

THE DEFEAT OF LEPIDUS IN 36 B.C.

by Léonie Hayne
(University of Sydney)

The campaign in Sicily in 36 B.C. was of the utmost importance to the Roman world, for it resulted in the complete triumph of Octavian in the west. The triumvirate became a duumvirate, and the empire was divided entirely between two men who past experience had shown were unlikely to co-operate together for long – hence Actium and the emergence of the sole ruler Augustus.

The events of this year therefore merit careful consideration, yet what is unfortunately most apparent in the ancient sources is bias – in favour of Octavian and against the two men who in different ways opposed him, Sextus Pompey and M. Lepidus. This is not altogether surprising, for Augustan propaganda affected later Imperial writers. What *is* surprising is that, as far as Lepidus is concerned, modern scholars seem equally biased. Lepidus is criticised explicitly for acting against Octavian, and implicitly because failure was in any case inevitable. In this article I propose to discuss Lepidus' actions in Sicily, to see how deserved is the criticism that he was both disloyal and short-sighted.

The attack on Sextus Pompey in Sicily had been planned for some time. In 38 Octavian had attempted to invade the island, but was defeated by lack of support from his colleagues Antony and Lepidus.¹ The following year, however, Antony handed over 120 ships, getting in return a promise of 20 000 soldiers to help him in his Parthian campaign.² At the same time the triumvirate was renewed, and consequently Lepidus also promised his help. A three-pronged attack on Sicily was therefore planned, Octavian sailing from Puteoli, Stalilius Taurus from Tarentum and Lepidus from Africa.

Lepidus sailed with twelve legions and 5 000 horse, plus 70 warships.³ The strength of this force has given rise to the claim that from the very beginning Lepidus planned to do more than simply help Octavian gain victory.⁴ This may be true, but it may also be hindsight. Sextus Pompey had proved a formidable opponent, and Octavian himself arrived with 21 legions of infantry, 20 000

1. Full details of the unsuccessful campaign are given in Dio 48, 46–49 and App. *B.C.* 5,78–91. The excuse for the two triumvirs' non-cooperation was that the attack breached the recently signed Treaty of Misenum with Sextus. This may have been true, but jealousy of Octavian was obviously also a factor.

2. App. *B.C.* 5,95. See also Dio 48,54.

3. App. *B.C.* 5,98.

4. M. Hadas, *Sextus Pompey*, p. 125: 'The size of Lepidus' armament makes it clear that from the very beginning he was planning a conquest for his personal advantage.'; M. Grant, *From Imperium to Auctoritas*, p. 51: '... Lepidus was preparing to vindicate his own private ambitions to the detriment of his colleagues.'

cavalry and over 5 000 light-armed troops.⁵ In comparison Lepidus' force was by no means unusually strong.

However, if Lepidus was indeed hoping to play the major role in defeating Sextus, which would then enable him to dictate terms to Octavian, it would be neither surprising nor, in the terms of power politics, unreasonable. Lepidus, after all, had gained considerably less from the triumvirate than either of his colleagues. In 43 the respective importance of the triumvirs can be seen in the distribution of provinces. Lepidus received Gallia Narbonensis and the two Spains, Antony Transalpine and Cisalpine Gaul, and Octavian was left with Africa (involved in a civil war of its own) and Sardinia and Sicily, two islands already threatened by Sextus Pompey. Since then there had been two redistributions, and by 36 Octavian had gained all the west, Antony all the east, while Lepidus had Africa (at least the provinces were now peaceful). To add insult to injury, Lepidus had not even been present at the second redistribution at Brundisium in 40.⁶ It must also be remembered that, despite these differences, Octavian and Lepidus, as triumvirs, legally had equal powers and were therefore strictly speaking colleagues in the Sicilian campaign. This was a fact that Octavian himself kept forgetting.⁷

To oppose Lepidus, Sextus stationed L. Rufius Plenius at Lilybaeum with one legion and a large number of light-armed troops. Sextus also guarded the island of Cossyra, to prevent its capture by Lepidus. Despite a violent storm (which must have encouraged Sextus in his belief that he was the son of Neptune) which wrecked many of his ships, and a meeting with the Pompeian admiral Demochares, Lepidus landed and besieged Plenius in Lilybaeum.⁸ He also captured some other towns. Dio⁹ implies that Lepidus was meant to join up with Octavian immediately, and it was Lepidus' own idea to besiege Lilybaeum, either because of the losses he had already suffered, or because he wanted to leave Octavian in the lurch, or because he hoped thus to divide Sextus Pompey's attention and forces. It is impossible to know whether the siege of Lilybaeum had been jointly agreed on or not, but it was surely good strategy. Plenius' forces were inferior in numbers, and so Lepidus could argue that it would not take long to capture Lilybaeum, which would then give him a firm base from which to control the western part of the island. The matter of drawing the attention of Sextus away from Octavian was also good reasoning, for Sextus was forced to send Tisienus Gallus to oppose Lepidus.¹⁰ In fact, there is probably an element of truth in all Dio's reasons. It must also be remembered

