

The First Dictators: Politics, Propaganda and the Collapse of the Roman Republic

Transcript

Welcome to this Tuesday Talk, from the fortnightly series of podcasts given by staff and students at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, the Grade I listed art gallery and part of the University of Birmingham. This talk introduces the new Coin Gallery exhibition, *The First Dictators: Politics, Propaganda, and the Collapse of the Roman Republic*, which will be on display until 10th July 2022. I'm Maria Vrij, the coin curator, and if you have any questions or comments pertaining to this talk please feel free to contact us at info@barber.org.uk or post to our social media platforms.

This episode is split into two sections. The first will focus on three items in the exhibition. The second section will look at some of the issues surrounding the topic of the exhibition and our rationale in choosing the topic.

Section 1

Coins can often be difficult objects to display. They are usually very small, making their imagery difficult to see, and can sometimes feel repetitive to non-numismatists. In previous exhibitions we have tried to pick an interesting period or aspect of history and illustrate it with the coins. For this exhibition, however, we have chosen to display fewer objects but in much greater and more specific detail than before, focussing on what the images are, possible interpretations for their meaning and the purpose behind their production.

Sulla



The first of these examples depicts the dictator Sulla. Sulla was the first Roman senator to receive the title *dictator* in over a century. This happened following Sulla's success in a civil war against Gaius Marius. Sulla was elected dictator for life in 82 BCE, and he died 4 years later in 78 BCE. His dictatorship was the prototype for all of the rest which followed.

Our first example is a coin that was made by Sulla's son, Faustus. It recalls one particularly important achievement of Sulla's on his path to dictatorship. The image shows three figures. Sulla is the figure seated on a platform. Facing him and kneeling is the North African king Bocchus, who presents Sulla with a branch, representing either peace as an olive branch, or victory as a laurel branch. By kneeling before Sulla he shows his deference, and his lower position on the coin in relation to Sulla marks him out as a figure of lesser importance. The figure beside Sulla is Jugurtha, a defeated Numidian king. Jugurtha is shown kneeling with his hands bound behind his back and his head bowed; this was a common way to depict captives and defeated enemies.

Sulla's role in ending the war against Jugurtha was an important stone in his path to dictatorship. Though this specific scene never occurred in reality, the depiction is conceived of as a decodable message to remind users of the coin of Faustus's father's prowess as a defender of Rome.

Caesar



The next example was made for Julius Caesar, but before he became dictator. For context, Julius Caesar was a nephew of the Gaius Marius that had opposed Sulla, and Caesar supported the same political faction as his uncle. In 60 BCE, an uneasy alliance was made between Caesar, Pompey and Crassus, three of the most powerful men in the republic at the time. Crassus was killed in a war against the Parthian Empire in the East, and the rivalry between Caesar and Pompey quickly descended into civil war.

This coin was struck during this civil war period. It was made to pay Caesar's troops, who owed loyalty to him personally, rather than to Rome. Its imagery is much simpler than that of the previous example, yet it has at least two interpretations. The legend is clear enough – CAESAR – in case the troops were in any doubt as to who paid them, but the imagery is of an elephant trampling a snake.

The traditional interpretation is that the elephant represents Caesar, and the snake Pompey, his enemy. The use of the image of an enemy being trampled underfoot is well-known on coins. Caesar had taken an elephant with him on his brief invasion of Britannia, a sight some of his troops may have seen, and therefore associated with their leader. The elephant could be seen as a large, unstoppable force against the small, potentially venomous snake representing Caesar's enemy, Pompey.

A newer interpretation is that the elephant represents a senator called Metellus Scipio, who was a prominent supporter of Pompey's faction in the Senate. The majority of Roman coin types depicting elephants were made by or for Metellus Scipio and his family, so could have been readily understood by the troops to represent Scipio, not Caesar. Meanwhile the snake was an often used motif associated with the health, wellbeing and prosperity of Rome, which is being squashed by Caesar's enemy, Metellus Scipio. The interpretations of the motifs in this version relies much more on numismatic and artistic precedent than modern understanding of the politics of the time which is heavily filtered by the perspectives of the surviving written sources. It lets the art lead the historical narrative, rather than letting the narrative lead our understanding of the art.

Octavian



The final example is a coin made for one dictator remembering another. After becoming dictator, Caesar had stuffed the senate with his own partisans, and three of these came to divide the empire between them – two powerful generals and senators, Marcus Lepidus and Marcus Antonius, and Caesar's adopted son, Octavian. All three used their coins to promote their connection to the assassinated dictator, Caesar, but only Octavian could claim filial piety as Caesar's son. In addition to coins, Octavian also understood well the use of propagandistic building in the city of Rome itself, which he controlled. He built a temple in Rome dedicated to the divine Julius, with a large statue of the deceased dictator including the stab wounds from his assassination, and a large star motif on the façade representing the passing of a comet that was believed, or at least utilised, to signify that Caesar had become a god. This coin depicts that temple. The great advantage of coins as vehicles of propaganda is that they are much more mobile than buildings. One had to be in Rome to see the temple itself, but this coin could travel and be seen by anyone who used it.

