

“MARE PACAVI A PRAEDONIBUS”:
OCTAVIAN AND THE ORIGINS OF THE ACCUSATIONS
OF PIRACY AGAINST SEXTUS POMPEIUS*

by

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ABSTRACT: It is argued in this article that the accusation of piracy against Sextus Pompeius by Octavian dates from at least the period of the Perusian War, and plausibly even from 43 BCE. A supplementary hypothesis was also proposed, which points to the possibility that Octavian made use of an earlier accusation against Gnaeus Pompeius' sons which had previously been formulated by Caesar in the years 46/45 BCE.

Octavian/Augustus is, for a wide variety of reasons, an exceptional character in the history of Rome. Nobody before him recognised so clearly just how essential it is for politicians to have an effective method of communication with society. The heir to Caesar built up a rich and coherent political message. This consisted of a narrative, signs and symbols, but equally “performative facts” such as various forms of gestures and rituals, public ceremonies, etc. To this it is necessary to add the reorganisation of the space of the City (just the building activity of the princeps and those associated with him is characterised by a scale hitherto unheard of). This multifaceted action is usually connected with the period of Augustus' independent rule, but this dividing line, regardless of its significance, cannot occlude the fact that Octavian understood much earlier the importance of an eloquent “tale” for the realisation of such ambitions as taking and maintaining power, the elimination of political opposition, and so on.

The examples of Sextus Pompeius and Marcus Antonius demonstrate that Octavian was more than capable of spinning original and suggestive “tales” about his political adversaries even during the period of the Triumvirate. With time they became embedded within the historiographical currents which favoured the princeps. The Augustan narrative of the Civil War became the dominant one.

* The article was written under a research grant of the Polish National Science Centre (UMO-2012/07/B/HS3/03368). It was translated by Donald TRINDER. Unless otherwise stated, all dates given here refer to Before the Common Era. I would like to thank Carsten Hjort Lange for his valuable comments on the manuscript. It goes without saying that all errors are my own.