
Title: The Internal Roman Conflict between Antonius and Octavius (44-27 BCE)

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Abstract :

Between 44 and 27 BCE, Rome witnessed a bloody struggle between Antony and Octavian, who differed in their political ambitions after the assassination of Julius Caesar. The conflict began with the Third Civil War, which arose following Caesar's death. Antony and Octavian fought for control of power. Initially, they formed an alliance to avenge Caesar's murder, but later, sharp disagreements emerged between them. Antony dominated the East and was allied with Cleopatra VII, while Octavian sought to gain influence in the West. The war concluded with the naval Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, where Octavian defeated the forces of Antony and Cleopatra. After pursuing Antony to Egypt, both he and Cleopatra committed suicide in 30 BCE. Octavian then became the sole ruler of Rome, founding the Roman Empire after years of civil wars. In 27 BCE, he declared the beginning of the imperial era and relinquished the republican titles.

Keywords: Antony, Octavian, Roman Civil War, Battle of Actium, Roman Empire, Julius Caesar

Introduction

The spark of the civil war in Rome was ignited after the reforms of the Gracchus brothers, who attempted to protect the interests of the plebeian class from the aristocratic dominance led by the Senate. This division caused Roman society to split into two opposing factions with different objectives. The civil war went through three distinct phases. The first phase was the civil war between Marius, leader of the populares, and Sulla, leader of the optimates (133-78 BCE), which ended with Sulla's victory over Marius and his followers. Sulla declared himself dictator of Rome and carried out massacres against the opposing faction. After Sulla's resignation and subsequent death, the conflict between the two sides was reignited by two new leaders: Pompey, the optimates leader, and Caesar, the populares leader. This phase is referred to as the second civil war (49-44 BCE), in which the populares emerged victorious, with Caesar becoming the undisputed ruler of Rome and declaring himself dictator. Following Caesar's assassination in 44 BCE,

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the struggle resumed in a third round of civil war (44-27 BCE) between Antonius and Octavius. Initially, the two leaders formed a temporary alliance to avenge Caesar's murder at the hands of the aristocrats. However, after a bloody conflict, Antonius committed suicide, and Octavius emerged as the sole ruler of the Roman state. In this context, the central issue we examine is the nature of the conflict between Antonius and Octavius and its impact on the republican system of Rome.

The Rise of Octavius and Antonius:

After the conclusion of the second civil war and the assassination of Julius Caesar, which directly led to the outbreak of the third civil war between Caesar's supporters and his enemies, the figures of Antonius and Octavius began to emerge as key players in these developments.

1- Antony:

One of the most notable aspects of Antony's ¹ character was his experience in military affairs from a young age. This helped him develop the physique of a soldier and the strategic mind of an experienced commander. His military prowess was honed through his association with Caesar in numerous battles, making him one of the most prominent military leaders. Caesar, however, was often indulging in pleasures and wine, which eventually led him into debt. After some time, Antony went to Greece, where he stayed for a period. It was there that Gabinus, who was consul that year, called upon him to join him in his campaigns in Syria. Initially, Antony declined, as he did not wish to serve in the army as an ordinary soldier. However, he eventually accepted an order from Gabinus, appointing him as an officer in the cavalry. Antony's relationship with Gabinus grew stronger, and he fought among his troops, eventually becoming their leader.

Later, Antony became the most important officer in Caesar's army in Gaul. He held the position of tribune and then took on Caesar's duties with the Senate. He was subsequently appointed as the commander of Caesar's left flank and became the leader of Caesar's cavalry. After assuming the role of dictator, Antony became the second most powerful man in the Roman world, after Caesar. He later served as consul and chose to govern the eastern provinces, particularly Egypt, recognizing the wealth of resources it held. As the strongest partner in the alliance, Antony was able to impose his will on his other partner, retaining control over the East. (12) ²

Octavian:

The rise of Octavian came after Caesar's assassination, especially after he was mentioned in Caesar's will as the adopted son. According to Roman custom, he was named after his adoptive father and took the name Julius Caesar Octavian. Caesar's murder caused tremendous shock in Rome, and the conspirators expected that control would revert to the Senate. However, this did not happen, and their crime was not accepted by the Roman people or by Caesar's former associates. The latter were a group of Caesar's old

¹ Antonius: Antonius was born in Gaul in 82 BC and spent the majority of his life in military camps. He was Julius Caesar's right-hand man and, later, an adversary to Octavian during the second civil war. After being defeated, he died in 31 BC, as detailed in *Plutarch's Lives*, reference, p. 1665.

