

The story behind Venus's behind: Octavian and the change in the iconographic representation of the Victorious Venus after the battle of Actium

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Venus is most commonly recognized today as the goddess of love and desire. It is thus somewhat surprising to find out that in first-century BC Rome she was also considered a goddess of victory. Sulla was the first Roman general to attribute his victories to Venus, a practice he had most likely become acquainted with during his eastern campaigns. Pompey followed suit by establishing (55 BC) a cult of Venus Victrix ("The Victorious") in Rome, while Caesar, who claimed to have been a descendant of Venus, built a magnificent temple for Venus Genetrix ("The Ancestor") in 46 BC. Despite some differences among the Venus representations used by the various generals, contemporary coins suggest a common iconography for a victorious Venus: dressed and standing tall, seemingly alert, and accompanied by unmistakable attributes of victory, such as the writing *Imperator*, a triumphal chariot, a scepter, and a Victoria.

This iconography started changing after the battle of Actium (31 BC). The reverse of a coin minted by Octavian to commemorate his victory (see figure) shows a bare-bottomed Venus facing away, which would become the most common representation of a Victorious Venus in imperial times. Despite the presence of victory attributes – a scepter, a helmet, and a shield – the coin depicts a rather relaxed Venus and portrays an aesthetical aspect of the goddess, which was neglected in most of her earlier representations in Rome. An examination of late-Classical and Hellenistic representations of Aphrodite shows that a bare-bottomed Venus-Aphrodite was already identified with Victory prior to Octavian, suggesting a motive for choosing such a type. Furthermore, it seems that choosing this representation was beneficial for Octavian's political aims in the early twenties BC.



Denarius of Octavian, 31-29 BC (BMCRE, Augustus 599)