

# LEPIDUS RECONSIDERED<sup>1</sup>

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The general impression of the triumvir M. Aemilius Lepidus given in the works of many modern historians is one of an indecisive, disloyal, and incompetent nonentity.<sup>2</sup> His role in Roman politics during the late Republic is often overlooked or summarily dismissed. It may be that Lepidus' reputation has suffered because of the partisan nature of the sources in that period of political turmoil. Although Cicero is very explicit in his denunciations of Lepidus' presumed fickleness, lack of principle, and criminal neglect of the Republic as exhibited in his giving aid to Antony, it should be noted that Cicero was far from objective in his analysis of the situation.<sup>3</sup> Late in 44 and early in 43 Cicero had made a concerted effort to gain the support of Lepidus and other provincial governors, even praising Lepidus highly and securing from the Senate a decree to erect an equestrian statue in his honor: 'Quam ob causam iustam atque magnam, et quod periculosissimum civile bellum maximumque humanitate et sapientia sua M. Lepidus ad pacem concordiamque convertit . . .'<sup>4</sup> With Antony's defeat at Mutina Cicero must have felt that the Republican cause would be victorious. It is only natural that after his hopes were subsequently dashed by the union of Antony and Lepidus he would vent his frustration and anger upon Lepidus, the man he felt was most responsible for rekindling the Caesarian opposition.<sup>5</sup> The influence of Cicero on other classical authors and upon modern historians has been great. In addition, writers in the early Empire period often belittled Lepidus for daring to challenge the authority of Octavian, who by then was viewed as the revered emperor Augustus.<sup>6</sup>

A recent article has correctly questioned the picture of Lepidus as a weak, indecisive character and pointed out the important role he played in controlling events immediately following Caesar's assassination.<sup>7</sup> A close examination of other phases of Lepidus' career reveals additional testimony to the man's character and capabilities. There is little information concerning the early years

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1. This article resulted from research conducted for my unpublished dissertation, *The Aemilii Lepidi* (Newark, Delaware, 1973).

2. See W. E. Heitland, *The Roman Republic*, III, 287, 404; R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 165-166, 180; L. Hayne, 'Lepidus' Role after the Ides of March', *AClass* XIV, 1971, 109, n.3.

3. Cic. *Ad Brut.* III,1, XVIII,2.

4. Cic. *Phil.* V,40, see also XIII,17.

5. Cic. *Ad Brut.* XVIII,2; XXIII,2; XXIV,4,9-13.

6. Vell. Pat. II,80; Suet. *Aug.* 16,4.

7. Hayne 109-117.

of Lepidus' political 'cursus'. Around 66 he issued coins as a triumvir monetalis, a position often held by a young Roman noble between his first military experience and his quaestorship.<sup>8</sup> It was very likely in 62 that Lepidus was elected to the College of Pontiffs. This honor, although quite natural for a man of such a noble family, may also reflect the influence of a close relationship between Lepidus and Julius Caesar, who had become pontifex maximus in 63 and who was praetor in 62.<sup>9</sup> Lepidus' activities during the fifties are unclear. He is not mentioned in connection with Caesar's campaign in Gaul. It is likely that he spent most of his time in Rome, perhaps protecting Caesar's interests there. He must have held the quaestorship around 58 or 57 and he was probably a curule aedile in 54 or 53.<sup>10</sup> The violence between the rival gangs of Milo and Clodius kept the regular elections for 52 from being held and led to the selection by the Senate of Lepidus as the first interrex. However, during his five-day term early in 52 the followers of Clodius besieged Lepidus' home and prevented the elections from being held.<sup>11</sup>

