

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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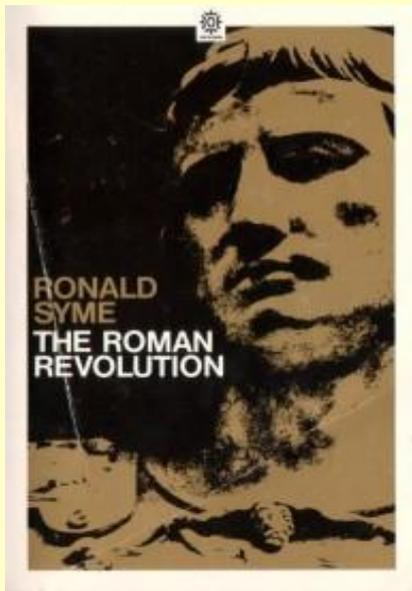
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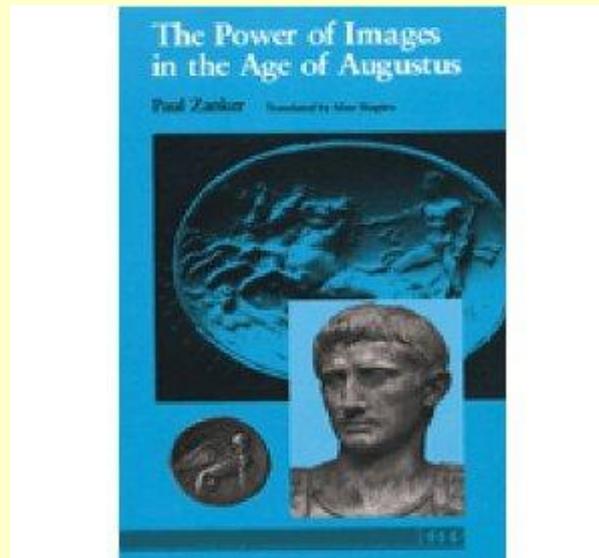
June 9-10, 2010

Octavian's Propaganda

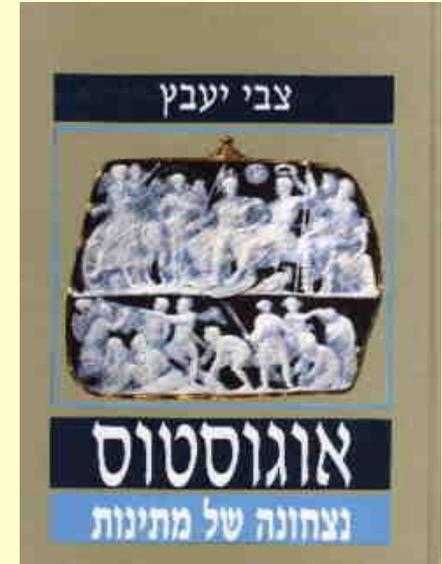
- Quiet times after the Battle of Actium; single rule
- Seminal studies
- A pro-peace, pro-republican message
 - Trend of return to the tradition of the forefathers (*mos maiorum*)
- An exceptional representation of Venus



Syme, 1939
Written Evidence



Zanker, 1984/88
Iconography



Yavetz, 1988
Hebrew

The Victorious Venus enters Roman Politics

- Venus = Aphrodite (sort of)
- Diverse roles of Aphrodite
 - Political, warrior, victorious
 - No such roles for pre-Sullan Venus
- Sulla imported the Victorious Aphrodite to Rome
 - Became familiar with her during his eastern campaigns
 - Used this Venus to attract local populations
 - Used a Victorious Venus upon return to Italy

Victorious Venus before Octavian: Sullan times

- Strongly connected to the battlefield
 - Trophies; a salutation to the victorious general



RRC 359/1, 84-83 BC

Victorious Venus before Octavian: Sullan times

- Takes part in combat
- Head cover



RRC 360/1, 82 BC

Victorious Venus before Octavian: after Sulla

- Venus and Roma
- Militant
 - Helmet
 - Spear/Scepter
 - Upright and alert
- Completely draped



RRC391/3 (reverse), 75 BC

Victorious Venus before Octavian: after Sulla

- Trophies show strong connection to the battlefield
 - Faustus demonstrates family pride
- Stern and formal



