

The Temple of Mars Ultor: What Was Being Avenged?  
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It is common wisdom that the Temple of Mars Ultor had been vowed by Octavian at the Battle of Philippi, yet this appears only vaguely and only in two sources (Ovid, Fasti 5.569-78, which does not mention Philippi at all and Suetonius, Augustus 29, the only one to mention the battle). All others who discuss events of either the battle or dedication do not mention any vow by Octavian. Ovid's description was written nearly half a century after the battle, when all eyewitnesses were dead or elderly, and presents a heroic portrait of Octavian at odds with other reports, including that of Octavian himself (Appian, Civil War 5.14, 53, 58) and his colleagues Agrippa and Maecenas (Pliny, Natural History 7.147-8; Elegiae in Maecenatem 1.43). These imply Octavian was in no position to vow anything and was not even recognized as the victor of the battle, a role that fell to the person seen at the time as the true avenger of Caesar, Marcus Antonius, something conveniently forgotten in later years.

Forty years later in 2 BC, when the Temple of Mars Ultor was dedicated, seeking vengeance for Philippi would have seemed irrelevant to most, and at odds with the decades of peace and prosperity Augustus had successfully promoted. Yet Ovid hinted at another source for vengeance: the Parthians, who, were still an issue in 2 BC. In fact the name Mars Ultor is unknown from the era of Philippi but first appears on coins of 19 BC, just after the recovery of the standards lost by Crassus in 54 BC. Ovid, in his account of the dedication, did not mention Philippi but referred to the Parthians three times (Fasti 5.580, 585, 593). Yet the temple ended up with a dual avenging role, the Parthians and Philippi, something explained away twice by Ovid (Fasti 5. 579, 585), creating a forced dedication that not even Ovid was comfortable with.

The question remains as to why Philippi was associated with the temple at all, if the events of 40 years ago were now irrelevant after years of Augustan peace, and the Parthians were the real threat (as the temple was being dedicated, Augustus' grandson Gaius was setting forth against them). If there had been a temple of Mars Ultor vowed at Philippi, such a vow would have been made by the recognized victor of the battle, Antonius. Antonius was long dead but Augustus, even in 2 BC, was still in a familial relationship to him: Antonius had been married to Augustus' sister Octavian, and saw to the raising and careers of Antonius' surviving children, including Iullus Antonius, who had been consul in 10 BC. Other children of Antonius, such as the two Antoniae and Kleopatra Selene, were assured proper marriages. If Antonius had vowed a Temple of Mars Ultor at Philippi, it eventually fell to Augustus to insure its completion. But this obviously was touchy politically, but when the Temple of Mars Ultor, essentially a monument to vengeance against the Parthians, was dedicated, Augustus could fold Philippi into it and thereby discharge the vow of his late brother-in-law. But it created an ironic situation that not even the propagandistics of the reign could fully explain.