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Edward Anson ✦ Michael Fronda ✦ David Hollander
Timothy Howe ✦ John Vanderspoel
Pat Wheatley ✦ Sabine Müller ✦ Alex McAuley
Catalina Balmaceda ✦ Charlotte Dunn



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Four Observations on Mark Antony and the Triumviral Narrative

Mareile große Beilage

Abstract: *This short article adds some observations about the agenda of Mark Antony during the triumviral period. Matching numismatic and literary evidence, a strong case can be made for Antony actively supporting his family's agitation against Octavian from 41-40 BCE. If the imagery on coins is taken seriously as a well-thought-out statement designed to express authority and ensure loyalty, it can further be argued that Antony's close link to Cleopatra was not, per se problematic for a Roman audience but rather used to present Antony as a powerful, well-funded general. The prominence of Antony's role as augur on the legionary denarii clarifies that Antony, contrary to the claims of his enemies, had remained well aware of Roman sentiments. In the decisive confrontation with a Roman rival (Octavian), the Antonian faction expected Antony's priestly title to give him a type of authority that the mentioning of his victories as imperator would not have had.*

Keywords: *Marcus Antonius, Second Triumvirate, Perusine War, Cleopatra, coinage, augur*

The complicated career of Antony has fascinated biographers from Plutarch all the way to modern historians and in spite of—or maybe just because of his eventual misfortune, Antony has never failed to rouse at least a drop of sympathy. Without attempting yet another full ‘reappraisal’, this contribution aims to supply some clarifying arguments about Antony’s agenda, which I feel have been overlooked in the discussion on the triumvir and his supporters. The first two pieces of evidence challenge in particular the positive image of the triumvir as a loyal ally to the young Octavian, as presented by Halfmann 2011 and originally argued by Goltz Huzar 1978.¹ It will be argued that Antony’s coinage lend further support to the—seemingly more conservative but rightly dominant view—that a ‘deep-seated rivalry and contention right from the beginning’ between Antony and Octavian is the more plausible version of events.² Two further observations from coinage add detail to Cleopatra’s role in Antonian propaganda and show the relevance of Antony’s priestly title.

Coinage suggests that Antony did support his family’s actions in 41-40 BCE

During Antony’s absence in the East, severe friction and eventually a full-scale military conflict developed between his supporters in Italy and Octavian, who had been given the

¹ H. Halfmann, *Marcus Antonius* (Darmstadt, 2011); E. Goltz Huzar, *Mark Antony. A Biography* (Kent, 1978).

² R. Newman, ‘A Dialogue of Power in the Coinage of Antony and Octavian (44-30 B.C.)’, *AJN* 2 (1990), 37-63, 62.

difficult task to settle veteran soldiers in Italy. In the confusion of the so-called Perusine war, personal interests mingled with political goals to such extent that they were impossible to entangle even for contemporaries.³ Although it is comprehensible that Antony did not intervene in order not to lose popularity with the veteran soldiers, the triumvir's apparent inactivity has invited speculation about his own attitude towards the events. Using coinage as evidence, Haymann recently provided further support for a popular view that, in spite of the agitation of his brother Lucius, Antony remained a loyal partner of Octavian in 41-40 B.C., and calmly awaited the course of events.⁴ Haymann's analysis of Antony's emissions and their specific purposes is convincing. However, the interpretation of one detail, verified only through a combination of coinage and literary record, can qualify our view of Antony's agenda.

