

Caesar's heirs

More than one party tried to assume power after Caesar's death. On the one side were men like Cicero, Brutus or Cassius, who tried to rebuild the system of the former republic. On the opposite side were men like Marc Antony and, most importantly, Octavian, who were keen on assuming Caesar's power themselves. Still others, like the son of Pompey the Great, merely wanted control over a smaller part of the empire. After more than ten years of civil war and after hundreds of thousands had been killed or expelled, Octavian finally emerged as Caesar's successor. As emperor he called himself Augustus.

01 Caesar's heirs The dictator is dead ...

After Caesar had been assassinated, Rome was engaged in a struggle for power. Caesar had altered politics so radically that a return to old power structures was not possible anymore. You cannot turn back the hands of time, not today and not 2,000 years ago.



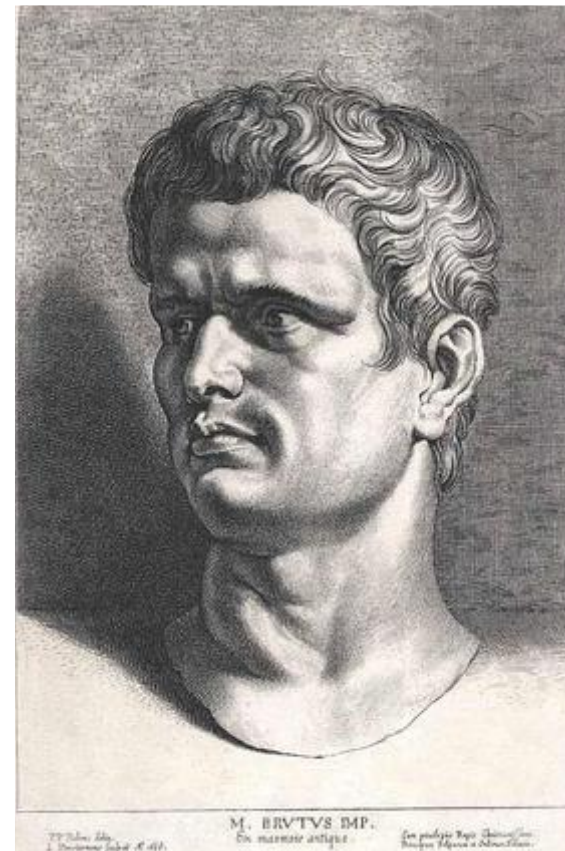
Deification of Iulius Caesar. Copperplate engraving by Virgil Solis, illustration of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Source: Wikicommons.

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Caesar's heirs

... to the Republic!

Marcus Iunius Brutus had originally planned to re-establish the Republic in an impassioned speech immediately after the assassination. Unfortunately, the startled senators had fled the place. Two days later, however, the senate granted amnesty to Caesar's assassins – and confirmed the legal status of all decrees previously passed by the former dictator.



Marcus Iunius Brutus. Engraving by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), Private collection. Source: Wikicommons / Postumus.

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Freedom and piety

After Caesar's death, all parties striving for power minted coins which represented their motivations and ambitions. Caesar's assassins dedicated their coins to Libertas, the deity of freedom. The reverse shows a jug and a lituus, the curved wand of an augur, traditionally symbols of Pietas, who stands for the devotion to tradition. What the assassins insinuate here is that the assassination should be seen as motivated by the respect for ancient tradition and a victory in the name of freedom.



Denarius of C. Cassius and Cornelius Lentulus, 43–42, military mint moving with Brutus and Cassius. Obverse: Libertas. Reverse: Jug and lituus.

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A comprehensive victory

Here is yet another coin issued by the assassins. It commemorates the triumph over the 'tyrant' with impressive imagery: Victoria advances holding palm branch and wreath and stepping on a broken sceptre on the ground, an image symbolising the victory over the defeated dictator.



Denarius of P. Servilius Casca and M. Iunius Brutus, 43–42, military mint moving with Brutus. Obverse: Neptune. Reverse: Victoria.

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A youngster takes the stage

Nobody had anticipated what happened then. Caius Iulius Caesar Octavianus Augustus, whom Caesar had made his son and heir by will, arrived on the scene. The 19-year-old knew that his life was at stake. As Caesar's heir, he had to expect attempts on his life from his competitors. So he made an appearance before the senate and demanded vengeance for his adoptive father.