It is not until 49 that the sources begin to record Lepidus' actions in more detail. From this date on several instances can be cited of the trust Caesar placed in him. With the opening of hostilities between Caesar and Pompey, Lepidus, who was a praetor, received responsibility for the control of Rome in Caesar's absence.<sup>12</sup> In his official role as praetor Lepidus secured the passage of a law to elect Caesar as dictator, apparently for the purpose of holding elections at which Caesar himself was later chosen as a consul for 48.<sup>13</sup> Before departing for his campaign against Pompey in the East, Caesar engineered the appointment of Lepidus as proconsul in Hither Spain.<sup>14</sup> This was an important assignment because Spain had long been the scene of rebellion and was at this time a Pompeian stronghold subdued by Caesar only the year before. It is unlikely that Caesar would have risked entrusting the direction of such an important province to a man possessing little administrative or military capability. As proconsul Lepidus put an end to a serious dispute within the Caesarian forces in Farther Spain, a struggle between Q. Cassius Longinus and M. Claudius Marcellus Aeserninus. Lepidus' swift action in marching into the province with a large force and in compelling arbitration between Marcellus and Cassius ended the threat of a revolt that could have restored the region to Pompeian control.<sup>15</sup>

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8. E. A. Sydenham, *The Coinage of the Roman Republic*, 136–137.

9. Cic. *Har. Resp.* 12; T. R. S. Broughton, *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic*, II, 171, 173, 205–206; see L. R. Taylor, 'Caesar's Colleagues in the Pontifical College', *AJPh* LXIII, 1942, 385–412.

10. J. Seidel, *Fasti Aedilicii*, 70; Broughton II, 228.

11. Cic. *Milo* 13; Ascon. 29(33C), 37–38(43–44C); Broughton II, 234–236.

12. Plut. *Ant.* 6,4; App. *BC* II,41.

13. Dio XLI,36,1; XLIII,1,1; Caes. *BC* II,21,5.

14. Dio XLIII,1,1; App. *BC* II,48; Broughton II,275.

15. Dio XLII,15–16; Caes. *BA* 59,2; 63–64,2; Broughton II, 275, 288.

For his services in controlling the Spanish provinces during 48 and 47 Lepidus was rewarded with a triumph and with election as Caesar's consular colleague and master of the horse in 46.<sup>16</sup> Lepidus' conduct in Spain and the fact that he was entrusted once again with the care of Rome, this time while Caesar was busy eradicating Pompeian opposition in Africa and Spain, provide further testimony to Caesar's confidence in the abilities of his master of the horse. Lepidus and his assistants kept order in Rome, paying particular attention to cater to Cicero's wishes and thereby reduce the intensity of the orator's opposition to the Caesarians.<sup>17</sup> During the dictator's absence, Lepidus convoked an assembly which elected Caesar as sole consul for 45. He also was responsible for the direction of extensive building activity, including the erection of the *Saepta Iulia*, a permanent polling-place in the *Campus Martius*, and a temple to *Felicitas*, the goddess of good fortune, in the *Forum*.<sup>18</sup>

After Caesar's return to Rome from his victory over the Pompeians in Spain, Lepidus was continued in his office as master of the horse and received an appointment as proconsul of Narbonese Gaul and Hither Spain, which was to begin in 44. Lepidus sent assistants ahead to temporarily govern these provinces for him and was still in Rome at the time of Caesar's assassination in March.<sup>19</sup> His swift action in occupying the *Forum* and the *Campus Martius* succeeded in restoring relative stability to Rome after the murder had thrown the city into upheaval. Although he expressed a desire to avenge Caesar's death, he was willing to join with Antony in working out a compromise that brought the conspirators down from the *Capitoline*.<sup>20</sup> Although Antony as a reward engineered his election as *pontifex maximus*, it should be noted that Lepidus was one of the most likely candidates to succeed Caesar in that office in any case. With Antony in control of Rome, Lepidus departed to assume personal control of his provinces and to end the new threat presented by Sextus Pompey in Spain. Lepidus, with the assistance of Antony and the Senate in Rome, successfully negotiated an agreement with Sextus which temporarily put an end to hostilities in Spain.<sup>21</sup> His parley with Sextus resulted in the Senate's voting Lepidus a public thanksgiving and later, upon Cicero's motion, in the issue of a decree and the erection of a statue in his honor.<sup>22</sup>

