The Rise to Power of Octavian

Neil Johnson

Introductory note
The following account of the rise to power of the man who was to become Augustus Caesar was written to support a series of three lectures given in 2013 to the Year 13 students of Columba College in Dunedin, New Zealand. It, and the lectures upon which it is based, therefore attempt to serve a very specific purpose, namely to provide a succinct survey of the period of some 15 years between 44 BC and 29 BC during which a complex series of events took place in Rome, in the Roman provinces, and in those other adjacent countries which were either client states of Rome or where attempts were under way to bring them under Roman control. This was a time of conflicts and treaties, of alliances made and broken, of acts of almost unimaginable brutality and others of surprising leniency, and of strategically arranged marriages and divorces; things were done that were motivated by the desire to maintain the highest principles of democratic rule, whilst others sprang obviously and shamefully from naked personal ambition.

To reach some understanding these things, as far as that is possible such a long time after they occurred, it is necessary to have a chronological structure of events that can be fairly easily grasped and remembered, and this I have tried to provide. Inevitably, such an endeavour is fraught with risks, primary amongst which is the impression which can be given by compressing the account of so many years into the space of only three 50-minute lectures, that events separated by weeks, months, or even years, occurred in a much more rapid sequence than was actually the case: this can sometimes make one event appear to have a strong causal relationship to a subsequent one when the casual link was in fact slight or even absent.

There is nothing in what follows that cannot be found in other published sources. I present no new evidence and I claim no novel historical perspective. All I have tried to do is to distil from other writings what seem to me to be the essential features of this turbulent period of Roman history, and in that process of distillation, and in trying to concentrate only upon events which are directly germane to the main theme of Octavian’s rise to power, I have had necessarily to omit much that others might think important, and certainly a great many side-plots which make good reading because of their dramatic nature. I therefore encourage readers to augment their knowledge by referring to other accounts.

I am also well aware that in trying to present historical material in such a way as to make an interesting story, one runs the risk of making up a narrative that fails to reflect the reality of what actually happened. Accounts of the same series of historical events frequently vary in which events are given prominence and which are not, and also in the precise order in which those events occurred: I have had to make my choice between these accounts in formulating my own narrative, and I shall therefore please some whilst incurring the disapproval of others.

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Although the primary focus of the following narrative is upon the period between 44 BC and 29 BC, the story really begins somewhat earlier, in the year 63 BC. This was the year in which Marcus Tullius Cicero was elected Consul. Cicero was a distinguished senator, lawyer, philosopher and orator, and his writings have been credited with transforming the Latin language (indeed, it has been said that after Cicero, all Latin literature was either an attempt to copy Cicero’s elegant style or a reaction against it). His election to the consulate was the culmination of Cicero’s political career, and an event that was destined to ennoble his family for generations to come. What Cicero did not know was that on 23rd September of that same year there would be born in the small town of Velitrae, a few miles to the south-east of Rome, a child by the name of Gaius Octavius, referred to as ‘Octavianus’ by Ronald Syme (see Note 1 at the end of this account) in The Roman Revolution (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1939) and as ‘Octavian’ by most other historians; had he also known that 20 years later that same Octavian would be directly responsible for ordering his illegal, unjustified, and brutal murder, Cicero’s blood would have run cold.

Octavian’s mother Atia (Atia Balba Caesonia) was the daughter of Julia (Julia Caesaris Minor), the younger sister of Julius Caesar. His father, also called Gaius Octavius, was a well-to-do banker from a respected, though not distinguished family; a member of the Senate; he was made praetor in 61 BC and later governor of Macedonia; his military successes in Macedonia qualified for a triumph in Rome and also made him eligible to stand for election as Consul, though he died before either could happen (Octavian was only four years old at the time). Octavian’s mother remarried, her new husband, and thus Octavian’s step-father, being Lucius Marcus Philippus, who was Consul in 56 BC.

Relationship of Octavian to Julius Caesar

Julius Caesar took great interest in the welfare of his great-nephew Octavian, allowing him the honour of giving the funeral oration to Caesar’s sister Julia when Octavian was no more than eleven years old. In 46 BC Octavian rode in Caesar’s
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*triumph* and the following year he joined Caesar in one of the Spanish campaigns. Subsequently, he was not only accorded various honours by Caesar, but also enrolled as a patrician. In 44 BC Caesar sent Octavian to Apollonia where Caesar intended to plan and organise his Parthian campaign; Octavian was to study oratory (rhetoric) and get to know the troops (who seem to have taken to the young man).

However, before Caesar could join Octavian and take command of his legions, he was assassinated in Rome, at the foot of Pompey’s statue, on 15 March (the Ides of March) 44 BC. When Octavian received the news of Caesar’s death he decided to return to Rome. Though urged by some of his friends to take Caesar’s Macedonian legions and march on Rome, he adopted instead a more cautious approach, returning with only a few troops and landing near to Brundisium (Brindisi) towards the end of March.

Map 1. Major towns mentioned in the period up to the siege of Perusia

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In Rome, events had been moving rapidly. The conspirators who had murdered Julius Caesar had not made any plans for what would happen next, assuming naïvely that the Republic would return automatically to the manner in which it had operated before Caesar’s rule as Dictator. They were wrong. The leadership of the state was now in the hands of Antony (Marcus Antonius) who had been Caesar’s fellow Consul, and who now resolved to fill the power vacuum left by Caesar’s death.

Publius Cornelius Dolabella (who was Cicero’s son-in-law) had seized the consulship left vacant by Julius Caesar's death, and although Dolabella was young and ambitious Antony confirmed him in his consulship, judging correctly that he would not be an immediate rival in the scramble for power. He then turned his attention to Lepidus (Aemilius Lepidus). After Caesar had been elected dictator for life he had raised Lepidus, his strongest supporter, to the position of Master of the Horse – which effectively made him Caesar’s deputy and thus Antony’s chief rival for power. Antony secured the support of Lepidus by (illegally) appointing him to the position of Pontifex Maximus. Whether this was strictly necessary is debatable: Lepidus, although ambitious, was not a particular courageous man and might well have baulked at the prospect of taking on an opponent as formidable as Antony. In any case, on the day that Caesar was assassinated Lepidus was preparing to leave for the province of Gallia Cisalpina to the governorship of which Caesar had just appointed him.

On 16 March, Antony persuaded the Senate to confirm the legality of all the decrees made by Caesar. One effect of this (which must surely have been foreseen by Antony) was to make legal the appointment of the two prime conspirators against Caesar, Brutus (Marcus Junius Brutus) and Cassius (Gaius Cassius Longinus) to the governorships of Macedonia and Syria, respectively. In fact, Antony was happy for the conspirators to be pardoned, because this conveniently absolved him of the need to pursue them and bring them to justice, which would inevitably involve another civil war. He was also aware, however, that whilst they were still in Rome they, and the republican ideals which they embodied, posed a serious threat to his plans. It is often said that Antony’s inflammatory speech, delivered on the occasion of Caesar’s funeral on 20 March 44 BC, produced the necessary effect, stirring the mob to attack the conspirators’ houses, and causing the conspirators themselves to flee from Rome in alarm. This is, however, an oversimplification. Whilst Antony may have made such a speech, and its effect could well have been to induce Brutus and Cassius to make an immediate and judicious departure from Rome, it is clear that they subsequently returned, because on 5 June 44 BC Antony persuaded the Senate to offer them the provinces of Crete and Cyrene. Though both Brutus and Cassius left Rome with every appearance of going to take up their governorships of these provinces, Brutus moved to occupy Macedonia whilst Cassius took Syria. Antony was uneasy about this illegal seizing of two territories, but to ensure that the two principal conspirators stayed out of Rome he initially raised no objections; and indeed in due course the Senate gave legal recognition to Brutus and Cassius’s governorships. Decimus Brutus, the half-brother of Marcus Brutus and also one of the conspirators, had already left for his province of Gallia Cisalpina.

By his conciliatory policy, Antony had managed to rid Rome of the conspirators whilst keeping within the bounds of legality, and the Senate showed its appreciation by decreeing to him the province of Macedonia and the legions based there; Dolabella, Antony’s companion consul, was awarded the governorship of Syria. These two appointments were in spite of Macedonia and Syria being in the hands of Brutus and Cassius, respectively, and in conflict with the legalization of Caesar’s acts
which had given the governorships of the provinces to the two conspirators: such anomalies do not seem to have concerned either Antony or the Senate, perhaps reflecting the degree of confusion existing in the aftermath of Caesar’s assassination.

Antony also arranged for a law to be passed which provided for the abolition of the office of Dictator: not to have done so would have revealed his own aspirations too clearly.