Coin legends document Marcus Barbatius Pollio (RRC 517/1-2) as one of Antony's quaestors in the East. Appian tells us that Antony and Barbatius, who was responsible for minting and sending Antonian money to Italy, fell out.⁵ The fact that Barbatius soon joined Octavian gives us some hint as to what the dispute might have been about. Barbatius, whom Cicero counts not among Antony's most loyal companions but among the former friends of Caesar now 'shipwrecked' and stuck with Antony,⁶ went on to proclaim that Antony was loyal to Octavian and disagreed with his family. Appian, the ancient author most persistent in explaining the entangled and obscured situation, already questions the truth of this claim. Haymann suggests that Antony and Barbatius likely had a disagreement over the minting of coins with Lucius' portrait—a hypothesis that is weakened by his own claim that, although the RRC 517 coins were meant as 'Handgeld' for Lucius to distribute to the veteran soldiers in Italy, the Lucius coins were no attack on Octavian.⁷ It is in any case unlikely that Barbatius would have parted with Antony and actively opposed the Antonians in Italy had he been happy with Antony's actions concerning his brother's activities. The events make sense only if, to Barbatius' dismay, Antony had indeed launched at least a subtle attack on his triumviral colleague to support his brother and so the handing out of coins with Lucius' portrait should be interpreted in this way. As the reluctant attitude during and the pacifying efforts of the troops after the Perusine war prove, any provocation which might have kindled further civil war must have been hugely unpopular with parts of Antony's followers, many of which had backed him as their best chance for the restoration of peace and stability.

Barbatius was replaced as quaestor by Marcus Cocceius Nerva (RRC 517/4-6).⁸ In the autumn of 41 BCE, this Cocceius must have been in Italy by the side of Antony's brother.⁹

³ See E. Gabba, 'The Perusine War and Triumviral Italy', *HSPH* 75 (1971), 139-60 as a standard reference for the conflict.

⁴ F. Haymann, 'Der Perusinische Krieg und die Münzen für Marcus Antonius im Jahr 41', in F. Haymann, W. Hollstein and M. Jehne (edd.), *Neuere Forschungen zur Münzprägung der römischen Republik. Beiträge zum internationalen Kolloquium um Residenzschloss Dresden 19-21. Juni 2014* = *Nomismata* 8 (Bonn, 2016), 215-44, 240.

⁵ App. 5.31.120-1.

⁶ Cic. *Phil.* 13.3 ('*naufragia Caesaris amicorum*'). Cicero names Barbatius in one breath with Asinius Pollio, who as general of Antony actively aimed for lasting peace and played a major part in enforcing and securing the peace of Brundisium.

⁷ Haymann 2016, 231-3; similarly P. Wallmann, *Triumviri rei publicae constituendae. Untersuchungen zur politischen Propaganda im zweiten Triumvirat (43-30 v. Chr.)* (Frankfurt, 1989), 85 as quoted by Haymann.

⁸ Haymann 2016 227.

⁹ App. 5.61.256.

This fact, again recorded by Appian, has been noted before but has not been used as a clear argument, although Cocceius certainly did not go to Italy to support Lucius without Antony's knowledge and even approval. Given that Antony's scope of action was limited by the wishes of his supporters, the action taken by his immediate family in 41-40 BCE, in particular his wife Fulvia, sheds the most authentic light on the personal ambitions of the triumvir.¹⁰ The claim that Antony simply was not informed about the events in Italy must ultimately be discarded. Not only must Antony have known about the republican attitude of his brother Lucius long before, the fact that Antony clearly had not uttered a single official word against Lucius' and Fulvia's ambitions before and during the Perusine war is proof that Antony's family acted in his interest. Given the embarrassing efforts to cover up all possible involvement in the conflict in order to make way for the peace of Brundisium, even the slightest hint of Antony's disapproval would surely have been put on record.¹¹

On a related note, the coinage of 40 BCE, minted with images of clasped hands and *concordia* (RRC 529/2-4), cannot be used to illustrate friendship between the triumvirs.¹² The silence of Dio and Plutarch concerning the prelude to and the peace of Brundisium illustrates the complexity of the situation which is hard to reconstruct. The claims that Antony, by sailing to Italy with 200 ships, only intended to test Octavian's loyalty, had no 'warlike intentions' or even only wanted to 'have a word with his young colleague' are all based on the euphemistic account of Lucius Cocceius Nerva in Appian, who tried by all means to reconcile the two combatants by stretching truth to a maximum.¹³ There can be no doubt that peace was negotiated only because of the pressure of the military and the plebs.¹⁴ The only thing the joint coinage verifies is that public cooperation was the best strategy to keep support of the troops.

