P. VENTIDIUS—FROM NOVUS HOMO TO ‘MILITARY HERO’

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‘A portent strange has taken place of late,
For he who curried mules is consul now.’

Quoted by Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 15.4

Of all the *novi homines* of his time, P. Ventidius seems to have puzzled the Romans most (Gell. 15.4.1). Thrown up in a period of political and military strife, he was a meteoric figure—springing from nowhere, vanishing again and again to reappear at a higher altitude, then, at his zenith, blinking out for ever. Borne in his mother’s arms among the captives in Cn. Pompeius Strabo’s triumph in Rome, c. 89 B.C., he was hailed there himself as *triumphator* half a century later. His life, as recorded fragmentarily by ancient authors, is reduced almost to a series of strokes of luck (Juv. *Sat.* 7.199 ff), with transitory links altogether wanting. How did a mere buyer or driver of mules, knowing little of war, ever catch Caesar’s eye, find his way into the army of Gaul, and become an officer measuring up to Caesar’s exacting standards? How came he to be one of Mark Antony’s principal legates after Caesar’s death—and be given a proconsulate in the East despite his apparent inaction in the Perusine War? And how did he come to win victories over the Parthians, where experienced generals—like Antony and Crassus—failed before and after him?

Perhaps the most difficult question is how Ventidius’s career, so to speak, got off the ground. He was industrious, efficient and physically hardy—but so were many who, however, remained in obscurity. He began life in humble circumstances, his youth was marked by hardship. If, as is alleged (Plancus, Cic. *Fam.* 10.18.3), his first occupation was that of a muleteer, he must have been out in all weathers, driving beasts over often precarious terrain where mules, being surer-footed, were superior to horses as saddle and pack mounts. Cicero states that he was a mule-driver for an army bakery (Plin. *HN.* 7.43.135)—not, one would think, a well-paid job. He must have acquired capital by some means, perhaps better not investigated—in Rome then, as later, it was difficult to prosper and remain honest (Juv. *Sat.* 3); for we hear of him as a government contractor, a
'buyer of mules and carriages' for supply to the magistrates who had been allotted provinces (Gell. 15.4.3)—a profitable business, and not disdained even by members of the senatorial class. Here his expert judgment of beasts would have stood him in good stead. And it was here, at the age of about 30, that he encountered Julius Caesar on his way to take up his new provinces, the two Gauls—a meeting which was to shape the rest of his life.

Caesar, an expert rider who had picked his way over mountain roads in Spain, would have inspected his new livestock with a critical eye. No doubt, too, he summed up Ventidius as a no-nonsense man who knew his job and was not afraid to speak up. But if Caesar had been a different person—say, a Lucullus—the matter might have ended there. From his proconsular eminence, he might have approved the goods and dismissed Ventidius with polite thanks, and perhaps a promise of future patronage. But Caesar, confident in his lineage and free from petty snobbery, was used to getting alongside of and sizing up all sorts of people. He was probably planning to go on campaign before long, and saw that here he had a man worth tempting away from civilian life—a man who thoroughly understood pack animals and could deal with the multifarious problems arising in the transport of goods. This was not so much to ensure food supplies—in campaigning Caesar usually lived off the country—as to look after the baggage train. The baggage train was of immense importance when the army was on the move, both to the soldiers and to Caesar as ensuring their loyalty: it contained all their accumulated loot. But we may be sure that Ventidius did not sell himself too cheaply; if he was to give up a lucrative business, he would have expected an army staff posting carrying some status, which might offer entry into public life—as in fact it did.

Ventidius, then, accompanied Caesar to the Gallic provinces (Gell. 15.4.3), probably early in 58, and 'showed commendable energy' ('satis naviter versatus'). Presumably he stayed with Caesar throughout the Gallic campaigns, though here there is another tantalizing silence. We do not know what he did. Caesar never mentions him in his commentaries, but then Caesar took efficiency for granted and never commends even his legates unless they had done something exceptional. As for the tribunes, he regarded them as elegant, useless puppies, prone to panic (BG. 1.39) and interested in their posts only as a stepping stone to public office. Certainly Ventidius would have been more useful than they were. But we cannot suppose that he gained Caesar's goodwill by shepherding mules around for nine years and mounting guard over the soldiers' belongings. A fast-moving, hard-hitting commander like Caesar would constantly be faced with urgent transport problems, and here Ventidius' rare gift for logistics may already have shown up. He would surely have come to direct the ac-
tivities of large numbers of men as well as animals, perhaps in siege works.
And as a staff officer closely concerned with the movement of troops and
matériel, he must have learned much of military strategy as practised by a
master of the art. This was to serve him well in the Mutina campaign.

