

BELLARIA XCV



MACROBIUS AMBROSIUS THEODOSIUS (ii) (c. AD 390- after 430)

Augustus' Ajax



No laughing matter

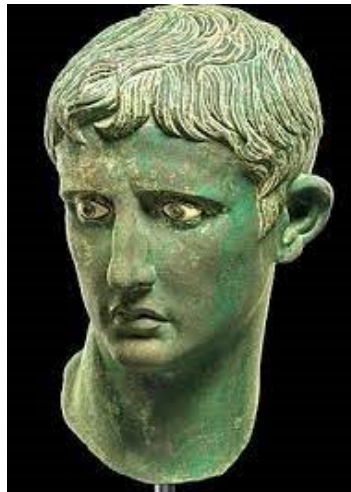
2.4.1 'Augustus Caesar', said Avienus, 'was fond of a joke, but he did not forget the respect due to his high rank, and he showed a proper regard for decency—he never stooped to buffoonery.'

2.4.2 He had written a tragedy entitled *Ajax* but, dissatisfied with it, had rubbed it out. And, when the tragedian Lucius Varius asked him afterward how his *Ajax* was getting on, he replied: “He has fallen on his sponge.”

2.4.1 *et Auienus: Augustus, inquam, Caesar adfectauit iocos, saluo tamen maiestatis pudorisque respectu, nec ut caderet in scurram.*

2.4.2 *Aiacem tragoediam scripserat, eandemque, quod sibi displicuisset, deleuerat. postea L. Varius tragoediarum scriptor interrogabat eum, quid ageret Ajax suus. et ille: in spongiam, inquit, incubuit.*

Augustus' gifts of money



Don't believe it

2.4.4 ‘When Pacuvius Taurus was asking him for a gift of money and added that it was common gossip that he had already received a considerable sum from him, Augustus replied: “Don’t you believe it.”

2.4.5 To another, a prefect of cavalry who had been relieved of his command but nevertheless claimed a pension, saying that he made the request not for the sake of the money but that it might be thought that he had resigned his commission and had been adjudged worthy of the gift by the emperor, Augustus retorted: “Tell everybody that you have had it. I shall not deny that I gave it.”

2.4.4 *idem cum ab eo Pacubius Taurus congiarium peteret, diceretque iam hoc homines uulgo loqui, non paruam sibi ab illo pecuniam datam: Sed tu, inquit, noli credere.*

2.4.5 alium praefectura equitum submotum et insuper salarium postulantem dicentemque: non lucri causa dari hoc mihi rogo, sed ut iudicio tuo munus uidear impetrasse, et ita officium deposuisse, hoc dicto repercussit: tu te accepisse apud omnes affirma, et ego dedisse me non negabo.

Augustus on military failures

2.4.6 'His reply to Herennius, a young man of bad character whom he had ordered to be dismissed, was a well-known example of his humour; for, when the man begged for pardon, saying: "How am I to return home? What shall I say to my father?" Augustus answered: "Tell your father that you didn't find me to your liking."

2.4.7 A man who had been struck by a stone when on active service and had a noticeable and unsightly scar on his forehead, was bragging loudly of his exploits and received this gentle rebuke from Augustus: "Never look round when you are running away."

2.4.6 urbanitas eiusdem innotuit circa Herennium deditum uitii iuuenem. quem cum castris excedere iussisset, et ille supplex hac deprecatione uteretur: quomodo ad patrias sedes reuertar? quid patri meo dicam? respondit: dic me tibi displicuisse. 2.4.7 saxo in expeditione percussum ac notabili cicatrice in fronte deformem, nimium tamen sua opera iactantem, sic leniter castigauit: at tu, cum fugies, inquit, numquam post te respexeris.

Augustus on Herod and Maecenas



Maecenas

2.4.10 'A certain Vettius had ploughed up a memorial to his father, whereupon Augustus remarked: "This is indeed cultivating your father's memory."

2.4.11 When he heard that Herod king of the Jews had ordered boys in Syria under the age of two years to be put to death and that the king's son was among those killed, he said: "I'd rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son."

2.4.12 Again, knowing that his friend Maecenas wrote in a loose, effeminate, and extravagant style, he would often affect a similar style in the letters which he wrote to him; and, in contrast to the restrained language of his other writings, an intimate letter to Maecenas contained, by way of a joke, a flood of such expressions as these: "Goodbye, my honey of the world, my ivory from Etruria, silphium of Aretium, diamond of the Adriatic, pearl from the Tiber, Cilnian emerald, jasper of the [Umbrian] Iguvians, Porsenna's beryl, Italy's carbuncle—to cut it short, you charmer of sluts."