Mixed feelings in the Antonian faction. A rumour about the death of Sextus Pompey attests to severe tensions between the triumvirs in 36 BCE

As the existence of a long-lasting, serious rivalry between Antony and Octavian has occasionally been questioned, most recently by Halfmann 2011, another piece of evidence can be added to clarify that there were severe tensions between the triumvirs even in the seemingly more co-operative phase after the treaties of Brundisium and Misenum. Already

¹⁰ As it has been shown that Antony's trusted wife Fulvia was decidedly canny and ambitious, it is an inevitable conclusion that she would have taken pains to keep the peace, had this been the most promising way of action for their family; see K. Welch, *Magnus Pius. Sextus Pompeius and the Transformation of the Roman Republic* (Swansea, 2012), 221; the literary sources show Fulvia as the 'driving force in the events' (Goltz Huzar 1978, 132, similarly A. Goldsworthy, *Antony and Cleopatra* (New Haven/London, 2010), 316); on Fulvia in the Perusine war see F. Rohr Vio, 'Dux femina: Fulvia in armi nella polemica politica di età triumvirale', in T. M. Lucchelli and F. Rohr Vio (edd.), *Viri Militares. Rappresentazione e propaganda tra Repubblica e Principato* (Trieste, 2015), 61-89.

¹¹ Instead, the triumvirs agreed on the fiction that Antony's wife Fulvia was responsible. Appian himself notes that it was simply impossible to find out about Antony's reply to his brother's and wife's letters (App. 5.21.83). It is highly unlikely that Antony did not respond at all.

¹² As done, e.g., by P. V. Hill, 'Coin-Symbolism and Propaganda During the Wars of Vengeance (44-36 B.C.)', *NAC* 4 (1975), 157-90, 183.

¹³ Halfmann 2011, 130; Gabba 1971, 152 and H. Bengtson, *Marcus Antonius. Triumvir und Herrscher des Orients* (München, 1977), 171; App. 5.61.258.

¹⁴ App. 5.59.246-48; 5.64.272-3; Dio 48.31.3-4.

in 37 BCE, Octavian painfully complained about the disloyalty of his partner and accused him of having entered into secret negotiations with Lepidus on Sicily.¹⁵ The fact that Antony had to personally send the respective messenger to Octavian proves the seriousness of the accusation. Although Antony made credible that the communication with Lepidus was only about a suggested marriage, the suspicion itself is telling: Antony had explored his options for an alliance against Octavian before turning against Sextus Pompey for good.

Soon after, Sextus Pompey's death led to quite a number of theories about his demise in the East. Significantly, most of them seem to have been spread in order to deny any involvement on Antony's part.¹⁶ While it is unlikely that Antony had anything to do with the death of the young Pompey, which could have been (and was) used against him,¹⁷ one rumour claimed that Antony's general Plancus had Pompey killed in order to maintain peace between Octavian and Antony.¹⁸ I believe that this point is worth dwelling on just a little longer: contemporaries found it likely that some of Antony's supporters were actively keeping the peace while Antony himself might have jumped at the opportunity.

Antony's connection to Egypt and Cleopatra was useful for propaganda purposes even in a Roman context

Among Antony's biographers Halfmann 2011 and before him Goldsworthy 2010 and Traina 2003 have disputed the older view of Antony as 'prince of the East' and pointed out that the triumvir's focus always remained on Rome.¹⁹ The important observation that Antony's close relationship with Cleopatra was a sensible political move can be further clarified by numismatic evidence. While the cooperation between Antony and Cleopatra was accepted or even welcomed in the Eastern provinces,²⁰ our knowledge of the Roman attitude towards the subject is heavily biased by propaganda. However, the Latin legend on coins with both Antony's and Cleopatra's portraits (RRC 543/1) proves that the close connection to the Egyptian queen was considered useful for propaganda purposes even in a Roman context and should not per se be considered problematic.²¹ The legend ANTONI ARMENIA DEVICTA,

¹⁵ App. 5.93.390-2.

