Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. July 13, 44 BC. I’m Sally Helm.

If the ancient Roman Senator Marcus Junius Brutus were a listener of this podcast, he would prefer that we identify this date as the 13th of Quinctilus or Quintilis Not July. The name “July” is new—it honors Julius Caesar—and Marcus Brutus doesn’t like it. Because Marcus Brutus has been trying his best to get people to stop thinking about Caesar.

Four months ago, almost to the day, Brutus was one of the leaders of the group of Senators that stabbed Caesar to death. He says he did it to save the Republic: Caesar had recently named himself dictator for life. Brutus hoped that people would rally around the assassins for killing the dictator and restoring the Republic. Some of them do…but a lot of them don’t. The backlash has essentially banished Brutus from Rome.

Now he’s holed up in a villa in the Italian countryside, trying desperately to make his case to fellow Romans. To do that, he’s sponsoring a games. They coincide with a festival called The Ludi Appollinares. In the large stone structure of Rome’s Circus Maximus, there are chariot races and theater performances and beast hunts in honor of the god, Apollo. Brutus’s goal: to put on a games so good, they’ll create a wave of popular approval. And convince the people to call him back to Rome as their rightful leader.

It’s now the 13th day of July—or of Quinctilus, depending on your perspective. It is the very last day of the Ludi Appollinares. The games have just concluded. And as the dust settles in the Circus Maximus, and the chariot-pulling horses are sent back to their stalls, and the people of Rome hang up their ceremonial wreaths and put back on their everyday tunics—the exiled Brutus is about to find out if his plan worked.

Today: a shocking assassination has left a power vacuum, and three men vie to fill it. Can a play convince the masses that Brutus was right to stick a dagger into Caesar? And what’s the meaning of a sudden streak of light against the sky—is it a blessing…or a curse?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: It’s been four months since Marcus Brutus and his fellow conspirators stabbed Julius Caesar to death. Now, instead of following through on his plan to take power in Rome and restore the glorious republic…Brutus is holed up in a country estate. Unable to return to Rome. Brooding about what went wrong.

Geoffrey Sumi is a classics professor at Mount Holyoke college. He takes us back to a moment four months ago when things began to unravel for Brutus. He and his fellow conspirators have just recently killed Julius Caesar on the floor of the Roman Senate House.

Because Brutus thought Caesar was a tyrant. And he thought the people would agree. Some do but many don’t. Rome is divided…and in chaos. Caesar is dead and now the question is, what to do with his body? More to the point: should he be given a state funeral?
**Geoffrey Sumi:** In Roman tradition, if you have a tyrant, someone who's acting against the interests of the Republic as the conspirators would have argued Caesar was doing, there's a very clear tradition about what you do with his body. You impale it on a hook and drag it through the streets and toss it into the Tiber River.

**Sally Helm:** That's what Brutus and his allies want: to disgrace Caesar by feeding his corpse to the fishes.

But Caesar's second in command, Marc Antony, says…not so fast. Before the assassination, Marc Antony was Caesar’s consul—second only to the dictator himself. You can think of him as Caesar’s understudy. Meaning…he thinks the moment for his star turn has arrived.

**Geoffrey Sumi:** His path to power clearly was, to take Caesar's place as much as he could.

**Sally Helm:** The meeting is convened, and the debate begins. Marc Anthony is Team Caesar. He goes big, arguing that not only should Caesar have a state-sponsored funeral, but it should be held in the Roman Forum, which would be an immense unprecedented honor. Because the better Caesar looks, the better Marc Antony looks.

**Geoffrey Sumi:** He wanted to preserve Caesar's memory as much as possible because it was his advantage to do so.

**Sally Helm:** Brutus and the conspirators, meanwhile, want Caesar to be swiftly forgotten. Or maybe remembered, very occasionally, as an ugly detour on the Republic’s march towards glory. So, they say, no state funeral. We’ll have none of Antony’s naked political ploy.

**Geoffrey Sumi:** Treat him as a tyrant. Get rid of him and move on. You can almost see, you know, almost like two political parties in Rome.

**Sally Helm:** But then…Brutus gets to his feet. He stands before Antony and the Senate as the descendant of a noble Roman family—a lineage that goes back to Luscius Brutus, the very first Consul of the Roman Republic. A person who helped usher in a government of the people, not a government of kings.

**Geoffrey Sumi:** So, there's this tradition in Roman history that the earliest form of government was a kingship. The Kings became tyrants, Luscius Brutus got rid of the Kings. And so, this is the Brutus that, you know, Marcus Brutus, at least partly, modeling himself after.

**Sally Helm:** He feels that he, too, has overthrown a king, by killing Caesar. And so surely, he’ll condemn this proposal to give Caesar a burial fit for royalty.

