

Antony and Cleopatra

The Events Leading to the Donations of Alexandria and its Aftermath

Chad Scott Brown

Abstract

Having defeated Sextus Pompey as well as relieving Lepidus of his Triumvir status in 36 BCE, Octavian had control of the Western Roman territories. But with the future Augustus taking Lepidus' former troops and territories of Africa under his control, Octavian was forcing the hand of his other partner in the triumvirate, Mark Antony. Seeing Octavian's grasp on Italy and the West tightening, Antony now seemingly fell under the spell of Cleopatra of Egypt. In a stunning act known as the Donations of Alexandria in 35 BCE, Antony bestowed the rule of several eastern kingdoms to Cleopatra and her children. With the Donations, Antony was trying to establish and legitimize his rule, as well as Cleopatra's, over the eastern world. This would supplant any claim Octavian had on the East, but it also put Antony squarely at odds with the traditions of Rome itself. To the people of Rome, however, it appeared that Antony was blinded by love; tricked by Cleopatra into throwing away his allegiance to Rome and setting up a renewed Ptolemaic dynasty in the East. While it does appear that Antony did love Cleopatra, he was in fact taking careful deliberate actions; combining his remaining forces with Cleopatra's in order to ultimately defeat Octavian and take back Rome for himself.



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Antony and Cleopatra

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Following their victories over the assassins Brutus and Cassius at Philippi in 42 BCE, it was Antony who had been hailed by the troops, not Octavian.³ Octavian was recovering from illness, and returned to Rome; he was tasked with finding land to settle the veterans on in Italy.⁴ Antony assumed that Octavian would fail in bringing Italy to follow him, but Octavian was successfully building up massive support among the lower orders as well as healing old wounds with the aristocracy.

Octavian procured land for distribution to the army veterans⁵, winning the loyalty of the army. He cut taxes, which brought the equestrians over to him. Octavian married Livia Drusilla which connected him with the old nobility. He added men to the senate, most notably from the old aristocratic families. This began creating a new oligarchy; Octavian was winning the aristocrat's loyalty by restoring their former honors. Octavian

¹ Plutarch. *Makers of Rome* Translation by Ian Scott- Kilvert. Harmandsworth: 1965 Life of Mark Antony pg 292 paragraph 25 "*Such being Antony's nature, the love for Cleopatra which now entered his life came as the final and crowning mischief which could befall him.*"

² Huzar, Eleanor Goltz. *Mark Antony, A Biography* Minneapolis: 1978 pg. 155 "...despite the tales of passion told by his detractors, Antony was ruled by his head, not his heart."

³ Plutarch pg. 289 paragraph 22 "...Octavius achieved nothing worth mentioning: it was Antony who seized the initiative and triumphed in every engagement."

⁴ Huzar pg. 148 "*Octavian's troubles and triumphs had derived from his responsibilities for settling the veterans on Italian land.*"

⁵ Suetonius *The Twelve Caesars* Translation by Robert Graves. London: 1957 Divus Augustus pg 49-50 "*There are those that say Augustus fought because he wished to offer his secret enemies...a chance to declare themselves by joining Lucius Antonius; he would then crush them, confiscate their estates, and thus manage to pay off his veterans.*"

was bringing together Rome politically and economically; he instituted massive public works projects that would aid society and provide jobs. Through these actions, Octavian began to appear as someone who could be all things to all people.⁶

While Octavian was building his power base in Rome, Antony was touring the East, expounding his love of Greek culture while at the same time collecting money from the Greeks so he could pay his troops.⁷ Antony was promoting his love of the Hellenic culture as he traveled, as well as his possible divinity. He styled himself as Dionysus, partly to win over the crowds, but also to curry favor in the East for his coming Parthian campaign.⁸ He continued his tour on into Asia Minor.

It was in Cilicia that Antony sent for Cleopatra to join him in Tarsus, ostensibly so she could defend herself against charges that she had sent aid to Cassius. More likely it was so that Antony could gain aid from her against the Parthians. Cleopatra impressed Antony enough with her charms⁹ that after she left Tarsus in the Autumn of 41 BCE, he decided to join her in Alexandria. He hastily attended to some duties in the East, then made his way to Egypt.¹⁰ She continued to dazzle him with her company, impressing upon him the possibilities of a joint partnership between the two of them. Cleopatra had won over Julius Caesar upon meeting him, and she apparently had no issue winning over Antony. Their twins would be born later.

