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Marcus Junius Brutus

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Marcus Junius Brutus

Abstract

Marcus Junius Brutus (BREW-tuhs) came from noble stock. His reputed paternal ancestor, Lucius Junius Brutus, helped overthrow the last king of Rome, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, in 510 B.C.E. and then became one of the first two consuls of the Roman Republic. His mother, Servilia Caepionis, was descended from Gaius Servilius Ahala, who had murdered the would-be tyrant Spurius Maelius in 439.

Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Political History

Comments

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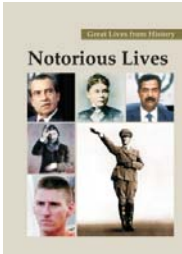


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See Also in Notorious Lives

John Wilkes Booth
(10.3331/GLN_1069)

Cassius Chaerea
(10.3331/GLN_1109).

Great Lives from History: Notorious Lives

Marcus Junius Brutus

by David B. Hollander

ROMAN POLITICIAN

CAUSE OF NOTORIETY: As the leader of the plot to assassinate Roman dictator Julius Caesar, Brutus attempted to restore the Roman Republic but instead brought forth the Roman Empire.

ACTIVE: March 15, 44 B.C.E.

LOCALE: Rome

Early Life

Marcus Junius Brutus (BREW-tuhs) came from noble stock. His reputed paternal ancestor, Lucius Junius Brutus, helped overthrow the last king of Rome, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, in 510 B.C.E. and then became one of the first two consuls of the Roman Republic. His mother, Servilia Caepionis, was descended from Gaius Servilius Ahala, who had murdered the would-be tyrant Spurius Maelius in 439.

Marcus Junius Brutus.

(Library of Congress)



Brutus grew up in a time when the Roman Republic was already in serious decline, afflicted by political violence and civil war. Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (better known as Pompey the Great) treacherously killed Brutus's father in 77 during the revolt of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus. Quintus Servilius Caepio subsequently adopted Brutus, who then took the name Quintus Caepio Brutus. Marcus Porcius Cato (also known as Cato the Younger), Brutus's uncle and one of the fiercest adherents of the conservative faction in Roman politics, played a major role in Brutus's education. Brutus's rhetorical skill and deep commitment to philosophy were well known.

Military Career

Brutus served under Cato in Cyprus in 58 and was a *monetalis* (in charge of the mint) probably in 55. Some of his coins featured portraits of his famous ancestors Lucius Brutus and Ahala. In 54, Brutus married Claudia, daughter of Appius Claudius Pulcher. He served as quaestor in Cilicia under his father-in-law the following year.

In spite of having close connections to Julius Caesar (Caesar had an affair with Servilia and some believed him to be Brutus's father) and ample reason to hate Pompey the Great, his father's murderer, Brutus chose to side with Pompey in the civil war between Caesar's forces and those of Pompey; it began in 49. Caesar pardoned Brutus after Pompey's defeat at Pharsalus in 48.

Brutus did well under Caesar's new regime. He became a pontifex (a member of a Roman guild of priests) and, in 46, governed Cisalpine Gaul as a proconsul. The following year, Brutus divorced Claudia and married his cousin Porcia, Cato's daughter. Brutus became urban praetor in 44 and was promised the consulship for 41. However, Brutus became disenchanted with Caesar's increasingly autocratic rule. His friend Gaius Cassius Longinus brought Brutus into a large conspiracy against Caesar, and he came to play a leading role. On March 15, 44, the conspirators stabbed Caesar to death at a meeting of the senate. Chaos ensued as Republicans and those loyal to Caesar jockeyed for power.

By summer, the assassins had been forced to leave Italy. Brutus went to Athens and soon began to raise troops and money. Cassius did the same in Asia. Meanwhile, in Italy, Marcus Antonius (better known as Marc Antony) and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus (son of the Lepidus mentioned above), two of Caesar's chief lieutenants, formed a shaky alliance, called the Second Triumvirate, with Caesar's grand nephew and heir, Gaius Octavius (who later became the emperor Augustus). Together they tried and condemned the assassins in absentia, brutally suppressed local resistance through proscriptions, and prepared to avenge the death of Caesar.

In the fall of 42, the combined forces of Brutus and Cassius met with the army of the Second Triumvirate, led by Antony and Octavian (as Augustus was then called), at Philippi. In the first battle, Brutus defeated Octavian, but Cassius, following his own defeat at the hands of Antony, committed suicide. In a second battle several days later, Brutus was defeated, and he, too, committed suicide.

Impact

Marcus Junius Brutus became a controversial figure in history. In antiquity, many admired his principled stand against tyranny, but others condemned the assassination of Caesar as the betrayal of a friend. Dante Alighieri's *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802) placed Brutus in the lowest circle of hell, while William Shakespeare, in his *Julius Caesar* (pr. c. 1599-1600), has Antony call Brutus "the noblest Roman of them all." Opponents of monarchy, autocracy, and federalism, as well as assassins such as Lorenzo de' Medici and John Wilkes Booth, have looked to Brutus for inspiration. Scholars, however, are more apt to note his usurious lending practices and lapses of political and military judgment.

Further Reading

- 1 Clark, Martin L. *The Noblest Roman: Marcus Brutus and His Reputation*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1981. A brief biography of Brutus with chapters on his historical reception and literary impact.
- 2 Morstein-Marx, Robert. *Mass Oratory and Political Power in the Late Roman Republic*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Chapter 4, "The Voice of the People," includes a discussion of Brutus's attempts to sway popular opinion in Rome following the assassination.
- 3 Sedley, David. "The Ethics of Brutus and Cassius." *Journal of Roman Studies* 87 (1997): 41-53. Explores the role of Platonic philosophy in Brutus's decision to assassinate Caesar.