Caesar may have kept Ventidius in mind for yet another purpose. He had
need of loyal supporters, like Mark Antony and Curio, who could watch
his interests in Rome. Antony, who had joined him in 54, had acted as his
agent in Rome in 53, then been elected to quaestor, or promoted to chief
of staff, where he was less likely to be tied up on campaigns, and in 51 sent
back to Rome, again to stand for the office of tribune of the plebs and the
augurate (BG. 8.50). It has been suggested that resentment at Antony's
rapid advancement was a prime cause for the defection of Caesar's chief
legate, T. Labienus; and here it is instructive to compare Labienus with
Ventidius. Both were Picentines and men of allegedly low origin, and both
had served Caesar well since 58. Yet in nine years, Labienus was never
used as an agent or allowed to stand for office at Rome. Neither was Ven-
tidius, of course, but he had not Labienus' seniority or war record, and
he got his chance later during the Civil War when Antony was back in
Rome as Master of Horse and needing reliable assistants. I believe that
Caesar kept Labienus in Gaul not only because he was needed there, but
also because he had long since summed him up as not having the personal
attributes or the contacts required in a political agent. Ventidius, however,
may have retained useful contacts in the business world; and whereas La-
bienus was harsh and unamiable, Ventidius must have had an altogether
pleasanter and more outgoing temperament. He won the friendship of both
Caesar and Antony. We never hear of his quarrelling with anyone. And
it says something for his powers of diplomacy that he could refuse Octa-
vian's invitation to join him after Mutina without giving offence (App. BC.
3.80.328); and subsequently that Octavian, on renouncing his consulate
at the formation of the Second Triumvirate, was happy for Ventidius to
take it over as consul suffectus, 'a particularly high distinction'. Not the
least of Ventidius' qualities, appreciated even by Octavian, and possibly
lacking in Labienus (Hirtius, Caes. BG. 8.52), was steadfast loyalty—first
to Caesar, then to Antony, in whom he apparently saw Caesar's designated
successor.

Apart from his consulate, Ventidius' steps in the cursus honorum (Gell.
15.4.3; Dio 43.51.5) seem to have been initiated by Caesar himself. He
was enrolled in the Senate about the end of 47 after Caesar returned from
Africa, 'as a reward for his services, and also to fill up the Senate'. He
was invested as tribune of the plebs (Gell. ibid.) probably in 46. In
June 44, three months after Caesar's death but apparently on his proposal
(Dio 43.51.5), he was nominated praetor for 43 (Cic. Phil. 13.26, 14.21;
Gell. ibid.; Dio 47.15.2). Shortly afterwards (late 44 or early 43) he must
have begun recruiting troops on Antony’s behalf, initially among Caesar’s veterans in Campania and Apulia ‘where he was well known’ (App. BC. 3.66.270), raising two legions in all, and a third in Picenum.

Meanwhile Antony was besieging D. Brutus in the fortress city of Mutina; and a relieving army under Octavian and the consul A. Hirtius held the Via Aemilia east of Mutina, preventing a junction between Ventidius’ forces from Picenum and Antony’s main army. Ventidius apparently moved north to Ancona on the coast (Cic. Phil. 12.20.23), where he could threaten any advance along the Via Flaminia to the Via Aemilia. The other consul C. Vībius Pansa, hastening north with reinforcements, was forced to take the Via Cassia, a more difficult inland route leading through foothills and the Tuscan Alps to the Po valley. Ventidius continued his advance, to Ariminum or possibly as far as Faventia, but was unable to join Antony before a decisive battle was fought at Mutina (21 Apr.) in which Antony’s army was badly mauled and thrown into disorder. A euphoric Senate headed by Cicero pronounced Ventidius and other supporters of Antony public enemies (Cic. Brut. 1.3a). But now two unexpected factors intervened: the attitude of Octavian, who refused point-blank to associate himself with D. Brutus, one of Caesar’s assassins (App. BC. 3.73.299; cf. D. Brut., Cic. Fam. 11.10); and an epic march by Ventidius which came close to nullifying the effects of the victory.