⁶ Huzar pg. 131 *"Somehow Octavian emerged from the crises stronger than he had entered them. He was showing the political acumen that would so effectively make him the savior of the state in later years."*

⁷ Huzar pg. 148 *"Antony's eastern responsibility was to...extract the monies needed for veteran benefits (500 drachmas promised to each soldier)."*

⁸ Chauveau, Michel. *Cleopatra: Beyond the Myth* Translation by David Lorton. Ithaca: 2002 pg. 40 *"But this assimilation to Dionysus...was first and foremost a matter of conditioning minds for the war he was planning against the Parthians and of placing himself at the forefront of this grandiose project."*

⁹ Volkmann, Hans. *Cleopatra* Translation by T.J. Cadoux. New York: 1958 pg. 98 *"Cleopatra went to meet Antony with the dignity that befitted an exalted goddess."*

¹⁰ Volkmann pg. 100 *"All over the East pressing tasks waited for Antony's attention...With the utmost haste he discharged only the most urgent of his duties. Then he hurried to Alexandria to join Cleopatra."*

Antony and Cleopatra

While Antony was away in Egypt with Cleopatra, he became out of touch with the goings on in Italy.¹¹ Octavian was making strides in Rome, but Antony still had supporters in Italy, such as his wife Fulvia and his brother Lucius. The two had grown concerned about the amount of power Octavian had was gaining, and they schemed and stirred up trouble as best they could.¹² Their actions went from stalling in the Senate to actual fighting breaking out between their forces and Octavian's. Antony, however, was strangely silent on these unfolding events.¹³ The forces of Lucius were defeated at Perugia by Octavian,¹⁴ and Fulvia was forced to flee to Greece. Antony, upon finding out that the fighting had ended, prepared to make his return to Italy.¹⁵

Fulvia, who had schemed so carefully against Octavian to help her husband and forced to flee Italy, was forsaken by Antony and died heartbroken and discarded in 40 BCE.¹⁶ Antony returned to Italy, and outright civil war seemed inevitable. At Brundisium, the armies of Octavian and Antony faced each other; however the armies refused to fight, and forced their commanders to reach a compromise. As Fulvia was dead, a major dividing issue between the two was now gone.¹⁷ The two split their spheres of influence, with Antony getting the East and Octavian getting the West. Lepidus, the minor partner, was given Africa. Octavian even offered his own sister Octavia in marriage to Antony¹⁸, to further build the bridge between the two powerful leaders. The two seemed committed to their agreement, and war between them was averted.

For a time, Antony remained with Octavia. It seemed a happy marriage, and their daughter Antonia was born. However, Antony grew restless,

¹¹ Plutarch pg. 294 paragraph 28 *"There(in Alexandria) this veteran(Antony) indulged himself in the amusements and diversions of a young man with all his future before him, and was content to squander on idle pleasures what Antiphon calls the most precious of all commodities, that is time."*

¹² Plutarch pg. 290 paragraph 24 *"...while Octavius Caesar in Rome was wearing himself out in the never-ending struggle of party politics and civil war, Antony was reveling in the delights of peace and infinite leisure..."*

¹³ Huzar pg. 133 *"Mark Antony later attributed his silence to distance and unawareness of the crisis..."*

¹⁴ Huzar pg. 155 *"...(Antony) let Egypt provide the excuse for his failure to help his wife and brother in the Perusine War against Octavian of which he disapproved."*

¹⁵ Huzar pg. 135 *"Antony was in Asia Minor preparing for a campaign against the Parthians when news reached him of the fall of Perugia."*

¹⁶ Volkman pg. 107 *"Fulvia, exhausted by her physical trials and heartbroken by the miscarriage of her enterprise and the reproaches of her beloved husband, had died in Greece."*

¹⁷ Huzar pg. 137 *"Even Fulvia's death made concessions between Antony and Octavian easier."*

¹⁸ Cary, Max and Scullard, H.H. *A History of Rome* Hong Kong: 1976 pgs. 291-292 *"In place of Fulvia, who had died at an opportune moment, Antony took the hand of Octavian's sister Octavia."*

perhaps missing Cleopatra, and once again left.¹⁹ Antony could not stop his desire for glory, he still meant to conquer Parthia and become recognized as a new Alexander. Taking Parthia would avenge the death of the consul Crassus at the hands of the Parthians. This achievement would outshine Octavian's accomplishments and bring Antony untold riches and fame.