Victorious Venus before Octavian: Caesar

- Venus Genetrix
 - Not as militant
 - Shown after the battle was already won
- Yet shares a similar appearance
 - Draped
 - Standing erect
 - Facing forward



RRC 463/13 (reverse), 46 BC

Victorious Venus before Octavian: Caesar

- Common origin for the coin and sculpture
- Similar to the previous Venus
 - Except for the exposed left breast



RRC 480/13
(reverse), 44 BC

Vénus de Fréjus, marble;
Late 1st-early 2nd cent. AD. Musée du Louvre, Paris

Victorious Venus before Octavian: Caesar

- These two representations of Venus are very similar
 - Erect and draped
 - Stern and formal
 - Facing forward



Vénus de Fréjus, marble;
Late 1st-early 2nd cent. AD. Musée du Louvre, Paris



RRC 480/13
(reverse), 44 BC

Octavian's New Venus

- A significant change
 - Turning her back
 - Nude!
 - What's the origin of this type?



BMCRE 599, 31-29 BC

Inspiration for the New Venus



- Actually an old type
 - *mos maiorum*
- Visual resemblance
 - Posture
 - Dress
 - Attributes
- Connection to Victory
 - Disarming the god of war returning from the battlefield
 - Peace after the battle
 - Common scene in Greek and Roman iconography

Gelon Gem, Hellenistic, ca. 200 BCE.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Inspiration for the New Venus

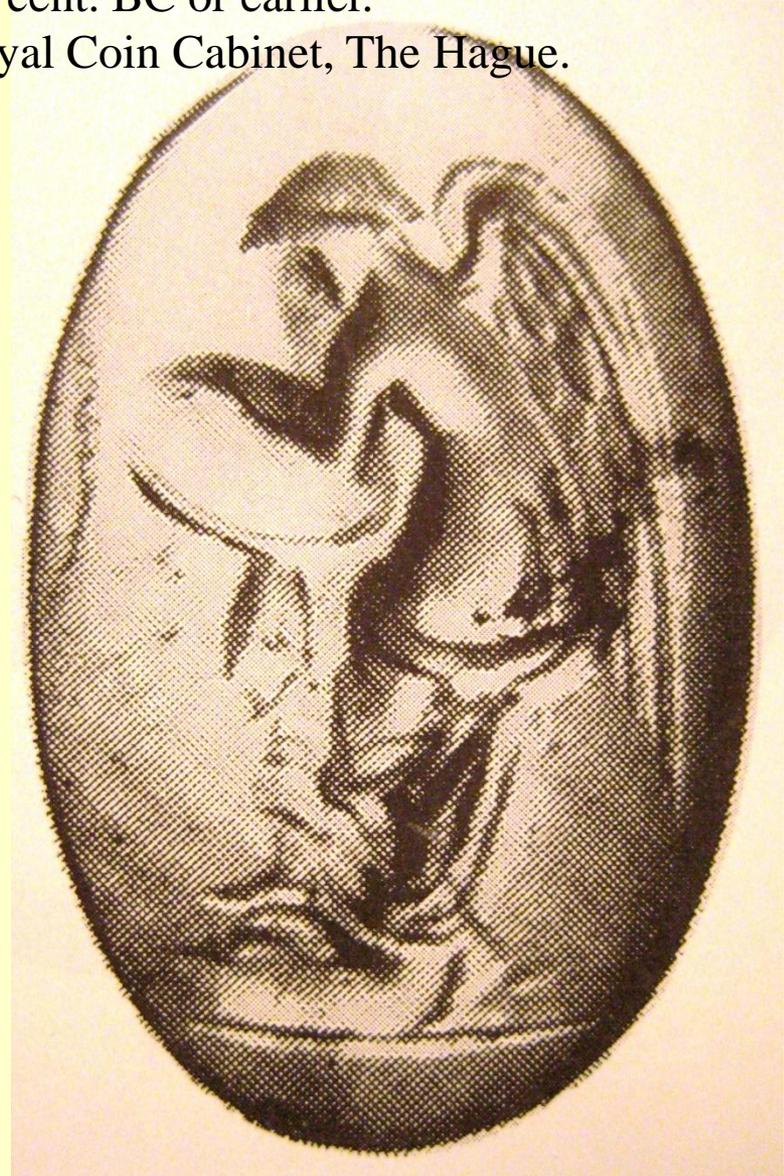
2nd cent. BC or earlier.

