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**Fact and Fiction: Crassus, Augustus, and the *Spolia Opima***

By Catherine McPherson

Dedicating the *spolia opima* was the highest honour a Roman commander could achieve, outstripping even the most lavish triumph. Such a dedication occurred when a Roman commander personally killed the enemy's king or general in battle, stripping the body of its armour, which was then brought back to Rome and dedicated at the temple of Jupiter Feretrius on the Capitol. The extreme rarity of such an occurrence, as well as its semi-mythical history, ensured that the *spolia opima* remained a particularly exalted honour, more ingrained in legend than in reality. This paper provides an attempt to study the transition from the late republic to the early imperial period through the changing nature of this important honour. Such a study requires an analysis of the accomplishments of Marcus Licinius Crassus, who in 29/28 B.C.<sup>1</sup> won the right to dedicate the *spolia opima* at the temple of Jupiter Feretrius, but did not do so. The reasons behind this decision are illustrative of both the uncertain, but also influential, nature of Octavian's power in the years between Actium (31 B.C.) and the Settlement of 27.

The *spolia opima* were reputedly dedicated only three times in Roman history. This tradition allegedly began under Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome, after he killed King Acron of the Caeninenses following the abduction of the Sabine women. Romulus returned in triumph to Rome with the armour of the slain king, vowing to build a temple to Jupiter Feretrius at which future generals would dedicate the *spolia opima*. In fact, this temple was the first to be consecrated at Rome.<sup>2</sup> The *spolia opima* were again dedicated by A. Cornelius Cossus in the mid-fifth century after he killed Lars Tolumnius, King of Veii.<sup>3</sup> They were dedicated for the last time by M. Claudius Marcellus in 222 after the Battle of Clastidium during which Marcellus killed the Gallic leader Viridomarus.<sup>4</sup>

The *spolia opima* should have been dedicated a fourth time by M. Licinius Crassus following his campaigns on the Danubian frontier in 29/8 B.C., when he killed Deldo the Bastarnae king.<sup>5</sup> This event is difficult to understand and interpret for two reasons: first, because of the scant and ambiguous nature of the sources covering it, and second, due to the weighty political implications of the episode. Crassus' lengthy campaigns were recorded solely by Cassius Dio (51.23-27) and Livy (*Per.* 134 and 135), however Dio's is the only complete extant account. There is also an inscription from Athens noting Crassus' victory over the Thracians and the Bastarnae.<sup>6</sup> While the lengthy excurses in both works (especially

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<sup>1</sup> All dates are B.C.

Livy 1.10, among others.

<sup>3</sup> Liv. 4.19-20.

<sup>4</sup> Liv. *Per.* 20.

<sup>5</sup> Cass. Di. 51.24.

<sup>6</sup> *ILS* 8810.

in Livy) point to the significance of the campaign, it is troubling that no other source makes any mention of it, as both Suetonius and the *Res Gestae* are silent on this matter. This is perhaps just one manifestation of the influence of the political implications of Crassus' deed on our sources. Similarly, our sole source on Crassus' killing of the enemy chieftain and his right to dedicate the *spolia opima*, Cassius Dio, is both cryptic and exceptionally brief: he writes simply that "Crassus himself killed their king, Deldo, and would have dedicated to Jupiter Feretrius the king's armour as *spolia opima*, if he had been in supreme command."<sup>7</sup>

One other source exists that might corroborate Dio's account of Crassus' deed: Livy's account of Cossus' dedication of the *spolia opima*, which was first connected to the Crassus affair in an article published in 1906 by H. Dessau.<sup>8</sup> Livy writes that

In stating that Cossus placed the *spolia opima secunda* in the temple of Jupiter Feretrius when he was a military tribune I have followed all the existing authorities. But not only is the designation of *spolia opima* restricted to those which a commander-in-chief has taken from a commander-in-chief and we know of no commander-in-chief but the one under whose auspices the war is conducted – but I and my authorities are also confuted by the actual inscription on the spoils, which states that Cossus took them when he was consul. Augustus Caesar, the founder and restorer of all the temples, rebuilt the temple of Jupiter Feretrius, which had fallen to ruin through age, and I once heard him say that after entering it he read that inscription on the linen cuirass with his own eyes. After that I felt it would be almost a sacrilege to withhold from Cossus the evidence as to his spoils given by the Caesar who restored that very temple. [...] Everyone is at liberty to form his own conjecture; these doubtful points, in my belief, can be made to support any opinion. The fact remains that the man who fought the battle placed the newly-won spoils in the sacred shrine near Jupiter himself, to whom they were consecrated, and with Romulus in full view – two witnesses to be dreaded by any forger – and that he described himself in the inscription as 'A. Cornelius Cossus, Consul.'<sup>9</sup>