Section 2

While the exhibition focuses on the use of coinage as propaganda, the surrounding events related to the exhibition will ask you to think about an issue I have heard raised repeatedly when I have given tours of previous exhibitions: the issue of history repeating itself. History does not appear to 'repeat itself' because we are passively in the grip of some greater force known as history, nor is it because we do not understand the lessons of the past. Rather, it is in large part because we actively seek to emulate the past.

Few societies have been as studied and emulated as Rome. Almost all mediaeval and modern European states have claimed to be the 'true inheritors of Rome' – whatever that meant to them. That emulation has in turn had impacts on other parts of the world. The French Empire, for example, modelled much of itself on its perception of what Rome was. The Roman Empire was used as

justification for France's supposed civilising mission, for which read 'conquest' of Tunisia. French scholarship on Roman North Africa informed the mode of French colonisation of Tunisia, and their experience as colonisers in turn informed French scholarship on Roman North Africa. It may come as no surprise, then, that after Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956, much Tunisian scholarship focussed on Carthaginian and 'Berber' history. It was a direct retaliation to France's choice to use Rome as a model. The Roman past was viewed as the colonial past, while the Carthaginians and 'Berbers' were viewed as Tunisians. It didn't matter that the Carthaginians were themselves also colonisers, but from Phoenicia, the point was that they were there before the Romans, and the Romans had been linked to the French. For both the French and the Tunisians, the past was studied, mobilised for political purposes, then restudied in light of those purposes and remobilised in a continuing cycle.

Why do the English often look back to the Anglo-Saxons, as the root of 'Englishness' – whatever that is? Why is there a statue of Richard I in Parliament Square in London? A king who spoke no English and spent almost his entire reign in the Holy Land. There are lies, damn lies, and history. It is rarely a reflection of past reality and more commonly an important architectural feature of modern identity.

This exhibition considering Roman dictators and their numismatic propaganda was conceived of around the time that a mob loyal to a political strongman tried to violently wrest control of the state from its elected representatives. Representatives who themselves are more part of an oligarchy than a democracy. The state was the US, and the strongman Trump, but this description could equally suit Julius Caesar, and his mob, whom he riled up with fake news such as the senate's supposed plans to disband the legions.

How does that comparison make you feel? Are you immediately reaching to defend Caesar against the comparison to Trump? Or the other way around? When, at the beginning of this episode I introduced the exhibition as *The First Dictators*, and then continued to describe Sulla, Caesar and Octavian as dictators, did you bristle, even slightly at that description? Did you agree with it entirely? Did you think of it purely in terms of the Roman title dictator? Or did you think nothing of it? The term is deliberately ambiguous in the title, it's supposed to make you think. No response is correct, no response is wrong. If you felt that it is unfair to tar Caesar and Octavian with the modern connotations of the term dictator, but either fair for Sulla, or you'd never previously heard of Sulla, there's a good reason for that. Not one based in what we might call fact, but based in the very process of history creation itself. Caesar and Octavian were from a faction that ultimately won out; Sulla, though 3 generations earlier, had been in the opposing faction. Victors do not merely write history, they decide what histories survive, and which do not. Our choices of which history to study, and which to ignore, intensifies that process and passes the filter on to later generations who filter it further.

History is not a list of facts and artefacts, and it can never be truly objective. My choice of topic for this exhibition, my choice of presentation style, the way I constructed this talk, the way it was edited by others and the intonation I use to read it. All of it is filtering your interaction with the past. Every single word. When this ends and you visit the exhibition, or discuss it with friends, you will filter it further, consciously or unconsciously. Everything is a choice which alters history, because history is merely a perception.

THE FIRST DICTATORS

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As a final thought, I would like you to look at the title image for this exhibition. What do you see? For some of my colleagues it recalls protest posters of the 1960s and 70s, for me it looks pixelated – like old computerised art. Our different experiences of the world cause us to experience this image differently, like that coin of Caesar with the elephant and the snake. It depends on perspective, which depends on experience. For me, the pixilation is important, though, because I want you to look beyond the obvious whole image of Octavian's head, I want you to see all the little pieces that make up our perception of Octavian, of Caesar, of Sulla. When you visit this exhibition, and others, I want you to ask why? Why are these the objects being presented to me? Why did they survive above others? What am I not being shown? Why have I chosen to come here? Every choice matters.

Thank you very much for joining me here, and thanks to Jack Davies for playing his guitar compositions to accompany these Barber podcasts. We look forward to welcoming you back for the next podcast in two-weeks' time.