**Divi Filius: Augustus, Authority, and Legitimation through the Stars**

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Sources used to create lesson plan:

1. Dora Gao, “Divi filius: The Comet of 44 BCE and the Politics of Late Republican Rome.” *JHI Blog.* 09.30.2019.

<https://jhiblog.org/2019/09/30/divi-filius-the-comet-of-44-bce-and-the-politics-of-late-republican-rome/>

1. <http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.39033>

Age of students (7th-12th grade): 9th-12th grade

Background “Crash Course”:

Student-friendly background on Late Republican Roman politics and the transition to Empire:

“Roman Empire” (Khan Academy): https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/world-history/ancient-medieval/roman-a/a/roman-empire

“The Great Conspiracy Against Julius Caesar” (TED-Ed): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgPymD-NBQU

“History v. Augustus” (TED-Ed): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrcmojhFmzY&t=85s

Learning Objective:

What will students be able to do by the end of this lesson? What new skills will they have gained?

1. Main: Students will examine Augustus’s rise to power through the lens of political campaigning, messaging, and propaganda.
2. Secondary: Students will make connections between Augustus’s use of the heavens to contemporary politicians’ use of natural phenomena to further political ends.
3. Skill acquisition: Students will have analyzed Augustan coinage for iconography of empire and divine/natural legitimation of power, gaining valuable ‘reading’ skills in both textual and visual media.

Materials needed:

1. Dora Gao, “Divi filius: The Comet of 44 BCE and the Politics of Late Republican Rome.” *JHI Blog.* 09.30.2019.

<https://jhiblog.org/2019/09/30/divi-filius-the-comet-of-44-bce-and-the-politics-of-late-republican-rome/>

1. Laptop computers, access to internet—in particular, the *JHI Blog* and *MANTIS*: <http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.39033>

Discussion Questions:

Specific Comprehension Questions (with page references to text)

1. Gao writes: “According to Octavian’s testimony, ‘the common people believed the comet to signify that the soul of Caesar had been received among the spirits of the immortal gods” (*Memoirs*, fr. 6 (Malcovtai)).
   1. Octavian writes this in his own *Memoirs* regarding the appearance of the comet. Why does he attribute this belief to ‘the common people’?
2. Gao writes: “The Romans, up to Octavian’s time, had viewed comets as bearers of misfortune and did not often receive them with optimism (e.g. Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.11.18; 2.28.60).”
   1. What importance does this observation have for Octavian’s use of the event to legitimize his rule? What did Octavian first do to use the comet to his advantage?
3. Gao writes: “Suetonius writes that Vespasian famously joked, upon seeing a comet on his deathbed, “Woe’s me. Methinks I’m turning into a god” (Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian* 23.4).
   1. What did the later Emperor Vespasian mean when he said this joke? What are the political implications?
4. How many distinct political messages can you find on the coin we’ve analyzed in Gao’s article? Remember, you can access images of this coin and more information at http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.39033. When you’re ready, list both the images and the political messages they represent.

Analytical Questions (how does this study relate to broader historical questions?)

1. How do political actors use natural phenomena to their advantage? How do they use them to justify their rule? Can you think of modern examples? Other examples from our study of Late Republican Rome? (Think Caesar, Cicero, Pompey, Mark Antony, Cleopatra.)
2. Why did Octavian need ‘legitimization’? When do political actors/factions/parties need this? What other ways might they ‘legitimize’ themselves?
3. Why might a coin be an especially useful tool for legitimization? What does it do? Where does it go? What does it represent? What messages of ‘legitimization’ are present on US coinage?

Sources for developing a background coinage unit:

http://numismatics.org/ocre/ - *Online Coins of the Roman Empire*

http://numismatics.org/search/ - *American Numismatics Society General Catalogue*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman\_currency#Imperial\_iconography – ‘Roman currency’, Wikipedia (high quality article, especially helpful for students)

Metcalf, William E. (2012). The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sample lesson plan: “Creating Coins: Figures and Symbols”, J. Paul Getty Museum. http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom\_resources/curricula/ancient\_art/lesson03.htm

Sample lesson plans from *Ancient Coins for Education* (an organization which will procure and send your classroom a selection of physical Roman coins): http://ancientcoinsforeducation.org/index.php?option=com\_content&task=blogcategory&id=29&Itemid=93

Activities:

**Numismatics Activity**

Now that we’ve seen how Augustus used natural phenomena to justify his political rise (as part of his ‘self-fashioning’), let’s do a little self-fashioning ourselves! Let’s imagine we’re all political upstarts—newcomers to Late Roman Republican politics—and we’ll imagine that we’re running as co-consular running mates.

1. Choose a partner.
2. Construct two personas for the two-person consular ticket (think ‘Caesar’ and ‘Balbus’). Write this down in a few sentences.
3. Imagine ways you could legitimate your rise—make it seem really special!—especially drawing on strange, miraculous natural phenomena. Write this down in a few sentences.
4. Last, draw up an ambitious, exciting “Victory Coin” that you promise you’ll mint when you win the consular elections! Make sure to incorporate visual iconography to go along with the miraculous events you describe in (3). Think about the coins we’ve looked at, and how Romans conveyed messages through coins. Emulate these coins.
5. After this, we’ll present these (give your best campaign pitch!) and ‘elect’ our new consuls based on the quality of legitimation and coinage.

Teacher to Teacher:

*Major impediments*: If you would like to expand a numismatics activity into a larger portion of the class period, make sure to *show* students how to use the web resources you might introduce to them.

Also make sure to show and explain examples of Roman coin iconography to them in prior activities—otherwise you’ll have them ‘reading’ without understanding the ‘letters’! For practice in reading the coins, use the sample Roman coins from the Ottilia Buerger Collection of Ancient and Byzantine Coins at Lawrence University: <http://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/CATALOGUE/060.HTML>. Also see Daniel C. Taylor’s essay on Roman coins and history for general background: http://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/ESSAYS/ROMANC.HTML.

*Major payoffs*: In my experience, students love to learn from Greek and Roman coins. It’s such a clear example of continuity between ancient and modern political messaging that students make immediate connections between ancient models and contemporary descendants. Varying interpretive media is also an excellent way to engage students who would otherwise be uninterested—the political messaging of a coin is clear to them in a way subtler linguistic political messaging is not.

*Advice:* As noted above in ‘major impediments’: Make sure to introduce a project like this with sufficient front-loading. Students need to ‘read’ a number of coins with you before they’re given coins to examine themselves. This will make for a more rewarding and rich experience when they’re given time to work themselves.