5. App. *B.C.* 5,116.

6. Details of the treaty can be found in Dio 48,29, App. *B.C.* 5,65 and Plut. *Ant.* 30. Antony and Octavian had met to cement the alliance which had virtually been broken by the Perusine war and its aftermath.

7. Dio 49,8.

8. *ibid.*; App. *B.C.* 5,98.

9. Dio 49,8.

10. *ibid.*

that so far Octavian on the whole had done little to reveal himself as a great general or military strategist, and Lepidus was determined to be his own master.¹¹

Whatever Octavian's original plans were, they were upset by the same storm which Lepidus had encountered, and his fleet was destroyed partly by the weather and partly by Menas.¹² Octavian was forced to return to Italy. The new plan was for Octavian's forces to join Lepidus near Tauromenium, from where Messana, the Pompeian headquarters, could be threatened. This plan also became complicated when Octavian suffered a further defeat which, despite Agrippa's naval victory at Mylae, forced Octavian again to retire; the three legions which he left under the command of Cornificius were stranded in Sicily. Eventually, however, they linked up with Agrippa, and Octavian returned to Sicily with his full complement of forces.

Meanwhile Lepidus, having successfully established himself in western Sicily, sent for the remaining four legions he had left in Africa, but they were attacked at sea by the Pompeian fleet. Two legions were destroyed, and the other two, having fled back to Africa, re-embarked there and joined Lepidus later. When Gallus withdrew to Sextus, Lepidus swept over the island and eventually joined up with Octavian near Messana. According to Dio,¹³ Lepidus immediately quarrelled with Octavian, who insisted on treating him as a subordinate, and so began to negotiate secretly with Sextus. Is this simply bias? The first part (the quarrel) is almost certainly true, for the reason given is very plausible. Since Octavian had personally met nothing but failure, while Lepidus had been remarkably successful in his operations, the relationship between the two men would have been strained in any case. What is not certain, however, is the accusation that Lepidus was dealing with the enemy (the same charge Octavian had made in 42/41).¹⁴ No other ancient writer, not even Velleius Paterculus, mentions this, and Velleius never loses an opportunity to denigrate Lepidus, even describing him in Sicily as *inutilis alienae victoriae comes*.¹⁵ Octavian may perhaps have feared that Lepidus might desert him, but it is by no means proved that Lepidus thought of changing sides before the outcome of the war

11. In addition to his prior defeat by Sextus, Octavian's role in the battle of Philippi was by no means glorious. The credit for that victory had gone to Antony (App. *B.C.* 5,14; Plut. *Ant.* 22).

12. Menas' changes of allegiance are notorious. He had already transferred his loyalty from Sextus to Octavian and back again to Sextus, and now was furious that Sextus had not given him the command against Lepidus. Having won the victory, he consequently deserted to Octavian for the second time (Dio 49,1).

13. 49,8,4.

14. App. *B.C.* 5,3. The earlier accusation was, I believe, groundless. Certainly, while Lepidus was consul in 42, a great number of victims of the proscription had escaped from Rome to join Sextus in Sicily, but there is no evidence that in this they were either actively or passively encouraged by Lepidus. Indeed, the only man whom Lepidus is recorded as helping, his brother Paullus, fled not to Sextus but east to Brutus (*ibid.* 4,37; Dio 47,8,1).

15. Vell. Pat. 2,80.

was settled. Moreover, if Lepidus knew the full terms of the Pompey-Octavian-Antony treaty of Misenum he would not have felt kindly to Sextus, who had suggested taking his place as triumvir.¹⁶

Lepidus then had probably quarrelled but not broken with Octavian. The final rift came soon enough, however. Sextus was defeated at the sea battle of Naulochus and fled, first to Messana and then in panic eastwards to Antony,¹⁷ and Octavian ordered Agrippa to help Lepidus in capturing Messana, which was now occupied by Plenius with eight legions, whom Sextus had summoned from Lilybaeum, presumably before Lepidus captured that city, unless the siege had been abandoned.¹⁸ This task was easily performed, for Plenius sued for peace. Agrippa counselled waiting for Octavian to arrive, but Lepidus accepted the terms and entered the city, while to win over Plenius' troops he allowed them to join in plundering the city.