¹⁶ App. 5.144.598-600; Dio 49.18.4-6; see Welch 2012, 281.

¹⁷ Dio 50.1.4.

¹⁸ App. 5.144.600.

¹⁹ Goldsworthy 2010, 340 and 386 in particular G. Traina, *Marco Antonio* (Rome, 2003), ix with the 'intento principale' to disprove 'il mito di un Antonio «ultimo principe dell' Oriente greco», as opposed to F. Chamoux, *Marc Antoine. Dernier prince de l'Orient grec* (Paris, 1986). Halfmann 2011, 194 even believes that Cleopatra would have remained a 'politisch unbedeutende amouröse Episode im Leben eines bedeutenden Römers' had Antony won the battle of Actium.

²⁰ See C. Rowan, *From Caesar to Augustus (c. 49 BC-AD 14). Using Coins as Sources* (Cambridge, 2019), 100-5 for numismatic evidence.

²¹ In his widely received work *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder* (München, 1987), P. Zanker has recognized Antony's use of eastern iconography and considers Antony's decision to put first his wife Octavia and then his 'lover' Cleopatra on coins as part of his unashamed association with Hellenistic lifestyle and art. His discussion of Antony's 'problematic images' is, however, based on the doubtful premise that Antony simply didn't bother about the reception of his imagery in a Roman context (65). To Zanker, Antony's use of female portraits on coins is part of his failure to adhere to traditional 'Romanness', which made him lose the propaganda war against Octavian (69).

without a doubt chosen to impress a Roman audience, connected Antony's military potency with Cleopatra's status as REGINAE REGVM and vice versa. However passionate or pragmatic the personal relations between the two might have been—Antony would certainly not have handed out these kind of coins if he had any reason to suspect a widespread negative reaction among his followers. Instead, the close ties to Ptolemaic Egypt stressed Antony's status as a powerful, well-funded general.²² This also provides a sensible context for claims made by Plutarch and Dio, who reproach Antony with having distributed his own money in the name of Cleopatra.²³ The triumvir's action however, was far from unreasonable. According to Dio, the money sent from Egypt had not been quite sufficient, but it must have been in Antony's interest to suggest that the support of the Ptolemies provided him with constant extra resources.

Antony's legionary coinage is an underrated piece of evidence for the potency of Antony's priestly role in a military context

While literary sources tend to smooth out inconsistencies and dead ends in the narrative, coinage captures the decision for a particular image and legend as a moment in time. In spite of being classified as a 'monotonous and unimaginative' emission for the simple soldier as opposed to the 'normale aristokratische Münzprägung',²⁴ Antony's best known coin type, the legionary denarius of 32-31 BCE (RRC 544/1-39) has a story to tell.²⁵

It has not been stressed enough that the extensive use of the augural title on coinage by Antony is without precedent and remains unique.²⁶ More attention should be paid to the fact that Antony's legionary coinage features the legend ANT AVG in the most prominent position on the obverse, while at the same time even dropping the title of imperator. While it has been noticed that the *lituus*, the augural staff, refers to the 'supreme military authority of the charismatic leader',²⁷ the coins explicitly name the office of augur itself, which Antony had held since 50 BCE. The denarius is relatively small but reducing the titles on the obverse to the most significant would have made sure to get the message across. The prominence of the priestly title was clearly intentional and raises further questions as to

²² The Cleopatra coins have been used as evidence for close personal connections between the queen and the triumvir, although there is more reason to assume pragmatic reasons behind type selection. Hill even suggests that RRC 543/1 was most likely coined in order to celebrate the assumed wedding ('From Naulochos to Actium. The Coinages of Octavian and Antony, 36-31 B.C.', NAC 5 (1976), 121-8, 123).

²³ Dio 49.31.4; Plut. Ant. 51.