2.4.10 *Vettius cum monumentum patris exarasset, ait Augustus: hoc est uere monumentum patris colere.*

2.4.11 *cum audisset inter pueros quos in Syria Herodes rex Iudaeorum intra bimatum iussit interfici filium quoque eius occisum, ait: melius est Herodis porcum esse quam filium.*

2.4.12 *idem Augustus, quia Maecenatem suum nouerat stilo esse remisso molli et dissoluto, talem se in epistolis quas ad eum scribebat saepius exhibebat, et contra castigationem loquendi quam alias ille scribendo seruabat in epistola ad Maecenatem familiari plura in iocos effusa subtexit: 'uale, mel gentium, ebur ex Etruria, lasar Arretinum, adamas supernas, Tiberinum, margaritum, Cilniorum smaragde, iaspi figulorum, berylle Porsenae, carbunculum habebas, ἵνα συντέμω πάντα, μάλαγμα moecharum'.*

Augustus on hospitality, Tyrian purple and a forgetful slave



2.4.13 ‘He hardly ever refused to accept hospitality; and, having been entertained to a very frugal and, so to speak, everyday dinner, he just whispered in his host’s ear, as he was saying goodbye after the poor and ill-appointed meal: “I didn’t think I was so close a friend of yours”.

2.4.14 He once had reason to complain that some cloth of Tyrian purple which he had ordered was too dark. “Hold it up higher,” said the tailor, “and look at it from below.” This provoked the witty retort: “Have I to walk on my roof garden before people at Rome can say that I am well dressed?”

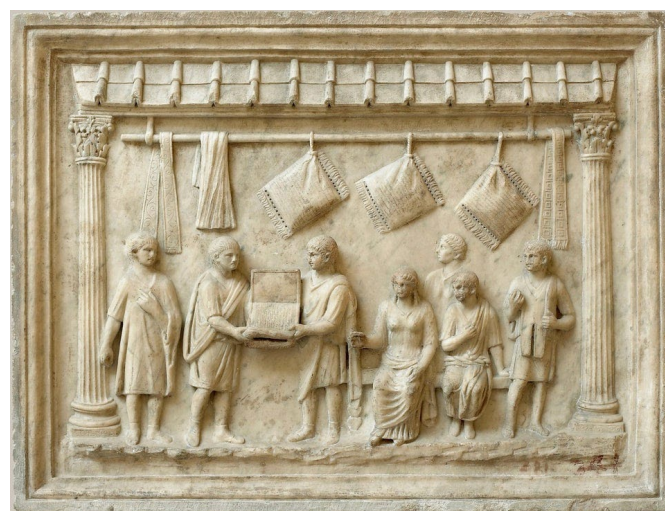
2.4.15 He once had occasion, too, to complain of the forgetfulness of the slave whose duty it was to tell him the names of the persons he met; and so, when the slave asked him whether he had any orders for the Forum, he replied: “Yes, take these letters of introduction; for you know no one there.”

2.4.13 *exceptus est a quodam coena satis parca et quasi cotidiana. nam paene nulli se inuitanti negabat. post epulum igitur inops ac sine ullo apparatu discedens uale dicenti hoc tantum insusurrauit: Non putabam me tibi tam familiarem.*

2.4.14 *cum de Tyriae purpurae quam emi iusserat obscuritate quereretur, dicente uenditore: erige altius et suspice, his usus est salibus: quid? ego, ut me populus Romanus dicat bene cultum, in solario ambulaturus sum?*

2.4.15 *nomenclatori suo, de cuius obliuione querebatur, dicenti: numquid ad forum mandas? accipe, inquit, commendatitias, quia illic neminem nosti.*

Augustus on Vatinius’ gout and the millionaire’s pillow



Pillows for sale

2.4.16 'As a young man he neatly made fun of one Vatinius who had become crippled by gout but nevertheless wished it to be thought that he had got rid of the complaint. The man was boasting that he could walk a mile; "I can well believe it," said Augustus, "the days are getting somewhat longer."

2.4.17 Hearing of the enormous debts, amounting to more than twenty million sesterces, which a certain Roman knight had successfully concealed while he lived, he gave orders that the man's pillow should be bought for him at the sale by auction of the estate, explaining to those who expressed surprise at his order: "The pillow must certainly be conducive to sleep, if that man in spite of all his debts could have slept on it."

2.4.16 *Vatinio in prima sua aetate eleganter insultauit. contusus ille podagra uolebat tamen uideri discussisse iam uitium, et mille passus ambulare se gloriabatur. cui Caesar: Non miror, inquit: dies aliquanto sunt longiores.*

2.4.17 *relata ad se magnitudine aeris alieni, quam quidam eques Romanus dum uixit excedentem ducenties celauerat, culcitam emi cubicularem in eius auctione sibi iussit, et praeceptum mirantibus hanc rationem reddidit: habenda est ad somnum culcita in qua ille, cum tantum deberet, dormire potuit.*

Augustus praises Cato

2.4.18 'I must not omit to mention his commendation of Cato. He happened to visit a house in which Cato had lived, and, when Strabo to flatter Augustus spoke slightly of Cato's obstinacy, he replied: "To seek to keep the established constitution unchanged argues a good citizen and a good man." And he meant what he said, for in thus praising Cato he also in his own interest discouraged any attempt at revolution.'

