Was Julius Caesar Initiated into the Mysteries of Eleusis?

Have you been to Eleusis, the village outside Athens where the ancient Mysteries were held? Nick Economopoulos of Pegasi Numismatics has been there, and I love to hear him talk about the Cave of Pluto there that leads to the underworld, where the king of Hades and the bride he abducted held court among departed heroes and sages. Each year when spring comes, Persephone joyfully rejoins her mother Demeter at the court of the celestial gods, only to return to the gloom below at the onset of winter.

Nowadays not many people make the pilgrimage, but in ancient times, anyone who was anybody found that all roads led to Eleusis. Emperors and empresses shed their royal vestments and donned white sheets (much as millions do in Mecca to this day), and marched along the Sacred Way from Athens to Eleusis, holding aloft torches and singing mystic hymns. The entire ritual, over several days, entailed purifications and fasting, the sacrifice of piglets (like the sacrifice of goats and sheep in Mecca), the drinking of the barley broth kykeon, and the witnessing of visions that changed the initiate for life.

What did the Mysteries of Eleusis convey to the newly initiated? According to the Roman statesman Cicero – and other writers of the time – they promised a blissful afterlife.
Among the many excellent and divine institutions that your Athens has developed and contributed to human life, there is none, in my opinion, better than these mysteries, by which we have been brought forth from our rustic and savage mode of existence, cultivated and refined to a state of civilization; and as these rites are called ‘initiations’ so, in truth, we have learned from them the first principles of life and have gained the understanding, not only to live happily, but also to die with better hope. – Cicero, *On Laws*

Ancient Romans looked to the culture of the Greeks, from their gods to their philosophy, and the Mysteries of Eleusis can already be found on coins of the Republic (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Top, denarius of Volteius: Bacchus on obverse; on reverse, Ceres (Demeter) brandishes torches in a chariot drawn by magical serpents, searching for her abducted daughter. Middle, denarius of Vibius Pansa: on reverse, Ceres walks with torches behind a plough (grain, *cereal*). Bottom, Bacchus on obverse, Demeter with torches on reverse, piglet before her – the traditional sacrifice of those about to be initiated at Eleusis.

Toward the end of the Republic, the dictator Sulla was initiated at Eleusis. That would not stop the ruthless course that he charted
and many would follow ("If Sulla could, why not I?"), with blood flowing in the streets of Athens when he besieged that city.

The orator Cicero, who fought tooth-and-nail to preserve the Republic, made the pilgrimage to Eleusis. Marc Antony, the right hand man of Julius Caesar, ordered the assassination of Cicero once he triumphed in the triumvirate with Octavian, and he too took part in the Mysteries.

Ironically, or perhaps logically, Octavian went to Eleusis for initiation after Marc Antony’s defeat at Actium. Soon, the Senate granted him the title *Augustus* and, years later, he returned to Eleusis as an initiate of the higher rank, one of the *epopteia*. Upon his death, Augustus would be deified. An eagle, the bird of Jupiter, was released as his body burned on the pyre, symbolizing the ascent of his soul to the company of the heavenly gods.

In fact, the Mysteries of Eleusis legitimized Roman rule over the ancient world, with initiated imperators easily deified (*divus*) since the rites of Eleusis had guaranteed them a celestial afterlife.

Octavian had been lucky. A comet sailed across the skies soon after the assassination of his great uncle Julius, and Octavian could point to it as the soul of Caesar ascending to the heavens as a divine being, which the Senate obligingly ratified. With this celestial sign, the adopted son could claim the title *Divi Filius*, or Son of God.

The first Roman emperor used his initiation into the Mysteries of Eleusis to advance his claim to the title of *Augustus*, a lesson not lost on later emperors and empresses. Many of them marched as pilgrims along the sacred road to Eleusis, and the goddess of the Mysteries often adorned their coins (Figure 2)
Figure 2. GODDESS OF THE MYSTERIES OF ELEUSIS on coins of Roman emperors: 1. Dupondius of Claudius with Divus Augustus on the obverse, his wife Julia as Ceres on the reverse. 2. Denarius of Vespasian with Ceres on the reverse. 3. Denarius of Titus, on the reverse Ceres. 4. Denarius of Domitian with Ceres on reverse. 5. Sestertius of Hadrian, showing Ceres on its reverse. 6. Denarius showing Diva Faustina, deified wife of Antoninus Pius, with Ceres on the reverse. 7. Denarius with Julia Domna, wife of Septimius Severus; on the reverse, Ceres holds a long torch and ears of wheat.
With such a long list of Roman emperors and empresses paying homage to the goddess of the Mysteries, who is the one central and seminal figure missing from the circle of Romans initiated at Eleusis? Who was a contemporary of Eleusinian *mystae* like Sulla, Cicero, and Octavian? To who would the Roman Senate grant divine rights while he was still alive? Who would be assassinated by liberty-seeking senators and thereby become the avatar of the Roman Empire?

That would be Julius Caesar himself, who shortly after he defeated Pompey, Rome’s greatest general, at Pharsalus in Greece, minted a most revealing coin (Figure 3).

![Figure 3. Denarius proclaiming Julius Caesar dictator again. Ceres on obverse; implements of the high priest (Pontifex Maximus) on reverse.](image)

The depiction of the Athenian goddess on Caesar’s denarius does not point to Africa, as has been claimed. The text on the reverse of prophet (*augur*) and high priest (*pontifex maximus*), with the
priestly implements, asserts the state religion of Rome as supported by the ancient rites of Eleusis (Demeter/Ceres). Julius Caesar here declares his allegiance to the Mysteries, which would serve him, as Pontifex Maximus and Dictator, to claim absolute power over both church and state (like the monarch of England today).

In gratitude for the victory at Actium in 31 BC, over a more experienced general (Marc Antony), Octavian would go to Eleusis to be initiated into the Mysteries. In all likelihood, he was following the precedent set by his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, who after his victory over Pompey in Greece very likely attended the Mysteries of Eleusis.

In fact, Caesar’s personal occasion to be thankful to Demeter for her grain-producing fertility would come in Greece, where his long campaign against Pompey would be saved by the timely intervention of the goddess, as he himself explains:

> Caesar, finding a suitable place in the countryside, where the crops were now almost ripe, decided to wait there for Pompey’s arrival and make that the sole theatre of operations. – Caesar, *The Civil War*

In other words Caesar’s coins, with Demeter on one side and the implements of the high priest on the reverse, proclaim his gratitude to the Greek goddess for the crops that saved his armies in Greece and granted him victory over Pompey. In his function as Pontifex Maximum, he sacrificed to the savior goddess of Eleusis, just as his adopted son Octavian would once Marc Antony had been defeated at Actium.

So was Julius Caesar actually initiated at Eleusis? There is a surviving Greek inscription there that reads *Autokraton*, which
translates to the Latin *Dictator* that appears on coins of Julius. It has been proposed that this inscription could apply to Caesar as well as to his heir Octavian, but let’s remember that the lesson Augustus learned from Caesar’s assassination was to not flaunt power so openly.

If Octavian was following in the footsteps of Uncle Julius, that would suggest that Julius Caesar had been initiated into the Mysteries of Eleusis, just as Octavian would be, as Sulla and Cicero had been, as countless Romans, emperors and empresses, nobles and slaves would be, finding spiritual solace in the embrace of Demeter, the goddess of the Mysteries of Eleusis.

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