Metropolitan Museum of Art



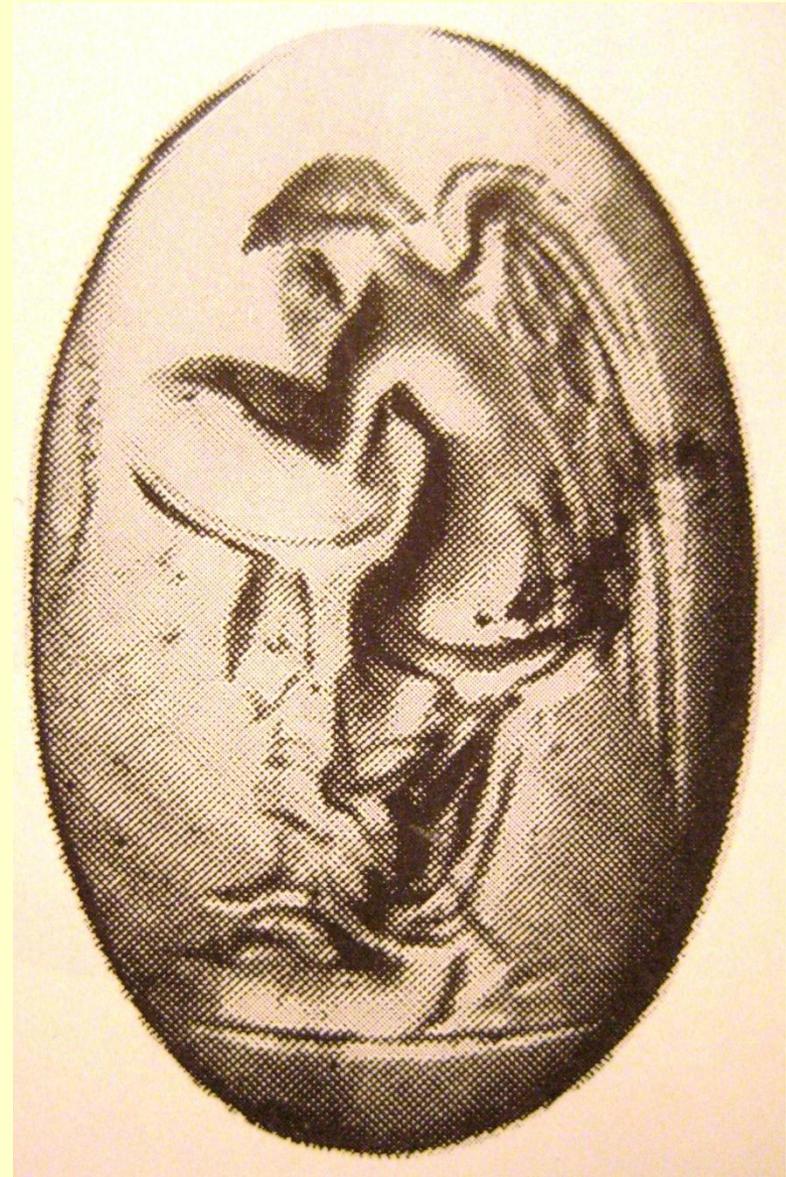
2nd cent. BC or earlier.

Royal Coin Cabinet, The Hague.



Inspiration for the New Venus

- Similar to Octavian's Venus
 - And the Gelon Gem
- Connected to Victory
 - This is the goddess Nike
 - Inscribing the names of victorious general on a shield
- Aphrodite and Nike types affect each other
 - Hölscher (2004), Kousser (2008)
 - Stronger connection to victory
 - Bare bottom, *himation* down



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 - Aphrodite of Capua (right)

Venus di Capua,
Al museo archeologico nazionale di Napoli.