Books one through five of Livy must have been written after 27 B.C., since as early as 1.19 Livy makes reference to the emperor as Augustus, a title which was bestowed in early 27; it is thus possible that they refer to Crassus' case. This passage is unanimously viewed by his-

7 Cass. Dio. 51.24. We do not know if Livy recorded this incident. The Periochae only state that "an account is given of the war fought by Marcus Crassus against the Basterni, Moesians and other peoples" (134).

8 H. Dessau, "Livius und Augustus," *Hermes* vol. 41 (1906): 142-151.

9 Liv. 4.20.

torians as a later insertion resulting from Augustus' 'discovery' of Cossus' corselet as evidence which would prevent Crassus from being eligible to dedicate the *spolia opima*. This emendation is evident as Cossus is described only twelve chapters later as military tribune.<sup>10</sup>

A brief picture of Crassus' family background and achievements, focusing particularly on his position at the time of his campaigns in 29/28 B.C. is necessary before tackling the problem of Crassus' dedication. The Licinii are often considered to be among the most important plebeian families in Rome, their rise beginning in the late third century and the Crassi were (for the most part) the most eminent branch of this family.<sup>11</sup> Our Crassus was the grandson of the *triumvir* of the same name who shared power with J. Caesar and G. Pompeius until his death in 53 B.C. The eldest son of the *triumvir*, Crassus' father, was quaestor in 54 and held important military positions under Caesar in Gaul, ultimately being put in command of Cisalpine Gaul in 49.<sup>12</sup> However, he died soon after, before being able to attain higher office.<sup>13</sup> Crassus' mother was a member of the Caecilii Metelli, another very important family whose prominence dated back to the second century.<sup>14</sup>

Relatively little is known of the life of Marcus Licinius Crassus and even some of what is known is contested or unclear. However, his important military achievements ensured that he would not be forgotten in the public memory, as was the case for the vast majority of Roman aristocrats. Crassus was born around 60 B.C.<sup>15</sup> though the first record of him is as a supporter of Sextus Pompey, who deserted to Antony in 36.<sup>16</sup> Numismatic evidence suggests that he was a quaestor 'pro praetore' in Cyrene, but never officially held the praetorship.<sup>17</sup> Like many aristocrats, he deserted Antony just before the Battle of Actium.<sup>18</sup> Crassus held the consulship in 30 with Octavian, highlighting his high status, and subsequently held a proconsular command in Macedonia and Greece during which time he undertook his campaigns against the Dacians, Moesians, Bastarnae, Getae, and Thracians, as well as other tribes "which had never before been subject to Rome," bringing all to under Roman dominion.<sup>19</sup> During this time, he was reputed to not only have killed the Bastarnae king himself, but also to have recovered the legionary standards which the Bastarnae had captured from G. Antonius, the brother of Antony, in 43 B.C.<sup>20</sup> Crassus

10 See, for example, J.W. Rich, "Augustus and the Spolia Opima," *Chiron* vol. 26 (1996): 188; echoed by H. Dessau and T.J. Luce, among others. *Liv.* 4.32.

11 "Licinius," *Brill's New Pauly*, Antiquity volumes edited by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (Brill, 2009).

12 *Caes. B. Gall.* 6.1.1; *App. B. Civ.* 2.41.

13 Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), 64.

14 "Caecilius," *Brill's New Pauly*, Antiquity volumes edited by: Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (Brill, 2009); *ILS* 881.

15 "Licinius."

16 *Cass. Dio.* 51.4.3.

17 T.R.S. Broughton, *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic* Vol. II (New York: American Philological Association, 1952), 397; *Cass. Dio.* 51.4. An ambiguous position, and contested by some historians, but one which seems to have held some influence; he was perhaps acting in place of a praetor.