This march, barely mentioned by Appian and not at all by Dio, was not only a notable feat in itself but was significant in retaining Antony as a major player in the current power game. Ventidius was approached by Octavian who, failing to win him over and nettled by the Senate’s attempt to demote Octavian himself in favour of D. Brutus, may now have decided that his best interests lay in joining forces with Antony (Dio 46.40). This must have been immediately after the battle (c. 23 Apr.). After refusing Octavian’s offer, Ventidius at once led off his troops on a long and arduous trek from Faventia over the Apennines, without keeping to any road, down to Vada Sabatia on the Ligurian coast west of Genua. Here he joined Antony (3 May) after easily eluding the boastful but ineffectual D. Brutus (D. Brut., Cic. Fam. 11.9), who had pursued him along the Via Aemilia (D. Brut., Cic. Fam. 11.10.3, 11.13.3; Pollio, Cic. Fam. 10.33.4). However far Ventidius’ previous experience had extended, he was now a competent general who could inspire his men; a forced march of 220 miles (375 km) over mountain terrain without days of rest took them no more than 12 days. Antony now neatly tricked D. Brutus into rushing off in the wrong direction to intercept him (D. Brut., Cic. Fam. 11.13); and the combined forces quietly moved off westwards along the coast road.

The accession of three fresh legions, composed largely of Caesar’s veterans eager for vengeance on his assassins (D. Brut., Cic. Fam. 11.13), must
have given a tremendous boost to Antony’s demoralized army. More im­portant, its appearance a fortnight later outside Lepidus’ camp at Forum Julii was undoubtedly the turning point for Lepidus (cf. Lepidus, Cic. Fam. 10.35), and later Pollio and the timorous Plancus (Cic. Fam. 10.23)—they had no doubt wondered what was in store for other Caesarean generals, with Caesar dead, Antony fatally weakened and a Pompeian Senate in Rome. But Antony himself, according to Appian (BC. 3.72.297), had never doubted that Ventidius could and would come to his aid. His intervention was critical, and not only for Antony. The inexperienced Octavian might have been hard put to it to survive unaided against a combination of Caesar’s assassins supported by most of the Senate—and later, during the food riots in Rome in 39, when Antony saved his life (App. BC. 5.68.268).

Octavian’s open break with the Senate and his famous conference with Antony and Lepidus at Bononia shortly followed; and the Second Triumvirate came into being on 27 Nov. 43 under a lex Titia, which appointed the three partners triumviri for a period of five years. Their powers (probably imperium maius) were almost unlimited, including the appointment of consuls and other magistrates and provincial governors, and criminal jurisdiction. Formally, all their actions had to be approved and ratified by the appropriate Republican institutions. In the early years, the reality was a reign of terror.

Ventidius must now have been one of the Triumvirate’s most prominent supporters. He was consul for the last month of 43, and also became a pontifex. His activities during the proscriptions are not known. In 41, and ‘probably but not certainly’ in 42, he was governing a Gallic province for Antony (Dio 48.10.1–2), who had taken over the Cisalpine and all Transalpine Gaul except the Narbonese ‘province’ (‘Old Gaul’) under the triumviral agreement (App. BC. 4.2.7). His command was either the western part of the Cisalpina or, more probably, with Calenus in Transalpina Gaul (Dio 48.10.1). It was at this time that he, in common with Antony’s other generals, was faced with an acute dilemma.