Antony’s greatest need was for money: without it, he could not pay troops to support his cause. As Consul, he persuaded Calpurnia, Caesar’s widow, to place into his custody not only Caesar’s Will but the greater part of his personal fortune. In addition, he seized the public treasury and raised additional money by selling various privileges and immunities (as it was in his power as Consul to do). He did not pay the citizens of Rome the bequest of 300 sesterces each that had been left to them by Caesar. Antony insisted that all his actions were consistent with Caesar’s Will, though suspicions have been raised that he may have forged parts of it and altered others.

So far, everything appeared to be going to plan for Anthony, but that plan was soon to be thrown into disarray by the arrival in Rome of Octavian.

Octavian had decided to land a short distance from Brundisium rather than in the port itself, because he was unsure of the reception he would be given by the legions stationed there prior to their being sent to join the troops already in Macedonia. As it happened, when he eventually arrived in Brundisium he was received enthusiastically by the legionaries.

Whilst in Brundisium, Octavian learned of the provision in Caesar’s Will making him Caesar’s adopted son (see Note 2) and thereby changing his name to Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (though Octavian thereafter dropped ‘Octavianus’ and referred to himself as ‘Caesar’). Octavian also received letters from his mother Atia and his father-in-law Philippus, advising him that it would be dangerous, and therefore inadvisable, to accept Caesar’s legacy, but he decided not to heed the advice, replying that he would not only accept the legacy, but would punish Caesar’s murderers and succeed to power. He was still only 19 years of age.

To accomplish these last two objectives Octavian knew he would need money. Although at this point he may have known that he had been left a substantial portion of Caesar’s wealth, he did not yet have access to it. According to Werner Eck, in *The Age of Augustus* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), he appropriated the funds that Caesar had sent for the Parthian campaign, and the annual tribute that had been paid by the province of Asia; others, such as H. G. Weddel in *A History of Rome* (London: Johnson Murray, 1867) say that it was Antony who had appropriated these funds, and that Octavian was obliged to raise money by selling such property as he had been left by Julius Caesar and by also borrowing large amounts (in the confident belief that he would succeed in his quest to replace Caesar and would therefore be in a position to repay such loans). In his autobiographical note *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (Acts of the Divine Augustus) Octavian claimed to have used only his own money and, given Caesar’s bequest, even if, as Eck suggests, Octavian had seized the Parthian campaign money (which was, after all, Caesar’s) the assertion might actually be justified.

Accompanied by a small force, Octavian set out for Rome, though he first called upon the orator and senator Cicero (Marcus Tullius Cicero) who was staying at Cumae near to Puteoli. Cicero had met the conspirators after they had murdered Caesar, in order to assess their intentions, and he had favoured the subsequent amnesty (not surprisingly, as he was the leader of the republican faction in the
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Senate). He had also formed a highly favourable impression of Octavian’s father, and was flattered by the young Octavian’s visit (‘He is devoted to me,’ he later wrote). Octavian was aware of the influence wielded by Cicero, and was wise to cultivate his acquaintance and support.

On his way through Campania, where he visited Philippus, his father-in-law, Octavian also used some of his appropriated funds to win over a substantial force of some 1,000 veterans to his cause.

Octavian arrived in Rome on 6 May 44 BC where he presented himself to the people in the Forum and announced his acceptance of Caesar’s legacy and his intention to fulfil his filial duty – firstly by avenging Caesar’s death and secondly by honouring the stipulation in Caesar’s Will that each member of the urban plebs (the non-patrician, free members of Rome’s population) should receive the 300 sesterces bequeathed to them by Caesar. His announcements were all well received.

Octavian also paid for the games in honour of Caesar’s victories (Eck notes that a comet appeared at the time of these games, and that Octavian encouraged the belief that this portended the elevation of Julius Caesar to the status of a god, though others put the manifestation of the comet to a much later date).

When Octavian approached Antony and asked to be given that portion (three-quarters) of Caesar’s wealth that had been bequeathed to him, Antony refused. Octavian was not able to resolve this matter militarily because the troops accompanying him refused to fight those supporting Antony, because they had been comrades in various campaigns. Nevertheless, some historians, including Eck, claim that Antony must have felt sufficiently nervous about the developing situation for him to decide that it would be prudent to take certain precautions.

In early June Antony acquired provincial command (proconsular imperium) of Gallia Cisalpina and Gallia Comata (the transalpine provinces in Gaul with the exception of Gallia Narbonensis) for a period of five years. The legality of this has been questioned, with some historians asserting that Antony used his consular status to award the command to himself: this seems unlikely, as there is clear evidence that the decision was made by a plebiscite – a ‘resolution of the people’ – on 1 June. It was an important move, for these provinces – and Gallia Cisalpina in particular – were strategically placed to provide him with easy access to Italy. In exchange, he agreed (some sources say he was required) to relinquish the province of Macedonia which had been decreed to him earlier, though he retained command of the Macedonian legions.

Antony’s assumption of Gallia Cisalpina faced an important difficulty: the term of the incumbent governor, Decimus Brutus had not yet come to an end. Antony knew that he would have to fight for the province, and that to expel Decimus he would need troops. He turned to the Macedonian legions based in Brundisium.

When Octavian became aware of this, he consulted his advisers – Agrippa (Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa), who had been Octavian’s friend from their schooldays and was an able general and administrator; and the Etruscan Maecenas (Gaius Cilnius Maecenas), a diplomat, artist and voluptuary, whose talent for negotiation made him a particularly important figure in Octavian’s rise to power. Presumably as a result of their counsel, Octavian raised a further force of veterans from Campania and sent agents ahead of Antony to Brundisium where they distributed propaganda leaflets extolling the virtues of Octavian and the negative aspects of Antony, and also told the troops that Octavian would pay 2,000 sesterces to each soldier who joined him.
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Upon his arrival in Brundisium, Antony offered the soldiers a mere 400 sesterces each, and this, combined with the effects of Octavian’s propaganda offensive, led the legions to riot. Antony had the leaders of the riot arrested and executed – an act which (predictably) led to a further worsening of his appeal to the troops. However, three legions eventually agreed to accompany him to Gallia Cisalpina, first marching north towards Ariminum (Rimini). Antony left the main body of his troops at Tibur, to the north-east of Rome, and then, surrounded by a body of soldiers, entered Rome.

Once in Rome, Antony set about the process of turning the people and – more importantly – the Senate, against Octavian. It is a particular feature of Antony’s strategy that he did not baulk at the use of obscenity, if it served his purpose to do so. On this occasion he claimed that Octavian had secured his inheritance from Julius Caesar by selling his body sexually to the Dictator, a claim which Antony clearly felt might be believed.

Antony also claimed that he had been the victim of an assassination plot, with the strong implication that it had been initiated by Octavian, and Antony had several members of his own bodyguard arrested and executed.

Although it seems that neither accusation was widely believed, Antony proposed to the Senate that Octavian should be declared a public enemy, and a date was set upon which this proposition would be discussed. Antony, however, failed to turn up for the debate on not one, but two, occasions. On the first of these, Antony received word that one of his legions, which he had left at Tibur, had deserted him and had declared allegiance to Octavian. He left Rome and rushed back to Tibur to assure himself of the loyalty of the remaining troops. The second occasion followed a similar pattern. On being informed that another legion had deserted him and had gone to the town of Alba Fucens not far from Tibur, Antony hurried to Alba only to be met (if reports can be believed) by a shower of arrows from the city’s ramparts. The reasons for the defection of the legions from Antony to Octavian are not clear, though the magic of Caesar’s name must surely have been one factor and the offer of more money by Octavian than by Anthony another.

On his return to Rome, Antony (perhaps wisely) decided that the best thing he could do would be to get any troops remaining loyal to him into battle as soon as possible. He therefore put into immediate effect his plan to go to Gallia Cisalpina and eject Decimus Brutus from the governorship. Whilst this decision could have reflected his unease about Octavian’s popularity with the legions (the name of Caesar, which Octavian now bore, had a dramatic effect on Octavian’s standing with the troops), another interpretation is that he underestimated the threat posed by Octavian to his own aspirations in Rome, and was not at all nervous about leaving Octavian in Rome unopposed.

When he reached Gallia Cisalpina, Antony found that Decimus, after taking stock of Antony’s forces, was refusing to engage in battle. Instead, he and his troops had taken refuge in the walled city of Mutina (Modena) and were prepared to withstand a siege.