That Lepidus acted correctly in entering Messana is indisputable. His imperium was the same as Octavian's,¹⁹ so he was under no obligation whatever to wait for his fellow triumvir, and Plenius offered to surrender the city. Agrippa was different – ὑπὲρ τοῦ Καίσαρος ἀλλ' οὐχ ὑπὲρ ἑαυτοῦ μαχόμενος.²⁰ If relations between Octavian and Lepidus had been good, then Lepidus might have been tactful, but the relations never had been good, and Lepidus was entitled to assert his rights. It is also possible to justify his attitude towards the eight Pompeian legions, whom he wished to add to his own force, for his action was not unprecedented. After Philippi, for example, an amnesty had been proclaimed and many of Brutus' soldiers had joined Antony and Octavian.²¹ Moreover, after the defeat of Lepidus Octavian himself allowed the free citizens who had served under Sextus to join his legions.²² Lepidus' action can therefore be defended, but the reason nevertheless was obviously that he now planned a showdown with Octavian, and to give him equal military support he needed all the legions he could get.

The confrontation came quickly, as soon as Octavian had heard what had happened. Initially the two men spoke through legates. Lepidus pointed out that he was the first to land in Sicily, that he had accepted the surrender of many towns,²³ and had helped to conquer the island which as a result he now claimed.

16. App. *B.C.* 5,71.

17. Earlier he had helped Antony's mother, and was believed to be favourably disposed towards Antony (Plut. *Ant.* 32). Nevertheless he attempted treachery and was executed (Dio 49,17–18; App. *B.C.* 5,133–144).

18. App. *B.C.* 5,122.

19. Velleius Paterculus neatly argues that Lepidus' army followed the *auctoritas* of Octavian, not Lepidus (2,80).

20. Dio 49,4,1.

21. *ibid.* 47,49,3; App. *B.C.* 4,135. Caesar had done the same with Pompey's soldiers after Pharsalus.

22. Dio 49,12,4.

23. He must have stationed guards in these towns, for he ordered the garrisons not to admit Octavian's envoys (App. *B.C.* 5,123).

His original provinces in Spain and Gaul were now possessed by Octavian, and he proposed an exchange of these provinces for Africa and Sicily. All of his arguments were undeniably true, and in the circumstances his demands were not unreasonable. (Octavian would surely have done the same had the positions been reversed.) As far as the exchange of provinces was concerned, Lepidus was merely proposing a return to the distribution agreed on at Bononia, but Africa and Sicily were obviously of greater value in 36 than they had been in 43. Africa was now fairly peaceful (Statilius Taurus assumed control for Octavian later that year without any trouble at all),²⁴ and Sextus Pompey had clearly demonstrated the strategic importance of Sicily.

Despite this, Hadas claims that Lepidus' 'attempt to possess himself of Sicily when he was under no personal necessity to do so . . . constitutes a grave offence against patriotism'.²⁵ Whether co-operation with Octavian is equivalent to patriotism is perhaps only a semantic argument, but in any case there surely *was* a personal necessity for Lepidus' action. No triumvir would willingly pass up a chance to regain equal status with his colleagues, and this, after all, was what Lepidus was claiming. He certainly was not trying to supplant Octavian entirely.

Lepidus' action then is both understandable and reasonable, but Octavian's reaction is equally understandable. He refused. This raises the next question: was Lepidus' failure inevitable and predictable?²⁶ An analysis of the events will help to answer this. An immediate problem is that the sources all differ slightly. According to Appian and to a lesser extent Velleius Paterculus,²⁷ Octavian began to suborn Lepidus' legions, particularly those belonging to Plenius, then entered Lepidus' camp with only a few supporters (though he prudently left a body of cavalry at the gate). Once inside he began to approach the soldiers in person, suggesting where their real interests lay.