During the rest of 44 and the first part of 43, Lepidus apparently consolidated the control of his two provinces. Rather than being indecisive, he seems to have made an effort to keep his options open, maintaining his loyalty to the Senate, while preparing himself to assist Antony if the situation demanded it. The overwhelming defeat suffered by Antony at *Mutina* in April brought the Republi-

16. Broughton II, 293–295.

17. Dio XLIII,28,2; 48,1; Cic. *Att.* XIII,47a; *Fam.* VI,8,1; XIII,26.

18. Dio XLIII,33,1; XLIV,5,2–3; LIII,23,2; Cic. *Att.* XIII,42.

19. Dio XLIII,49,1; 51; App. *BC* II,107; *Vell. Pat.* II,63,1; Pliny *NH* VII,147.

20. App. *BC* II,118,124; Dio XLIV,22,2; *Zon.* X,12; *Nic. Dam.* 27; see Hayne 109–117.

21. Dio XLIV,53,6–7, XLV,10,6; App. *BC* III,4; IV, 94.

22. Cic. *Phil.* III,20–24; V,38–41; XIII,8; Dio XLVI,51,4.

cans close to a total victory, but the junction of Lepidus' forces with the remainder of Antony's revived the Caesarian threat and thereby earned Lepidus the eternal damnation bestowed by Cicero.<sup>23</sup> It is true that Lepidus proclaimed his loyalty to the Senate and the Republic throughout this period and he even swore that the union with Antony had been forced upon him by a mutiny of his soldiers, but these statements should be viewed as attempts at self-protection rather than as examples of weakness or indecision.<sup>24</sup> His actions, in opposition to Caesar's murderers and in support of Antony, were consistent.<sup>25</sup>

It was apparently Lepidus who brought together Antony and Octavian for the negotiations which led to the formation of the Second Triumvirate in November of 43.<sup>26</sup> The manner in which the West was partitioned among the three men clearly indicates that Lepidus' strength was still considerable at that point. He kept control of his provinces of Narbonese Gaul and Hither Spain and received in addition Farther Spain. Although Antony took the most important share by gaining authority over Cisalpine Gaul and Gallia Comata, Octavian received only Africa, Numidia, Sardinia, Sicily, and some other islands, the least desirable regions in the West.<sup>27</sup> With hindsight it is clear that Lepidus made a fatal mistake in agreeing to stay behind and control Rome as consul in 42 with only three of his ten legions while his two colleagues took the other seven with them to fight the forces of Brutus and Cassius in the East.<sup>28</sup> Lepidus' soldiers had not seen very much action under him and the glory and booty that they would receive if victorious would be likely to turn their allegiance from any previous leader.

Despite Lepidus' successful administration of Rome during 42, the military strength presented by Antony and Octavian after Philippi enabled them to ignore their colleague and effectively reduce the triumvirate to a duumvirate. As a sign of the new balance of power after Philippi, the two men decided upon a redistribution of the provinces. Cisalpine Gaul became an independent section of Italy and in compensation Antony took Narbonese Gaul. He retained Gallia Comata and picked up Africa from Octavian. Octavian took Spain from Lepidus and held on to Sardinia, Sicily, and Numidia.<sup>29</sup> Lepidus was to receive nothing in the new distribution, but Africa and Numidia were probably set aside to be given to him if his assistance should again prove necessary. It was very likely because of the discontent stirred up by L. Antonius and Fulvia in the Perusine War of 41 that Octavian decided to regain Lepidus' aid by turning over Africa and perhaps also Numidia to him. Lepidus then

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23. App. *BC* III,84; Cic. *Fam.* X,15,2; XII,8-9; *Ad Brut.* XVIII,2.