²⁴ B. Woytek, 'The Depth of Knowledge and the Speed of Thought. The Imagery of Roman Republican Coins and the Contemporary Audience', in P. P. Iossif, F. de Callatay and R. Veymiers (edd.): *TYPOL. Greek and Roman Coins Seen Through Their Images. Noble Issuers, Humble Users? Proceedings of the International Conference Organized by the Belgian and French Schools at Athens, 26-28 September 2012* (Liège 2018), 355-87, 378; T. Hölscher, *Staatsdenkmal und Publikum. Vom Untergang der Republik bis zu Festigung des Kaisertums in Rom* = Xenia 9 (Konstanz, 1984), 16.

²⁵ For the long afterlife and impact of the large coin series see Rowan 2019, 109-16.

²⁶ The reference to augury on coinage of military leaders had begun in the late republic with Sulla and was continued by Caesar. The very prominent Antonian use of the priestly title is as unique as its setting with the re-shaping of authority by Augustus (see Ov. fast. 1.607-12 for Augustus and augury) preventing continuity.

²⁷ J. R. Fears, *Princeps a diis electus. The Divine Election of the Emperor as a Political Concept at Rome* = Papers and Monographs of the American Academy in Rome 24 (Rome, 1977), 103.

the authority and power of augury in the target audience. Whether chosen by Antony himself or a quaestor, the position as augur was considered the most relevant in preparation for a decisive military confrontation with a Roman rival. Cicero's speeches against Clodius and Antony, in which he denigrates his opponents as uneducated and ignorant when it comes to religious knowledge and traditional values, show that ritual competence had become a playground of late republican politics. Together with the missing portrait and Antony's continued insistence on his office as III VIR R P C in the bottom half of the obverse, the legionary denarii can be interpreted as stressing Antony's selfless concern for the republic and its traditions as opposed to the exceptional claim to power of the *divi filius* Octavian.²⁸

However, a possible religious significance of the priestly title should also be considered. One last piece of evidence for the latter is the coinage Antony's general Scarpus minted in Cyrenaica in 31 BCE (RRC 546/2a-3c). The reverse legend reads: ANTONIO AVG – P SCARPVS IM. Shortly before the battle of Actium, Scarpus stressed his confidence in having backed the right horse: he as commander fights for a leader who is an augur and whose cause is thus sanctioned by the divine powers. After the expected victory turned into a defeat, Scarpus defected to Octavian. A new set of coins by Scarpus can almost be read as an attempt at an explanation: The victorious IMP CAE[SAR] DIVI F is not only AVGVR but also PONTIF (RRC 546/4-6).

Summing up

What to take from these observations? By adding some more detail about repeated and severe tensions between the triumvirs, I have tried to counter the view that considers the narrative of intense rivalry between Antony and Octavian a product of the hindsight of the literary sources. The triumphal coinage, documenting the politically convenient representation of authority at a particular moment in time, offers an invaluable addition to the ancient authors who tried to make sense of the conflict. Coinage discloses the decidedly republican attire of Antony and puts at least a question mark on claims that Antony's final failure can be explained by him having lost touch with Roman traditions and values. Antony's augural title on the legionary denarii offers just one, if maybe the best of several examples.

When discussing the history of the triumviral period, it seems wise to consider that the personal agenda of the triumvirs did not necessarily match their actions in the eventual course of events, which were to a large extent dictated by the wishes of their supporters. The Perusine war and the peace of Brundisium are prime examples, but, as I have shown above in the second section, there is even more evidence. Much which has previously been ascribed to a loyal or guileless nature on Antony's part was in fact the hesitant outcome of mixed feelings within the heterogeneous Antonian faction.

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²⁸ Rowan 2019, 110 suggests that the Antonians might not have used the portrait on the legionary series because a 'decidedly "non-Hellenistic" set of images may have been thought advisable' as a reaction to Octavian's propaganda against Cleopatra. Without necessarily being markedly Roman, giving up the single general's portrait could have been meant to stress that Antony, together with various senators who had joined him (Dio 50.2.6-7; 50.3.2), was fighting for a common goal.

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