Octavian's Message

- What's the purpose of the new Venus type?
- Proclaiming victory
 - A type already identified with victory
- However, other Venus types were also related to victory
 - What's so special about this type then?
 - Messages of Octavian's propaganda: peace and republic

Peace and Quiet after Victory

- **Everybody longed for peace and quiet**
- **Representation is not as martial**
 - Not dressed for war anymore
 - Calm and relaxed appearance
 - Emphasizes the relief brought by end of war
 - Rather than victory at the battlefield
- **A common pattern**
 - Caesar uses a more peaceful type for his Venus Genetrix after his victory over Pompey.
 - And so does Sulla
 - Luce (1968), Crawford (1974)



Peace and Quiet after Victory

Sulla, before victory



RRC 360/1b, 83 BC



RRC 359/1, 84-83 BC



RRC 375/2, 81 BC

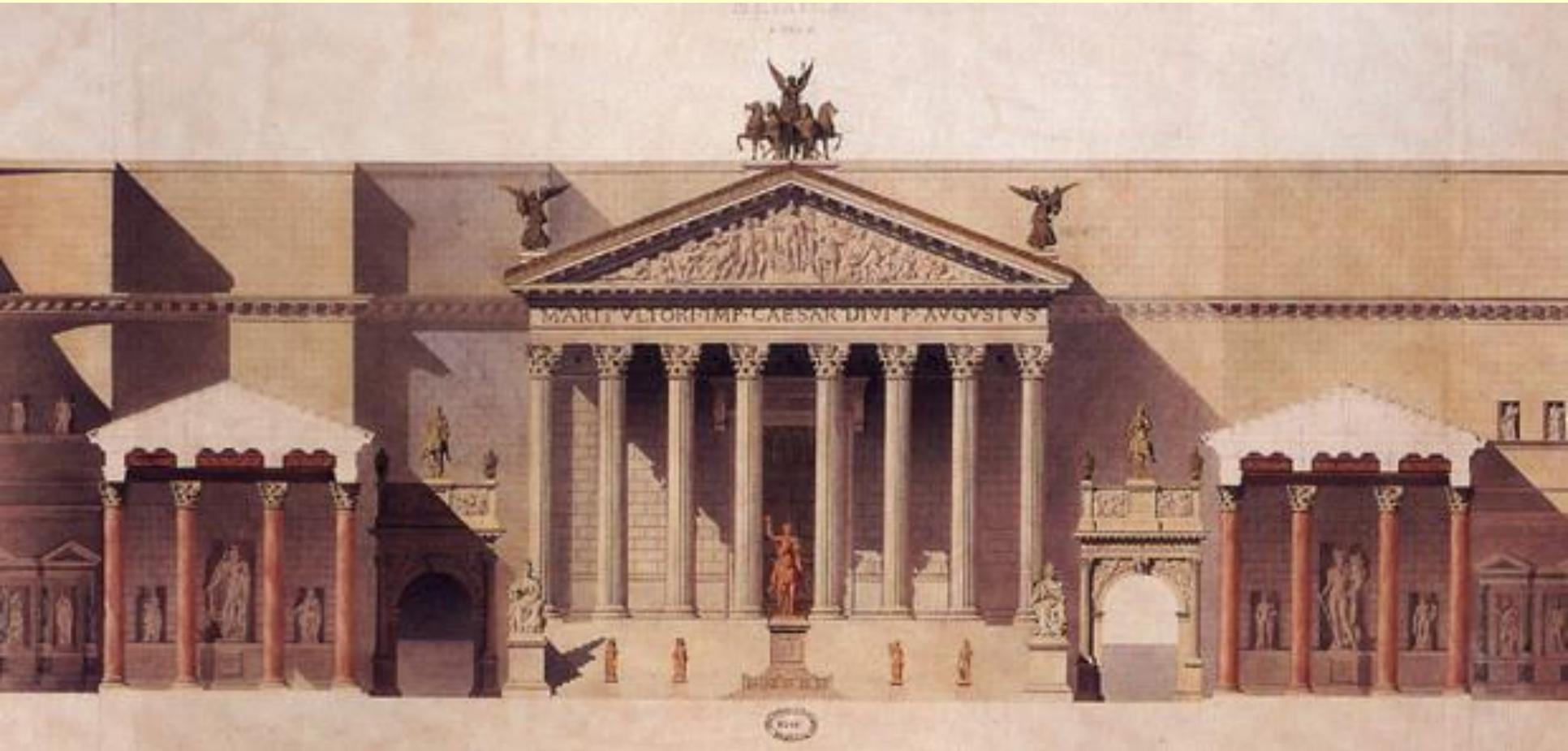
Sulla, after victory

- Attributes of war replaced with attributes of peace

Towards the Republic, away from Caesar

- *(This is purpose number two...)*
- Octavian picked a Venus type completely different than Caesar's
- Was in a delicate situation after Actium
 - End of the Triumvirate
 - Traditional Roman hostility towards sole rulers, and Caesar's son in particular
 - Also wished to avoid Caesar's fate
- Let's examine the historical (written) evidence