After Philippi (Oct.–Nov. 42) some 100,000 discharged veterans had to be paid off in money and lands. While Antony went off to collect money in the East, Octavian undertook the settlement of veterans in Italy, which involved massive confiscations of land all over the country (App. BC. 5.22.87)—an ‘agrarian and social disaster’. The resulting crisis in food production, together with Sextus Pompeius’ naval blockade, reduced Rome to famine. Moreover Octavian, inexperienced in command and dependent on the soldiers’ goodwill to protect him against violent public hostility, had allowed them to help themselves to land in the most arbitrary and brutal fashion (App. BC. 5.13.51–52, 5.15.60–61; Dio 48.6). The civilian population rose in armed revolt (App. BC. 5.27.54), led by one of the consuls,
Antony’s brother Lucius, and Antony’s formidable wife Fulvia, who claimed to have Antony’s backing (App. BC. 5.14.54; Dio 48.5.4–5, 48.11.4).

At first Lucius, who had collected six legions, mostly of recruits (App. BC. 5.32.127), made some headway against Octavian’s forces, and no doubt looked forward to receiving support from Antony’s generals. He even occupied Rome temporarily and was hailed as imperator by the citizens while Lepidus, the remaining triumvir, fled without striking a blow (App. BC. 5.30.118; Dio 48.13.3–4). But he could not, or did not, hide the fact that he was siding with the landowning classes against the veterans; and indeed claimed, with some justification, to be in arms against a ‘tyrannous’ triumvirate to restore constitutional government (App. BC. 5.30.118). He thus handed Octavian a useful propaganda weapon, and put his brother, whose full cooperation he had guaranteed, in an acutely embarrassing position. Almost needless to add that no word came from Antony, either public or private.

Advancing north to join Ventidius and Pollio, Lucius found himself threatened by the Octavian general Q. Salvidienus Rufus, who was presently joined by M. Agrippa with a second army, but was himself being followed by the armies of Ventidius and Pollio, slow, but purposeful. Salvidienus and Agrippa headed off Lucius with some ‘harassing’ but without open hostilities, and drove him to take refuge in Perusia, a strongly fortified city, which was at once surrounded by the Octavian armies, plus that of Octavian himself, who now joined them. Despite appeals from Lucius, the Antonian generals did nothing to raise the siege. If it had come to open battle, they might have intervened to save the triumvir’s brother, but they had no intention of starting a war with another triumviral army. It would seem that a show of force by Octavian and Agrippa sufficed to disperse them to their various strongholds (App. BC. 5.33.132).

One can appreciate their difficulty. Calenus in Transalpine Gaul had not moved at all, thus leaving their forces numerically inferior to Octavian’s. As Appian points out (BC. 5.32.126), a war with fellow Romans, especially those with like interests, would be unpopular with the soldiers; and there was probably rivalry among the generals for the leadership. But above all, they had had no indication at all of Antony’s wishes. And they must have guessed that his silence was deliberate. Antony’s prestige in Italy was still very great. A firm declaration from the victor of Philippi would have changed the whole complexion of the war—possibly brought over many of Octavian’s own supporters. As it was, a few months later Salvidienus of his own accord offered to desert to Antony (App. BC. 5.66.278).

The shilly-shallying must have tried Ventidius’ patience. Given a free hand, there is little doubt that he could have worsted the enemy forces. Agrippa and Octavian, in their early twenties, were only novices—and Salvidienus was half-hearted. But he may have been handicapped by his
Plancus hated him and Pollio was none too friendly, and neither would accept him as leader. He seems to have taken the lead anyway—Lucius was ‘waiting for Ventidius’ at Perusia (App. BC. 5.32.124), and later he led a rescue operation (5.35.139,141) which was held up at Fulginium, c. 20 miles (32 km) from Perusia. Not surprisingly, Plancus was able to talk the other two out of advancing further. They had lost the initiative. They could not raise the siege without a major battle. As Ventidius would have realized, this was the right military decision: with a divided leadership and probably reluctant troops, a battle would have involved unacceptable risk. It was also the decision Antony wanted. Perhaps Ventidius realized that too.