Meanwhile, back in Rome, Cicero had realized that if Antony were to succeed in establishing a power-base in Gallia Cisalpina and Transalpina he would emerge as a natural successor to Julius Caesar and would continue Caesar’s undermining of the ideals of the Republic. Cicero concluded that the best chance of restoring the Republic lay in giving the strongest possible support to Octavian. Accordingly, he delivered a
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long series of speeches in which he extolled at length the virtues of Octavian, whilst launching fierce invective against Antony; these speeches were referred to in later years as the *Philippics* (a name derived from the series of fiery, damning speeches given by Demosthenes against Philip II of Macedon in the 4th Century BC). The first Philippic, which was delivered in the Senate in Antony’s absence on 1 September, 44 BC, was a relatively measured attack on Antony and his policies; it avoided the slanderous personal references which were contained in later Philippics, and drew only a written response from Antony. As soon as Antony had left with his forces for Gallia Cisalpina, Cicero privately circulated the text of the second Philippic (which was never actually presented as a public speech, though Antony soon came to hear of it); in it, Cicero dealt at length with what he claimed was Antony’s dissolute and corrupt nature. At this point, it appears that Cicero privately held the view that the young Octavian could be used to offset the challenge posed by Antony to the restoration of the republic, and then could be manipulated into not assuming an authoritarian role himself. The Philippics were Cicero’s way of ensuring that Octavian was viewed by the Senate in a more favourable light than Antony. The remaining 12 of the 14 Philippics were delivered between December 44 BC and April 43 BC.

The republican faction in the Senate hated Antony, whom they saw as attempting to re-establish the Caesarian authority over the Senate; the Caesarian faction (who were in a majority), whilst not averse to the establishment of authoritarian control over the Senate, were nevertheless in fear of Antony’s naked ambition which might put them, collectively or individually, in danger. This led to a general feeling in the Senate that Antony’s drive for power had to be checked. The problem was, of course, that Antony’s proconsular imperium appeared to give legal status to his decision to take over control of Gallia Cisalpina. In his speeches attacking Antony, Cicero had studiously avoided any mention of the plebiscite giving Antony control of the Gallic provinces, concentrating instead upon the argument that Decimus Brutus had been awarded control of Gallia Cisalpina by Julius Caesar and was therefore the legitimate governor of the province. Despite the weakness of Cicero’s case, his sophistry succeeded in persuading Senate to affirm Decimus Brutus’s title to the governorship of Gallia Cisalpina, thereby making illegal Antony’s attempt to take the province by force. The difficulty with this, as far as the Senate was concerned, was that Antony had troops – and they did not.

This is where Octavian made a quite brilliant move (and not the first of its kind in his career) by placing his troops at the disposal of the Senate. This act – which according to Eck (who is almost certainly correct) was brokered by Cicero – led to Octavian’s being admitted to the Senate with the rank of praetor (strictly illegal for a person only 20 years of age, when the minimum age for admission to the Senate was 30) and awarded an *imperium* (the official authority to raise and command an army). In addition, the Senate approved the payment of the promised bonus to Octavian’s troops from public funds (a promise that was not kept). On 7 January 43 BC Octavian took the *fasces*, the symbol of command.

Even at this stage, Senate was still uneasy about starting another civil war, and sent three envoys to try to persuade Antony to abandon his attempt to take command of Gallia Cisalpina. One of the envoys died in the course of the mission, the remaining two returning with Antony’s reply that he would desist from assuming control of Gallia Cisalpina if he were allowed to take command of Gallia Comata. Senate rejected the proposal.

At the behest of Cicero, the Senate was persuaded to annul all legislation enacted by Antony, and although when Antony heard of this he offered to suspend his
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march on Gallia Cisalpina if his legislation were allowed to stand, the Senate annulled it anyway. Decrees were issued by the Senate against Antony and also against Lepidus in Gallia Narbonensis, who was now allied with Antony.

Octavian and the Consul Hirtius (Aulus Hirtius) led their legions towards Gallia Cisalpina in pursuit of Antony, followed by the other Consul Pansa (Caius Vibius Pansa) with his army.

* On 14 April 43 BC, less than a year since the assassination of Caesar, the battle of Forum Gallorum (a village near to Mutina) took place between the legions of Antony and those of Pansa and Hirtius. Antony thought that he could deal with the two Consuls piecemeal, one after the other, and leaving his younger brother Lucius Antonius in charge of the siege of the town of Mutina, moved some of his forces south to Forum Gallorum, attacking Pansa first. Pansa’s legions were defeated and Pansa himself was seriously injured. Antony’s troops, retiring exultant but weary and disorganized from the battle with Pansa, were then taken by surprise by those of Hirtius and Octavian and forced to retreat.

One week later, on 21 April 43 BC, the armies of Octavian and Hirtius again engaged that of Antony, this time in the battle of Mutina. Antony suffered a crushing defeat, but Hirtius was killed in the battle, and shortly afterwards, Pansa, who had been injured in the earlier engagement at Forum Gallorum, also died. The siege of Mutina was lifted, and Antony and the remnants of his army fled deeper into Gaul. When the news reached Rome, Senate (somewhat belatedly, one might think) declared Antony to be a Public Enemy.

The deaths of Pansa and Hirtius had important consequences for Octavian. As the sole survivor to whom imperium had been awarded, he was now in command of all three armies – a sizeable force. This, of course, has given rise to speculation that Octavian might have had both Pansa and Hirtius killed, and in the light of later developments casting light upon Octavian’s character, the suggestion ought not to be dismissed lightly.

It might be presumed that his command of so many legions would have strengthened Octavian’s position in the eyes of the Senate. Indeed it had. But the Senate was wary of according too much credit, and hence power, to one so young and clearly ambitious, and although it had readily declared Antony to be a public enemy it refused, according to some accounts, Cicero’s call for Octavian to be given a public ovation (a ceremony less magnificent than a triumph but a reward nonetheless). Syme, however, records that the ovation was approved, but that Decimus was accorded the greater acclaim of a triumph. Moreover, the Senate ordered the transfer of Octavian’s legions, including those of Pansa and Hirtius, to the control of Decimus, now released from his siege in Mutina.

In a move that was to have far-reaching consequences, Senate placed Sextus Pompeius (Sextus Pompeius Magnus Pius) in command of the Roman fleet; the son of Pompey the Great, Julius Caesar’s arch rival in the quest for power, Sextus was the natural enemy of Octavian, as was to emerge clearly a few years later. The placing of the fleet under Sextus’s command was in response to Sextus’s having promised the Senate his assistance in their actions against Antony.

Brutus and Cassius, who had illegally placed themselves in charge of the provinces of Macedonia and Syria, respectively, were now confirmed in these
positions by the Senate. All these decisions of the Senate were intended as, and indeed were perceived as, snubs to Octavian, and a signal that he should not unreasonably raise his aspirations.

The complexities of the aftermath of the battle of Mutina have been interpreted in different ways. The following diagram illustrates one set of possibilities, according to which: (1) Antony retreated from Mutina to join Lepidus, the governor of Narbonensis (southern France); (2) Octavian refused a request from Decimus that they should join forces and go in pursuit of Antony (Octavian could not, and would not, aid one of Caesar’s murderers); (3) Decimus tried to follow Antony, but his army was relatively small and weak and he failed; (4) Lepidus in Narbonensis asked Plancus (Marcus Munatius Plancus) who was based in Gallia Transalpina to join him in attacking Antony and Plancus agreed; (5) then, for reasons that are not clear, Lepidus sent word to Plancus that he (Lepidus) alone would attack Antony and told Plancus to hold back (Plancus, who was in any case never quick to enter into conflict, did so); (6) Plancus returned to his base; (7) Antony was joined by Ventidius (Publius Ventidius Bassus) who brought with him three more legions; (8) Lepidus moved to attack Antony; (9) the armies of Lepidus and Antony, however, fraternised and refused to fight; (10) Lepidus and Antony therefore agreed to join forces; (11) Decimus ceased pursuit of Antony and returned to Gallia Transalpina where he joined forces with Plancus; (12) Octavian agreed to a request to join forces with Plancus and Decimus, but in fact did nothing (he still could not be allied to one of Caesar’s killers); (13) and finally Octavian returned to Rome.
The suggestion that Antony’s intention in entering Gallia Narbonensis was to seek the support and protection of Lepidus (which Lepidus had offered a month previously) raises the question of why Lepidus moved to attack him. It may be that Lepidus was initially unaware of the extent to which Antony’s forces had been depleted by the battles of Forum Gallorum and Mutina (Antony still had his cavalry, but only one legion was still in reasonable order, the rest of his forces being the remnants of his other legions) and thought that Antony intended to try to take Gallia Narbonensis, and with it Lepidus’s legions. This would, of course, then allow Antony to regroup and return to Gallia Cisalpina to try once again to take that province. Such a supposition on the part of Lepidus would not have been unreasonable, particularly in view of the arrival of Ventidius with three more legions to add to Antony’s forces. That Lepidus was not initially kindly disposed towards Antony is confirmed by his assurance to the Senate, on 21 May 44 BC, of his fidelity to the republican cause: it was only a week later, on 28 May, that he and his forces declared support for Antony.

