

Sextus Pompeius: Rebellious Pirate or Imitative Son?

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Among the best-known leaders and statesmen of ancient Rome are Julius Caesar and Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, better known as Pompey the Great. The two generals were originally allies with a third man, Marcus Licinius Crassus, in a loose agreement called the First Triumvirate. Almost as soon as the bonds of the First Triumvirate were constructed, they began to disintegrate into competition and civil war. Every modern student knows of the outcome: Pompey's defeat and death, and Caesar's rise to prominence. Our knowledge of Pompey the Great himself is quite extensive, despite his eventual defeat by Caesar. However, there is a strange lack of concrete information about one of Pompey's closest relatives: his younger son, Sextus Pompeius.

"Neither wholly good nor wholly bad," Sextus Pompeius was "a man whose life was characterized by puzzling contradictions" stemming from a personal need to live up to his father's name, and a simultaneous call to respond to whatever external political and social pressures were placed upon him by contemporary rivals for power (Gowing 203). The enigmatic and misremembered Sextus was an integral part of a second generation of those original civil wars initiated by his father and Julius Caesar, but genuine portrayals of his true motivations and character are next to impossible. Ultimately conquered by Julius Caesar's adopted son, Octavian (Augustus), at the Battle of Naulochus near Sicily in 36 B.C.E., Sextus and his legacy were all but erased in the pursuant political propaganda of the newly solidified Principate, which branded him as little more than a "pirate" (Aug. RG 25.1). Even though Sextus' personality is "one of the worst treated in the propaganda and historiography of Augustus," it is his enduring presence

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in the historical record in spite of his decisive defeat which demonstrates that his political importance was probably greater than Octavian wished future generations to realize (Gabba 153).

Although many of his actions against Octavian and a new Second Triumvirate were intentionally hostile—most notably his naval blockade of Roman grain shipments—Sextus’ seemingly “piratical” tactics were often simply the result of the desperate political climate which typified his time. Instability frequently forced Sextus, along with many other men from every rank in society—including powerful *nobiles* like Octavian and Antony—to consider self-preservation before the preservation of an ambiguous Roman state. In the absence of a recognizable and legitimate Roman law, Sextus’ actions were driven instead by the law of necessity. Sextus Pompey used the only resources available — his burgeoning naval power and the widespread positive reputation of his family name—for personal and political survival during the tumultuous shift from Republic to Principate. Rather than simply remembering him as a “pirate,” as the victorious Octavian wished, we ought to examine the details of his life more critically before making any final judgments about Sextus and his ethical character.

Sextus’ Rise to Power, Contention with the Second Triumvirate

A reconstruction of Sextus’ life and times begins with information found in primary classical sources. Sextus’ early days in the Roman city,¹ his campaigns with his father and older brother against Caesar, and his contributions to the civil wars following Julius Caesar’s assassination are among the major themes in two classic primary texts: Cassius Dio’s *Roman History* and Appian’s history of the *Civil Wars*. Despite the fact that these two indispensable primary sources tend to jump haphazardly from place to place in their chronology² and often describe unrelated events using deceptively similar language, they are still undoubtedly our best resources for study of Sextus’ acquisition of various types of power, and also for study of the ways in which he used those newfound powers in opposition to the young and inexperienced Octavian. In addition, when they are considered collectively, the surviving primary sources provide insight into the volatile and unstable political climate of Sextus’ time, which

necessitated his problematic use of naval power against his rivals. Although these primary texts are often contaminated by Augustan invective,³ an objective reading of the factual information they contain has the power to vindicate Sextus' reputation, as both a dutiful son and noble aristocrat compelled to unorthodoxy by forces beyond his control.

Although Sextus Pompey inherited a place among the upper class as a member of the senatorial *nobiles*—a group populated by families whose ancestors had held the highest magistracies in the Roman Senate—he was born into a world of civil strife and precariousness and did not spend much of his adult life in residence at Rome. We know that Sextus did live in Rome during his childhood and youth, just like other children from senatorial families. In his biography of Sextus, Hadas admits that “it cannot be established that he held any public office,” but it is likely that Sextus eventually held some of the offices and positions that a young man of the aristocratic senatorial class would normally hold (Hadas 20). Irrespective of his political experiences as an adolescent, civil wars disrupted the typical path which Sextus might have followed to power and prestige within the Roman Senate.

