Octavian and Parthia: The Earlier Policy of the Later Augustus

In this paper, I address the modern assessment of early Augustan policy on Parthia. Augustus played a major role in Roman-Parthian relations, and his interactions with the Parthians proved central to his domestic and foreign policy. As a result, scholars have focused on Augustus in the history of Roman-Parthian relations. Despite this attention, however, they neglect a body of literary evidence that suggests he already took important action related to Parthia before 31/0 BCE. In addition, while moderns recognize progressive elements of his Parthian policy, most still unduly emphasize his provocation of Parthia in and shortly after 31/0 BCE. In this paper, I argue that Octavian collaborated with Antony in creating an image of Parthia as conquered by Rome for domestic consumption, which subsequently allowed Octavian to pursue constructive foreign relations with Parthia after the battle of Actium.

The following assumptions, not entirely compatible, but often held simultaneously by scholars, define the modern understanding of Augustus and Parthia. (A) The Augustan period restored diplomacy and the goal of peace between Rome and Parthia after two decades of violence that began with Crassus’ invasion of the Parthian empire in 54-53 BCE (e.g. Ziegler 45-57, 82-96; Colledge 46; Seager 16-7; Sherwin-White 320, 326-7, 332-5, 340-1; Gruen 396, 398, 415-6; Campbell 214, 220-8; Rich 72; Sampson 171-2; cf. Rose 21-75). (B) Augustan policy on Parthia effectively began in 31/0 BCE when Octavian, victor of the battle of Actium, longed to inflict military retribution upon or exact reconciliatory concessions from the Parthians—an assumption that encourages some scholars to suggest the princeps willingly and aggressively provoked Parthia early on after Actium (e.g. Debevoise 135-9; Campbell 221-2; Levick 25; Seager 16-7; cf. Marsh 81; Sherwin-White 328-41).

Yet untapped literary evidence shows that Octavian had a domestic policy on Parthia even before 31/0 BCE, which enabled his later achievement of diplomacy, cooperation, and peace with this imperial neighbor. In the decade before Actium, Antony devoted much energy to the Parthians. So in response to the Parthian invasion of the eastern Roman empire in 40 BCE, Antony pushed them from Syria and neighboring territories via efforts of his lieutenant Ventidius, to whom (along with Antony) the senate voted a triumph (see Dio 49.21.2-3, Plutarch, *Antony* 34.2-5, etc.). Then Antony himself invaded the Parthian empire a few years later. Although the campaign proved a failure, Antony and his partisans spun it as a success back in Rome (Dio 49.32.1). Significantly, they also enjoyed the help of Octavian and his partisans, who instituted sacrifices and festivals to celebrate the pretended victory (Dio 49.32.2). And other comments by Octavian and stories that certainly circulated under his supervision also assume that Antony defeated the Parthians (comments: Plutarch, *Antony* 55.2; stories: “Donations of Alexandria” in Plutarch, *Antony* 54.3-55.1, Dio 49.41.1-4, etc.). Such evidence documents how Octavian before 31/0 BCE tried to satisfy the Roman desire to settle the score with Parthia. What’s more, it may help explain his subsequent policy. After 31/0 BCE Octavian would have felt less compulsion to seek revenge than previously assumed. Partially freed from this burden, Octavian pursued more progressive action. He rescued the son of the Parthian king Phraates IV from his rival Tiridates II (Dio 51.18), received the king’s envoys well (Dio 53.18.3), and subsequently returned the boy to his father (Dio 53.33.2; Justin 42.5). In short, Octavian’s efforts before 31/0 BCE, which encouraged the idea at home that the Romans were avenged on the Parthians, allowed him after Actium to cooperate with the Parthian king toward establishing Roman-Parthian peace.

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