18 *Cass. Dio.* 51.4.

19 *II 13.1.170*; *Cass. Dio.* 51.23-27.

20 *Cass. Dio.* 51.24, 26.

was voted a triumph *ex Thraecia et Geteis* by the Senate which he celebrated in July 27.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, Crassus was the descendent of two prestigious and established families, and the grandson of a very important politician in Rome. Furthermore, he rose to an extremely high political and military position by his early thirties, holding the consulship and an important and lengthy proconsular command. He had thus risen farther than the vast majority of aristocrats of his time, a fact which is especially revealing given that Octavian still monopolised one out of two annual consulships. With regard to Crassus' dedication of the *spolia opima*, however, it is particularly important to be clear on what position and what powers he held in 29/28. Neither Dio nor Livy give Crassus a precise title, but the general consensus seems to be that he was acting as proconsul, as both the *fasti triumphales* and the Athenian inscription list Crassus as proconsul.<sup>22</sup> However, the difficulty lies in ascertaining the position of proconsuls under Octavian in the period between Actium and the Settlement of 27. It is clear that Crassus held independent *imperium* as he was voted a triumph by the senate and such an honour could only be celebrated by a commander with *imperium* who was fighting under his own authority.<sup>23</sup> This position was not unusual; in the period between 31 and 27, several proconsular governors held independent *imperium* and celebrated triumphs, including C. Carrinas and M. Valerius Messalla Corvinus in Gaul as well as L. Autronius Paetus in Africa.<sup>24</sup>

The Athenian inscription furthermore cites Crassus as holding the title of *imperator*.<sup>25</sup> This assertion conflicts with Dio, who writes that Crassus "was not granted the title of *imperator*, as some sources report: it was Octavian alone who received this."<sup>26</sup> This statement however can be fairly conclusively shown to be mistaken. First, as has been noted, it would have been impossible to strip Crassus of his imperial status and still allow him to celebrate a triumph.<sup>27</sup> Historians supporting Dio's statement, including R. Syme, usually cite ILS 881 (which lists Augustus as IMP VII for the year 29) as evidence

21 II 13.1.334.

22 II 13.1.334, ILS 8810. See also "Licinius" in *Brill's New Pauly*; H. Flower, "The Tradition of the *Spolia Opima*: M. Claudius Marcellus and Augustus," *Classical Antiquity* vol. 19 no. 1 (2000): 34-64, and Rich 1996.

23 Rich 1996, 93. It seems clear that proconsuls fought under their own auspices (based on Republican precedents) although this is somewhat contested. Recent work has tended to support this argument however (see Rich and Flower).

24 *Fasti Triumphales*.

25 ILS 8810.

26 Cass. Dio. 51.25.

27 Rich 1996, 96. While T. Mommsen argued that Dio was right in his claim, and thus that the inscription was erected before or in ignorance of the verdict from Rome, Badian, Reinhold and Brunt argue that Crassus did take the imperial salutations for his victory. E. Badian, "'Crisis Theories' and the Beginning of the Principate," in *Romanitas-Christianitas: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Literatur der römischen Kaiserzeit*, ed. G. Wirth (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1982), 38: "it is difficult to see on what legal grounds a commander who was later allowed to triumph would be deprived of imperial acclamation." However, even proconsular governors such as Statilius Taurus (Spain) won imperial salutations without ever having triumphed. Furthermore, John Carter writes in his note to Cass. Dio. 51.25 that "since the triumph was the greater honour, to strip him of the title of *imperator* was senseless."

for Octavian having stripped Crassus of his title and claiming the victory on the Danubian frontier as his own.<sup>28</sup> These historians fail to take into account Octavian's Egyptian campaigns of the same year, for which he later celebrated a triumph and it is to this campaign that the inscription refers.<sup>29</sup> This evidence, demonstrating that Crassus held *imperium* and imperial status, indicates that he was not acting as one of Octavian's legates (a title which is never attributed to him in the sources) but held independent command.

