



Liberators vs. Triumvirs: The Battle of Philippi Begins Today in 42 B.C.

“In these circumstances, as the forces on both sides were unusually eager, the trumpet sounded, and they advanced against each other with a great shout, and the trumpets sounded the attack. They hurled their javelins, slung stones, shot darts, and performed all the acts of war. Then they drew their swords and fought hand to hand, until the survivors on each side turned and fled.” — Appian of Alexandria, *The Civil Wars*

The year was 42 B.C., and the Mediterranean world stood on the precipice of history. In the heart of what is now Greece, two of the most formidable figures of ancient Rome, Mark Antony and Octavian (later known as Augustus), were poised to clash with the assassins of Julius Caesar at the Battle of Philippi. This battle would reshape the course of Roman history and cement the legacy of these larger-than-life personalities.

The stage was set in the wake of Julius Caesar’s assassination in 44 B.C. The conspirators, led by Brutus and Cassius, believed that the death of Caesar would restore the Roman Republic to its former glory. They could not have been more wrong. Caesar’s murder instead plunged the Roman world into chaos and sparked a series of civil wars, with Octavian and Mark Antony emerging as two of the most prominent contenders for power.

The conflict reached its zenith at Philippi, a Macedonian town on the Thracian border, in the autumn of 42 B.C. As the armies of the Second Triumvirate — consisting of Octavian, Mark Antony, and Lepidus — faced off against the forces of Brutus and Cassius, the fate of Rome hung in the balance.

Appian, the Roman historian, provides us with invaluable insights into the dramatic onset of the Battle of Philippi. In his vivid account, he describes how the two sides, each brimming with military prowess and political ambition, faced each other across the battlefield: “As the armies approached each other, they looked intently at one another, waiting for the signal to engage. Then they advanced against each other with a great shout, and the trumpets sounded the attack.”

These words evoke the palpable tension that must have hung in the air as these mighty armies prepared to collide. It was not merely a clash of swords and shields; it was a battle for the future of Rome itself.

The Battle of Philippi unfolded in two stages, with each side winning one of them. In the first engagement, Brutus and his forces gained the upper hand, forcing Octavian and his legions to retreat.



Joel Bellviure/Wikimedia Commons
Augustus of Prima Porta



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on October 3, 2023

However, in the second encounter, Mark Antony's troops secured a decisive victory over Cassius, who mistakenly believed that Brutus had also been defeated. Overwhelmed by despair and erroneously thinking that all was lost, Cassius took his own life.

Despite the setback at Philippi, the conflict raged on. Mark Antony and Octavian ultimately emerged victorious, with their adversaries falling one by one. The battle marked the end of the Republican cause and the ascent of the Roman Empire, with Octavian eventually becoming the undisputed ruler as Augustus.

The aftermath of the Battle of Philippi was nothing short of transformative for Rome. The Roman Republic, which had endured for centuries, was forever altered. The power-sharing arrangement of the Second Triumvirate soon gave way to a power struggle between Octavian and Mark Antony. This rivalry culminated in the famous naval Battle of Actium in 31 B.C., where Octavian's fleet decisively defeated Antony and Cleopatra's forces, leading to their suicides.

Octavian's victory at Actium solidified his control over the Roman world, and in 27 B.C., he took the title of Augustus, becoming the first Roman Emperor. This marked the birth of the Roman Empire, a political system that would endure for centuries and shape the course of Western history.

The Battle of Philippi is a testament to the sheer scale of ambition and power that defined the final years of the Roman Republic. It was a clash of titans, where destiny itself seemed to hang in the balance. In the words of Appian, it was a moment when the two sides "advanced against each other with a great shout," heralding the dawn of a new era — an era that would witness the rise of the Roman Empire and the transformation of the world.

Ancient Sources for More Information:

For those readers interested in drinking their historical draughts from closer to the source, here are the ancient historians who recorded details about the Battle of Philippi:

Appian of Alexandria:

Appian's *The Civil Wars* is one of the primary sources for information about the Battle of Philippi. He describes the clash between the forces of the Second Triumvirate (Octavian and Mark Antony) and the forces of Brutus and Cassius.

Appian notes that the battle occurred over several days, with various engagements. He provides insights into the strategies and tactics employed by both sides, as well as the shifting fortunes of the battle.

He also describes key events, such as Cassius' suicide and the subsequent battles leading to the ultimate victory of the Triumvirs.

Cassius Dio:

Cassius Dio's *Roman History* contains an account of the Battle of Philippi. He provides a narrative of the battle's progression, including the initial success of the republican forces under Brutus and Cassius.

Dio discusses the personalities and strategies of the leading figures, such as the rivalry between Octavian and Mark Antony.

He also details the consequences of the battle for the Roman Republic, including the consolidation of power by Octavian (Augustus) and the end of the Roman Republic.



Plutarch:

Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* (commonly called *Parallel Lives*) includes biographies of important historical figures, and he provides accounts of both Brutus and Mark Antony. While not a dedicated account of the battle, his writings offer insights into the characters and motivations of the individuals involved.

Plutarch's biographical approach gives readers a sense of the personal and political dynamics that contributed to the Battle of Philippi.

Suetonius:

Suetonius's biography of Augustus included in his *Twelve Caesars* provides a brief account of those events leading up to the Battle of Philippi, as well as the ultimate defeat of the republican forces by the army of the Second Triumvirate.

These ancient historians offer valuable information about the Battle of Philippi and its historical context, though their accounts vary in detail and perspective.



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