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THE STAR IN POMPEY'S EYE

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Scale: x6
British Museum Collection

In 50 B.C. two leaders bestrode the political and military stage of Rome like colossi. They were Gaius Julius Caesar and Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, Pompey the Great. A struggle between the two warlords was inevitable and hostilities commenced in 49. Forced to abandon Italy to his rival Pompey mustered a large army in Macedonia. On 9 August 48 he was decisively defeated on the field of Pharsalus and fled to Egypt. There he was murdered on 28 September by local functionaries anxious to do Caesar a favour. Its recipient was not impressed.

Despite Pompey's death his cause lived on. In 46 Caesar was still in the field. On 17 March in that year he confronted a large Pompeian army at Munda in Spain. Among its commanders were Pompey the Great's two sons, Gnaeus Pompeius junior and Sextus. After an apocalyptic struggle Caesar emerged victorious and returned to Rome. There, two years later, he was assassinated on the Ides of March by a group of Senators, some ex-Pompeians some his own disaffected supporters. Further rounds of political in-fighting and Civil War ensued.

The mainstream development was the rise to supreme power of Mark Antony and Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, Julius' posthumously adopted son. They first joined forces in Italy at the end of 43 and organised a massacre of all significant and accessible opponents. In 42 they crossed the Adriatic and headed for Macedonia to confront huge forces assembled by Brutus and Cassius, Caesar's leading assassins. Triumphant at Philippi Antony and Octavian went different ways. Antony proceeded eastward to reorganise Rome's eastern provinces and client kingdoms. Octavian returned to Rome and Italy to stabilise the political situation at the empire's hub.

The dominance of Antony and Octavian was not totally unchallenged. There was one significant fly in their ointment. The fly was Sextus Pompey. After Munda in 46 he raised an army from Pompeian fugitives and won considerable success against Caesarian governors of Spain. He went on to organise an impressive fleet, piratical in the view of Antony and Octavian, loyal republican in the eyes of their opponents. In 43, prior to the seizure of Rome by Octavian in concert with Antony, a republican group temporarily in control of the city sought to legalise his status by appointing him Prefect of the Fleet and Coastal Areas.

Outlawed by Antony and Octavian, Sextus continued to represent himself as a legal, republican official, saved refugees from the political massacre in Italy in 43 and 42 and seized control of Sicily. From the island he blockaded and raided the Italian coast. A legate of Octavian, Q. Salvidienus attempted to crush him towards the end of 42 but was badly mauled in a naval engagement. In 40 Antony and Octavian felt it politic to recognise Sextus as a junior partner in their regime. By the so-called treaty of Misenum he became governor of Sicily, Sardinia and Greece.

From 43-40 as legal or purported Prefect of the Fleet, according to one's perspective, Sextus Pompey issued coins for the payment of his sailors and marines. A golden *aureus* probably struck in 42 includes a remarkable feature which is the subject of the present note. Before focussing on it I describe the piece in full.

The obverse bears the head of Sextus, bearded and facing right. Behind Sextus head is the legend *MAG* (short for *MAGNUS*) *PIUS*. Sextus assumes his father's title *the Great* and proclaims himself loyal to Pompey the Great's cause. In front of Sextus' head is the legend *IMP* (short for *IMPERATOR*) *ITER* (short for *ITERUM*). Sextus emphasises the fact that his troops have twice saluted him as *Imperator* in honour of significant victories. The second victory was the defeat of Salvidienus alluded to above. An oak wreath borders all the other elements. At Rome an oak wreath crown was awarded to those who saved citizens' lives. Sextus alludes to his role in rescuing escapees from the political massacres carried out by Antony and Octavian late in 43 and early in 42.

The reverse (illustrated) bears two heads facing each other. That on the left is Pompey the Great; that on the right Gnaeus Pompeius junior, Sextus' elder brother. Behind Pompey the Great's head is a *lituus*, an augur's crozier. Pompey was a member of the augural college and thus part of the Roman state's religious establishment. Inclusion of the motif on the coin contributes to stressing that the Pompeius family respects the gods who are likely, therefore, to assist its members in present enterprises. Behind the head of Gnaeus junior is a tripod, associated with the cult of Apollo. While the precise allusion is obscure, the general purport again is that the family can expect divine favour. The legend *PRAEF* (*ECTUS*) *CLA(SSIS)* *ET ORAE MARIT* (*IMAE*) spells out Sextus' official, or pseudo-official, position as Prefect of the Fleet and Coastal Areas, and goes on by way of *EX* (*ENATUS*) *C(ONSULTO)* to parade the fact that it was conferred by Senatorial decree. I come at length to the remarkable feature, normally ignored, alluded to above. A star is constructed around and including Pompey the Great's visible eye.

Given that every other design element on both obverse and reverse of Sextus' coin conveys a message of some kind, it is unlikely that the star, so strikingly positioned is mere decoration. What can its significance be? There is an interesting possibility to which I draw attention in what follows.

A few months after Julius Caesar's assassination, Octavian presided over Games held partly in the dead dictator's honour. The occasion was marked by the appearance of a comet in the skies above Rome. Eventually Augustus, Rome's first emperor, Caesar's adopted son alluded to the phenomenon in his memoirs. The passage concerned is quoted by Pliny the elder in his encyclopaedic work on Natural History (2.94). "On the very days of my Games", writes Augustus, "a comet was visible for seven days in the region of the sky beneath the Great Bear. It became visible an hour before sunset; it was bright and visible from all countries. The common people believed that the star signified the soul of Caesar received amongst the awesome presences of the immortal gods. On this account *the emblem of a star was added to the bust of Caesar* [my italics] that shortly afterwards I dedicated in the Forum". The comet of 44 and its alleged association or identification with a deified Julius Caesar became a key element in the propaganda of Octavian both before and after he became Augustus in 27 B.C. As such it features conspicuously together with Julius' bust in Augustan coins which I have described and discussed elsewhere¹.

Is it possible, I have begun to wonder, that the comet of 44 had more than one claimant. Did Sextus Pompeius come to insinuate that it signified the translation of Pompey the Great, rather than his conqueror and rival, to the celestial company of the gods? If so, Sextus' addition of a star to his father's bust on an *aureus* struck in 42 could be viewed as an emulative and competitive counterpart to the similar action of Octavian described in the passage of his memoirs that the elder Pliny cites.

By placing the star around Pompey's eye, I go on to suggest, Sextus sought to make the point that the deified Pompey the Great was no remote and dispassionate figure secluded in the Empyrean, but one who watched, took interest in and abetted the struggle of his son and successor against Caesar's henchmen and heir. Did not Pompey's star, Sextus could well have insisted turn up on cue not only to certify approval of an assassination in which his followers had played a leading role but to observe their fortunes in its wake. If such is the case, then in more than one respect Sextus' and Octavian's propagandistic manipulations of the comet ran on parallel tracks. According to Propertius², court poet of Augustus, Julius was watching assiduously from *his* star when Octavian defeated Antony at the battle of Actium in 31 B.C., thereby winning control of the entire Roman world and bringing decades of civil war to a climactic end.

Not long after the compact of 40 B.C. Sextus Pompeius fell out with his partners in power. Defeated by Octavian in Sicily in 36 and killed on the run in Asia Minor by Antony in 35, he vacated the political arena, despised and unlamented. With the death of its leader the Pompeian cause collapsed. The comet of 44 was exclusively the Julian star. Augustus and his successors ensured that it stayed that way.

1. *Ancient History Bulletin* 5 [1991] 123-128.

2. Propertius, 4.6.59.