Another area of uncertainty concerns the actions of Plancus. The interpretation given above that Lepidus had asked Plancus for assistance in confronting Antony, but had subsequently withdrawn his request when he felt confident of beating Antony without Plancus’s support, may not be the whole story. Although Plancus, who was at the time governor of Gallia Comata, had certainly been encouraged by Lepidus to come to join him, it may be that he distrusted Lepidus’s motives and, fearing a trap, had decided that the wisest course would be to turn back. Plancus, who was joined by
Decimus and his forces near to Grenoble, was eventually persuaded by Pollio, the governor of Hispania, to become reconciled with Antony, and it was at this point that Decimus, feeling betrayed by Plancus, and having also been deserted by his own forces, fled, only to be captured and killed, as described later.

Whatever the precise details of this period immediately after the battle of Mutina, the primary upshot was that Antony and Lepidius were now even more closely allied. Although Octavian’s greatly enlarged army had been assigned by the Senate to Decimus, Octavian had no intention of relinquishing his control over his troops and returned with Pansa’s legions to Rome.

A decisive series of events was about to unfold.

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In July 43 Octavian entered Rome accompanied by only a small number of troops. The Senate, holding still to its view that here was a man whose ambition had to be kept firmly in check, refused him the Consulship which his troops demanded and which he himself desired so as to put him on equal terms with Antony. Octavian departed, assembled his troops, and then marched on Rome. A startled and intimidated the Senate immediately conceded him permission to stand for a Consulship; the permission was then quickly withdrawn when, according to Eck, rumours spread that the legions of Marcus Brutus and Cassius were on their way to support the Senate.

In response, Octavian and his troops occupied a whole region of Rome. There, the populace flocked to him. He was received not only by his mother Atia and his sister Octavia, but also by the Vestal Virgins, who occupied a high and revered position in the constitution of the Roman state. Then the soldiers based in the city, no doubt seeing how things were developing, also joined him.

The last to greet Octavian was Cicero who, one imagines, was beginning to wonder whether his support of Octavian, and his assessment of him as manipulable, had been sadly misplaced, and whether Octavian might not be another such as Julius Caesar. After all, he was Caesar’s adopted son and heir and might well be a greater threat to the continuance of the republic than that posed by Antony. Octavian was not slow to recognise Cicero’s equivocation, and is reported to have remarked to his erstwhile supporter and champion, “You are the last of my friends to welcome me.”

The Senate had failed to pay the soldiers of Octavian and Pansa, despite their earlier promise to do so, and Octavian accordingly seized the public treasury and made the payments, thereby securing the continued allegiance of the soldiers at this crucial time.

The Senate withdrew its opposition to Octavian’s election as Consul, and Octavian and his uncle Quintus Pedius were elected Consuls on 19 August 43 BC. It is recorded by some historians that one of Octavian’s envoys stood before the Senate, drew his sword partly from its scabbard, and announced ‘Either you elect him, or this will.’ Whether or not this is so, it cannot be denied that Octavian’s consulsip was acquired by force. Immediately afterwards, a law was passed confirming the adoption of Octavian by Julius Caesar.

A sentence of outlawry was passed on Caesar’s assassins, thereby rescinding the earlier amnesty in their favour, and the Senate revoked the decrees issued against Antony and Lepidus.

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Although Octavius was now in a strong position in Rome, he still had to face the problem of what to do about Lepidus and Antony. Decimus was no longer a factor. As has been mentioned earlier, he had been deserted by his own forces and betrayed by Plancus and had tried to make his way alone through Illyricum to his half-brother Marcus Brutus in Macedonia, but had been captured by a Gallic chieftain, and on Antony’s orders had been put to death.

The situation was one of uneasy balance. On the one hand, Antony and Lepidus were between them in control of a powerful army, were well placed and secure in their province, and both – though particularly Antony – possessed considerable experience of military action. Octavian, on the other hand, had Consular authority, was highly popular with his soldiers, and was, after all, the heir and adopted son of the great Julius Caesar. The stand-off could be resolved either by head-on conflict, the outcome of which was uncertain, or by compromise. Wisely, all parties chose the latter.

In October 43 BC, Octavian, Lepidus and Antony met together on an island in a river near to the city of Bononia (Bologna) and drew up the Treaty of Bononia, under the terms of which the three agreed to join forces. Specifically, they determined that: (1) a *Triumviri rei publicae constituendae* (Triumvirate for the Setting in Order of the State) should be set up and invested with consular power for a period of five years; (2) this meant, of course, that Octavian agreed to resign his consulship; (3) Antony was granted control of Gallia Cisalpina and Gallia Comata; (4) Lepidus added the Spanish provinces to Gallia Narbonensis, but agreed to return to Rome to ensure the security of Italy; (5) Octavian received Africa, Sardinia and Sicily, though he must have been aware that these were substantially less important territories than those given to Antony and Lepidus and not of a great deal of use in the struggle for power at Rome. As we have noted earlier, after the battle of Mutina the Senate had placed Sextus Pompeius in charge of the fleet and the coast of Italy; the result of this was that Sicily was now in his hands and he thereby controlled the sea to the south of Italy, making it difficult for Octavian to assert his claim to either Africa or Sardinia; (6) Octavian was to marry Clodia (Clodia Pulchra, also called Claudia), the daughter of Antony's wife Fulvia by a previous husband (the sealing of pacts by marriages is commonly noted throughout history, and occurred on at least three occasions during the period that Octavian was rising to power); this was a marriage in name only, remaining unconsummated; (7) Antony and Octavian agreed that they had to deal with Brutus and Cassius.

It was the final clause of the Treaty of Bononia that proved to have such devastating effects upon the people of Italy and Rome. If Octavian and Antony were to devote any time at all to tracking down and punishing the conspirators, their own opponents in Italy would have to be neutralised, and preferably removed, so that the campaigns against the conspirators would not be distracted by unrest amongst the general population. Moreover, and as always, money would have to be found for the actions – wars, indeed – that would be needed. To achieve both these ends the triumvirs declared a *Proscription*. Lists were published of men who could be killed with impunity and their estates confiscated.

The triumvirs had no legal authority to draw up, far less carry out, the terms of this treaty. Octavian, however, acted to bring their decisions within the legal framework of the state – this subordination (whether apparent or real) of his actions to the authority (*auctoritas*) of the Republic, whether or not that authority actually existed over and above his own power, was to characterise all his dealings with the Senate and the other constitutional systems throughout his life. It was, of course, a
way of legitimising, and putting beyond reproach or criticism, whatever he wished to do. It gave the Triumvirate the right to formulate laws and to place their own followers into strategic positions within the state, including nominating them as governors of important provinces: in effect, the authority of the Senate was subordinated to that of the triumvirs.

The list of names published in the proscriptions included some 300 senators and 2,000 equites. Among the names was that of Marcus Tullius Cicero (himself a member of the equites) whom Antony hated – the proscriptions were not simply about money: settling old scores was a major factor in determining the names placed on the list. Although Octavian recognised that Cicero had been of service to him when he had first arrived in Rome, he also understood that Cicero’s motives had been, if not self-serving, then at least serving Cicero’s desire to re-establish the republic. It is recorded by some historians that Octavian expressed discomfort about the proscriptions, and that at first he argued strongly for Cicero’s removal from the list of the proscribed. Whatever the truth of it, Octavian eventually capitulated to Antony’s desires and Cicero was taken and killed; it is said that his severed head and hands were hung upon the Rostra in Rome, though the veracity of this cannot be determined. In exchange for his having permitted the murder of Cicero, Antony gave up his own uncle (Lucius Caesar) to be killed by Octavian. For a similar reason, Lepidus agreed to the murder of his own brother. The willingness of one triumvir to sacrifice an ally or even a relative in exchange for the murder of someone whom they wished to have murdered, meant that it was as dangerous to be the friend of a triumvir as it was to be an enemy.

Octavian may indeed have been uneasy about the introduction of the proscriptions, but he was ultimately one of the most assiduous and ruthless in carrying out some of its worst atrocities. This was a time of terror; acts of appalling cruelty and savagery were perpetrated throughout Rome and Italy. Anyone was permitted to kill a proscribed individual and to claim a fixed reward for doing so (money for free men, freedom and money for slaves).

The proscriptions had several consequences. The least favourable, from the point of view of the triumvirs, was that the money raised was far less than expected, and certainly far less than needed. This resulted in the imposition of special taxes and thus further hardship for the people. Many whose names were on the proscription list, and many others who were not (but feared that they might one day be), fled Rome to join Brutus and Cassius in their respective territories.

