A Vast Roman Conspiracy

The Death of Caesar
By Barry Strauss
Simon & Schuster, 325 pages, $27

By GREG WOOLF

DELVING INTO THE history of the Roman Republic is like exploring a vast rau-

ged house. The lights are out in most of the rooms in the dingy parts of the-

nights and seventh and sixth centu-
ries B.C., when Rome was ruled by kings—women can barely make out the

shape of the rooms. Were there really seven kings? How many of the names

we have are real? Can we trust any of the dates? Climb the dirty stairs a few

centuries and we pass into other empty rooms, a few dimly lit by sunlight

filtering through the floorboards from above. Hamilcar and his elephants stand

out in a pool of light cast mostly by the humble Livy, but he was writing two

centuries later. There are decades after

Hannibal when we do not have much more than lists of names. But cross

these last dingy corridors and suddenly, in the last decades B.C., also the last

genesis of the free Republic, we emerge into brilliant daylight.

How did they manage to get 60 people involved and keep it secret? What had Caesar
done to alienate so many?

Now at last we hear the Romans in their own words. Caesar tells (carefully
edited) stories of his campaigns in Gaul. Sallust describes Catilina’s great conspira-
cy, when Cicero was consul in 63 B.C. Caesar himself was nearly implicated in

that botched coup. That and most of all, we hear Cicero: Cicero making passion-

ate speeches in the court, Cicero the self-made man, trying to get the aristocratic

titans to put aside their differ-

ences and build a government for Rome. Cicero uncomfor-

tably trying to rally the Roman mob, and Cicero corresponding with all the great figures of the day. Lastly,

we have philosophical Cicero in forced retirement, composing works of cool

reason tinged by despair. For Caesar was now dictator and Cicero, whose life Ca-

ser had spared, could do nothing about it. Some modern historians have de-

spaired, too, that we see Cicero.

Clearly on its death bed—that after

we manhandle through its 700-year history the light, when it does come, reveals

such a bloody end.

The historian Barry Strauss works in the light, but he does not do despair. In

“The Death of Caesar” he tells the kind of vivid story that is almost always out

of reach of historians of ancient times. At the center of this page-turner are

the months that led up to Caesar’s assassination on the Ides of March, 44 B.C., and the story of

what happened next to those who killed him. So far as Shakespeare, although Mr.

Strauss gives us a little more background than the Bard and follows the story a little

further. The Shakespeare plays begin just before Cae-

ser was offered a crown by Mark Antony, almost

a month before the assassination—one of a se-

ries of scenes that ap-

peared in the hearts of the con-

spirators. Mr. Strauss starts

six months earlier, as Caesar

returns to Rome in triumph

from his last campaign. And

from his last campaign. And

the last days B.C., also the last

genesis of the free Republic, we

emerge into brilliant daylight.

 TOKEN: A coin honoring
Caesar’s assassin
Marcus Junius Brutus.