And yet…Brutus sees that all this infighting is tearing Rome apart. So as a kind of olive branch to Caesar's supporters he says, Go ahead. Have your funeral. What’s the worst that could happen?

The historian Plutarch will later write that Brutus has just made ‘a total and irrevocable error.’

**Sally Helm:** The funeral is held the next day. Caesar's body is wrapped in gold and purple cloth. Professional mourners wail in chorus as the body is carried into the Forum atop an ivory couch. Marc Antony steps forward. The crowd grows hushed.

**Geoffrey Sumi** Marc Anthony gave this really, eloquent, but also provocative speech.
**Sally Helm:** You might know Shakespeare’s version. Antony begins, ‘Friends, Romans, Countrymen….’

**Voice Portrayal of Antony:** …Lend me your ears. I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them. The good is oft’ interred with their bones. So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus had told you Caesar was ambitious if it was, so it was a grievous fault. And grievously had Caesar answered it.

**Sally Helm:** Antony knows that Rome is listening. And especially, that Roman soldiers are listening. Men who fought with Caesar. Men who now are still scattered across the empire, watching this all unfold.

**Geoffrey Sumi:** And Antony knew that if it ever came to civil war again, he needed soldiers on his side. And, you know, the Caesar soldiers, Caesar's veteran soldiers were very sympathetic to Caesar's memory and wanted to preserve it.

**Sally Helm:** Antony ends his speech…

**Voice Portrayal of Antony:** Bear with me. My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar, and I must pause till it come back to me.

**Sally Helm:** …and all hell breaks loose.

Mourners pour forward. A mob of them. They hoist the couch holding Caesar’s body onto their shoulders and carry it out of the Forum. They parade it through the streets, then return to the Forum, where they set Caesar’s body ablaze

**Geoffrey Sumi:** They're impromptu funeral Pyre right there. And then they set up an altar, marking the spot where he'd been cremated and effectively begin worshiping him almost as a God.

**Sally Helm:** Watching this, Brutus realizes, ‘Rome is not safe for me now.’ He flees the city to plot his next move.

With Brutus out of the city, Antony is poised to become the new ruler of the Roman Empire. There’s just one problem. Caesar has left an heir. His great nephew Gaius Octavius, or Octavian. A teenager with limited scant experience. But, thanks to Caesar’s will, Octavian does have a couple of big things going for him.

**Geoffrey Sumi:** By the terms of Caesar's will not only was he Caesar's primary heir, which meant he got an enormous amount of money…but he also was given Caesar's name. So, Gaius Octavius then became, Gaius Julius Caesar.

**Sally Helm:** To some Romans, it’s as if Julius Caesar is speaking from beyond the grave. Saying, ‘you want another Caesar? Well, here he is.’

At the moment Caesar is killed, Octavian is doing what teenagers sometimes do: he’s studying abroad. In what’s then part of Greece, and now Albania. He finds out about his great Uncle Julius’s assassination in a letter from his mother. Which includes a strict instruction:

**Geoffrey Sumi:** Don't come back to the city.

**Sally Helm:** Do NOT show your face in Rome.
Geoffrey Sumi: It's just too risky because she thought, if the conspiracy grew, that as Caesar’s heir he would be next.

Sally Helm: “Next” meaning, *next to be stabbed to death*. This is wise motherly advice. Octavian ignores it. After all, he is a teenager. He rushes to Rome. The seat of power. And that is where this previously obscure relative of Julius Caesar’s, meets with Marc Antony, the celebrated Roman commander. And:

Geoffrey Sumi: There’s is a snubbing moment, where Antony meets up with Octavian, but just dismisses him saying this is a kid who owes everything to his name, you know, he doesn't take him seriously, really at all.

Sally Helm: Antony feels that Octavian is no threat. And in fact, could be useful. It’s clear that the young man has come to Rome to present himself as Caesar’s heir. That puts Octavian directly in conflict at this moment not with Marc Antony, but with Brutus, who believes that the last thing Rome needs is another Julius Caesar.

Antony likes the idea of letting Octavian take on Brutus. So, he tolerates him … for now.

Geoffrey Sumi: Anthony, clearly, he feels some need to accommodate Octavian and it may be because again, he just says, okay, I can do this and then get rid of the kid forever kind of thing.

Sally Helm: Antony’s plan: let Brutus and Octavian battle it out and when they’re done, Antony will swoop in and take power. Should Octavian win, somehow, Antony is confident he can be swept aside. Or as Professor Sumi put it:

Geoffrey Sumi: Get rid of the kid forever.

Sally Helm: It's the first, but not the last time, that someone will fatally underestimate Octavian.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: It’s the summer of 44 BC and Julius Caesar is dead. Marc Antony, the military leader who has for years served Caesar faithfully, remains a powerful force in Rome. Octavian, Caesar’s great nephew, is back new in town, and hoping to grab the reins. Brutus, the once-great statesman, is biding his time outside of Rome, trying to figure a way back in.

