



## Denarius depicting the head of Victoria and Octavian as Neptune with his right foot on a globe (32-29 BCE)

### Denarius depicting the head of Victoria and Octavian as Neptune with his right foot on a globe (32-29 BCE).jpg



[1]

### [Denarius depicting the head of Victoria and Octavian as Neptune with his right foot on a globe \(32-29 BCE\) reverse.jpg](#) [2]



[3]

**Denomination:** Denarius

**Date:** 32 BCE to 29 BCE

**Material:** silver

**Mint:** Rome ?

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):** American Numismatic Society; ID: 1937.158.439

**Name of Ruler:** Roman Republic

**Obverse (Image and Inscription):**

Image: Winged bust of Victoria looking right

**Reverse (Image and Inscription):**

Image: Naked male figure with his right foot on a globe, holding a sceptre in his right hand and an aplustre in his left hand

Inscription: CAESAR•DIVI•F

**Diameter (mm):** 20.00mm

**Weight (g):** 3.73g

**Commentary:**

RIC I<sup>2</sup>, Augustus, no. 256, p. 59.

This denarius minted between 32 and 29 BCE, possibly at Rome, depicts the head of Victoria on the obverse, and a naked male standing, with his right foot on a globe, holding an aplustre (an ornamental appendage of wood located at the stern of a Roman ship) and a sceptre. Some of the attributes of this male figure (especially the aplustre) recall that of the god of the sea, Neptune, yet the legend "son of the deified (Julius) Caesar" shows that this male figure probably refers to Octavian.



Victoria, the goddess or personification of victory, was the Roman equivalent of the Greek goddess Nike. While Victoria is often depicted as a winged figure, which looks like a statue, in this case, only the bust of the goddess is depicted on the obverse of the coin. An earlier example of this iconography of Victoria is found on the obverse of a denarius minted by T. Carisius in 46 BCE (the reverse depicts Victoria on a chariot; see RRC 464/4, p. 475). From Augustus's reign onwards, the personification of victory became one of the most important aspects of the imperial taxonomy. Indeed, according to Carlos Noreña, victory was one of the tangible benefits of the Roman Empire. Military victory therefore stood as the central imperial ideal around which all others, such as *pax*, *concordia*, *fortuna*, and *salus*, circled. Victory was in fact the most common benefit type on silver and base metal coins (Noreña, *Imperial Ideals*, p. 146-147).

The coin presented here is part of a set of *denarii* minted at the same time and bearing on their reverse the same legend CAESAR DIVI FILIUS. These coins can be divided in two groups (see Zanker, *The Power*, p. 53-55). In the first one, the obverse bears a portrayal of Octavian, and the reverse a representation of the goddesses Pax ([RIC I<sup>2</sup>, Augustus, no. 252, p. 59](#) [4]), Venus Genetrix – the mythical progenitor of the Julian *gens* – ([RIC I<sup>2</sup>, Augustus, no. 250a](#) [5]-b, p. 59), and Victoria ([RIC I<sup>2</sup>, Augustus, no. 254a](#) [6]-b, p. 59). In the second group, the same goddesses appear on the obverse of the coins, whereas a full-length figure of Octavian appears on the reverse. On the first type, on the obverse appears the bust of the goddess Pax, and on the reverse Octavian is represented while performing an *adlocutio* – he is addressing his troops before the battle ([RIC I<sup>2</sup>, Augustus, no. 253, p. 59](#) [7]). On the second type, on the obverse appears the bust of the goddess Venus Genetrix, and on the reverse, Octavian is represented while leading his army's charge into the battle ([RIC I<sup>2</sup>, Augustus, no. 251, p. 59](#) [8]). The third type, which corresponds to the coin presented here, celebrates the victor. On the obverse is depicted the goddess Victoria who is thus associated with the naked male figure depicted on the reverse. The posture and the attribute of the *aplustre* suggest that this figure is that of Neptune, yet the legend appearing on each side and the comparison with the two other types of coin bearing the same legend lead to conclude that Octavian is here depicted in the pose of Neptune (we will come back later to the message conveyed by this identification). Thus, considering the coin presented here inside this second group of coins bearing the legend CAESAR DIVI FILIUS, it appears that these three types narrate a coherent sequence of martial events – the *adlocutio*, the battle and the celebration of victory. For Paul Zanker these coins must have started to be produced before the battle of Actium – they would be part of a “programmatically sentence” recalling the main elements of Octavian's speech pronounced before Actium (Zanker, *The Power*, p. 53) –, and they must have continued to be produced in order to pay Octavian's troops after the battle.