Antony embarked on another tour of the East. He began staging parties in the cities he was going through, attempting to gather forces to aid him in his plans to attack the Parthians. Once again, Antony was forced to go back to Italy, this time to meet Octavian at Tarentum in 37 BCE. Once again diplomacy won out²⁰, and the triumvirate was renewed for another 5 years. The truce also included a bargain, with Antony giving 120 of his ships to Octavian to help in the fight against Sextus Pompey. In exchange Octavian was to send 20,000 troops to aid Antony in his conquest of Parthia.²¹

The Parthian expedition finally began in 36 BCE. Antony looked to Egypt for supplies and Armenia for troops. Antony laid siege to Phraaspa on the Persian Plateau in an opening move, but he lost his siege engine train,²² and was unable to take the city. Antony's Armenian allies beat a hasty retreat back, figuring the Romans were lost. Running out of food and resources, Antony was forced in the autumn to retreat.²³ The beleaguered Romans had to battle their way back out in an epic retreat. As Antony was being beaten back, Octavian was claiming his victory over Sextus Pompey.

Octavian's victory over Sextus Pompey at Sicily had assured him the people's loyalties, as Pompey's piracy had been a threat to all of Italy, not just Rome.²⁴ When Lepidus had tried to claim Sicily as his own, Octavian had turned the tables by convincing Lepidus's own troops to abandon him. Lepidus then thought it might be best to announce his retirement

¹⁹ Volkmann pg. 117 *"In these days Antony came to realize what he had missed during his two years apart from Cleopatra."*

²⁰ Plutarch pg. 302 paragraph 35 *"There the inhabitants witnessed a truly noble spectacle, an immense army, peaceably camped on land, and an equally powerful fleet lying quietly off shore, while between these two great armaments there passed nothing but friendly greetings and expressions of goodwill."*

²¹ Huzar pg. 175

²² Volkmann pg. 128 *"The clumsy train of siege-engines...was attacked on the way and utterly destroyed..."*

²³ Cary pg. 294-295

²⁴ Plutarch pg. 298 paragraph 32 *"He(Sextus Pompeius)was also ravaging the Italian coast, and...was able to threaten shipping throughout the whole Central Mediterranean area."*

Antony and Cleopatra

from the Triumvirate.²⁵ Octavian now had control over Lepidus' former troops and territories in Africa. The West and control of 45 legions²⁶ was now in Octavian's hands.

In 35 BCE, Antony was bruised and beaten after the failure in Parthia, and anxiously awaited relief being brought by Cleopatra to his battered army. Antony now seemed to fall under the spell of Cleopatra; he abandoned Octavia and began associating openly with Cleopatra. When Octavia tried to bring aid to Antony in Greece, he refused to see her, and sent her back to Rome. This was not how a man should treat his loyal wife. In the face of this insult, Octavian asked Octavia to leave Antony's house, but she refused. She stayed in his house and took care of his children as if they were her own.²⁷ Antony later forced her out of his house. Antony's rejection of such a forthright acting woman could only bring him ill feeling for his actions from other Romans.²⁸

The supporters of Antony had begun to disappear. Antony was desperate for supplies and troops, and he turned to Ptolemaic Egypt and Cleopatra in 34 BCE. Antony first subdued Armenia; he did not want any trouble coming up behind him as he was advancing into Parthia. Antony was successful in Armenia,²⁹ but it became obvious that Octavian was not going to send the troops promised for Antony's conquest of Parthia.³⁰ Rather than fritter away his soldiers against Parthia, it became evident Antony needed to turn his attentions to Octavian.

In the Autumn of 34 BCE Antony did something unthinkable to Romans; he staged a triumph not in Rome, but in Alexandria.³¹ The Triumph was held to celebrate his victory in Armenia. Antony portrayed himself as

²⁵ Tarn, W.W. *Octavian, Anthony, and Cleopatra* Cambridge 1965. pg. 79 *"Octavian spared his life but apparently forced him to resign his office of triumvir, and dismissed him to drag out the remainder of his days as Pontifex Maximus in honourable captivity at Circeii."*

²⁶ Tarn pg. 96

²⁷ Plutarch pg. 320-321 paragraph 54 *"She went on living in her husband's house as if he were at home, and looked after Antony's children, not only those whom she had borne him but also Fulvia's, with a truly noble devotion and generosity of spirit."*

²⁸ Plutarch pg. 321 paragraph 54 *"...he was naturally hated for wronging such a woman."*

²⁹ Cary pg. 295 *"(Antony) contented himself with overrunning Armenia and dethroning its king, Artavasdes, whom he held responsible for the loss of his siege train in 36."*