² Hussein Yusuf, reference, p. 487.

officers and the common people of the city, led by Marcus Antonius, the consul, and Marcus Lepidus, the head of the cavalry. Together with Octavian, they controlled power for five years.¹

In 36 BCE, Octavian celebrated his triumph in Rome, thereby gaining the immunity granted to a tribune. This allowed him the right to propose laws and present them to the Senate, as well as the right to veto any action taken by government officials. He also reviewed the membership of the Senate and gave himself the title of Leader of the Senate.²

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By 27 BCE, it was announced before the Senate that the era of civil war had come to an end. It was declared that he would relinquish all his powers and restore the republic to its former state. Octavian, however, retained the consulship, which served as a constitutional support for his uninterrupted rule until 23 BCE. He also assumed tribunician power, granting him the right to summon the popular assemblies and propose legislation, making him a sacred figure. In 17 BCE, he celebrated the completion of the reforms and the birth of a new era, which he had organized. His successors were entrusted with the responsibility to preserve and safeguard it for two centuries, despite the subsequent interference of those who sought to undermine it. See Appendix No. (11).

II- The Conflict Between Octavian and Antony:

When the will was read in Antony's house, it was revealed that Julius Caesar had adopted Octavian and bequeathed to him all that he had. Caesar only mentioned Antony among the secondary heirs. This led the gathered people to see it as an opportune moment to claim high ranks. As soon as the public learned of the will, they were enraged and demanded the execution of the assassins. This forced Brutus and Cassius to flee.⁴

At the same time that Antony left Rome to face the army coming from Macedonia, Octavian went to Coneytia to win over the seasoned veteran soldiers of Caesar. They gathered around him, and half of the soldiers from Macedonia also joined him. Thus, before the end of 44 BCE, Antony found himself facing two enemies: Decimus Brutus and Octavian in the south. He decided to first deal with Decimus in the north, so he moved towards the Po Valley at the head of the troops he had gathered. Decimus feared the superior forces of Antony's army and camped at Mutina. Antony was forced to lay siege to the city. The year 44 BCE ended during the siege, and new consuls were elected. Both Hortensius and Pansa succeeded, having been nominated by Julius Caesar before his assassination⁵.

Antony's ambitions frightened the Senate, which chose to support Decimus. However, they found that the new consuls lacked the military strength needed to confront Antony. As a result, they were compelled to

¹ Hussein Sheikh, reference, p. 57.

² Durant, reference, p. 11.

³ Hussein Sheikh, reference, p. 57.

⁴ Will Durant, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

⁵ Charles Sinois, *The History of World Civilizations*, translated by Muhammad Kurd Ali, Al-'Alamiyyah for Books and Publishing, Taybah Press, Giza, Egypt, 2012, p. 208..

accept Octavian's help. Despite their dislike for a man bearing the name of Caesar, Cicero spoke in his favor within the Senate, swaying the support in his direction. The Senate granted Octavian the right to recruit troops and collaborate with the consuls to lift the siege of Mutina. All parties moved north, and a decisive battle took place at the Battle of Gallorum, which led to Antony's retreat from the battlefield in Italy. He then turned toward Gaul to seek the support of Lepidus and his forces.¹

The Senate was filled with joy, and they could not contain themselves. They believed that the soldiers of Antonius should not be held accountable for their killings. They stood cautiously towards the soldiers of Octavius. The consuls had been killed on the battlefield, and the Senate transferred their command to Decimus. The Senate then joined Octavius' army and demanded an investigation into Antonius' actions, as well as the election of Octavius as consul for the remainder of the year.

