

The Augustus Code: a response to L. Haselberger

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We all know how tenuous the evidence is for so many crucial aspects of the Roman world. We are accustomed to debates in which one scholar attempts to tease an elaborate reconstruction out of a few tiny and unsatisfactory scraps of information, and in response a more sceptical reader points out that the evidence may not support the full extent of such fancies. Gradually, a consensus emerges, or so we hope, and by this dialectic knowledge advances, bit by bit. L. Haselberger would like you to believe that this is one of those debates. Accordingly, I have been invited to play the rôle of the sceptic. In a normal case I would not mind doing that: in most debates it is useful to have someone play the pedant. But this is not such a debate. The facts are not in dispute: this is about a fundamental difference in methodology. On one side is the scientific method and spirit of rational inquiry; on the other is the will to select and distort the evidence to fit a preconceived theory. This is not a place where a judicious compromise is desirable or possible: you have to choose.

What makes the affair of Augustus' meridian so disturbing is the willingness displayed by so many serious scholars over a period of 30 years to subscribe to an interpretation of a monument which, in the strict sense, has no evidence to support it: that is to say, every single aspect of the evidence can be explained much better by a much simpler hypothesis. Ockham's razor prohibits going further. Speculation beyond the bounds of the evidence may be interesting, but only if it is clearly labeled as such. The interpretation of Augustus' meridian is an important issue not only on account of its intrinsic interest as an object, but also because the history of its reception raises broader questions about the state of scholarship today. It tells a fascinating story of power, corruption, fear and credulity.

The main points of that story are easily told. In 1750, occasioned by the excavation of the obelisk from the Campus Martius and its erection in nearby Piazza Montecitorio, A. M. Bandini, having consulted the leading antiquarians, scientists and mathematicians of the day, produced an exhaustive study of the object.¹ Their consensus was that the instrument as described by Pliny was certainly a meridian, an instrument to measure the progress of the year by means of a line running precisely due north, along which the daily lengthening and shortening shadow of the obelisk with its gnomon could be measured each day at the local time of noon. Over the years, some scholars loosely and erroneously referred to this instrument in passing as a sundial, but a much grander argument along these lines was published in *RömMitt* 1976 by E. Buchner. He postulated not only that there was a large sundial, but that the shadow of the obelisk fell toward the Ara Pacis on Augustus' birthday — an interesting speculation, except that Buchner dismissed the important arguments of Bandini and colleagues about the details of Pliny's description without any serious discussion.² This is a fatal flaw in the article, and in ordinary circumstances Buchner's hypothesis probably would have received little attention, but he was about to become president of

1 A. M. Bandini, *De obelisco Caesaris Augusti e campi Martii rudibus nuper eruto commentarius* (Rome 1750).

2 See the reprint in E. Buchner, *Die Sonnenuhr des Augustus: Nachdruck aus RM 1976 und 1980 und Nachtrag über die Ausgrabung 1980/1981* (Mainz 1982) 7-55, especially 7-9.