Sextus Pompeius, who was amongst those proscribed, used his ships and men to rescue others similarly placed, taking them to Sicily as a place of refuge. One of those rescued in this way was Tiberius Claudius Nero whose attempt to start a slave insurrection in Campania had failed. In a curious and ironic twist of history, Tiberius Claudius Nero took with him to Sicily his wife Livia (Livia Drusilla), later to be Octavian’s wife, and his son Tiberius, whom Octavian was later to choose as his successor (see Note 3).

When senators were amongst those who fled the proscriptions, their places were filled by loyal supporters of the triumvirs, often drawn from the ranks of the army: in this way there came about a shift in the composition of the Senate, with sentiment moving away from republicanism and towards the establishment of some form of autocratic rule.

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The year 42 BC commenced with Senate’s declaration of Julius Caesar as a god, and thus Octavian as Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus *divi filius*. In this, as in other ways, the year was to be a dramatic one.

Having established their position, the triumvirs were ready to take on the two prime conspirators, Brutus (in Macedonia) and Cassius (in Syria). From the outset, it was clear that this was not going to be a simple matter. Brutus and Cassius controlled the whole of the Roman East with the exception of Egypt, having each taken steps to establish themselves in their provinces. Before Cicero had fallen during the proscriptions Brutus had been in almost continuous correspondence with him, a fact strongly suggesting that Cicero had abandoned any hope of using Octavian as an instrument to restore the republic. Brutus and Cassius both controlled provinces that were rich, and they were assiduous in making full use of that fact: they had money aplenty, fleets and legions. Their combined forces totalled 19 legions, and they were assembled together in Greece to withstand the expected onslaught of the triumviral forces which amounted to 28 legions.

The triumvirs suffered an initial setback when their fleet sailed from Brundisium: Ahenobarbus (Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus), commander of Cassius and Brutus’s Adriatic fleet and in control of the whole of the Adriatic, inflicted such crippling damage upon the triumviral supply fleet that when the triumviral army landed on the Macedonian coast it found itself cut off from mainland Italy. Ahenobarbus’s domination of the Adriatic also cut off the triumvirs’ retreat. Octavian and Antony, weighing up the situation, realised that it was essential that they should achieve a resolution in the form of a land battle – and quickly.

This came in the form of two battles, each at Philippi, and the outcome of each undoubtedly due to the military expertise of Antony. The first engagement, on 23 October 42 BC, was indecisive, raging for many hours. Brutus made some headway against the forces of Octavian, whilst the Cassius and his troops fell back under the onslaught of Antony, but progress was slow. The dust raised by the battle, which spread widely across the plain of Philippi, rendered it impossible to determine how each side was faring. Eventually, the forces of Cassius and Brutus, fearing that they were being defeated fell back, but so also, and for the same reason, did those of Antony and Octavian. Cassius, on finding that his camp had been destroyed, wrongly supposed that he had been defeated, and committed suicide. Octavian, it was reported (and not denied, even by his close friends Agrippa and Maecenas), was found after the battle ‘skulking in a marsh,’ though other sources say that he had been too ill to take part in the battle, with Syme reporting that Octavian had been carried into battle on a litter. Brutus assembled together the remnants of Cassius's forces, combining them with his own. On 16 November 42 BC the second engagement at Philippi led to the decisive defeat of Brutus’s army. Brutus escaped but later committed suicide, either by falling on his sword, as some have claimed, or being killed at his own behest by a colleague. It is reported by some historians that Octavian sent Brutus’s head to Rome, where it was to be cast down at the foot of Caesar’s statue, though it is difficult to confirm this.

According to Suetonius (C. Suetonius Tranquillus) in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (Translated by A. Thomson; London: George Bell & Sons, 1899), Octavian’s treatment of even those prisoners who were distinguished and of high rank was excessively cruel.
The last hopes of the republicans were shattered. Although Ahenobarbus maintained his fleet in the Adriatic, and Murcus (Lucius Staius Murcus) who had been in charge of Brutus’s other fleet offered his ships and services to Sextus Pompeius in Sicily, there was no-one left possessing Brutus’s authority who could effectively lead a republican movement. 

The routing of the republicans had an unexpected effect. The elimination of their common enemy – the main conspirators – also removed the necessity for the Caesarians to remain united, a fact that was reflected in the outcome of discussions between Octavian and Antony after the Battle of Philippi. They met together in November 42 BC and drew up the Agreement of Philippi, which proposed that: (1) Antony should stay in the East to settle its affairs and raise the money needed to pay the armies of both the victors and the vanquished (it was never wise to leave even defeated armies unpaid and disgruntled); (2) Octavian should return to Italy to superintend the settlement of the veterans, i.e., to find land which might be given to them; (3) Octavian would retain the provinces of Africa, Sardinia and Sicily; (4) Antony would add Gallia Narbonensis to his other territories in Gaul; (5) Cisalpine Gaul would become incorporated into Italy; (6) Lepidus would be deprived of Spain for alleged treacherous communication with Sextus Pompeius (allegations, it has to be said, that were founded on the vaguest of rumours); (7) Spain would be transferred to Octavian; (8) Lepidus would, in addition to the other measures directed against him, lose his legions, though he remained – at least in name – a member of the triumvirate. The Agreement of Philippi was the first stage in the division of the Roman world into East and
West (not, of course, the last time that such a division would be made). It also marked the beginnings of an attempt by Octavian and Antony to ease Lepidus out of the Triumvirate.

On the face of it, at least, Octavian appeared to have come out well from the provisions of the agreement: not only did he now have sole control of Italy, but Lepidus had been neutralized, essentially bringing the Triumvirate to an end. It is, perhaps, a measure of just how far the importance of the Senate had declined in the past two years that the issue of whether or not the Triumvirate should be brought formally to an end was never raised.

Octavian’s position was not, however, quite as fortunate as it appeared. He was faced with a major problem: how to settle the veterans of both sides of the Philippi conflict in mainland Italy, where there was little if any free land still available. Julius Caesar had awarded his own veterans grants of land in the provinces, primarily in Spain, but this practice was not on this occasion adopted by Octavian, who solved the problem by designating 18 towns in Italy, the land and property of which should be assigned to the veterans, whilst the present incumbents should be wholly or partly dispossessed (see Note 4). Such a policy met with well-deserved outrage.

The dispossessed inhabitants of the 18 towns found a leader in the person of Lucius Antonius, who was consul at the time and was also the younger brother of Antony. It has been suggested – and is, indeed, more than probable – that Lucius was encouraged by Antony in assuming this leadership role. Antony was aware of the need to keep Octavian’s popularity in check, now that Octavian occupied such a potentially powerful position on the mainland of Italy. It is also significant that Lucius was strongly supported and aided by Antony’s wife Fulvia. A rather less probable explanation of the uprising of the dispossessed is that it was provoked by Octavian in order to flush out those who were opposed to him: there is no clear evidence to support this view.

Lucius gathered amongst his following a majority of the members of the Senate, both those of republican inclination and also those Caesarians who saw Octavian as a major threat to the stability of the country and to their own interests. These disaffected senators tried to declare the Triumvirate illegal and Octavian an enemy of the state; they failed in both, because the soldiers depended on Octavian for their settlement, and as a group were far more dangerous than a collection of dispossessed landowners.

Though Lucius made many attempts to form alliances with other factions within Rome and Italy, he was ultimately unsuccessful, and had eventually to seek refuge in Perusia (Perugia). In December 41 BC Octavian laid siege to the town, and in early January 40 BC Perusia fell, starved into submission.

Out of consideration for his uneasy relationship with Antony, Octavian treated Lucius with dignity and respect, allowing him to leave Italy to become governor of Spain and pardoning his soldiers. Octavian took a quite different approach, however, to Perusia itself, handing it over to his soldiers to be stripped and plundered. The senators and equites who had taken refuge with Lucius in Perusia he massacred without mercy. It is said by some historians – though the veracity of the reports is uncertain – that Octavian killed 300 on the Ides of March at an altar erected outside the walls of Perusia and dedicated to the memory of Julius Caesar.

Following the Siege of Perusia, Octavian despatched some of his legions to Gaul, occupying territories that had been assigned to Antony. The fact that Antony did not react to this is a clear indication that his interest lay primarily in the eastern territories.

Octavian was now in virtual sole control not only of Italy but also of the greater part of the Roman world’s western territories. His brutal and ruthless treatment of those who had taken refuge in Perusia discouraged any attempt by others to exert control
over his actions. When Antony became aware of what had occurred, he sought to strengthen his own position by joining forces with Sextus Pompeius who had now seized control of Sicily and whose naval forces dominated the seas to the south and west of Italy. Octavian’s response to this was to do the same: he, too, tried to create ties with Sextus. In response to the skilled negotiations conducted by Maecenas, Octavian divorced Clodia (to whom, it is said, he had been married in name only) and married Scribonia, the sister of Lucius Scribonius Libo, father-in-law of Sextus. Though the marriage lasted no more than a year, it gave issue to Octavian’s only child, Julia – born, it is said, on the day that Octavian left her.

