



*Death and Dynasty in
Early Imperial Rome with Text,
Translation, and Commentary,*

J. Bert Lott (ed.),
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Review by: Carey Fleiner

Death and Dynasty in Early Imperial Rome: Key Sources with Text, Translation, and Commentary. By J. Bert Lott (ed.). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012. 380 pp. ISBN: 9780521677783. £21.99



ften when I present a transcribed inscription to my students, all previously inquisitive and thoughtful discussion withers up and dies. They do all right with ‘tidied up’ inscriptions — such as those found in source collections of Lewis and Reinhold or Lefkowitz and Fantz. But present undergraduates with ellipses, brackets and other diacritical marks — there be dragons, and silence falls.

J. Bert Lott’s book *Death and Dynasty in Early Imperial Rome: Key Sources with Text, Translation, and Commentary* works on two general levels. One, it addresses the issue of how the commemoration of the deaths of Augustus (reigned 27 BC–AD 14) and Tiberius (14–37)’s successors became a ritualised means to strengthen the position of the Julio-Claudian family as the ruling dynasty in the early first century of our era. Two, it works as a practical introduction to decoding inscriptions. All too often, Lott notes, students overlook sources that are not a part of the usual literary canon of Classical texts, that is, Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny, and so forth. At a time when emphasis on myriad types of primary sources, examined together as complementary evidence, is becoming a fundamental means to explore contemporary issues in context, demystifying inscriptions is more important than ever. Lott readily demonstrates this point by reminding his readers that inscriptions are vital tools for examining contemporary propaganda and officially promoted image (or, as we might say in the twenty-first century, ‘spin’). They work both as texts and as material objects. It is useful to have these immediate imperial directives to compare to the texts of the ancient historians, to see how they have adapted these sources in their accounts of the era.

Lott also demonstrates how certain rituals of commemoration became entrenched in the social mainstream and how they had been shaped by rituals of death and mourning for those heirs of Augustus and Tiberius who predeceased the Emperors (Gaius and Lucius on the one hand, and Germanicus and Drusus the Younger on the other). Specifically, the rituals for Gaius (d. AD 4) and Lucius (d. AD 2) became, by the time of the deaths of Germanicus (AD 19) and Drusus (AD 23), the standard response for the death of an imperial heir. Augustus, Lott reminds the reader, had to secure the legitimacy of his rule and reinforce in popular consciousness that his family was not only the ruling family but also the only family that was suited to rule the Roman state (by creating the *domus Augusta* as the central household in the great Roman familia); and as formidable as Augustus’s sense of occasion was, as R. Syme reminds us in the seminal *Roman Revolution*, the new emperor

modern, sometimes forget. Augustus combined novel actions with the ostentatious revival of long-neglected Republican traditions and cultural practices to create a wholly new precedent while cementing the authority of his familial position and legitimacy of power. So successful was he at enacting public mourning rituals across the Empire on the deaths of his successor-grandsons that similar proclamations were set up as inscriptions for Germanicus and Drusus nearly automatically at their deaths, about a decade later.

Lott begins his study of the inscriptions of the funerary memorials with a solid introductory section and establishes context on several important issues. First, he summarises the historical context behind Octavian/Augustus's rise to power and the constitutional and non-constitutional resources with which he secured his and his family's position. Next, the issue of imperial succession is covered from Augustus's through to Tiberius's reigns, a complex issue, but succinctly discussed by Lott. Lott then discusses general Roman practices of death and commemoration, legal proclamations and senatorial sanction regarding memorials, commemoration of Roman heroism on monuments and other public buildings. Finally, he concludes this section with a brief overview of the Classical historiographical tradition and a quick discussion of Classical epigraphy. Both of these sections are brief by necessity and should be supplemented by a vast literature on both subjects already extant.

The meat of *Death and Dynasty* is the inscriptions themselves, and their texts and commentary take up the bulk of the study. Each inscription in this section pertains specifically to the memorial orders and rituals associated with the deaths of the four heirs. First, Lott effectively leads the reader through the process of decoding the inscriptions as well as a case study on how one goes from those crumbly bits of building and slabs of stone with writing on them to the neat and tidy texts found in collections and source-books. Then he explains briefly the conventional use of punctuation, brackets and other marks in transcriptions (the 'Leiden Convention', pp. 54–56). Then follow the inscriptions themselves. First, photographs of each of the inscriptions are reproduced in high resolution in black and white; several of them are allotted close-up and detailed photos. Then the diplomatic text of the inscriptions in the original language follows. Next is an edited text which is presented using the apparatus of the Leiden Convention of punctuation — the form of translated inscriptions that usually stop students in their tracks. Finally, there is the English translation that uses modern punctuation and spelling with the lacunae filled in as it is best understood. Each inscription is thus presented in this fashion and the reader can see the process behind studying the inscription from its original form through to a final translated edition.

The next section of *Death and Dynasty* is quite lengthy, and here Lott provides for each inscription in turn a detailed *explication de texte*. One wonders if these commentaries would have worked better if they each followed on their relevant inscriptions rather than being placed together in one section, but it is an economic presentation that allows focus on reading inscriptions on the one hand and on interpreting their context on the other. The commentaries are most detailed, and they include secondary literature as well as references to relevant and contextual primary sources. After this commentary, Lott follows the sections of the inscriptions with relevant excerpts from Tacitus's *Annals*, particularly on descriptions of Germanicus's life. This section supports one of Lott's themes, the importance of contemporary inscriptions as a basis of study and comparison of the historians of the Augustan and Julio-Claudian era. Then follows a useful, short biography of each of the four princes featured in the memorial and funerary inscriptions. Lastly is a bibliography of the works cited throughout the book.

Lott's *Death and Dynasty in Early Imperial Rome* comes highly recommended. As a text for students on depth or comparative modules, the book works on several levels. It is, for example, a good case study of Augustan propaganda of family to create the image of his household as the household needed to hold together the Roman state and, as such, makes an excellent companion to works like K. Milnor's research on the domus Augusta titled *Gender, Domesticity, and the Age of Augustus: Inventing Private Life* (Oxford, 2005). With its focus on these four princes, it also serves as a useful case study on how Augustus tackled the problem of succession. Additionally, it works as a study of Augustan propaganda on-the-hoof and how quickly new images and rituals were folded into the social and political norms of the empire. Finally, the book works as a complementary source for studying imperial epigraphy, especially considering the importance of inscriptions as supplemental texts to the usual canon of literary texts of this period. The immediacy of these inscriptions, their physical placement, and their visual impact not only provide more evidence to support contemporary Augustan politics, but Lott's presentation of this particular group of inscriptions also serves as a model for students that illustrates how much detective work is involved in deciphering these texts and their context. Rather than giving up or being intimidated by inscriptions, students will discover from Lott's useful presentation new resources and ways of approaching non-traditional sources — without always needing the crutch of neatly translated and edited texts. It is definitely a study where the author 'shows his work' and it thus becomes inspirational for students who wish to explicate inscriptions further, if not other non-literary sources.

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