Dio is further mistaken on a second point in his account, namely that "a triumph and *supplicationes* were decreed not only for Octavian but also for [Crassus]."<sup>30</sup> This error is similar in substance to his belief that Crassus did not hold the title of *imperator*. The passage cited above can be compared to an earlier one in which Dio states that on the first day of Octavian's triple triumph, he celebrated the conquest of several tribes of Germans and Gauls who had been subdued by C. Carrinas. Dio also notes that "this triumph was celebrated both by Carrinas and by Octavian, who was duly entitled to the credit for the victory by virtue of his position as supreme commander."<sup>31</sup> However, Carrinas celebrated his own triumph in July 28, and according to both Suetonius and Livy, Octavian did not amalgamate Carrinas' victory with his own.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Crassus is listed as celebrating an independent triumph in July 27.<sup>33</sup> These errors all derive from Dio's view of the relationship between the princeps and proconsular governors, and form a wider pattern of misconceptions in which Dio retrojects later imperial developments into the early years of Octavian's dominance.

In 29/28, during an independent proconsular command and under his own auspices, Crassus killed the Bastarnae king Deldo and celebrated a triumph in 27. This act would seem to be in accordance with fulfilling the requirements for dedicating the *spolia opima* at the temple of Jupiter Feretrius. Sources dating from Augustus' reign and after all state that the *spolia opima* can only be dedicated by a Roman 'supreme' commander, though there is earlier evidence to the contrary. Festus writes that "M. Varro says that the *spolia opima* can be such, even if a common soldier has taken them, provided it is from an enemy commander,"<sup>34</sup> while the later historian Plutarch notes that

Spoils in general they call '*spolia*,' and these in particular, '*opima*.' And yet they say that Numa Pompilius, in his commentaries, makes mention of three kinds of '*opima*,' prescribing that when the first kind are taken, they should be consecrated to Jupiter Feretrius, the second to Mars, and the

28 Ronald Syme, *The Augustan Aristocracy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 274, backed by Mommsen. Augustus was thus not, as Syme notes, "asserting abnormal potency for his *imperium* as consul."

29 See Rich 1996, 96 and Badian 1982, 40-41. Mommsen/Syme's interpretation would contradict the information provided by ILS 8810, which is unlikely to be wrong, especially due to its location.

30 Cass. Dio. 51.25.

31 Cass. Dio. 51.21.

32 *Fasti Triumphales*.

33 II 13.1.334.

34 Festus 204L.

third to Quirinus; also that the reward for the first should be three hundred asses, for the second two hundred, and for the third one hundred. However, the general and prevailing account is that only those spoils are ‘*opima*’ which are taken first, in a pitched battle, where general slays general.<sup>35</sup>

This suggests that previously the exact requirements for dedicating the *spolia opima* were rather vague, but after Octavian’s ascendancy a consensus was reached that the Roman commander must have *imperium* in order to dedicate the spoils. This ambiguity is likely due to the extreme rarity of such dedications, their semi-legendary nature, and to Octavian’s discovery of Cossus’ corselet (whether authentic or not) during the restoration of the temple of Jupiter Feretrius in 30 B.C.

Thus even by Octavian’s standards, Crassus should have had the right to dedicate the *spolia opima* in Rome. Yet Dio writes that Crassus “would have dedicated to Jupiter Feretrius the king’s armour as *spolia opima*, if he had been in supreme command,” suggesting that Crassus was prevented from performing the dedication. The argument proposed by Dessau and others (notably R. Syme and more recently H. Flower) is that Augustus could not allow Crassus to perform his dedication due to the obvious political implications of such an act. Syme notes that Crassus’ military glory “infringed the martial monopoly of the new Romulus,” and Dessau argues that Augustus simply feared being overshadowed.<sup>36</sup> Not only was a dedication of the *spolia opima* the highest military honour a Roman general could achieve – accomplished only three times in Roman history – but it consisted of a tradition initiated by Rome’s founder, and thus put the dedicator on par with Romulus himself. Unluckily for Crassus, Octavian actively strove to achieve Romulus’ position as a new ‘founder’ of Rome. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that it had not been very long since Actium and Octavian’s position was not yet unassailable. Therefore, he could ill-afford his power to be threatened. Livy’s description of Cossus’ dedication perfectly demonstrates the prestige involved in such an act of dedication:

successful in all directions, the Dictator [M. Aemilius] returned home to enjoy the honour of a triumph granted him by decree of the senate and resolution of the people. By far the finest sight in the procession was Cossus bearing the *spolia opima* of the king he had slain. The soldiers sang rude songs in his honour and placed him on a level with Romulus. He solemnly dedicated the spoils to Jupiter Feretrius, and hung them in his temple near those of Romulus, which were the only ones which at that time were called *spolia opima prima*. All eyes were turned from the chariot

<sup>35</sup> Plut. *Marc.* 8.