Octavian had no success in forming an alliance with Sextus. Antony, however, now with Sextus as an active ally, decided to bring matters to a head between himself and Octavian and returned to Italy in the Autumn of 40 BC where he attempted to land his forces at Brundisium. On being refused entry to the harbour he laid siege to the town. In response to Antony’s aggressive move, Octavian ordered Agrippa to mass his forces at Brundisium. The war-weary troops refused to fight each other, however, and the two remaining active members of the Triumvirate were forced to reach yet another agreement. In September 40 BC the Treaty of Brundisium was drawn up, Octavian being advised by Maecenas, Anthony by the scrupulously honest Pollio, with Lucius Cocceius Nerva attending as an advisor acceptable to both Octavian and Anthony. Under its terms, the division of the Roman world into two separate parts, a process which had begun with the Agreement of Philippi, was strengthened: (1) Octavian would rule Dalmatia, Sardinia, Spain, and all Gaul; (2) Antony would rule all the Eastern provinces; (3) Italy alone would remain a recruiting ground for both Octavian and Antony; (4) Lepidus was permitted to retain Africa; (5) Sextus Pompeius would be left in possession of Sicily; (6) Antony’s wife Fulvia having died, Antony would marry Octavia (Octavian’s sister).

For Octavian, the terms of the Treaty of Brundisium were very favourable. Although Antony had asked for, and had been granted, recruiting rights in Italy (where the most experienced troops were to be found), in practice he could make little use of such rights as he was based in far-off provinces across the Adriatic.

Sextus Pompeius was not appeased by the treaty, being angry at not having been invited into the Triumvirate in place of Lepidus, as he might have expected in return for his support of Anthony, and thus not being accorded the consular powers that would have followed. He responded by extending his control of the seas and blockading Italy. As Italy depended upon grain imports, this action threatened the whole country with starvation. As winter deepened on the mainland, the food situation became critical. According to Syme, the triumvirs’ popularity fell alarmingly and they were pelted with stones in the Forum. Octavian was forced to come to terms with Sextus, and in 39 BC he and Antony met Sextus on board his ship which was moored off Misenum, near Puteoli, and there the Treaty of Misenum was arranged. It is difficult to explain why Octavian and Antony should have exposed themselves in this way to the danger of being murdered by Sextus, and indeed Menas, one of Sextus’s admirals, is said to have suggested that it would be a good move to kill the two triumvirs. Sextus is reported to have replied that it would be a dishonourable thing to do, but that if Menas had carried out the act without first asking permission, then he (Sextus) could not have been accused of being dishonourable.

The treaty contained two primary provisions: Sextus agreed: (1) to withdraw his troops from Italy and make no further raids; and (2) to guarantee Rome's corn supply from Sardinia and Sicily.
In exchange for these assurances, Sextus: (3) received the Peloponnese, Sardinia, Corsica and Sicily; and (4) was promised the consulship of 38 BC.

The remaining provisions related to those who had fled to Sicily to join Sextus, many of them in order to avoid the proscriptions: (5) all the exiles in Sextus's army, with the exception of the condemned assassins of Caesar, were to have their civic rights restored; (6) the proscribed who had fled to Sextus would receive back a quarter of their property which had been seized; (7) slaves serving with Sextus would be freed; and (8) the free soldiers of Sextus would be rewarded at the end of their service on the same terms as those accorded to the veterans of the triumvirs.

From Octavian’s standpoint, the Treaty of Misenum was a bad treaty, giving far too much power to Sextus. Although it solved the immediate problem of securing Italy’s grain supply, Octavian had little choice but to prepare to go to war against Sextus. He first divorced Scribonia to emphasize his renunciation of the terms of the Treaty of Misenum. He then married Livia (Livia Drusilla) after arranging for her to be divorced from Tiberius Claudius Nero who was one of those who had returned from Sicily under the terms of the Treaty of Misenum. Livia already had a son, and was six months pregnant at the time of her divorce: Octavian’s marriage to her, and his manner of securing it, scandalised the people of Rome and Italy – but so powerful was he, that he could brush aside all such criticism. It is held by some historians that Livia was the only woman Octavian truly loved, and certainly the marriage was to last for the remainder of his life (see Note 3). Whether or not the reports of Octavian’s devotion to his wife were accurate, the marriage was, from Octavian’s point of view, particularly advantageous as it secured his link with the old Roman aristocracy – an important element in his eventual acceptance by the people of Rome as the holder of supreme power.

Octavian’s plans to destroy Sextus Pompeius’s hold on Italy received an unexpected boost when Menas, the admiral of Sextus’s fleet, assessing the balance of forces and predicting correctly the way in which the war was likely to go, surrendered Corsica and Sardinia to Octavian. In addition, Octavian’s trusted friend and adviser, the ever-practical Agrippa, had lost no time in building up Octavian’s fleet and also in preparing a new port from which the triumviral fleet could set sail when attacking Sextus. Despite these two encouraging circumstances, Octavian thought it advisable to request additional naval support from Antony, and despatched Maecenas to Greece to beg Anthony to meet him. In September 37 BC the two met at Tarentum.

Antony was angry at having been called upon in this way, resenting being diverted from his task of subduing the Parthians, and it was probably only his need to recruit experienced troops from Italy, and his wish to be free, once and for all, from distractions in the west, that persuaded him to meet Octavian in Tarentum.

In the ensuing negotiations Octavian was accompanied by his advisers Lucius Cocceius Nerva and Maecenas, the latter bringing with him three poets – Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro), Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus), and Lucius Varius Rufus. Antony refused to be placated, and the talks seemed doomed to failure. It was only the diplomatic intervention of his wife Octavia that calmed him sufficiently to conclude the Agreement of Tarentum (37 BC).

This agreement had only three elements: (1) Antony agreed to provide Octavian with 120 ships and the admirals to command them; (2) in return, Octavian promised to send 20,000 legionaries to Antony to fight the Parthians – a promise that was never fulfilled, Antony only ever receiving a mere 1,000 men from Octavian's bodyguard,
and even that in return for ten more ships; and (3) the Triumvirate, which had lapsed at the end of 38 BC, was to be prolonged for another 5 years, a decision which Octavian wisely, and in accordance with his usual strategy, arranged to have formally ratified by the Assembly of the Plebs.

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Armed with a fleet made up of his own and Antony’s ships, Octavian was now ready to confront Sextus Pompeius in 36 BC. In a series of sea battles around Sicily, Octavian, whose skills as a naval commander left a great deal to be desired, suffered many setbacks. Storms made crossing the straits between Sicily and mainland Italy hazardous, and Maecenas had to quell the fears of a superstitious population that the gods were favouring Sextus. In one engagement, Octavian was defeated and had to escape to the mainland.

Lepidus brought his forces from Africa and he and Agrippa landed on Sicily and pushed inland. Agrippa was an experienced and accomplished military commander both on land and at sea, and it was he who ultimately brought down Sextus, first defeating the enemy fleet off the Sicilian coast near Mylae, and then, on 3 September 36 BC, administering a final crushing defeat after a long and arduous battle off Naulochus.

Sextus escaped and fled to the East. There, he managed to raise three legions but was eventually captured by one of Antony’s generals. At Antony’s instruction Sextus was executed.

In the various engagements against Sextus’s forces on the mainland of Sicily, several legions which had surrendered to the army of Lepidus had been incorporated into Lepidus’s forces. Thus strengthened and encouraged, Lepidus determined to increase his powers which had been so drastically curtailed by Antony and Octavian, and he tried to seize the whole of Sicily as his province. In a rare show of personal bravery, Octavian walked into the heart of Lepidus’s camp and exerted his authority as adopted son and rightful heir of Julius Caesar. Lepidus’s troops immediately declared allegiance to Octavian, and Lepidus was arrested.

Lepidus begged abjectly for mercy, and although Octavian stripped him of his triumviral powers he nevertheless treated him with all the leniency and dignity due to one who had once been a member of the Triumvirate, and allowed him to retain the office of pontifex maximus; in any case, the office of pontifex maximus was held for life, and Octavian had no wish to alienate those in Rome who held strongly to the religious traditions. Lepidus was sent away to Cape Cerceii, situated half way between Rome and Naples, where, according to Suetonius, he lived for a further 24 years. Syme suggests, however, that Lepidus was allowed to live in Rome where he could exercise his functions as Pontifex Maximus, whilst eschewing any other political role, though one has to ask why living in Rome was essential to Lepidus’s exercise of this particular function since he had managed to spend many months away in Narbonensis or in Africa without, presumably, compromising his position at the head of the religious hierarchy.