The Senate responded by stating that Octavius did not meet the necessary conditions for such an election. This led him to march with his army towards Rome, compelling the Senate to accept his offer to become consul. The Senate immediately passed a law requiring the punishment of Julius Caesar's assassins. As a result, Octavius moved north to confront Antonius.

At that time, Antonius had already reached an agreement with the leader of the army in Spain, Lepidus, and with the commander of the forces in Gaul, Plancus. He thus became the dominant force in the West. In order to eliminate Caesar's killers, Antonius sought to align with Octavius. Octavius, recognizing that his interests required an understanding with Antonius and Lepidus, agreed to cooperate, especially since they had already reached a prior agreement before Octavius' arrival.

When Octavius advanced with his army from Rome to the north, he met with Antonius and Lepidus in Bononia, in the Po Valley. There, they agreed to form a Triumvirate government.²

Once the situation stabilized for the Triumvirs Antonius, Lepidus, and Octavius, they formed a Triumvirate and agreed to employ violence in the same manner as Sulla had, rather than following the leniency that Caesar had practiced, which ultimately led to his assassination. They also discussed the possibility of seizing funds to address the treasury's deficit. However, they could not agree on the names of those to be eliminated. They thus granted each member the right to add names to the list of individuals to be executed or whose wealth would be confiscated, whether the other two consented or not. Octavius, in an effort to appease Antonius, had to sacrifice Cicero. They issued lists of those to be purged. According to Asad Rostam, the reason for the execution of 300 senators and 100 knights was the seizure of their wealth, which the Triumvirs needed, particularly to pay the soldiers' salaries.

As soon as the three of them consolidated their control over the West, their attention turned towards the East. Lepidus stayed in Rome to manage its affairs, while Antonius and Octavius, each at the head of their armies, crossed the Adriatic and landed in Greece. Brutus and Cassius had already arrived in Philippi, in Eastern Macedonia. The armies of Cassius and Brutus were crushed, leading to their suicides on November 23, 43 BCE. With this, the three became masters of the Mediterranean world. After the battle, the two leaders agreed to divide the possessions of the Roman state³ Antony took control of the East to

¹ Ibrahim Rizqallah Ayoub, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

² Ibrahim Rizqallah Ayoub, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

³ Ibrahim Rizqallah Ayoub, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

govern it, while Octavian returned to Rome to manage its affairs. As for Lepidus, he was assigned the province of Africa.¹

Antony became aware of the events taking place in Rome while he was in Egypt, particularly the Parthian war. He then traveled to Athens and met his wife, Flavia, who informed him that his influence in Italy and Gaul had begun to wane. In response, he hastened his journey and arrived at the outskirts of Brundisium, where he met Octavius. The two armies camped there after Octavius' arrival from Rome in preparation for battle. However, the news of Flavia's death and the refusal of the soldiers to fight postponed the conflict between the two leaders. As a result, the two parties reached an agreement in Brundisium in the autumn of 40 BCE. Under this agreement, the Mediterranean basin was divided between them, with Africa remaining under the control of Lepidus, who had gained the loyalty of Octavius' soldiers in Africa.²

In 39 BCE, one year after the Treaty of Brundisium, Octavius and Antony were forced to make peace with Sextus Pompey, who still controlled Sicily. Sextus had seized the island of Sardinia from Octavius. His control over both Sardinia and Sicily, as well as the surrounding seas near Italy, allowed him to disrupt the transportation of grain to Rome, which had been suffering from a severe famine.

During a meeting of the three leaders in Messinium, near the Bay of Naples, it was agreed that Sextus would rule the three islands (Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily) for five years. He was also granted the right to nominate a consul, assume the role of a priest, and receive compensation for the property of his father, Pompey the Great, in Rome. In return, Sextus was expected to ensure a steady supply of grain to Rome and refrain from sheltering rebellious slaves in his army.