<sup>36</sup> Syme 1985, 274. See also S.J. Harrison, “Augustus, the Poets and the *Spolia Opima*,” *Classical Quarterly* vol. 39 (1989): 409 and K. Raaflaub and L.J. Sammons, “Opposition to Augustus” in *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and his Principate*, eds. Raaflaub, Kurt and Mark Toher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 424.

Thus even the renowned dictator M. Aemilius was far outshone by Cossus' feat.

It is clear that Octavian could not allow Crassus to enter Rome in triumph and dedicate the *spolia opima*, but how was he to prevent such an act? It has generally been argued that the substance of Livy's passage in 4.20 reflects an attempt on the part of Octavian to show that only generals fighting under their own auspices could dedicate the *spolia opima*. As Livy points out, Cossus was a military tribune when he killed Lars Tolumnius in 437, and only became consul in 426.<sup>38</sup> Although some ancient sources state Cossus' rank differently, the widely held opinion among ancient and modern sources is that Cossus did not hold *imperium* when he killed the King of Veii.<sup>39</sup> However, what has largely been neglected is the fact that Augustus' assertion that Cossus, Romulus, and Marcellus were each fighting under their own auspices would not be sufficient to dismiss Crassus' right to dedicate the spoils. As has been noted, a few scholars, such as Syme, argue that Cassius Dio was correct in stating that Crassus did not hold the title of *imperator* during his campaigns. However, this has been shown to be mistaken. Others such as Dessau and Flower accept that Crassus was hailed as *imperator*, but view Octavian's demonstration of Cossus' consular status as an adequate rebuttal to Crassus' demand.

It may perhaps be argued that Octavian needed only to show that the dedicator had to be a consul, and that a proconsular general did thus not fit the requirements.<sup>40</sup> However, there is no trace of such an argument in the sources, but only the notation that the general had to hold 'supreme' command – that is, *imperium* – which proconsuls did indeed hold.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the power of proconsuls was exactly the same as that of consuls, as both had *imperium* and fought under their own auspices in their different *provinciae*.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, though Octavian was consul at the time of Crassus' campaigns, it has been demonstrated that Crassus was still commanding independently of Octavian. Thus, it would have been extremely difficult for Octavian and the Senate to have dismissed Crassus based on his rank.<sup>43</sup> Such a dismissal would have been inconsistent with Octavian's program of the 'restoration' of the Republic, a program which was of critical importance in securing the support of the aristocracy.<sup>44</sup> Clearly, Crassus' feat threatened Octavian in two very crucial ways.

37 Liv. 4.20.

38 Liv. 4.19-20.

39 Livy is supported in particular by Dion. Hal. and by all modern scholars; both Val. Max and Diod. Sic. state that Cossus was *magister equitum* and a consul. However, this seems to be due to a compression of events and thus a confusion in chronology.

40 See Syme, 1939, 309 and Flower 2000, 52.

41 See references from Livy, Cassius Dio, and Plutarch.

42 Rich 1996, 100-104, Flower 2000, 52.

43 Rich 1996, 93, 98-99.

44 P.A. Brunt, "The Role of the Senate in the Augustan Regime," *The Classical Quarterly* vol. 34 no. 2 (1984): 423-444.



First, he challenged Octavian's military supremacy, and second, his demand to dedicate the *spolia opima* – which Octavian could not afford to grant him – jeopardised the *triumvir's* long thought-out attempts to restore the republic, thus weakening his base of support among the senatorial aristocracy. Therefore, contrary to Raaflaub and Sammons argument that a dismissal of Crassus' claim would in fact have been “one of the most important political crises of the early years of Augustus' reign [...] [and] a political development of considerable moment” which may have caused some resentment among the aristocracy.<sup>45</sup>