In contrast to his merciful treatment of Lepidus, Octavian ended the Sicilian campaign on a note of what was becoming his typical brutality. Of the many slaves who had fled to Sextus Pompeius, Octavian returned 30,000 to their former owners, but 6,000 others whose owners could not be traced were, on Octavian’s orders, all crucified. Octavian then settled his troops mainly in Sicily and southern Gaul.

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Late in 36 BC Octavian, now in command of the combined forces of Sextus Pompeius and Lepidus, returned to Rome where he was received as a hero. Senate awarded him the immunity of a Tribune, an immunity that was later extended to Livia and to Octavia – thereby establishing the beginnings of a ruling family.

Octavian took steps to consolidate his position even further. Particularly important amongst these was the appointment of many of his own supporters to the Senate, thereby substantially weakening Antony’s position on that body. Antony’s prestige in Rome suffered a further blow when his campaign against the Parthians failed to progress well.

In 40 BC, whilst Antony had been engaged in negotiating the Treaty of Brundisium, the Parthians had first attacked Syria and had then pushed on to take the greater part of the province of Asia (see Note 5). Although they were eventually forced back by Antony’s generals, confidence in Antony’s ability to control the Eastern provinces was badly shaken. The situation was made worse four years later, in 36 BC, when Antony launched an invasion of Parthia only to lose over 20,000 men when winter arrived and he had to withdraw because of lack of provisions.

Antony was unable to resolve the Parthian problem satisfactorily because of his involvement in various other actions – in Armenia, for example – and by his being recalled to Italy in 37 BC to take part in the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Tarentum.

When in 36 BC Octavian sent Octavia to Antony with 2,000 troops instead of the promised 20,000 (now badly needed after the loss of so many troops in the winter retreat from Parthia) this was seen (correctly) by Antony as a studied insult and a declaration of the new balance in their relative positions.
Antony realised that if troops were to be obtained they would have to come from elsewhere than from Octavian, and for this he would need money. He sent Octavia back to Rome, and was joined in the East by Cleopatra – though whether or not money was the sole, or indeed the predominant, reason for Antony’s summoning Cleopatra to him, is a matter of contention. Octavia appears to have borne her rejection by Antony, and even their divorce in 32 BC with dignity and lack of rancour, even to the extent of eventually bringing up one and possibly two of his children by Cleopatra. She was a skilled diplomat, a quality shown to its full at Tarentum where she calmed the heated relationship between Antony and Octavian.

Antony’s relationship with Cleopatra is one of history’s most fascinating enigmas. Some have regarded her as a cunning and scheming temptress who, though perhaps not as beautiful as has been claimed, seduced and thus controlled powerful men, with the sole purpose of securing the continued independence – and, indeed, aggrandisement – of Egypt. She had beguiled Julius Caesar, who was widely regarded as having fathered her son Ptolemy XV Philpater Philometor Caesar (usually referred to as Caesarion). Indeed, Cleopatra and Caesarion were in Rome at the time of Caesar’s assassination, and fled back to Egypt in the following days.

Cleopatra was half Macedonian and half Greek, with, it has been said, ‘just a touch of Iranian.’ Despite her not being Egyptian, she was nevertheless accepted in Egypt because she was multilingual and spoke the language perfectly. It is said that Antony had first seen Cleopatra in Egypt when she was only fourteen, and they must certainly have seen each other often, and perhaps even met, during the time that she was in Rome with Julius Caesar. She had, indeed, been in Rome at the time of Julius Caesar’s assassination, fleeing to Egypt shortly thereafter (though she may well have stayed long enough to discover what Caesar had put in his Will, hoping perhaps that Caesarion had been formally named as the heir and successor of the Dictator). In the late Summer of 41 BC, following the Agreement of Philippi which had ceded the Eastern territories to Antony, Antony called Cleopatra, who was then aged 20, to Tarsus in Cilicia to answer allegations that she had provided support to Cassius. Arriving in her golden barge and dressed as Aphrodite she seems to have persuaded Antony that the charges were baseless. Antony then accompanied Cleopatra to Alexandria where, on her wishes, he arranged the death of Cleopatra’s sister Arsinoe who, according to Cleopatra, was the one who had favoured Cassius and had, moreover, attempted to seize the Egyptian crown for herself. Antony spent part of 40 BC in Alexandria where he and Cleopatra became lovers and the twins Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene were conceived; they were born shortly after Antony left Alexandria for Syria which had been invaded by the Parthians.

Whatever Cleopatra’s true feelings may have been towards Antony, many historians believe that her relationship with Antony flourished as a result of Antony’s love for her. Whether or not Antony and Cleopatra were ever married remains an open question: many historians believe that a marriage took place in 36 BC. If so, it was shortly after Antony had rejected Octavia and sent her back to Rome and Cleopatra had arrived to join him in the East: this, however, would put Antony’s marriage to Cleopatra four years before his divorce from Octavia (around 32 BC). Equally, opinions differ as to whether or not Antony’s relationship with Cleopatra was based primarily upon his need for the money that she could bring. Certainly Cleopatra, who disapproved of Antony’s invasion of Parthia, did not finance it. In any case, Egypt was well within reach of Antony’s forces and had he needed to secure its treasury he could have done so without having to ask for it.
That the relationship was not primarily mercenary (at least on Antony’s part: see Note 6) is also clear from several of Antony’s acts. When, for example, he captured the province of Armenia in 34 BC, he appointed their son Alexander Helios as King of Armenia. In the same year, in a lavish pageant held in Alexandria, he named Cleopatra the ‘Queen of Queens’ and Caesarion ‘King of Kings’ and gave them joint rule over Egypt and Cyprus, also ceding to Cleopatra and her children many territories that had been assimilated into the Roman world, such as central Syria, much of the coast of Palestine, the island of Cyprus, and the province of Cilicia. Alexander Helios was given Parthia and Media in addition to Armenia; to Cleopatra Selene he gave Libya and Cyrenaica. Curiously, at the time this raised little comment in Rome; this may have been because none of the territories in question was a Roman province.

In 36 BC Cleopatra bore Antony a third child, a son whom she named Ptolemy Philadelphus in recognition of her desire to reestablish the Ptolemaic Empire through Antony’s gifts of territories. Ptolemy Philadelphus, though only two years old, was made governor of Syria, Phoenicia and Cilicia in late 34 BC, at the Donations of Alexandria, a formal statement by Cleopatra and Antony detailing those lands held by Rome and Parthia which were to be assigned to Cleopatra’s children.

All such actions of Antony towards Cleopatra and her children were to play directly into Octavian’s hands, enabling him to present Antony as having allied himself to a foreign power. After all, had not Antony rejected Octavia, his legitimate Roman spouse, for an “oriental paramour”?

By the end of 34 BC the final cracks had begun to appear in the relationship between Octavian and Antony, fuelled no doubt on one side by Antony’s resentment at Octavian’s broken pledge to provide him with 20,000 troops, and on the other side by the insulting rejection by Antony of Octavian’s sister Octavia (who was pregnant at the time). Octavian realised that the time was almost ripe for the final act in his rise to power – the elimination of Antony as a rival. He had already, in 35 BC, commenced a campaign in Illyricum, a province still not fully under Roman control, with the twin aims of exercising his troops and providing himself with opportunities to demonstrate to the Roman people his bravery and skills as a military commander (doubts on both of which had been cast during previous campaigns), and he maintained and intensified these activities well into 33 BC.

On 1 January 33 BC a momentous event occurred, which led to a fundamental shift in the relationship between Octavian and the Roman state. The five-year term of the Triumvirate, renewed in the Treaty of Tarentum was about to come to an end, and with it its consular powers; new Consuls were therefore to be appointed by the Senate. Domitius Ahenobarbus and Gaius Sosius, both close allies of Antony, were elected Consuls. Sosius took the opportunity to launch a violent attack on Octavian in a speech to the Senate. In retaliation, Octavian arrived in the Senate accompanied by his troops and brought proceedings to an end. If this is indeed how it occurred, it would have had all the trappings of a coup d’état, which indeed it would have been. Other reports, however, suggest that Octavian’s actions were not as extreme as this, and that he summoned a meeting of the Senate at which, surrounded by his armed soldiers, he countered Sosius’s accusations.

Whatever transpired, the Senate was so alarmed that both Consuls, together with 300 senators, fled to Ephesus where Antony had assembled his troops. There they not only found Antony with Cleopatra, but saw that the relationship between the two was
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exactly as Octavian had described it. This caused Marcus Titius and his nephew Munatius Plancus to defect to Octavian in Summer 32 BC and provide him with all the evidence he needed to represent Antony as being firmly under Cleopatra’s influence. Moreover, when Marcus Plancus had held the post of Consul he had been the one to witness and sign Antony’s Will. When he told Octavian what the Will contained, Octavian realised that this was the proof he needed to receive the full support of the Roman state in eliminating Antony.

