms, redirected to new purposes." Moreover, the wide-spread and homogeneous participation of citizens in gratulatory supplications recalls Turner's concept of *communitas*, with its shared experience of unity (1969).

Unlike other victory rituals, supplications highlighted not soldiers, but citizens, who marked the transition between the end of fighting and the army's return home. The homogeneity characteristic of supplications recalls the liminal period of transition rites (Van Gennep 1909), with its temporary dissolution of boundaries of class, gender, and age, the phenomenon that Turner terms *communitas*. Men, women, and children flocked to the temples together. Magistrates opened temples throughout the city, rather than centralizing the event at the Capitoline temple, thus encouraging residents of every quarter and every social station to become involved. Although priests and magistrates performed primary roles in the central sacrifice, other citizens voiced their own prayers and made offerings. The shared priestly role was symbolized by the material stuff of thanksgiving, incense and wine, which was perhaps distributed to all citizens. Thus supplications offered a brief respite, although not total, from the hierarchical structure of Roman society and created a time and space where participants experienced a sense of shared identity as citizens of Rome. The ritual communicated a public image of unity, which complemented the notion of *pax Augusta* at home and abroad, *parva victoriis pax* (Gruen 1986).

At the same time that these traditional ritual behaviors evoked a sense of the familiar, they also constructed and supported the new power structure, in spite of significant changes affecting not only the number and length of supplications but the entire rationale of public thanksgiving. A novel concept attributing all victories ultimately to the *princeps*, as possessing supreme auspices, meant that supplications in Augustus' name commemorated even victories led by legates. Citizens publicly communicated and affirmed the imperial theology of victory, in which *felicitas* was the sole possession of the *princeps* (Fears 1981, Rappaport 1999). Most radically, supplications came to be used for events of a purely personal nature, such as imperial birthdays. This was consistent with a changing understanding of the concept of *felicitas* from a narrowly defined area of success on the battlefield, to a general prosperity for all of society (Wistrand 1987). The ruler became not only perpetual victor but savior, the guarantor of continual blessings for all Romans. Despite such radical changes, the constancy of ritual forms gave legitimacy to the new order and the message of *communitas* drew attention to the success of *pax augusta*.