The modern scholar is faced with a number of factors when considering the Crassus case. It has been demonstrated that Crassus' feat posed a considerable threat to Augustus on both military and political fronts, augmented perhaps by the general's illustrious family background. Furthermore, Crassus' independent proconsular rank (attested to by numerous sources) was in every way sufficient to allow him to dedicate the *spolia opima* at the temple of Jupiter Feretrius, ensuring that any attempt to dismiss the general based on rank would be exceedingly difficult. Finally, there is a notable lack of information in the sources concerning this event, even though it would seem that such a refusal of honours would have constituted an important and visible step by Octavian to consolidate his political power. These facts seem to point to an acceptance of J.W. Rich's thesis that Crassus did not even apply to dedicate the *spolia opima*.<sup>46</sup> This reluctance may have been the result of a private meeting with Octavian in which Crassus was persuaded not to make his demand. On the other hand, it is plausible that Crassus, being an astute political figure, would have recognized that such a demand exceeded the accepted bounds of aristocratic prestige under Octavian, and perhaps decided not to claim his right of his own accord.<sup>47</sup> However, it is most likely that Octavian asked Crassus not to request the honour and that the latter agreed. A private agreement such as this one would have been preferable to the rejection of a public demand by Crassus to the senate.

This explanation may account for the problematic nature of the sources. Crassus' campaigns would for the most part have been relegated to the background like those of so many other generals, therefore explaining its lack of coverage in most sources. Dio's statement – the only one describing Crassus' feat – has been shown to be the result of a mistaken conception of the relationship between Octavian and his generals in the early years of the *princeps's* rule. The Livy passage might be explained in two ways, or per-

45 Rich 1996, 107-8, 126; contra Raaflaub and Sammons 1990, 423: “There is no reason to assume that Augustus refuted Crassus' claim because he saw in him a political enemy.” Raaflaub and Sammons are right to argue however that Crassus was in no way involved or even the motivating factor behind later opposition to, or ‘conspiracies’ against, Octavian/Augustus.

46 Rich 1996, 86.

47 Rich 1996, 107; contra Flower 2000, 51, who argues that “there can be little doubt that he aimed to excel and to attain a reputation equal to that of the leading Roman heroes of the Republic and of his grandfather, the *triumvir*,” and given his family pedigree and personal merits, “it is hard to imagine that he would not have aspired to the *spolia opima*.”



haps by a combination of the two. It may account for a genuine initial attempt to demonstrate Crassus' ineligibility (at least very superficially), perhaps as a means of placating aristocrats who were upset with Octavian's stifling of their rights and ability to hold office. On the other hand, it may be the result of the antiquarian interests of Octavian and the aristocracy in general; such interests were, as Rich notes, a "notable feature of the cultural life of the Roman elite in and after the later Republic."<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, the paucity and intricacy of the sources on the matter precludes any definite conclusions.

Crassus' feat has often been painted as the driving factor behind the settlement of 27 B.C., which constituted a legalisation of Octavian's consular powers and gave him formidable legionary support by granting him control of 'troubled' provinces. It was Dessau again who first argued this thesis, though it quickly gained wide circulation and was actively promoted by Syme.<sup>49</sup> It has even been argued that without Crassus' feat the settlement would never have occurred (Dessau), or that the settlement would most likely have occurred at some point in time, but Crassus' achievement made decisive action by Octavian necessary (Syme). The settlement of 27 ensured that no general would ever again fight under his own auspices. However, more recent scholarship tends to dismiss the views advanced by Dessau and Syme, instead emphasising the premeditated nature of Octavian's settlement and thus rejecting Dio's insinuation that the 'transfer of power' occurred on two days in January 27.<sup>50</sup> This is demonstrated by Augustus' own statement in the *Res Gestae* that "in my sixth and seventh consulships [28/27 B.C.] [...] I transferred the republic from my power to the control of the Senate and the Roman people."<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, gold coins dating from 28 commemorate the fact the Augustus returned *iura et leges* to the Roman people.<sup>52</sup> It is clear that the settlement was underway at least as early as 28, meaning that from a purely chronological standpoint Crassus could not have provoked Octavian's action.<sup>53</sup> Crassus' feat was only the first real instance which demonstrated to Augustus the necessity of what he had long been planning to carry out, but in no way influenced such plans.