Lucius held out through the winter, surrendering only when his food supplies were exhausted (App. BC. 5.39.164), probably in late February 40; and the Antonian generals retreated over the Apennines, though details of their movements are unknown. Ventidius must have escaped without discredit and without joining Octavian, for we hear of the troops at Brundisium from the army of Plancus, who had fled to Greece, choosing him as leader (App. BC. 5.50.211). What happened to Ventidius’ original troops is unclear; they may have returned to Calenus, who had 11 legions when he died (5.51.214f). It appears that Ventidius then went south to Tarentum, where he remained, preparing for war with Octavian when Antony should arrive from the East. Hostilities were averted, however, and in September under the pact of Brundisium the triumvirs divided the empire between them, Antony taking the East and Octavian the West. Antony then proceeded to Athens to take up the administration of his new provinces. One of his first acts (App. BC. 5.65.276) was to send Ventidius to the East as proconsul of Asia and Syria, to deal with a growing threat posed by a renegade Roman, Q. Labienus and the Parthian king’s son Pacorus.

For Ventidius after frustrating months of inactivity, this commission in Asia—a token of his patron’s high approval—would have released a flood of pent-up energy. By now, he must have been aware of his potential as a military commander, and would feel intense satisfaction in at last having a free hand, not unmixed with lingering resentment towards his fellow generals. Pollio, no great general, in this year celebrated a triumph for quelling a minor revolt in Illyria; Plancus, of course, had never had one and was never likely to. His, Ventidius’ triumph, when it came, would be greeted with the plaudits of the whole city. Like King Lear, he might have said: ‘I shall do such things—what they are yet I know not, but they shall be the terrors of the earth.’

Ventidius had been set a daunting task—for one who had never before directed a major campaign. After Philippi, while Italy was torn by internal dissension, Labienus had subverted the Roman garrison troops in Syria (most of whom had served under Brutus and Cassius), then persuaded the
Parthian king to invade the province. Between them, he and Pacorus now controlled Syria, Palestine and Cilicia, and were winning over the Greek cities of the Asian province or coercing them into submission.

One can only marvel at Ventidius’ swift and accurate summing up of the military situation and the energy with which he took action. His unheralded appearance in Asia had shocked Labienus who, with only local troops, fled before him. He occupied Asia Minor, chased Labienus out of Caria and pursued him eastwards with the cavalry and light-armed infantry, in which he had included a strong body of slingers, whose weapons outranged the Parthian bows. They were also to prove effective against cataphracts.24

He brought his enemy to bay near the Taurus range; and when his own heavy infantry and the Parthians arrived a few days later, a battle was fought. The Parthian cavalry, despising Roman opponents after Carrhae, did not wait to join forces with Labienus, but charged headlong up the hill on top of which was the Roman camp. Ventidius, ‘fearing the barbarian cavalry’ (Dio 48.40.1) or pretending to (Front. Strat. 2.5.36; Florus 2.20.6), kept his men within camp until the enemy were within 500 paces (0.46 mile or 0.74 km).25 He had probably never encountered cataphracts before, but would be well aware that heavily burdened horses wearing body armour, even the large Parthian mounts, could not maintain a full gallop up a steep incline. They must have been flagging badly when they approached missile range, where they would run into a hail of slingshots, arrows and even pilae. And into this confusion of spent, plunging horses and shouting men—riders falling from their mounts, others turning to flee and colliding with those still coming up—Ventidius let slip his legionaries, armed only with long, unwieldy lances, would be ineffective against them; horse-archers even more so. None got through to the Roman camp. The whole body of horse were pushed pell-mell down the hill with heavy losses; and the survivors fled, not to Labienus, but back into Cilicia. Labienus deserted his army but was afterwards caught and killed; most of his army eventually joined Ventidius.

After recovering Cilicia, Ventidius remained there for a time on administrative duties, then sent Pompaedius Silo with a cavalry force to occupy the Amanus Gates,27 a narrow mountain pass through which passed the road to Syria. But he found the pass already held by a strong Parthian garrison under Phranapates, who at once took the offensive. Silo, with cavalry only, was at a disadvantage and was forced to flee, hotly pursued by the Parthians. He was in danger of being trapped when Ventidius, characteristically, emerged in strong force from ambush near Mt Trapezon (Strab. 16.2.8) and attacked the pursuers, who were routed with heavy losses; Phranapates himself was killed (Dio 48.41.1–4; Front. Strat. 2.5.37). How Ventidius came to be there at the critical moment is not clear—Dio says ‘by chance’, but this is to be doubted. He may have been alerted by
local intelligence, but it seems more likely that Silo’s troop was merely the advance guard of a large army whose objective was Syria. Ventidius could not have expected Silo to capture such a strongpoint with cavalry; Silo’s orders were probably to get away quickly if he found it occupied. At any rate his intervention had the desired effect: deprived of their general, the survivors of the Parthian force abandoned their position and withdrew, and on advancing into Syria Ventidius found it likewise deserted by the invaders and took it over without a blow.