All three of these men understand a basic truth about politics. He who controls the narrative will gain the upper hand. In this case, the narrative revolves around one question: was Caesar good or was Caesar bad?

Octavian wants to say: Caesar was good. His legacy should be carried on—in the form of me, Gaius Julius Caesar, his chosen heir. Brutus wants to say: Caesar was bad. A tyrant whose death was the best thing that could happen to the Roman Republic. A Republic which now should be restored and led by me—the great killer of kings. Antony, for the moment, stands watching from the sidelines, confident in his ultimate victory.

Brutus and Octavian will battle it out not with armies, but with festivals. And Brutus will go first.
Geoffrey Sumi: There's a lot at stake, in these games, you know, maybe even more so than usual. This is his chance to maybe win over popular opinion, right? To win people to his side.

Sally Helm: Brutus’s plan is to throw a wildly successful games at the festival of the Ludi Appollinares, return to Rome in triumph, and take over.

And the first element of pleasing the people at your games: entertain them.

Geoffrey Sumi: I would say three components to the entertainment. There were the, what were called Ludi Scaenici.

Sally Helm: The Theater.

Geoffrey Sumi: Ludi Circenses

Sally Helm: Chariot Races.

Geoffrey Sumi: And then something called the Venatio which was a wild beast hunt or beast show. And basically, what the Roman officials would try to do, is to import, sometimes, the most exotic animals they could find. You know, lions, panthers or leopards. We hear about giraffes, hippopotamus. Crocodiles, definitely animals, not indigenous to Italy you might say.

Sally Helm: Are there records of people being like, oh my gosh, we'd never seen giraffe before?

Geoffrey Sumi: Oh yeah, absolutely. There's often in our sources, they'll tell us something like, you know, this person was the first one ever to put on display, like, a lion, in Rome.

Sally Helm: So, Brutus goes out and assembles his beasts. He coordinates the chariot races—the fastest horses and the best riders. Done. And then he turns to the most important thing: the play.

In Ancient Rome, plays are a way for politicians to speak to the people. And Brutus wants his to go perfectly.

Geoffrey Sumi: He went to Naples to find some of the best actors that he could hire for his games.

Sally Helm: Brutus himself goes to find these actors. Actors who will perform a play with this message: disposing of Caesar was just and right. And his assassin, Brutus, can be trusted to guide Rome. The name of the play that Brutus chooses to put on is:

“The Brutus.”

I’m being serious—the play is actually a real play from ancient times called “The Brutus.” Which is perfect for Brutus’s plan. It is a play that tells the story of his early ancestor—Lucius Brutus—the toppler of kings.

Geoffrey Sumi: The subtext would be that. Yeah, like Lucius Brutus, he also was a tyrant killer.

Sally Helm: And Lucius Brutus, my ancestor, helped found our Roman Republic. Where every man has a voice, and no man is above the law.
Geoffrey Sumi: I think that's the message that Marcus Brutus was trying to send that we did the same thing, killed the tyrant, Caesar and we essentially re-founded the Republic.

Sally Helm: I’m not the villain here, I’m the hero.

Finally, everything is ready. The festival kicks off at the Circus Maximus. It’s hot, loud. And ordinary Romans show up. They’re living through this time of upheaval, of fear. Julius Caesar slain. All these rivals competing for power.

Geoffrey Sumi: I mean, people want to know what's happening. And one of the ways you find out what's happening is to go to the theater. To get a sense of, the climate, of the city at the time, the political climate,

Sally Helm: Brutus knows people are looking for answers. And he wants to tell them his version of the story about what is happening in Rome.

But Brutus is not in Rome—he’s still holed up out of town. And when spectators sit down to watch this production, with these famous actors hand-picked in Naples…the play that they watch is not “The Brutus.”

The record doesn’t tell us exactly what happened. But at the last minute, Brutus’s opponents swap in a different play.

Geoffrey Sumi: A different play that doesn't seem to have been at all politically topical. It wouldn’t have served the same political purpose that “The Brutus” would have.

Sally Helm: It's like, it was, he was trying to put on this political thriller and it's like, oh, a romcom, or a…

Geoffrey Sumi: Something like that. But just not, but yeah, clearly not what he would have wanted.

Sally Helm: But then, according to one source, something happens that is exactly what Brutus wanted.

Geoffrey Sumi: In the theater, this, kind of chants rising up from the crowd in favor of the conspirators.

Sally Helm: Even though this play has nothing to do with the assassination, Brutus’s dream seems to be coming true. A crowd of Romans enters the Circus Maximus, demanding that he and the other conspirators be forgiven for the assassination and recalled to Rome.

But then...another group of Romans comes in to stop the show.

Geoffrey Sumi: Kind of answering chant or rebuking chant from supporters of Caesar.