Augustus (Octavian), bronze head. Found in Meroe, Nubia (modern Sudan), 27–25 BC. British Museum, London. Photo: Wikicommons / Merlin-UK/Louis Le Grand / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>

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Octavian takes position

At the time, Octavian did not have his own legions yet. He 'acquired' them by promising every soldier 2,000 denarii a year, that was twice the usual pay. The coins with which Octavian paid his legions all presented him as his father's loyal son. This coin for instance combines his image with the name of his adoptive father Caesar. Octavian's beard signals that he is in mourning for a relative. The reverse depicts a wreath on a Stella Curulis, like the seat which the young man wanted to include in the games held in honour of the assassinated. The motif moved veterans and citizens of Rome alike. Just as it was meant to.



Octavian. Denarius, 42, mint travelling with Octavian. Obverse: Octavian. Reverse: sella curulis.

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Octavian and Cicero

Soon, Octavian had secured support from the people as well as a large army. And Cicero helped him into the political office of propraetor, hoping that he could use him against Marc Antony.



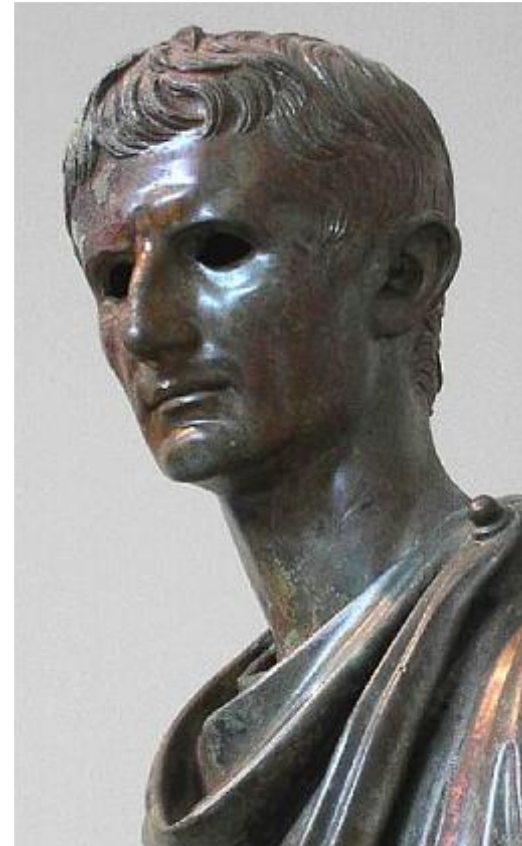
Modern Cicero memorial, at Woolsey Hall, Yale University, New Haven/Connecticut. Photo: Wikicommons / Rootology.

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Fighting Marc Antony

Marc Antony was not only a former colleague of Caesar's, but also the de facto heir of his office. Backed up by the senatorial army and his own, Octavian fought Marc Antony and won. To Octavian's great luck, both consuls fell in battle, which made him the highest-ranking commander. With his legions behind him, the young man demanded the consulate – and got it.



Bronze statue of Augustus, Archaeological Museum, Athens. Photo: Wikicommons / Adam Carr.

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The Second Triumvirate

Thus Octavian completed his rise from political nobody to potential ally. He remembered his original plan of revenging his adoptive father and entered into an alliance of convenience against Caesar's murderers with Marc Antony and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus in 43 BC. This so-called Second Triumvirate in effect constituted an absolute rule, able to pass laws, proscribe enemies and confiscate property – an easy way of financing the expensive war.



Entry of Marc Antony, as new Dionysus, into Ephesus in Asia Minor. Painting by Charles-Joseph Natoire, 1741, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nîmes. Source: Wikicommons / Robert Valette.

10 Caesar's heirs Dividing an empire

In the Battle of Philippi in 42 BC, the united forces of Octavian, Lepidus and Marc Antony defeated the troops of the Caesar murderers. The three men then divided the empire among them: Lepidus was given North Africa, Marc Antony the East, and Octavian the West.



Map of the Roman Empire after the Pact of Misenum in 39 BC. Source: Wikicommons / Akkakk/Borsanova / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.de>

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Big problems

In order to allot the 50,000 to 60,000 veterans their share, Octavian was forced to expropriate vast tracts of land. That did not contribute to his popularity, especially not with the Italian population. Consequently, many of the expropriated Romans joined the son of Pompey in his venture of barring Octavian's fleet from shipping grain from Sicily to Rome.



Bread and grains. Source: Wikicommons.

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Caesar's heirs Whose pietas is bigger?