Towards the Republic, away from Caesar



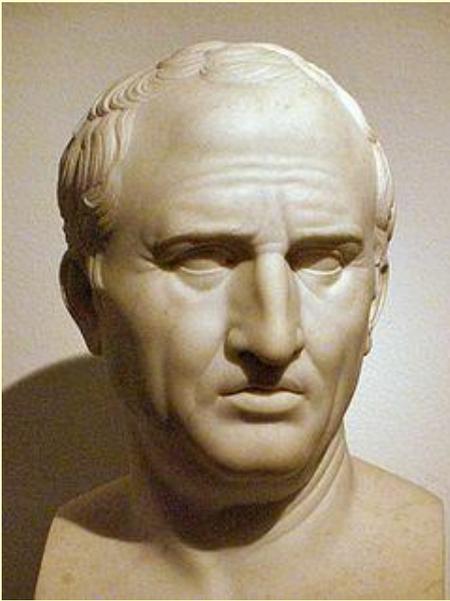
Reconstruction of the Temple of Mars Ultor. From *Encyclopaedia Romana*,
http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/imperialfora/augustus/mars.html

Towards the Republic, away from Caesar

- Temple of Mars Ultor (“the Avenger”)
 - Avenger of Caesar’s assassination
 - Octavian vowed it before defeating the armies of Caesar’s assassins... already in 42 BC!
- Construction did not start immediately after victory
 - Even though it seems as the perfect time
- Deliberate delay, to cover up the Caesar connection
 - Waiting for a more appropriate time (ten years later)



Towards the Republic, away from Caesar



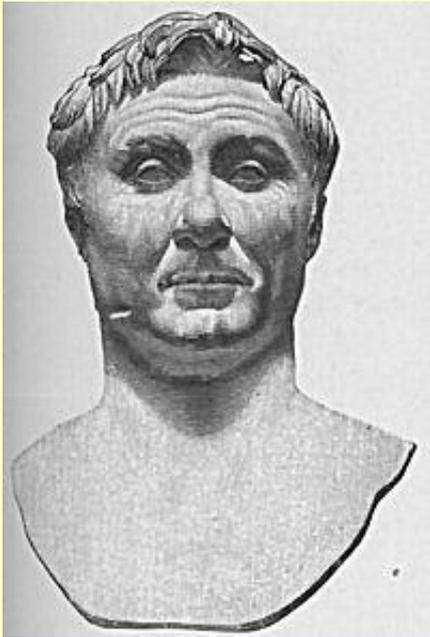
Cicero

- Augustus referred to Cicero as “a great patriot and scholar”
 - Plutarch, *Cicero* 49
- Cicero’s son appointed consul alongside Augustus.
- Cato described as teacher of Law and Justice in the afterlife.
 - *Aeneid* 8,670



Cato

Towards the Republic, away from Caesar



Pompey

- Appreciation for Pompey
 - Caesar's great enemy
- Affectionately called *Livy Pompeianus*
 - Tacitus, *Annales* 4.34.3
- Reconstruction of Pompey's Temple of Venus
 - Apparently he had enough time for this...
- Images of Pompey displayed on Augustus's funeral

Conclusion

- Transformation of the representation of the Victorious Venus
 - Goes from martial to calm and peaceful
- Meant to convey a message of “Peace and Republic”
 - Using the perfect means: an old republican type
- Iconographical evidence for Augustus’s attempt to belittle his connection to Caesar
 - Supports the vast written evidence
- A ubiquitous type until Christianity became state religion (next page)





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Coin images taken from

- *Roman Coins Database*, <http://davy.potdevin.free.fr/>

Backup: Pompeian Venuses



Onyx Cameo, Augustan.
Museo archeologico nazionale di Firenze.



Vénus d'Arles, 1st cent. BC.
Musée du Louvre.