Another reason that Octavian could not allow the honour to be awarded to Crassus was that the imagery of the *spolia opima* was to be incorporated into Augustan propaganda. Some have argued that Octavian planned to use such imagery to augment his position and prestige as early as his victory at Actium.<sup>54</sup> This is demonstrated most explicitly by the fact that Octavian rebuilt the temple of Jupiter Feretrius in 31 or 30 B.C., much earlier than the rest of his monumental building program. Dio also notes (though he is the only one to do so) that the senate gave Julius Caesar, Octavian's adoptive father, "the right to offer *spolia opima*, as they are called, at the temple of Jupiter Feretrius as if he had

48 Rich 1996, 112.

49 Syme 1939, 309; Syme 1985, 275.

50 Cass. Dio. 53.2-16. See especially Badian 1982, but also Flower 2000, 50-1 and Rich 1996, 110.

51 RGDA 34.

52 Werner Eck, *The Age of Augustus* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 50.

53 Flower 2000, 50.

54 Flower 2000, 48, Harrison 1989, 409.

slain some hostile general with his own hand.”<sup>55</sup> If this statement is accurate, it would support Flower’s argument that “the renaissance of Romulus’ image was a marked phenomenon of the late republic that was part of the family propaganda of the Julii.”<sup>56</sup> It is known with certainty that Augustus had been contemplating a connection to Romulus before the settlement of 27, when he decided instead to take the name ‘Augustus’.<sup>57</sup> Flower additionally notes that in his early years, Octavian “was in a good position to appreciate in some detail how Marcellus had used an array of triumphal spectacle and of dedications at specific shrines to further his career and public image in the third century.”<sup>58</sup>

Therefore, it is possible that Octavian had a premeditated desire to form a connection to Romulus and the *spolia opima* before Crassus’ campaign, but it is certain that he actively pursued such a connection in the years following Crassus’ victories. This can be seen in the works of Augustan poets such as Vergil and Propertius.<sup>59</sup> One of the most impressive public works in the Augustan Forum is the statue and the images on the roof and doors depicting Romulus carrying the *spolia opima* that he won from King Acron.

Furthermore, Augustus built an altar next to Marcellus’ temple to *Honos et Virtus*, where one of the *princeps*’ cuirasses demonstrates a trophy of enemy armour depicted very similarly to the traditional representation of the *spolia opima*.<sup>60</sup> Significantly, Augustus’ treatment of the standards regained from Parthia in 19 B.C. mimicked a special dedication of enemy spoils as depicted by Dio: “Augustus received them as if he had conquered the Parthians in a war [...] in honour of this success he commanded that sacrifices be decreed and likewise a temple to Mars Ultor on the Capitol, in imitation of that of Jupiter Feretrius, in which to dedicate the standards.”<sup>61</sup>

Suetonius notes that Augustus’ adoptive son Drusus, brother of the future emperor Tiberius, aspired to win the *spolia opima*.<sup>62</sup> Drusus’ aspirations, however, differed significantly from Crassus’ attempts to make the same honourary dedication. As Rich notes, imperial ‘princes’ were under considerable pressure to attain distinction, and were assisted in such efforts by the emperor himself who would often (like Augustus) hold the consulship together with them. This was an important succession mechanism used throughout the imperial period which ensured a smooth transition of power. Augustus would therefore most likely have encouraged Drusus in his attempts to win such an honour, which would only serve to enhance and solidify the reputation and prestige of the Julio-Claudian family. Such an event would have been entirely different than Crassus’ dedication, which instead threatened this

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55 Cass. Dio. 44.4.