Antony’s Will was kept by the Vestal Virgins. Against all tradition, Octavian went to them and demanded the Will. They refused to hand it over, but when he appealed to the emergency powers that were to be invoked when the safety of Rome was threatened, they relented.

Octavian read the Will to the Senate. Amongst its provisions were large legacies to Cleopatra’s children, the ceding to Cleopatra of many Roman-won territories, and a request that he be buried next to Cleopatra – all clear proof, Octavian declared, if more were needed, that Antony was no longer a true Roman. Octavian was no longer consul following the expiry of the Triumvirate’s mandate, and therefore to secure national support he organized a national oath by which the citizen of Rome and the rest of Italy swore allegiance to him: the results of the administration of this oath were certainly falsified to indicate overwhelming support for Octavian, but the Senate nevertheless elected Octavian Consul and stripped Antony of his triumviral powers, though this was a technical measure only, as the five-year term of the Triumvirate had lapsed. By then declaring war on Cleopatra rather than on Antony (though the effect was, of course, the same) the Senate could say that the war was against a foreign power and was not a civil war.

Octavian’s position and authority in Rome was further strengthened by the entirely practical supporting efforts of Agrippa who had seen to it that Rome was supplied with two new aqueducts, and had arranged for new fountains to be installed throughout the city.

Octavian knew that any war against Antony would have to be fought outside Italy, for in Italy there were troops who might well rally to Antony’s side. Accordingly, in 31 BC Octavian and Agrippa ferried all their forces over the Adriatic. Whilst Agrippa used his sea power to defeat Antony’s fleet and thus block Antony’s supply routes from Egypt (for Cleopatra was supporting Antony’s fleet and troops with supplies of grain), Octavian landed on the mainland opposite the island of Corya (Corfu) and marched south with his legions towards Actium, where Anthony’s forces were gathered.

Octavian delayed engaging Antony in battle, however, because Antony’s legions were daily being depleted by desertions, fuelled by suspicions amongst the demoralised troops that they were fighting more for Cleopatra than for Antony. Such engagements as did occur ended badly for Antony. The most devastating blow of all to Antony was the defection to Octavian of Ahenobarbus, which deprived Antony’s fleet of its ablest commander.

On 2 September 31 BC, Agrippa’s fleet defeated that commanded by Sosius in a decisive battle off Actium. In the course of the battle, Cleopatra was seen to escape, her ships breaking through the lines of engagement and heading for Egypt. Antony, with 40 ships, soon followed her. He is said to have boarded her flagship and to have sat in the prow with his head in his hands, as they fled to Alexandria. Cleopatra had her ships sail into the harbour of Alexandria in a show of victory, a ruse to buy time...
she arranged for all her potential opponents to be hunted down and killed. Within a few days of Anthony’s escape to Egypt his land forces at Actium had surrendered to Octavian.

Octavian negotiated favourable bonuses for Antony’s forces, a move which once again paid off handsomely, both politically and militarily. To his own veterans still in Italy he gave lands taken from Anthony’s supporters who, in their turn, were resettled in Philippi and other parts of the Eastern territories. Octavian was now in no hurry to deal with Antony who for his part had resigned himself to ultimate defeat and made no efforts to regroup his legions. Octavian was content for the time being to consolidate his power in Rome. It was not until almost a year later that he advanced through Syria towards Egypt. Antony is reported to have sent a message to Octavian in which he offered to kill himself if Cleopatra were spared, but no response from Octavian was forthcoming.

Antony put on a final show of force on 31 July 30 BC, in an action in which he scattered Octavian’s advance cavalry in the suburbs of Alexandria. That night, a strange sound was heard in the city, a sound interpreted by the people as being made by the god Osiris deserting Antony. This led to the desertion of Antony’s cavalry and Cleopatra’s fleet, all of whom went over to Octavian. Octavian finally defeated Antony at what was referred to as the battle of Alexandria – though in truth the engagement was slight and its outcome a foregone conclusion.

Antony committed suicide and died, according to some reports, in Cleopatra’s arms. Some have suggested that Cleopatra tried to bargain with Octavian regarding the fate of her children, and others that she tried to seduce him in the same way that she had captured the hearts and minds of Julius Caesar and Antony; it has to be said that the latter seems unlikely. Ultimately, Cleopatra committed suicide, possibly by allowing herself to be bitten by an asp smuggled into the palace in a basket of figs: she was aged 39.

Cleopatra’s son Caesarion, generally accepted as the son of Julius Caesar, and publicly acknowledged as such by Antony, was put to death: Octavian, as Caesar’s adopted son, could not afford to have as a potential rival an actual son of Caesar. It is variously reported that Octavian also had Alexander Helios killed or that he spared him to be brought up in Rome by Octavia; the truth of it is unclear, and certainly nothing further is heard of the boy. Similarly, the fate of Ptolemy Philadelphus, Antony’s third child by Cleopatra, is unknown, though some historians hold that Octavian killed him, too. Cleopatra’s daughter, Cleopatra Selene, was treated with kindness and consideration, being taken to live with, and be brought up by, Octavia, who also looked after Antony’s children by Fulvia.

Octavian annexed Egypt with all its wealth, adding it to the Roman territories. The money he thus acquired enabled him to settle in full all outstanding bonuses to the troops. In the summer of 29 BC he entered Rome where he celebrated three Triumphs in respect of his campaign in Illyricum and the battles of Actium and Alexandria.

Octavian, who in the 15 short years since he had first presented himself in the Roman Forum as Julius Caesar’s heir had been responsible for five civil wars (Mutina, Philippi, Perusia, Sicily and Actium), was now in undisputed sole control of Rome, Italy, the western and eastern provinces, Africa, Egypt and virtually the whole of the Mediterranean.

His rise to power was complete.

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NOTES

Note 1

Ronald Syme (later Sir Ronald Syme) was a New Zealander. He was born at Eltham and received his early education at Wellington, and later at Auckland University (then a University College), where he taught before moving to Oxford in the UK. He was during his lifetime, and has remained, probably the most respected of all classical historians. It was written of him that

... *in his own field he is a world scholar at the top of the first division, impossible to over-rate, as prolific and learned and sharp as anybody we have.... He is the noblest, well anyway the greatest, Roman historian of them all.* [Philip Howard].

And in his obituary it was concluded that

*The cosmopolitan New Zealander was at home anywhere in the world and had friends – as well as honorary degrees and other distinctions – in five continents. We will never see his like again.* [Antony Birley].

Note 2

Adoption of a son was a not uncommon practice. If, as in the case of Julius Caesar, an important or influential man had no male heir (or at least not one who would be acceptable to the citizens of Rome), it would be considered entirely appropriate for him to approach another family and ask to adopt their son, or one of their sons. The choice of the adoptee’s family was almost always based upon political or economic considerations (usually both). The adopted son then took on the name of the adopting father, who might then go on to adopt a second or third son, of different families, in order to become linked to aristocratic or (which was not necessarily the same thing) wealthy families.

Note 3

When Octavian later married Livia she already had a son by Tiberius Claudius Nero; the son was also called Tiberius, and was destined to become emperor after Octavian. Livia was six months pregnant, also by Tiberius Claudius Nero, and after her divorce and subsequent marriage to Octavian, Livia gave birth to a second son who was given the name Drusus. Drusus was to become the father of the emperor Claudius.

Note 4

Why Octavian did not choose what would seem to have been the more comfortable option of assigning lands in Gaul or Spain to the troops, is not easy to explain.
However, we have to bear in mind that the soldiers in question had already travelled from the east of Macedonia and would be in no mood to be asked to travel even further away. Also, of course, Julius Caesar had considerable first-hand experience of Gaul and Spain and would be well aware of what territory would be available for the settlement of the veterans: Octavian had no such experience.

**Note 5**

Artus, in *Augustus: Study Notes* (Bellona Books: Tauranga, 2002), makes the assertion that it was the Parthians who over-ran the province of Asia. It is more likely, however, that after the Parthians had invaded Syria, Asia was invaded by Quintus Labienus who had been despatched by Cassius to the Parthian court to see what trouble might be stirred up to embarrass Antony. Whether Labienus took with him legions composed primarily of Romans or of Parthians, or a mixture of both, is not known.

**Note 6**

The precise relationship of the dates of Antony’s divorce from Octavia and his marriage to Cleopatra, is immaterial. Antony was so besotted with Cleopatra that being married to someone else would have been a matter of minor importance to him.