CHAPTER TWO
APPROACH TO WAR

This chapter focuses on the breakdown of the relationship between the two triumvirs, and the way Octavian/Augustus represented the approach to war against Antonius and Cleopatra.

Each protagonist unsurprisingly sought (or may have sought) to put himself in the right. This is relevant because the triumvirate is a vital part of this justification, as the completion of the triumviral assignment lay at the heart of this dispute. Perhaps surprisingly this period was not just one of violence and chaos and the triumvirs were constrained by their assignment, at least in the ideological struggle of the period.

Importantly, at Brundisium new assignments were added to the triumviral task (Sextus Pompeius and Parthia) (App. B.C. 5.65). At the same time the marriage between Octavia and Antonius bound the triumvirs together. At the outset it certainly seems as if the conflict between Antonius and Octavian was non-inevitable.

There can be no doubt that the war, when it finally came, was represented as a foreign war; Octavian successfully avoided starting a civil war. But looking at the chronology and the context of events from 36–32 BC, even if there was an official stress on Cleopatra as the formal enemy, this did not conceal that Actium was at the same time a civil war.

2.1. The breakdown of a ‘friendship’

In accordance with the agreement reached at Tarentum, as mentioned in chapter 1, Antonius provided Octavian with ships to fight the war against Sextus Pompeius and later Octavian was to provide 20,000 soldiers to Antonius’ campaign against Parthia.\(^1\) The triumvirate was formally renewed on the pretext that a second five-year term was

needed in order to deal with Sextus Pompeius and Parthia, as decided at the meeting at Brundisium (App. B.C. 5.65). This followed from the triumviral assignment and the tasks should be discharged by respectively Octavian and Antonius, but with each co-operating and with an exchange of forces.

In 36 BC Antonius’ campaign began when after dynastic problems in Parthia he offered peace, if the captured Roman standards and prisoners were returned; in fact he wanted to invade (Plut. Ant. 37.2, 40.6–7; Dio 49.24.5). This was of course what finally happened under Augustus in 20 BC, a settlement that saw the standards and captives returned, even though there was no military victory, only a diplomatic accord. The standards sought were those lost by Crassus in 53 BC at Carrhae and in 40 BC by L. Decidius Saxa.

By 37/36 BC Antonius had also resumed his affair with Cleopatra. This implied a threat to his relationship with Octavian. A breakdown was always likely from this point onwards, but never inevitable. Livy Per. 130 stresses that M. Antonius dum cum Cleopatra luxuriatur tarde Mediam ingressus bellum (“While M. Antonius was revelling with Cleopatra, he at long last (belatedly) invaded Media”). Livy here reproduces criticism that Antonius delayed invasion because of Cleopatra, while Plut. Ant. 37–38 suggests he hurried home for her sake. According to Plutarch Cleopatra was there but not part of the campaign (i.e. as client ruler) (Ant. 37.3). The Cleopatra factor was already the key. In the end Antonius lost the campaign and 20,000 Roman legionaries and 4,000 horsemen (Plut. Ant. 50). The promised 20,000 men from the meeting at Tarentum were more vital than ever.

Ober rightly points out how different the course of subsequent events might have been had Antonius not suffered defeat against Parthia. Had he brought back the standards and forced a submission of the Parthian

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2 See Rice Holmes 1928, 123–12; Syme 1939, 259–275 for a description of Antonius and the east.
4 RG 29.2.
5 Trans. Schlesinger 1967. It seems more appropriate to translate dum with belatedly.
6 For a criticism of the information in Livy, deriving perhaps from Dellius, see Pelling 1988, 224; 1996, 32. According to him the preliminary marches and the preparatory campaigns meant Antonius attacked remarkably early (in or before July). On the information that Antonius wanted to spend the winter with Cleopatra, not in Armenia, Pelling suggests this to be wrong, as it would only have been possible if the campaign would have been delayed altogether.