Proceeding south, he occupied Palestine without difficulty, thus completing his task of restoring Rome’s rule in her former territories. The Senate, however, gave him no reward for his victories, though Antony as his chief was honoured with eulogies and thanksgivings, and took the title of Imperator for the second time.

Ventidius and his legions wintered in the reclaimed territories, but were spread out from Palestine to Cappadocia, for ‘the [Syrian] cities were not yet quiet’ (Dio 49.19.1), evidently having found Parthian rule less onerous than that of Rome. He had reason to fear the coming Parthian invasion; a direct offensive in force across the Euphrates at Zeugma, the usual crossing place and the shortest route, could well have destroyed him before he could get his army together. He now misled his enemy and gained time by the most celebrated of all his stratagems (Front. Strat. 1.1.6; Dio 49.19.2–3)—a typical business trick, requiring all his negotiating skills. Approaching one Pharnaeus (or Channaeus—Dio), a prince in the Cyrrhestican border region of Syria whom, though outwardly friendly, he knew to be in touch with Pacorus, he asked his advice on various secret but minor matters; and confided to him that above all he feared a Parthian attack across the plain as at Carrhae where they could use their cavalry and archers, whereas they would be hampered in the hilly Zeugma region. Hearing this, Pacorus took a circuitous route leading to a crossing further downstream into Cyrrhestica; but here the river banks were further apart and a bridge had to be built. This took ‘above 40 days’ (Front.)! Meanwhile Ventidius collected his forces with all speed, and was camped on a hill on the far side, in the region of Mt Gindarus (Strab. 16.2.8), three days before the enemy arrived. A battle was fought in June 38, possibly but improbably on the anniversary of the battle of Carrhae.28

One cannot help remarking that whatever Pacorus’ virtues as a ruler (Dio 49.19.4), as a general he was far from shrewd—first, in not realizing that time was of the essence; and second, in not finding out, or not learning from, what went wrong in the first battle. With patience, he could surely have forced a battle on more equal terms, which he might easily have won; Ventidius could not sit on a hill for ever while the Parthians overran Syria. As it was, the battle at Gindarus was little more than a replay of the
first, on a much larger scale. Tarn suggests that Pacorus brought every *cataphract* in Parthia.

Spurred on by the fact that the Romans did not oppose their crossing or attack them after they crossed, the Parthians launched a direct assault *en masse* on the Roman camp. Again, they were flung back with heavy losses, for the same reasons as before. Pacorus himself was killed. Dio (49.19.2–3) here makes it clear that *cataphracts* were used, and notes the important role of the Roman slingers and, of course, the heavy-armed legionaries. But the Romans must also have used cavalry and light-armed foot-soldiers, for they were able to cut off and kill many who tried to escape across the bridge after Pacorus fell. The victory was decisive, possibly outweighing that of Carrhae. 'It was long before the Parthians again sent their troops to the Roman bank of the Euphrates'.

Ventidius pacified Syria, crudely but effectively, by cutting off Pacorus' head and putting it on show in various cities. He sent off two legions and 1000 cavalry under Machaerus to Herod's help (Joseph. *AJ.* 14.15.7). He may also have considered a pursuit of the routed enemy into Parthian territory (Plut. *Ant.* 34.4), but must have thought better of it; he was too sensible to fall into the same error as Lucullus—although his troops, unlike those of Lucullus, were solidly behind him. His mission was accomplished, and Antony would certainly have objected to any Alexander-like projects. But he saw no harm in further punishing Antiochus of Commagene for sheltering Parthian fugitives at Samosata. And here he may have run into trouble. Shortly after the battle of Gindarus (c. July 38), Antony unexpectedly arrived in Syria and assumed supreme command. He took over the siege of Samosata and 'sent Ventidius home, with becoming honours, to enjoy his triumph' (Plut. *Ant.* 34.4), the legate C. Sosius succeeding him as governor of Syria. Both Plutarch (*Ant.* 34.2) and Dio (49.21.1) suggest that Antony had become jealous of Ventidius.