56 Flower 2000, 48. Supported by Harrison 1989; contra Syme.

57 Cass. Dio. 53.16.

58 Flower 2000, 59.

59 Prop. 4.10; Verg. *Aen.* 6.779-90, 855-9, 10.462-3, 449-50. Harrison 1989, 414: “the example of the *spolia opima* is one of many instances in which the poets of the Augustan period incorporated material of political importance to Augustus into their poetry”

60 Flower 2000, 57-9.

61 Cass. Dio. 54.8.

62 Suet. *Claud.* 1.4; Cass. Dio. 55.5.

reputation.<sup>63</sup> However, Drusus is the last Roman to be recorded as having such an ambition and upon his death, Augustus returned to Rome “and carried the laurel, contrary to custom, into the temple of Jupiter Feretrius.”<sup>64</sup> This episode demonstrates the importance of the *spolia opima* and its imagery as a propagandistic tool, one which was so valuable that it could only be used by members of the Julio-Claudian family. Once associated with old-fashioned ‘republican’ aspirations, the *spolia opima* was transformed in the years following Actium into the “iconography and self-definition of the new ruling family.”<sup>65</sup> As Flower notes, the *spolia opima* was a tradition “invented (and reinvented) by specific individuals at certain moments,”<sup>66</sup> but always for the same purpose so that by the time of Octavian’s ascendancy such a tradition was usurped by the imperial family and could be claimed by no one else.

Most scholars agree that Crassus’ feat put an end to his political and military career, since following his triumph in 27, there is no trace of him in any records.<sup>67</sup> It is possible that Octavian forced him to retire from public life following his campaigns in 29 and 28, though considering his career path, it may not be so surprising that there is no mention of Crassus again. After all, he had already held the consulship and an extensive two-year proconsulship in Macedonia, thus completing a highly successful aristocratic career.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, Crassus’ adopted son M. Licinius Crassus Frugi was consul in 14, signalling that the family had not been ‘blacklisted’ following Crassus’ campaigns.<sup>69</sup>

From a historiographical perspective, this paper has sought to question the “unchallenged orthodoxy”<sup>70</sup> of the Dessau-Syme thesis, which states that Octavian, threatened by Crassus’ achievement, dismissed him on a flimsy pretext based on Crassus’ rank in 437 B.C., and that this achievement was the catalyst for Octavian’s ‘settlement’ in 27. This paper has attempted to emphasize the importance and value of the *spolia opima* as a propagandistic tool and as a means of increasing one’s reputation and prestige.

Moreover, following Actium, Octavian was the single most powerful Roman aristocrat, but his powers were not well defined, nor were they ‘legal’. At this stage of Octavian’s rise to power (particularly from 31 to 27) there remained powerful and successful aristocrats with notable family backgrounds in important political and military positions, and some of these aristocrats were capable of threatening Octavian’s power. Crassus’ feat, which entitled him to dedicate the *spolia opima*, is a good example of this, since the power and imagery of this honour was a highly valuable means of gaining prestige and glory,

63 J.W. Rich, “Drusus and the *Spolia Opima*,” *The Classical Quarterly* vol. 49 no. 2 (1999): 545-6, supported by Brunt 1984; contra B. Levick, who views Drusus’ aspirations as issuing a challenge to Augustus based on the prince’s republican sympathies, and Flower 2000.

64 Cass. Dio. 55.5.

65 Flower 2000, 59.

66 Flower 2000, 40.

67 See Eck 2007, 61 and Raaflaub and Sammons 1990, 425.

68 Rich 1996, 109.

69 *Fasti Triumphales*.

70 Rich 1996, 85.

which could not be afforded to anyone other than Octavian. Indeed, Octavian used the imagery of the *spolia opima* to his own advantage throughout his reign as Augustus. The episode involving Crassus on one hand indicates the tenuousness of Octavian's position in the early years of his dominance and the need for him to tread carefully while securing his position above other aristocrats. On the other hand, the fact that Octavian was able to convince Crassus to step down from claiming the highest and most prestigious honour open to a Roman general is a testament to his influence and his ability to have his requests respected, even by very important aristocrats. It is also a notable step upward in his ascendancy. As Raaflaub and Sammons note, Crassus, a high-ranking aristocrat, "tested the limits of the powerful individual's freedom of action and self-advertisement under the new regime."<sup>71</sup> Events surrounding Crassus' rise to power are thus more broadly illustrative of Octavian's shifting position in the years between 31 and 27 B.C. Interestingly, the *spolia opima* faded from both the political and military arena as an honour to be achieved after Augustus' reign and were never mentioned thereafter, except in a purely annalistic manner.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Raaflaub and Sammons 1990, 425.

<sup>72</sup> Flower 2000, 35.

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