24. Cic. *Fam.* X,34-35.

25. See Hayne 117.

26. Dio XLVI,41,5; 51,2; Livy *Per.* CXIX; Eutrop. VII,2; App. *BC* IV,2; Oros. VI,18.

27. App. *BC* IV,2.

28. App. *BC* IV,3.

29. Dio XLVIII,1-2; 22,2; App. *BC* V,3.

governed Rome while Octavian pursued L. Antonius.<sup>30</sup> In 40, soon after the end of the Perusine War, Octavian sent Lepidus to govern Africa, giving him the six of Antony's legions whose loyalty was most suspect.<sup>31</sup> This act prevented Lepidus from joining Antony in the East, disposed of much of Antony's military strength in Italy, and situated Lepidus and his forces so that they could be readily available to trap Sextus Pompey in a pincers movement if hostilities with him should again be reopened.

Little is known about Lepidus' administration of Africa and Numidia. His right to the African provinces was confirmed later in 40 in the pact arranged between his two colleagues at Brundisium. The provinces were again redistributed so that Antony would govern the eastern ones and Octavian the western.<sup>32</sup> Although Lepidus was still technically a triumvir, he was no longer consulted by his colleagues and his position was clearly that of a subordinate to Octavian. He may have hoped to recoup his losses by his governorship of Africa and through an eventual show of strength against Sextus Pompey and perhaps also against the other two triumvirs. Lepidus gained control of four legions which had been commanded by T. Sextius, a legate of Antony in Africa.<sup>33</sup> An inscription from the coastal town of Thabraca records a decree of the local decurions which honored Lepidus as the patron of their city. It also refers to a third triumph for Lepidus, but the reason for such a reward is unknown.<sup>34</sup> As governor of the African provinces Lepidus probably founded several colonies for those who had been dispossessed of their property in Italy for the purpose of meeting the soldiers' demands for Italian land.<sup>35</sup> A lot of his time must have been spent in directing preparations for the eventual clash with Sextus Pompey. He apparently constructed a large fleet because he used many ships to transport his troops to Sicily in 36. After hostilities with Sextus were reopened in 38 Octavian apparently requested the aid of both of his colleagues, but a planned meeting at Brundisium never took place.<sup>36</sup> When Antony and Octavian did confer at Tarentum in 37 Lepidus was not consulted, but the powers granted to the triumvirs were extended for another five years.<sup>37</sup>

In 36 Octavian received Lepidus' promise to provide assistance against Sextus. On July 1 Lepidus sailed for Sicily with 1 600 carrier vessels, seventy warships, twelve legions of about half the usual strength of 6 000 each, 500

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30. App. *BC* V, 12, 20, 29; Dio XLVIII, 13, 3-4; Livy Per. CXXV.

31. App. *BC* V, 53; Dio XLVIII, 20, 4.

32. App. *BC* V, 65; Dio XLVIII, 28-29; Plut. *Ant.* 30, 3-4.

33. Dio XLVIII, 22-23; App. *BC* V, 75.

34. J. Guey and A. Pernet, 'Lépide à Thabraca', *Karthago* IX, 1958, 79-89.

35. Verg. *Ecl.* 1, 64; T. Frank, 'Vergil's *First Eclogue* and the Migration to Africa', *CR* XL, 1926, 15-16; E. Gabba, 'The Perusine War and Triumviral Italy' *HSPH* LXXV, 1971, 140-143.

36. App. *BC* V, 78-92; Dio XLVIII, 46.

37. App. *BC* V, 93-95; Dio XLVIII, 49, 2; 54.

Numidian cavalry, and a large amount of war material.<sup>38</sup> He landed on the west coast of the island and besieged the forces of Plenius, a legate of Sextus, within Lilybaeum. Lepidus captured some of the towns in the area, but, after Sextus sent Tisienus Gallus to aid Plenius, the fighting in the west was indecisive.<sup>39</sup> When Gallus was recalled to assist Sextus, Lepidus also moved his troops to the area of Messana, in the north-east, where he joined Octavian. The two triumvirs did not get along well because, while Lepidus demanded equal authority, Octavian treated his colleague as he would any lieutenant.<sup>40</sup> Although Agrippa deserves the credit for his naval victories over Sextus near Mylae and Naulochus, Lepidus' assistance was important to him in besieging Plenius' troops, the last remaining part of Sextus' forces in Sicily, within the city of Messana. Lepidus granted Plenius peace terms despite Agrippa's objection that they should wait until Octavian's arrival. When Lepidus also added the eight legions of Plenius to his own forces and laid claim to Sicily, his challenge to Octavian's authority demanded a response.<sup>41</sup>