In this he was helped by the reluctance of the soldiers to face another civil war, and, a less noble motive, the anger of Lepidus' own men at having to share the plunder of Messana with eight legions of former enemies. Only when enough soldiers had decided to change sides did Lepidus δι' ἀπραξίαν become aware of what was happening. Fighting broke out, and Octavian was struck by a lance, seizing in return, says Velleius, an eagle. Eventually the whole army was involved, with Lepidus trying to make half his soldiers prevent the other half from deserting, but to no avail. The last to leave him were the cavalry, who, Appian says, now offered to kill Lepidus. If this story is true, it

24. Dio 49,14,6.

25. Hadas, *op. cit.*, p. 162. Elsewhere (p. 149) he refers to Lepidus as 'both rebellious and selfish to the highest degree'.

26. This certainly is what Syme, *Roman Revolution*, p. 231, implies: 'A strange delusion now urged Lepidus to assert himself.'

27. App. *B.C.* 5,124–126; Vell. Pat. 2,80.

was probably a gesture to excuse their late desertion. In any case, Octavian refused the offer.

Dio has a slightly different version in that, after an initial rebuff by Lepidus' soldiers, Octavian returned with his whole army and besieged the camp, with the result that the soldiers, though they admired Lepidus, privately deserted him.²⁸ Orosius differs again, as he has Lepidus taking the initiative and attacking Octavian after a fruitless discussion, which compelled Octavian to counter-attack in force.²⁹

All these versions can actually be combined if we allow for the pro-Octavian bias shown by Orosius. The common factor in all the accounts is that Octavian was eventually compelled to use force to defeat Lepidus. What probably happened, therefore, is that Octavian approached Lepidus' camp, ostentatiously stationing his cavalry outside, and when his attempts at suborning the troops met with some resistance the cavalry rode in. It seems reasonable that Octavian would not have personally mingled with his rival's soldiers without having force of some sort to fall back on, though Velleius naturally makes Octavian's actions those of unarmed heroism. The fact that Octavian's legions mutinied immediately afterwards adds to the argument that Lepidus' soldiers submitted through force and a desire for peace rather than personal preference for Octavian.

It seems therefore that to accuse Lepidus of folly is not completely accurate. In numbers he was more or less a match for Octavian – he had twenty-two legions and Octavian twenty-one.³⁰ The difference between the two men lay in character and ability.³¹ Nevertheless, even though Octavian possessed the charisma of *nomen Caesaris* the sources preserve the fact that many of Lepidus' men initially remained loyal to him.

Octavian's victory was complete. Lepidus lost his triumviral powers,³² but remained pontifex maximus, a position from which only death could remove the holder, but whose power had now passed to Octavian, *divi filius*. For thirteen years he had continuously held imperium. For the next twenty-four

28. Dio 49,12.

29. Oros. 6,18.

30. In addition to Lepidus' original twelve legions, there were the two which had come as reinforcements and Plinius' eight. Dio 49,12,1 says that Octavian was stronger, therefore Velleius Paterculus is probably right when he says that Lepidus' legions were of half strength (2,80).

31. τῆς ἀρετῆς τὸν Καίσαρα ἐθαύμαζον καὶ τὴν ἀργίαν συνῆδεσαν Λεπίδῳ (App. B.C. 5,124).

32. The legal implications are discussed by R. A. Bauman, 'The abdication of Collatinus', *Acta Classica IX*, 1966, 129–142, who argues that the abrogation of imperium and condemnation for treason were begun only on Octavian's return to Rome. Octavian then chose to drop the criminal charges in return for Lepidus' voluntarily resigning his imperium.

years (the rest of his life) he lived virtually at the princeps' pleasure, a convenient scapegoat (together with Antony) for the crimes and excesses of the triumviral period.³³ Lepidus had gambled and lost, but the gamble was not, I think, unjustified, nor the losing inevitable.³⁴

33. The shifting of blame started as soon as Octavian returned from Sicily (Dio 49,15,4).

34. Antony's reaction to the events in Sicily is interesting for its opportunism. In 36 he was sufficiently involved in his invasion of Parthia to do little more than protest about what he considered Octavian's high-handed actions. In 33 he complained that Octavian had taken over Lepidus' legions as well as his provinces, when these should have become common property (Dio 50,1,3; Plut. *Ant.* 55) – the argument used earlier by Sextus Pompey when asking for Antony's help (App. *B.C.* 5,134). By 31, when the two men were pouring forth propaganda in readiness for the coming conflict, Antony pointed out that Lepidus had been removed from his command though innocent of any crime (Dio 50,20,3). Obviously at this stage Antony would have said this whether it was true or not.

ACTA CLASSICA



Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

Published by
The Classical Association of
South Africa

For further information go to:
http://www.casa-kvsa.org.za/acta_classica.htm