Ventidius celebrated his triumph as victor over the Parthians on 27 Nov. 38 (*Fasti triumphales* CIL 12 p. 50, 180)—a unique victory (Plut. *Ant.* 34.4) which led to more public rejoicing in Rome than any for decades past. His triumphal speech was reputedly composed by Sallust. He was given a State funeral on his death a few years later (Gell. 15.4.4, quoting Suetonius, *Frug.* 210).

However, Antony, who shared officially in the triumph as commander-in-chief, had not been present. Had Ventidius lost favour with Antony after his final, glorious success, which led to more public rejoicing in Rome than any other victory for decades past? Antony seems never to have used him again in a military capacity. But does that necessarily imply a loss of favour? Ventidius' health may have failed—he probably died no later than 35. Or Antony may have been jealous of Ventidius' successes (Dio 49.21.1)—but why? He was not a jealous man like Octavian, and two
or three victories over ‘barbarians’ would hardly match his own military record. Again, Josephus, probably biased by his ‘localized’ viewpoint,\textsuperscript{34} implies (AJ. 14.14.6; BJ. 1.15.2) that Ventidius might have angered Antony in 39 by accepting bribes\textsuperscript{35} from Antigonus, the king of the Jews, not to send help to Herod, to whom Antony had promised the throne. But Ventidius did send help; he sent Silo with a force. More he could not do, with Pacorus mustering troops in Mesopotamia for another invasion. The sums he took from Antigonus—and from Antiochus of Commagene and the Nabataean king Malchus—were not bribes but fines, ‘because they had helped Pacorus’ (Dio 48.41.5). Ventidius may have enriched himself thereby, but this was no more than most Roman generals would have done. That was what provinces and client rulers were for, as Antony himself would have agreed. Perhaps, after all, he decided at Samosata that it was time he had a share in the spoil! He allowed Ventidius his triumph, so it does not appear that there had been a serious rupture between them.

How do we rate Ventidius as a general—or as a proconsul? Here, as with anyone whose period of brilliant achievement was short, we should guard against the ‘mute inglorious Milton’ syndrome—that is, ascribing to him potentialities he did not have and never could have developed. Like any good general, Ventidius was gifted with tireless energy (‘impigre et strenue’—Gellius), quick appreciation of military situations, and promptness in making firm decisions. Muleteering and soldiering had made him a great expert in logistics, with a remarkable eye for terrain. He thoroughly understood the functions of the various army groups—heavy and light-armed, infantry and cavalry, auxiliaries—and was adept at coordinating them in battle. Cool-nerved, he could choose the psychological moment for action. Above all, he was aggressive. He would have made a dashing guerrilla leader—perhaps another Sertorius.

But our very limited records of his career do not justify our ranking him as much better than good—certainly not among the greats or near-greats. His successes were all on mountainous terrain against the same opponents, a noble elite whose feudal pride and disdain for the lowly horse-archers inhibited them from luring their enemies on to flatter ground where the two cavalry arms could work together, as at Carrhae. Ventidius deserves great credit as the first to devise winning tactics against cataphracts; but how would he have fared in conventional pitched battles? At Carrhae? Better than Crassus, I would guess. He was too wary and resourceful to fall into such a trap. With Caesar’s family background, Ventidius would no doubt have come to the fore earlier. But a Caesar’s upbringing does not make a Caesar. Marius, another novus homo\textsuperscript{36} of municipal origin who had to prove his military ability, rose to far greater heights. He was, perhaps, more of an egotist.