Although Lepidus has often been castigated for presuming to question Octavian's right of command, it should be pointed out that he was merely asking for a restoration of the powers of which he had been arbitrarily stripped when he in good faith had turned over the bulk of his legions for the war effort against Brutus and Cassius. Lepidus offered to trade Africa and Sicily for his former provinces of Spain and Narbonese Gaul.<sup>42</sup> He must have seen his role in the Sicilian victory as the only opportunity to regain his lost position of strength. With twenty-two legions under his command he probably felt that he at least had a chance, whereas acting merely as a lieutenant of Octavian would soon restore him to obscurity. Although his legions were large in number, however, they were probably only half-strength, ten of them owed loyalty to Antony, few had seen any action under Lepidus, and eight had come from the recently-defeated enemy forces. Octavian apparently surrounded Lepidus' camp and slowly forced the legions to defect. Lepidus submitted himself to his conqueror and was stripped of whatever triumviral power he still possessed and sent into exile at Circei, a coastal town about midway between Rome and Naples.<sup>43</sup> Although he remained pontifex maximus until his death late in 13 or early in 12 B.C., Lepidus spent the last twenty-two years of his life in political obscurity, certainly aware of the constant growth in power and prestige of the man who had so rudely dropped him from his pinnacle of power.

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38. Dio XLIX,1,1; 8,2; App. *BC* V,97-98; Vell. Pat. II,80,1.

39. App. *BC* V,98,104,117; Dio XLIX,8,1-4.

40. Dio XLIX,8,3-4; App. *BC* V,117.

41. App. *BC* V,122-123; Dio XLIX, 11,2-4; Vell. Pat. II,80,1-3; Suet. *Aug.* 16,4; Livy Per. CXXIX; Oros. VI,18.

42. App. *BC* V,123.

43. App. *BC* V,124-126; Dio XLIX,12,1-4; Oros. V,18; Vell. Pat. II,80,4; Livy Per. CXXIX; Suet. *Aug.* 16,4; Plut. *Ant.* 55,1-2.

It is quite likely that Octavian would have greatly reduced Lepidus' power even if his authority had not been challenged. He might have allowed Lepidus to continue as governor of Africa, but with Sextus Pompey's threat removed from the area, Lepidus' assistance was no longer really necessary. Octavian would likely have greatly reduced the number of Lepidus' legions and possibly have removed him from all command responsibility to prevent him from aiding Antony. The triumvirate had rapidly been changed into a duumvirate and just as quickly a struggle for one-man rule had begun.

A survey of Lepidus' career shows that Lepidus performed effectively in several important positions as an agent of Caesar, on his own following Caesar's death, and as a triumvir. He displayed considerable administrative ability both in the city of Rome and as a provincial governor. It is likely that he would have made an effective consul if he had lived much earlier in the Republic. He had very few tests of his military skills, but on the whole he was quite successful. He never had the opportunity to work with soldiers long enough to satisfy their greed and gain their personal loyalty. The indecisiveness ascribed to him by Cicero and others seems instead to have been the result of a calculated effort to keep his options open, while at the same time remaining consistent in his loyalty to the Caesarian cause. Caesar had trusted Lepidus with several tasks and he performed well. However, with Caesar's death the power vacuum thrust Lepidus into a struggle in which the stakes were too high and the competition too vigorous for him to emerge as the victor. His only hope lay in working with his adversaries, but, although he might side with one or the other, his opponents were bent on attaining sole domination, and he inevitably had to fall. No attempt should be made to portray him as a shining example of the ideal Roman statesman, but neither should he be portrayed as a nonentity, a political dwarf inexplicably found associating with the giants of his time. A careful examination of all available sources shows that he was more capable and that he played a more important role in Roman history than most historians recognize.

# 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

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