³⁰ Tarn pg. 96 *"...cut off from recruiting in Italy, Antony's power was to die like a ring-barked tree; Octavian only had to wait till the tree fell of itself."*

³¹ Plutarch pg. 318 paragraph 50 *"an action(the triumph) which caused particular offence to the Romans, because it was felt he was celebrating the honourable and solemn rites of his own country for the benefit of the Egyptians and for the sake of Cleopatra."*

Dionysus/Osiris, and Cleopatra as his Aphrodite/Isis. Artavasdes, the King of the Armenians, was paraded in silver chains.³² Following the triumph, Antony held a ceremony, known as the Donations of Alexandria. He began the proceedings with a speech, stating that what he was doing, he was doing for the honor of Julius Caesar.

Antony then proclaimed Cleopatra Queen of Kings, ruler over her children and their territories. Antony named her oldest child Caesarion King of Kings. This was a direct threat to Octavian; Caesarion was supposedly Julius Caesar's son by blood, while Octavian had been adopted into the Julian family.³³ With Caesarion, Antony could possibly challenge Octavian as to who was the real heir to the Caesar name³⁴. Antony went on to name the rest of Cleopatra's children as rulers, proclaiming them as Kings and Queens of the eastern provinces of Palestine, Cyprus, Libya, Armenia and Cyrenaica. With the Donations, Antony was establishing the Ptolemies as the rulers of the Hellenistic East, with himself and Cleopatra at the head.

The people of Rome were shocked at the Donations; Antony appeared to be close to an act of treason. To Rome, these kingdoms were not Antony's to give. Was Antony's political center going to be Alexandria in accordance with Cleopatra's designs of eclipsing Rome? Antony was making poor choices and becoming more and more isolated from his Roman supporters. The announcement of the Donations became the point where the tide of Rome's opinion turned against Antony.³⁵

Using the donations as an excuse, Octavian seized Antony's will from the vestal virgins³⁶, an act that was shocking and very close to sacrilegious. This could have been a very bad move for Octavian, however in the will Antony expressed his desire to be buried in Alexandria next to Cleopatra. Octavian had the will read to the senate, and it appeared to all that Antony was forsaking Rome and planning to subjugate Rome under his

³² Chauveau pg. 58 "*Artabazes was brought in chains of silver to Alexandria as living proof of a brilliant victory.*"

³³ Chauveau pg. 62 "*(Octavian) was much more deeply shocked by the recognition of Caesarion as a legitimate son of Caesar, implying that he himself was not the dictator's sole heir.*"

³⁴ Plutarch pg. 321 paragraph 53 "*This youth(Caesarion) was believed to be a son of Julius Caesar, who had left Cleopatra pregnant.*"

³⁵ Plutarch pg. 321 paragraph 53 "*People regarded this as an arrogant and theatrical gesture which seemed to indicate a hatred for his own country.*"

³⁶ Suetonius pg. 51 "*(Octavian)proved that his rival had failed to conduct himself as befitted a Roman citizen by ordering the will he had deposited at Rome to be opened and publicly read.*"

Antony and Cleopatra

joint rule with Cleopatra. This was the final break, and Octavian was now able to make himself the total leader of Italy. Octavian launched a propaganda attack against Antony and Cleopatra, claiming she was a witch who had enchanted Antony and had turned him away from Rome.³⁷ Octavian also claimed that Cleopatra's end design was first to take control of the East, and then after that her sights were set squarely on Rome itself. Octavian played the situation smartly; placing the blame on Cleopatra, and not poor besotted Antony. Octavian had turned his conflict with Antony into a battle of West against East, Rome versus Egypt.

Octavian was forcing Antony to choose between Rome and Cleopatra. Either way he chose, Antony would lose either the support of his remaining supporters in Rome or the powerful support of his lover and ally. As most of his power base was now in the East, Antony decided to take his chances with Cleopatra. With the expiration of the triumvirate at hand, Octavian now officially stripped Antony of his political powers and declared war, but not against Antony. War was declared against Cleopatra; in this way Octavian portrayed that Antony could still return to Rome if he had so desired; it was Antony's decision to abandon Rome.³⁸