Sally Helm: They yell that the conspirators are traitors who should be punished for their crimes. Their message: You killed Caesar. Never come back.
That second group drowns out the Brutus supporters. They have the final word. To put it in theatrical terms...Brutus’s play is a flop. His games end, and the narrative has not really changed. Brutus is no closer to becoming the leader of Rome.

Now it’s Octavian’s turn.

He announces a games with a single theme: honoring Julius Caesar.

**Geoffrey Sumi**: These are the kinds of games that really would have appealed, especially to Caesar’s veteran soldiers, but probably to the larger populace, in Rome.

**Sally Helm**: Octavian’s goal is to remind the people of the kind of giant parties that Julius Caesar threw. There was one legendary dinner party in particular.

**Geoffrey Sumi**: We think he had a banquet for 180,000 people

**Sally Helm**: Whoa, wait, it took me a second, 180,000 people?!

**Geoffrey Sumi**: 180,000 people. He showed up in his slippers which I always think is a great, image of, you know, like he's, everybody's at his house, you know, but it was out, you know, in the forum.

**Sally Helm**: So, Octavian has some big slippers to fill.

His games happen just days after Brutus’s, at the end of July. Octavian, of course, advertises the name July, not Quinctilus. He kicks things off with a grand procession.

There are magistrates, charioteers, musicians, dancers, singing as they file through the Circus Maximus.

**Geoffrey Sumi**: And then the images of the gods would also be paraded along. And so, Caesar's image was in this procession, in the circus procession.

**Sally Helm**: Octavian has made sure of this. The crowd is carrying a statue of Caesar on their shoulders. Placed among the gods.

**Geoffrey Sumi**: This smacks of, you know, Caesar's Regal power, which, you know, of course would have been anathema to the conspirators and all the supporters of the conspirators.

**Sally Helm**: Those supporters still exist. The anti-Caesar forces may be down, but they’re not out. And then…

… a comet appears in the sky.

**Geoffrey Sumi**: Usually comets were considered harbingers of doom. You know, they're not usually considered any kind of positive thing

**Sally Helm**: All of Rome looks to the heavens as an icy ribbon of light cuts across the sky.

**Geoffrey Sumi**: During these games, people are getting together in crowds, whether it's the theater, the circus in the forum, what have you, and they're looking at this comet. And so, there's gotta be some kind of talk happening in terms of trying to understand it and trying to interpret it.
Sally Helm: Octavian is also in the Circus Maximus looking up at the comet. And he doesn’t see doom. He sees opportunity. He gives his interpretation to the people of Rome. *That thing in the sky— it’s not a comet. It’s the divine soul of Julius Caesar.*

Geoffrey Sumi: Caesar's soul ascending to heaven, which means that it was interpreted to his apotheosis. His deification and indication of his divinity. And this did happen later. I mean, two years later, January 42 BC, he's the Senate decreed him a God. He became Divus Julius. The deified Julius.

Sally Helm: And if Julius Caesar is a god, that makes Octavian the son of a god. A divine heir destined to rule Rome. In the course of three months, he’s gone from a distant relative of a dead tyrant to practically a demi-god himself. Thanks in large part to his games at the Circus Maximus.

Geoffrey Sumi: Clearly, he has, he seems to have, political savvy in terms of understanding, you know, which way the political winds are blowing and being able to take advantage of things like this.

Sally Helm: Brutus realizes that he cannot defeat this new Caesar in the court of public opinion. So, he gathers an army. But, not even two years later, Octavian and his army will defeat Brutus at The Battle of Philippi. When it is clear to Brutus that all is lost, he kills himself on the battlefield.

Octavian now has one last man to defeat: Marc Anthony. Which Octavian does, a decade later, at the battle of Actium. Afterward, Marc Antony too takes his own life.

Octavian wins it all. He goes on to become Augustus, the first emperor of Rome. Beginning a dynasty that will last 400 years later years. Over the course of his long life, he reshapes Rome into a superpower that will dominate for centuries.

Geoffrey Sumi: I mean, if he had died at the age of 30, there would probably be another civil war and who knows what would've happened, but at least, but that gave him, the opportunity to remain in power, to establish succession that then would ensure that the, the system of government that he created would continue on after he died.

Sally Helm: Octavian dies at the age of 77. On his deathbed, surrounded by his confidants, he is said to have asked them a question that seems to recall those wild theatrics at the Circus Maximus.

“Have I played the part well?” he says. “Then applaud me as I exit.”

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to HISTORY This Week. And for other moments throughout history that are worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the history channel today. If you want to get in touch, please send us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410. We are reading and listening, and we’d really love to hear from you, so please reach out.

Special thanks to our guest and author of Ceremony and Power: Performing Politics in Rome between Republic and Empire Dr. Geoffrey Sumi of Mount Holyoke College.
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