Instead of remaining in Rome as a young man, Sextus joined the forces of his father during the final days of Pompey the Great's struggle against Julius Caesar, unaware that this decision would eventually lead to a naval command from the Senate similar in scale to the one his father had been granted in 67 B.C.E. After Pompey the Great's death in Egypt in 48 B.C.E., the young Sextus fled with his older brother Gnaeus to Africa (Evans 102). Together, the pair then journeyed to Spain as part of the protracted civil conflict with the still-living Julius Caesar. Even after Gnaeus was defeated and killed by Caesar's forces at the Battle of Munda in 45 B.C.E., Sextus Pompey remained in Spain and began a course of “guerilla warfare,” winning a number of small yet decisive victories over Caesarian governors in the area (Gabba 155).⁴ He took refuge in the area known as Lacetania, surviving and eluding discovery mainly because of the kind disposition of the natives toward him, due to their reverence for the memory of his father (Cass. Dio 45.10.1).

Whether unwelcome in or unwilling to return to Rome, Sextus Pompey at that time continued the subversive struggle against his

paternal enemy, Caesar. “Sextus punctiliously insisted on [...] his right to take vengeance on the slayers of his father and brother,” and eventually adopted the epithet “*pius*” to indicate that his subsequent actions against the Caesarians were morally justified (Evans 104). Indeed, according to Syme, devotion to the family and loyalty to ties of kinship were the “supreme obligation[s]” for Romans whenever they dealt with politics (Syme 157). Even so, it is possible that Sextus’ eccentric military actions in Spain at this time fueled later criticism of him as a “pirate” and rebel against the Second Triumvirate. Regardless of these later opinions, however, many of Sextus’ contemporaries saw his recurrent struggle against Caesarian rule in Spain as familial vengeance, and not necessarily as lawlessness. In a way, even though all hope of defeating Caesar was lost, Sextus probably envisioned himself as the participant in a righteous family feud with the Caesarians.

In the wake of the Ides of March, 44 B.C.E., Julius Caesar was dead and his adopted son Octavian was vying with Antony for political supremacy in Rome. Often these two determined young men ruthlessly opposed one another with moves designed to bring specific political allies to their side. Fear of continued civil war and dictatorship among the more traditionally-minded members of the Senate caused them to entrust a naval command to Sextus Pompeius, with the pretext of checking the ambitious power of Antony. Appian reports that in doing this, the Senate gave Sextus Pompeius “the same powers that his father had exercised” when Pompey the Great had been entrusted with the elimination of piracy in the Mediterranean in 67 B.C.E. (App. *BCiv.* 4.84). This command undoubtedly had a noticeable effect on the young aristocrat seeking to fill his dead father’s shoes, especially since it was a commonly held Roman social expectation that aristocratic officers and politicians would reenact the behavior of their ancestors (Powell 109). Pompey the Great had been a great naval commander, so of course his son would be as well. However, the Senate’s specific choice of Sextus Pompeius as commander of the new naval detachment seems a bit nonsensical at first. Why would the Senate give any power to a largely unorthodox man fighting against Roman governors in one of the provinces?

As noted above, Sextus had probably had at least minimal political experience as a young man living in Rome. He had also had some

military experiences in Spain, despite the questionable tactics which he had employed against the Caesarian magistrates and governors who were dispatched there. Hadas points to Cicero's speeches, the Philippics, as further evidence that Sextus had probably participated in Senatorial politics and life before leaving Rome to join his father and brother. For example, in Philippic V, Cicero refers to the way members of the Roman Senate, and especially Lepidus—who had recently arrived in Spain to govern there—"preserved" Sextus for the Roman state by giving him the naval command (Cic. *Phil.* 5.39-40). The willingness of prominent senators to entrust such a command to Sextus implies that he had been a participant in Roman political life before the outbreak of war between his father and Caesar. But the true reason that the Senate had for giving him the command made greater strategic and political sense (Hadas 48-9).

