

The deification of Julius Caesar, as symbolized by the *sidus Iulium*, has long been regarded as a political tool by which Augustus attained prominence and paved the way for his own eventual deification (e.g. Syme 1939, White 1988, et al.). In this paper, however, I argue that this by-now standard version of history – and, to some extent, the very idea of Augustan propaganda – ultimately derives less from historical evidence than from a narrative propagated by Ovid for his own poetic and political purposes.

I begin with a brief critique of the sources, most rather late, that have been used to assign Augustus a strong role in influencing public interpretation of the comet that appeared over Caesar's funeral games in 44 BCE, prompting his official deification (Domenicucci 1996; Ramsey and Licht 1997). Augustus' own *Commentarii* remain suggestive but inconclusive. Our only other contemporary sources are diverse numismatic and literary references to stars and comets, which, with the exception of Gurval's worthy 1997 attempt, have thus far defied comprehensive analysis.

I offer a new, diachronic interpretation of the *sidus*' iconographical evolution within various media. In its original guise as a star, early in Augustus' reign, it tends to represent divinity in a metaphorical sense derived from Euhemeran thought, as the fame attained by rulers in the minds of their subjects. Thus Horace *Odes* 1.12.45-8, Propertius 4.6.59-60, and even *Aeneid* 8.678-81, rather than assigning Augustus an active role in deifying his father, depict Caesar as a model (albeit an ambivalent one) for Augustus' own attainment of fame. Later in Augustus' reign, however, coins begin to re-present the *sidus* as a moving comet rather than a star, suggesting growing interest in the process by which Caesar attained the heavens. Finally Ovid, retrojecting Augustus' mature power onto his early career, provides an influential account at *Metamorphoses* 15.746-870 and *Fasti* 2.143-4: Caesar was turned into a god *so that* Augustus could claim divine parentage. By assigning Augustus motivation and responsibility for Caesar's deification, and performing an almost comically 'pro-Augustan' reading of the *sidus* (cf. Feeney 1991 and Hardie 1998), Ovid creates the sense that he is propagating an officially-sanctioned version of events – even as he invites his readers to view that version with cynicism. This fiction, ironically, continues to inform certain conceptions of Augustus, particularly the idea that the *princeps* maintained power through careful control over political symbols like the *sidus*.

Thus, the diverse representations of the *sidus Iulium* within Augustan discourse testify to individual Romans' interpretive independence and argue against a concerted Augustan propaganda campaign; instead, they trace the evolution of public perceptions of Augustus' power and ambitions, culminating in Ovid's portrait of the *princeps* as a masterful fellow-poet who manipulated public fictions (cf. Barchiesi 1997; Oliensis 2004) – an image so powerful that we have yet to escape its influence.