They met at battle at Actium in September of 31 BCE; Antony was a brilliant land commander, so it was odd that he would choose to fight at sea. Cleopatra was blamed for this miscalculation, as well.³⁹ Antony lost badly and retreated; without him his land armies soon deserted en masse to Octavian.⁴⁰ Ten months later Octavian was besieging Alexandria, and the situation, at least to Antony, seemed hopeless. Antony committed suicide. Cleopatra, however, tried a last ditch attempt to save herself and her children. She threw open the gates and welcomed Octavian. She offered herself and the treasury to Octavian⁴¹, and Octavian tried to humor her

³⁷ Volkmann pg. 158 *"So the slogan became: Antony is no longer a Roman! Indeed, he has become Rome's deadly foe; under the spell of Cleopatra, he is a threat to Rome."*

³⁸ Plutarch pg. 326 paragraph 60 *"He(Octavian) had a decree passed declaring war on Cleopatra and depriving Antony of the authority which he had allowed a woman to exercise in his place. Octavius Caesar also gave it out that Antony had allowed himself to fall under the influence of drugs, that he was no longer responsible for his actions..."*

³⁹ Plutarch pg. 327-38 paragraph 62 *"Although he(Antony) was far stronger than Octavius on land, he was determined that his victory should be gained by his fleet; he insisted on this merely to please the Queen..."*

⁴⁰ Volkmann pg. 188 *"The land army waited seven days in vain for Antony's return...eventually, deserted by their leaders...the Antonians were obliged to surrender."*

⁴¹ Huzar pg. 227 *"When Octavian visited her...she(Cleopatra) reminded him of her love for Caesar; she offered to buy the throne for her son with her fortune..."*

and reassure her of his intentions; he wanted her alive.⁴² Cleopatra committed suicide rather than be shamed in Octavian's triumph and strangled in Rome.

In proclaiming the Donations of Alexandria, had Antony simply been blinded by love, fooled into assisting Cleopatra in trying to reunite Alexander's empire under her rule? Unlikely. Antony had already forsaken his loyal wife Fulvia when she caused him unwanted trouble. He had seemed happy enough with Octavia, but later refused her aid and had her removed from his house. Perhaps he truly did love Cleopatra, but it seems what he most lusted after was power.⁴³ After all, Antony had once before left Cleopatra in Alexandria and married Octavia for political reasons. Antony loved women, but he mainly used them politically to suit his own needs.⁴⁴

The actuality was that Antony wanted to attain as much glory as he could, and he was willing to do whatever it took to keep the power, prestige and lifestyle that accompanied his lofty position. In this regard, Cleopatra also had desires to attain glory; she had previously dealt with Julius Caesar the same way she was now dealing with Antony. Antony and Cleopatra were a matched pair in their desire for greatness, and their willingness to use one another to gain power.

In the East, Antony had styled himself as the god Dionysus so he could gain aid against Parthia. He had wanted to conquer Parthia in order to outshine Octavian and be compared as a conqueror akin to Alexander. When Octavian came to power in the West and Antony's campaign into Parthia failed, Antony changed his plans. He at first brokered with Octavian diplomatically, splitting their spheres of influence East and West. When Antony again fell into the arms of Cleopatra, Octavian's propaganda attacks forced Antony into uncharted territory. Antony tried to establish and legitimize his rule, as well as Cleopatra's, over the eastern

⁴² Plutarch pg. 342 paragraph 78

⁴³ Huzar pg. 254 *"Calculation does not exclude attraction, or love, and Antony relished being in love. But even Cleopatra who fulfilled his passion with "infinite variety" rarely endangered his political judgement..."*

⁴⁴ Huzar pg. 254 *"Even his (Antony's) frank sensual attraction to women was tempered by prudent judgement, especially in marriage contracts."*

Antony and Cleopatra

world.⁴⁵ This would supplant any claim Octavian had on the East, but it also put Antony squarely at odds with the traditions of Rome itself.

With Octavian appearing to be firmly entrenched in Rome and the West, Antony likely wanted to split the world in two between them, with a Roman west and a Roman/Ptolemaic East. If Antony was successful at solidifying his joint rule over the East with Cleopatra, and Rome came to accept this, perhaps later Octavian could be dealt with when the time was right.⁴⁶ Antony could risk losing favor with Rome over the Donations, if later he was able to defeat Octavian; from Sulla and Julius Caesar the Roman senate now had a history of accepting the rule of whomever had a sword at their back.

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⁴⁵ Volkman pg. 148 "*None of the Ptolemies had ever wielded the sceptre over such extensive domains as Antony had now placed under her (Cleopatra) and her children.*"

⁴⁶ Huzar pg. 256 "*In all probability, he would have established one-man rule, less discreetly monarchical than Augustus's principate...*"