2.4.18 *non est intermittendus sermo eius quem Catonis honori dedit. uenit forte in domum in qua Cato habitauerat. dein Strabone in adulationem Caesaris male existimante de peruicacia Catonis, ait: quisquis praesentem statum ciuitatis conmutari non uolet, et ciuis et uir bonus est. satis serio et Catonem laudauit et sibi, ne quis adfectaret res nouare, consuluit.*

Augustus—the emperor who could take a joke (i)



Gaius Asinius Pollio (or not)

2.4.19 'I always think more of his acceptance of jests made against him than of the jests which he made himself—for the ability to take a joke against oneself is more creditable than a ready wit—especially since he bore with composure some sharp remarks that went even beyond a joke.

2.4.20 An unkind quip made by a man from one of the provinces is well known. In appearance he closely resembled the emperor, and on his coming to Rome the likeness attracted general attention. Augustus sent for the man and on seeing him said: "Tell me, young man, was your mother ever in Rome?" "No", replied the other and, not content to leave it at that, added: "But my father was—often."

2.4.21 During the triumvirate Augustus wrote some lampoons on Pollio, but Pollio only observed: "For my part I am saying nothing in reply; for it is asking for trouble to write against a man who can write you off".

2.4.22 A certain Curtius, a Roman knight given to good living, was dining with Augustus and, when a skinny thrush was placed before him, asked whether he might let it go. "Of course you may," said his host. Whereupon Curtius at once 'let it go'—out of a window.'

2.4.19 *soleo in Augusto magis mirari quos pertulit iocos quam ipse quos protulit, qui maior est patientiae quam facundiae laus, maxime cum aequanimiter aliqua etiam iocis mordaciora pertulerit.*

2.4.20 *cuiusdam prouincialis iocus asper innotuit. intrauerat Romam simillimus Caesari et in se omnium ora conuerterat. Augustus perduci ad se hominem iussit,*

uisumque hoc modo interrogavit: dic mihi, adolescens, fuit aliquando mater tua Romae? negavit ille, nec contentus adiecit: sed pater meus saepe.

2.4.21 *temporibus triumviralibus Pollio, cum Fescenninos in eum Augustus scripsisset, ait: at ego taceo. non est enim facile in eum scribere qui potest proscribere.*

2.4.22 *Curtius eques Romanus deliciis diffluens, cum macrum turdum sumpsisset in conuiuio Caesaris, interrogavit, an mittere licet. responderat princeps: quidni liceat? ille per fenestram statim missit.*

Augustus—the emperor who could take a joke (ii)



A demand for late payment (Roman London)

2.4.23 'After Augustus, unasked, had paid the debts of a certain senator who was a friend of his (they came to four million sesterces) the only thanks he got was a letter saying: "But you have given me nothing for myself."

2.4.24 Whenever he undertook some public works, his freedman Licinius used to advance large sums of money, and on one occasion this Licinius, following his usual practice, gave the emperor a promissory draft for a hundred thousand sesterces. Now in this draft a part of the line drawn over the written sign which represented the amount of the advance extended beyond the writing, thus leaving an empty space below the line, and Augustus took the opportunity to add to the former entry a second C, with his own hand, carefully filling up the empty space and copying his freed-man's handwriting. In this way he doubled the sum contributed. Licinius pretended not to have noticed the addition made to the draft, but afterward, when some other work had been begun, he gently reproached the emperor for what he

had done, by presenting him with a draft similarly written and saying as he did so: “Toward the cost of the new work, my lord, I advance—whatever sum will seem best”.

2.4.23 *aes alienum Augustus cuiusdam senatoris cari sibi non rogatus exoluerat numerato quadragies. at ille pro gratiarum actione hoc solum ei scripsit: mihi nihil.*

2.4.24 *solebat Licinius libertus eius inchoanti opera patrono magnas pecunias conferre: quem morem secutus centum promisit per libellum in quo uirgulae superductae pars ultra pecuniae defectionem protendebatur uacante infra loco. Caesar occasione usus priori alterum centies sua manu iunxit spatio diligenter expleto et adfectata litterae similitudine: geminatamque accepit summam dissimulante liberto, qui postea coepto alio opere leniter factum suum Caesari obiecit libello tali dato: confero tibi, domine, ad noui operis impensam quod uidebitur.*

Next week: Macrobius (iii)