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What does it mean when a statue spits blood? Athens and Augustus reconsidered

An anecdote in the corpus of Plutarch's *Moralia* (207e) records the following undated incident: when the Athenians seemed to have done something wrong, Augustus wrote from Aegina that he didn't want his anger to escape their notice; otherwise, he would not have wintered there. It has been proposed, from the chronology of Augustus' travels in the East, that this 'anger' must have resulted from an incident in around 22/1 B.C.E. Therefore this brief notice has been connected with the claim of Cassius Dio (54.7.1-4) that during his travels of 21 B.C.E. Augustus deprived the Athenians of tribute from Aegina and Eretria, because they favoured Antony, and he forbade them to sell their citizenship. Dio associates this with an odd event, in which an unspecified statue of Athena on the Athenian Acropolis turned from east to west and spat blood. Though often interpreted as a 'miracle' staged by anti-Augustan partisans, triggering the anger of Augustus, such a narrative is based on over-interpretation of the sources, and it does not take enough account of Dio's historical method. Since the incident has become a prism through which the whole history of the dealings of Athens and Augustus is viewed, when reconsidered it should alter our presumptions about this period.

The narrative relevance of the spitting statue is as a portent. In Dio's *Histories*, portents of statues exuding blood are extremely common; the two other cases of statues changing their orientation are both portents of military disaster. If the event on the Acropolis was staged as an act of political opposition, the most plausible statue that could have been employed is the statue of Athena Nike. Surely, then, the incident took place ahead of a battle (cf. Dio 46.33.3-4). There is no situation in late first century Athens in which this could have any meaning, except the eve of the battle of Actium: thus it was yet another Athenian portent of Antony's defeat. Dio's information on Athens in this period is not very reliable, and it may be that an anti-Augustan source which he was using had transferred the statue incident from an Actium portent to Augustus' 'punishment'. Because some had seen a connection between what happened to the statue of Athena and Augustus' actions, Dio described them in the same section; an imperial visit was a narrative opportunity to relate several chronologically unrelated events in the provinces.

But anyway, were Augustus' actions a punishment caused by his anger? More likely they were motivated by his programme of "moral rearmament" of cities with a great classical past. The loss of Athenian control over Aegina and Eretria looks more like the restoration of freedom to two of the great *poleis* of the classical period, rather than his punishment against the Athenians. Similarly, selling citizenship—a ghastly perversion in the eyes of a Roman aristocrat—was banned. This need not have brought a serious loss of revenue, since it seems that in the first century B.C.E. many foreigners were naturalized as Athenians by participating in the ephebate, not through purchase.