However, this agreement was not implemented, and Octavius clashed with Sextus Pompey, who returned to his pirate activities. A new war broke out between them, during which Octavius reclaimed Sardinia but was unable to capture Sicily.³

When Antony returned to the East, his officers achieved several victories over the King of the Lurians and repelled a counterattack launched by the Parthians. In 38 BCE, Antony returned to Italy in response to the call from Octavian, who informed him of the growing rebellion of Sextus Pompey and his piracy. This led to an agreement in Tarentum, as Octavian felt an urgent need for Antony's assistance to eliminate Sextus Pompey. Likewise, Antony recognized the necessity of Italian soldiers for a campaign against Parthia⁴

However, there was no mutual trust between them. The reconciliation between them was officially achieved through the efforts of Octavia, Antony's wife and Octavian's sister. The following agreement was made:

¹ Montesquieu, *Reflections on the History of the Romans*, translated by Abdullah Al-'Arawi, Cultural Center Edition, Morocco, 2011, p. 135..

² Ibrahim Rizqallah Ayoub, *op. cit.*, p. 214

³ Hussein Yustuf, *op. cit.*, p. 492

⁴ Abd al-Latif Ahmad Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

Will Durant, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

Charles Sinois, *The History of World Civilizations*, translated by Muhammad Kurd Ali, published by Al-'Alamiyyah for Books and Publishing, Taybah Press, Giza, Egypt, 2012, p. 208.

Ibrahim Rizqallah Ayoub, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

Ibrahim Rizqallah Ayoub, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

Ibrahim Rizqallah Ayoub, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

- Antony would provide Octavian with ships to fight Sextus Pompey in exchange for four legions stationed in Africa.
- The Triumvirate government would be officially renewed at the end of 38 BCE for another five years, ending in late 33 BCE. This renewal would maintain the division of territories as outlined in the Brundisium Agreement. Under these circumstances, Agrippa succeeded ¹

In the destruction of Sextus Pompey's fleet at the Battle of Naulochus in 36 BCE, Pompey himself fled to Asia. There, he was captured by Antony's forces and met his death two years later²

This treaty served as a temporary truce in which Octavius, the undisputed master of the West after eliminating Sextus Pompey and deposing Lepidus, began waiting for the right moment to eliminate Antonius as well, thus becoming the uncontested supreme ruler of the world.³

It was well known that Antonius was a womanizer. As a result, he did not restrain his desire for Cleopatra VII, the Queen of Egypt, and fell in love with her. He began spending most of his time at banquets and in pleasures, forgetting his glory and pride. He neglected his duties to consolidate his power and preserve his honor. In fact, he divorced his wife, Octavia, the sister of his friend and ally, Octavius, and married Cleopatra. She expanded her kingdom by granting him Libya, Cyprus, and the Cilician plain. Plutarch mentions that, during one public gathering in front of the people, Antonius massaged Cleopatra's feet with oil, perhaps to relieve her fatigue.⁴

As for Octavius, he worked hard to increase his power and solidify his authority. He took the necessary steps to eliminate his future rival and seize sole control of the rule. In 31 BCE, when he saw Antonius's weakness and his indulgence in pleasures, he kindled the flames of hostility and tarnished his reputation before the council and the people. Octavius then assembled a fleet of 300 ships and set sail to the East.⁵

During these extensive military preparations and the verbal war between the two great leaders, the conflict reached its most disgraceful and most glorified expressions.⁶

Antonius was exposed by Octavius, who accused him of giving Roman lands in the East to Cleopatra VII and her children. This accusation further deepened the rift between them, especially after Antonius divorced Octavia, at Cleopatra's instigation. In the same year, 31 BCE, Octavius became consul for the third time, with Valerius Messalla as his assistant. He then completed his military preparations, with an army of 80,000 infantry, 12,000 cavalry, and 400 ships, an increase from the previous 300. This expansion included many heavy warships. Octavius crossed the Adriatic, leading to the decisive Battle of Actium, in which Antonius was defeated in 31 BCE.⁷

¹ Agrippa: Born around 63 BC and died in 12 BC, Agrippa was a Roman military leader and politician. He played a crucial role in securing the victory over Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC. He was regarded as the second-in-command during the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus. See *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary*, 1890.