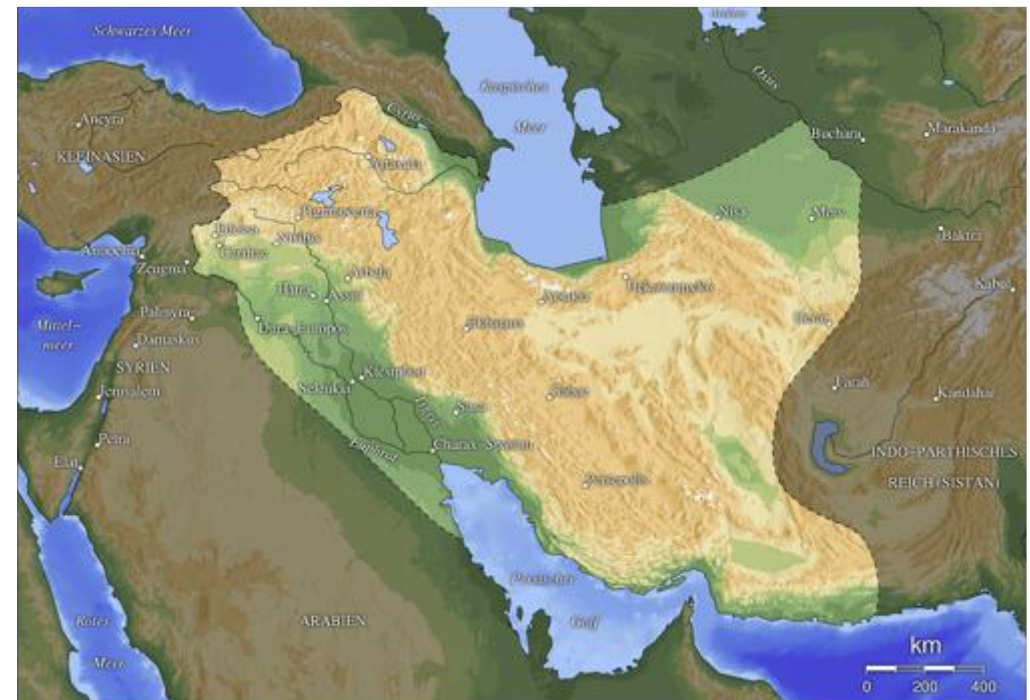
The two sides fought with weapons as well as with images. When Octavian prided himself on his pietas, Sextus Pompey claimed on this coin that his was still much bigger. He, too, wants to show that he is fighting in the name of his dead father, whose effigy is depicted on the obverse. A mythical scene serves to pictorially illustrate his filial devotion: The two brothers of Catania rescue their parents from the erupting Mount Vesuvius. Between them, Neptune puts down his foot on a ship's bow, demonstrating who rules the sea: certainly not Octavian.



Denarius of Sextus Pompeius, 42–40, mint on Sicily. Obverse: Pompey Magnus. Reverse: Neptune, foot on ship's bow (prora), the Catanian brothers to the left and right, symbolising filial love.

13 Caesar's heirs Shift of power

In 39 BC, Octavian succeeded in defeating Pompey. In general, power relations were changing – and to his advantage.



Map of Parthia. Source: Wikicommons / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>

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Representation and reality

On this coin, Marc Antony and Octavian meet each other as equals. The inscription reads III VIR RPC – meaning: Members of the triumvirate for the restoration of the Roman state. But the consensus among the politicians would not last much longer.



Denarius of Marc Antony, 41, mint moving with Antony. Obverse: Marc Antony. Reverse: Octavian.

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The situation escalates

When the term of office of the triumvirate officially came to an end in 33, Octavian got active. He denounced his former ally, who by this time had two children with Cleopatra, as irresponsible and love-crazed. Of course he could not officially declare war on Marc Antony, only on Egypt.



Antony and Cleopatra, painting by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1883, private collection. Source: Wikicommons.

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Minting for the troops

Thus began a new war: The legions of the west against the legions of the east. The coin must be seen in this context. It shows an aquila between two standards on the reverse, a ship on the obverse. The coins were issued by Marc Antony to pay his army and navy.



Denarius of Marc Antony, 32–31, military mint moving with Antony.
Obverse: War vessel. Reverse: aquila between two standards.

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Clearing the way

In 31 BC, the decisive battle took place at sea, near the city of Actium in the Ambracian Gulf: Octavian won. Not only the battle, but the rule over the entire Roman Empire.



Battle of Actium, painting by Lorenzo A. Castro, 1672. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London. Source: Wikicommons.