We know even less of Ventidius’s career as proconsul. It is questionable
whether he was a good administrator, or whether education would have made him so. The episode of Pacorus' head was repulsive, if effective. He was corruptible—but so were elegant aristocrats like Lucullus. He knew nothing of Roman law; and a man of his type, practical and learning from experience, would probably not have made much of abstract legal studies. His failure to ensure that Silo and Machaerus did the jobs for which he sent them to Judaea—though he knew that Antony was personally interested—was unwise, whether or not he suffered for it. He should have been more au fait with Roman policy. He was a fine commander, but decidedly more soldier than statesman.

NOTES

1. Most modern works give him the cognomen Bassus, but this appears 'late and seldom' (H. Gundel, RE 15 [1955], 'P. Ventidius Bassus', 796); no contemporary or official source gives him any cognomen at all (R. Syme, 'Sabinus the muleteer', Latomus 17 [1958] 73-80). His identification with the Sabinus of Virgil's Catalepton 10 has little substance (I. Kajanò, Arctos 9 [1975] 47-55; AnnPhil 46 [1975] 354).

2. 'Self-made men such as Bassus ... what brought them to the top but the stars in their courses, the miraculous occult powers of Fate, who lets captives triumph.'

3. 'Genere et loco humili' (Gell. 15.4.3). 'As a slave' (Gundel, ibid. 797), but this is unlikely. His father is listed in the Fasti triumphales as the first of the family to hold Roman citizenship (T.P. Wiseman, New Men in the Roman Senate, Oxford 1971, 16). Descent from a leader in the Allied War, based presumably on Plutarch's mention of brothers Ventidii who were municipal magistrates at Auximum (Pomp. 6.3), is not established. As genealogists are aware, basing putative kinship on a correspondence of names has its pitfalls.

4. Syme, ibid. 77.


6. A suitable post would be praefectus fabrum, 'officer of engineers', but in reality A.D.C. to the general (Keppie, ibid. 99); these were often men of great ability and long service (R. Syme, Roman Revolution, Oxford 1939, 71, n.3).


8. Ibid. 803, cf. Dio 47.15.2.


13. F. Millar, 'Triumvirate and principate', JRS 63 (1973) 50-67, points out that although the triumviral period was marked by violence, illegality and the arbitrary exercise of power, the triumvirs' powers were lawfully acquired, and they were much concerned with obtaining the sanction of Republican institutions for their actions.
15. Seaver, *ibid.* 277 and n.16.
17. See Gabba, *ibid.* 144–145, for discussion.
18. See Gabba, *ibid.* 150, for discussion.
20. On this see Syme, *RR* 92.
22. The legions from Gaul were taken over by Octavian on Calenus’ death but later restored to Antony (App. *BC.* 5.51.214–215, 5.66.279). They may have been the 11 legions commanded by Ventidius in Asia.
23. Gundel, *ibid.* 807, favours a later date. Some authorities accept Appian (*BC.* 5.65), who indicates a departure c. Octobor for Ventidius, but cf. Dio 48.39.1–2 and Plut. *Ant.* 32.1, who state that he was not sent until after the treaty of Misenum was made with Sex. Pompeius, viz. in winter 40–39, and that he began his campaign in early spring 39.
25. If the aim was to ‘avoid arrows’ (Front. *Strat.* 2.2.5), this range would appear excessive. The bows of horse-archers had a maximum range of about 200 yards (180 m).
26. Despite Frontinus (*ibid.*) and Drumann (1.321), there is little doubt that the Parthian cavalry were *cataphracts*, as at Gindarus (Dio 49.20.2–3), not horse-archers. Unarmoured horse-archers were not used in close combat. Their tactics at Carrhae were to ‘soften up’ the enemy infantry with arrows from a distance, leaving the cataphracts to make the final charge.
31. Most probable (Gundel, *ibid.* 812), though Tarn (*CAH* 10, 53) prefers a date in 37.
33. See W. von Sydow, *JDAI* 89 (1974) 189–216; *AnnPhil* 46 (1975) 556. A grave on the Via Appia, within the first mile before the Porta Metronia, has been dated at 35 B.C. and is believed to be that of Ventidius.
34. Gundel, *ibid.* 809.
35. Cf. Tarn’s disapproving remarks (*CAH* 10, 50, 53), which Seaver (*ibid.* n.22) considers ‘unduly harsh’.
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