A few words can be added to explain the association of Octavian with Neptune. In the framework of the struggle for power that followed Caesar's assassination, mythological affiliations and connections were used by the main protagonists to assert their prestige and their power. Among the most famous use of mythological affiliations at that time, is the association of Caesar/Octavian with Venus Genetrix, but also the opposition between Marc Antony identified with Dionysus, and Octavian identified with Apollo. However, before the period of confrontation between Marc Antony and Octavian, Sextus Pompey (the son of Pompey the Great who succeeded to take control of Corsica, Sardinia and Sicily between 41 and 36 BCE, thus threatening Rome's grain supply) officially proclaimed himself to be a descendent of the god Neptune and thus to be under his divine protection and favour (see Horatius, *Epode IX.7* in which Sextus Pompey is named *dux Neptunius*; for a short presentation of the sources dealing with this connection, see Zarrow, “Sicily and the Coinage,” p. 127). Between 42 and 40 BCE, series of *denarii* bearing representations of Neptune on their obverses or on their reverses were produced by Sextus Pompey in Sicily (RRC 511, p. 520). Interestingly enough, among these types, one representation of Neptune looks quite similar to the one reused by Augustus ten years later: Neptune is actually depicted on one reverse, standing, looking left, holding in his right hand an *aplustre*, having a cloak over his left arm, and placing his right foot on prow (see [RRC 511/3a, p. 520](#) [9]). Thus, when he ordered the production of the type presented here, Octavian appropriated an earlier issue of Sextus Pompey. By being represented under the guise of the protective god of his past enemy, Octavian was proclaiming that Neptune had abandoned Sextus's side to join his (Zanker, *The Power*, 53; Beacham, “The Emperor,” p. 153-154).

Finally, the fact that Octavian produced this type before and after the battle of Actium in 31 BCE should be interpreted as being an announce/praise of his victory over Marc Antony at the end of the naval battle of Actium (the naval success being here symbolised by the *aplustre* in his left hand). It should be noted that a cameo, often called “[the Cameo of Boston](#) [10],” and usually dated between 31 and 27 BCE, has been preserved, that portrays Octavian as the victor of Actium. Interestingly on this representation, Augustus is represented as Neptune: he is actually represented nude, holding the trident, riding a chariot drawn by four sea-horses through a turbulent sea. The head of one enemy of Octavian is represented while sinking into the sea, an enemy that can be interpreted as



symbolising Sextus Pompey or Marc Antony. The identification of Octavian with Neptune on this cameo and the one on the coin presented here thus use similar codes. The aim of both representations is to praise Octavian for his victories at naval battles, and especially during the battle of Actium. However, the aim of the scene depicted on the reverse of the coin presented here is not only to praise Octavian for his military victory. By representing Octavian with a sceptre in his right hand, and his right foot on a globe, it also conveys the message that at the head of the whole oikoumenè under the hegemony of Rome stands a man, Octavian.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Caesar](#) [11]
- [divi filius](#) [12]

Thematic keywords:

- [victory](#) [13]
- [victor](#) [14]
- [Victoria \(goddess of victory\)](#) [15]
- [Actium](#) [16]
- [Roman army](#) [17]
- [Roman hegemony](#) [18]
- [Roman power](#) [19]
- [globe](#) [20]
- [oikoumenè](#) [21]
- [Octavian](#) [22]
- [sceptre](#) [23]
- [warship](#) [24]
- [Neptune](#) [25]

**Bibliographical references:** Noreña, Carlos F., [Imperial Ideals in the Roman West: Representation, Circulation, Power](#) [26] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

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Zanker, Paul, [The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus](#) [28] (Ann Arbor (Mich.): University of Michigan Press, 1990)

Zarrow, Edward M., ["Sicily and the Coinage of Octavian and Sextus Pompey: Aeneas or the Catanian Brothers?"](#) [29], *The Numismatic Chronicle* 163 (2003) : 123-135

**Realized by:**

[Marie Roux](#) [30]



[Samuele Rocca](#) [31]



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