² Abd al-Latif Ahmad Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

³ Hussein Yusuf, *op. cit.*, p. 495.

⁴ Plutarch, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

⁵ Naguib Ibrahim Taread, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

⁶ Asad Rostom, *Caesar and His Successors*, Vol. 1, printed by Lebanese University Press, 1961, pp. 78-77.

⁷ Ibrahim Rizqallah Ayoub, *The Previous Source*, p. 248.

Some historians have described the Battle of Actium as one of the decisive battles in world history. Although the details of the battle remain unclear, as we know nothing about its stages, nature, or the time it took, it certainly was not as large-scale or devastating as the Roman poets and Augustus's propaganda machines claimed. It was merely a minor naval skirmish between Antonius's ships, supported by Cleopatra VII, and Octavius's ships on the other side. We consider it a naval battle because the land armies never engaged at all. In any case, Antonius's forces collapsed before the end of the battle due to the flight of Cleopatra VII, who was accompanied by the survivors from her fleet¹.

Other historical accounts suggest that it was one of the fiercest battles, with both sides displaying the steadfastness of heroes. However, Cleopatra fled to Egypt, and Antonius followed her, refusing to abandon her. He preferred to enjoy her beauty over the pride of victory and ruling the world. At that point, Octavius triumphed over those who remained with their army and ships, and he quickly marched toward Egypt to confront Antonius and kill him².

In the summer of 30 BCE, Octavius continued his pursuit of Antonius. On July 31, 30 BCE, the vanguard of his army reached Alexandria. Octavius followed soon after and entered the city in August of the same year without a fight. He seized Cleopatra's wealth and transported it to Rome. The Battle of Alexandria ended with the suicides of Antonius and Cleopatra. As a result, Octavius became the sole ruler of Rome³.

III. Results of the Third Civil War: After the political landscape in Rome, and indeed throughout the entire Mediterranean world, was cleared of any rivals to Octavius, he became the sole and undisputed ruler. He was elevated to the status of a god and surrounded with great reverence. He undertook several administrative actions, including:

- He made Egypt a Roman province directly under his control, thereby ending the Ptolemaic dynasty with the death of its last queen, Cleopatra VII, after 294 years of Ptolemaic rule.⁴

The republican system effectively came to an end, marking the beginning of a new era with Octavius's rise to power. He was given the title of Augustus, meaning "the revered" or "the lord." The Roman navy emerged as a powerful maritime force, dominating the Mediterranean, which had been the center of navigation. With this dominance, they no longer had any enemy to fear.⁵

- The new system of governance became an absolute rule, concentrated in the hands of a single man. He presided over the Senate, controlled all the armies, led them, and compiled the list of Senate and equestrian members. He also collected taxes and held the highest judicial and religious authority.⁶
- The specter of famine came to an end due to the two victories achieved by Octavius: his defeat of Lepidus in Africa, where he removed him from power and won over his soldiers, and his victory over Pompey the Younger after his defeat in Sicily.⁷

¹Hussein Yustuf, *The Previous Source*, p. 523.

²Najib Ibrahim Tarad, *The Previous Source*, p. 227..

³Ibrahim Rizqallah Ayoub, *The Previous Source*, p. 249.

⁴Najib Ibrahim Tarad, *The Previous Reference*, p. 228.

⁵Montesquieu, *The Previous Reference*, p. 127.

⁶Charles Synops, *The Previous Reference*, p. 210.

⁷Ibrahim Rizqallah Ayoub, *The Previous Reference*, p. 245.

- He solidified Herod's rule over Palestine.
- He paid compensation to the soldiers and then sent them to colonies in Italy and distant provinces such as Carthage.
- After Caesar's victorious return from the Battle of Actium and his completion of the organization of the eastern provinces, he returned to Rome and celebrated his victories over the non-Roman peoples in Asia and Africa. These peoples had been defeated by him and his officers. Thus, he inherited Caesar's legacy at the age of 33, having proven his capability. His final victory marked the end of a century full of civil wars that had claimed the lives of millions of Romans and others, leaving regions such as Macedonia and Greece on the brink of total destruction.¹
- He established a constitution that suited the new era.
- He reorganized the army, with its leader being the son of a god. He removed the forces stationed in Italy, keeping only the Praetorian Guard for the protection of the emperor, along with a few well-trained units.²

The Emergence of Augustus's Genius in Governance: Augustus demonstrated remarkable political brilliance when he established a precise hierarchical system for the empire. This system was likely inherited from the republic. He set clear boundaries for each social class in terms of political hopes and ambitions.

He established the rule of the "First Citizen" and granted senators privileges such as the right to stand for election, hold consular office, govern Roman provinces, and occupy high administrative and military positions. As for the equestrian class, they were given the opportunity to engage in administration and military affairs. The lower social classes of Roman society were allowed to serve as soldiers. Augustus also showcased his skill in effecting a transformative change by prioritizing merit over class. He permitted talented individuals from lower social classes to surpass the political limits of their social standing and rise to higher positions. Some individuals, originally from lower classes, were even freed and promoted based on Augustus's emphasis on competence over social origin. Despite this meritocratic approach, Augustus maintained the structural hierarchy within the functioning of the state.³

Conclusion:

The popular movements and political conflict between various factions of the Roman population in the late 2nd century BCE led to the emergence of new features that ultimately contributed to the fall of the republican system. These internal conflicts, particularly in the city of Rome and its surroundings, extended beyond the borders of Rome to regions such as Asia, Egypt, Africa, and the Kingdom of Numidia.

Through the study I conducted on the third civil war during the republican era and its repercussions on the Roman state, I have reached conclusions concerning the causes, circumstances, and factors surrounding this conflict, as well as the involvement of certain individuals and neighboring states. These events shaped the fate of the Roman state and its territories.

Since the end of the 2nd century BCE, the plebeian class in Rome could have peacefully secured their rights, which had been violated by the aristocrats and the Senate, without resorting to force. The spark for these wars was ignited by the reforms of the Gracchus brothers. Tiberius began his reforms in 133 BCE,

¹ Abdel Latif Ahmed Ali, *The Previous Reference*, p. 363.

² Restofitz, *History of the Roman Empire*, translated by Zaki Ali, Dar Al-Nahda Al-Misriyya, Cairo, 1986, p. 362.

³ Said Ahmed Ali Al-Nasiri, *The Previous Reference*, pp. 35-34.

followed by his brother Gaius in 122 BCE. After Gaius's assassination, this event deepened the division among the Romans into two major factions: the populares and the optimates (Senate). The conflict between these factions passed through three major phases, commonly referred to by historians as the three civil wars. After the defeat of the Pompeians at Munda, all Roman territories came under Caesar's control. However, this situation did not last long, as Caesar was assassinated by members of the Senate in a public session in 44 BCE. This opened the door for renewed conflicts between the leaders of the Roman Republic.

Caesar's successors—Octavius, Antonius, and Lepidus—faced fierce opposition from the Senate and their supporters, including military leaders and soldiers. They executed hundreds of them. After the defeat of their enemies, disagreements arose among them, leading to a dual struggle. Lepidus was sidelined by Octavius, and the conflict between Octavius and Antonius primarily took place in the East. The Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, between Octavius's fleet from the West (Rome) and Antonius's fleet, which was allied with Cleopatra, ended with the withdrawal of Cleopatra's forces from the battle. This significantly weakened Antonius's position, as he followed her retreat, leaving his forces vulnerable to Octavius's attack. Octavius decisively defeated Antonius's forces. Those who survived joined Octavius, and he then turned to Egypt. Antonius and Cleopatra, cornered and defeated, eventually committed suicide, surrendering to Octavius.

Octavius emerged as the sole ruler of the Roman world, and imperial autocracy became the dominant political system. The republican form of government, which had lasted for five centuries, came to an end.

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