After his father's enemy Caesar was dead, and the Roman Republic was temporarily restored to its original state, at least as far as surface appearances went, the Senate attempted to reconcile Sextus to itself mainly to stop him from continuing to wreak havoc in Spain. In exchange for a considerable amount of the Spanish territory he had conquered, they returned many of Sextus' previously confiscated paternal holdings (Cass. Dio 45.10.6), and also offered him the naval command to use against Antony as necessary. Sextus Pompey agreed and was granted a pardon for his involvement in the first generation's civil wars. His personal situation and political future seemed promising. He was able to leave Spain as a kind of victor, laden with Senatorial honors and guaranteed the restoration of his ancestral property (Gabba 154). The Senate had given him these honors and the navy to appease Sextus' injured pride and sense of familial duty to avenge his father's death, so that he would stop making trouble in Spain. The plan actually worked for a while; at first Sextus was willing to comply with the Senate's wishes. However, unbeknownst to the Senators and to Octavian, they were providing Sextus with a maritime foundation to which he might add the ships he had already acquired in Spain, increasing his soon to be indomitable naval strength (Cass. Dio 48.17.1).

Sextus' good behavior soon changed, beginning in 43 B.C.E. when the Senate was presented with a newly formed Second Triumvirate

which effectively took away Sextus' naval command. Antony, Octavian, and Lepidus had momentarily ignored the rivalry growing among them and collectively formed this Second Triumvirate. Since Antony and Octavian were now working together, and the goal of Sextus' command had been to protect the Senate and Octavian from Antony, his position at the head of a Senatorial fleet was no longer needed. But for a time, even after he had been stripped of this position as an admiral,⁵ Sextus continued to sail around to various islands, closely watching political events on the mainland and "supplying himself with food without resort to crimes" (Cass. Dio 48.17.2). Sextus also saw that after the three Triumvirs had returned to Rome, they once again instituted the same murders by proscription which the infamous Sulla had abused at the height of his power in Rome, claiming that they were avenging the death of Julius Caesar by proscribing his assassins and any co-conspirators (Cass. Dio 47.3.1). Sextus still expected that Octavian might allow him to return to Rome, despite the continued resistance to Caesarian forces he had demonstrated while in Spain, since he had clearly not participated in the murder of Julius Caesar.

But this was not to be. The new Triumviral proscriptions were really a mechanism used by the self-serving Triumvirs to eliminate threats to their power and to acquire money and other resources from the executed. Like others during that tumultuous time, including Sextus, the Triumvirs did whatever was necessary to preserve their possessions and positions, and to survive both physically and politically. Sextus' name was written among the proscribed, even though he had been in Spain at the time of Caesar's assassination (App. *BCiv.* 4.96).⁶ It was only after he discovered that his name was incorrectly included in the list of the condemned accomplices that Sextus began to conspire against the new Triumvirate, which was unfairly punishing many who had not yet committed any crime. The murderous proscriptions were the last straw for Sextus, who was forced to flee Italy indefinitely to avoid being executed. At this time he went to Sicily, which he made his base of operations.

Some of those who also found their own names on these proscription lists sought refuge with the actual Caesarian assassins Brutus and Cassius, though the majority fled directly to Sicily, which

Sextus was using as a launching point for some covert rescue operations. Sextus repeatedly sent his ships to Italy and offered double bounty to anyone who saved a proscribed man rather than turning him in (Cass. Dio 47.12.1-3).

The common plight of the Republican forces under Brutus and Cassius and those who escaped to Sextus fostered a feeling that the three leaders had a common purpose in opposing Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus. In her article "Sextus Pompeius," Welch admits that Sextus' personal struggle against members of the Triumvirate has often been considered as just another "part of the struggle for the *res publica* as he and his contemporaries understood it" (Welch, "Sextus" 33). And indeed, following the defeat of Brutus and Cassius at Philippi in 42 B.C.E., even greater numbers of their surviving allies escaped by sea and joined up with Sextus and the last vestiges of the "Republican" cause on Sicily (Cass. Dio 47.49.4). However, in another of her articles, "Both Sides of the Coin," Welch ultimately takes an opposite stance from this norm of labeling of Sextus as a conservative defender of the old Republic by reminding her readers that there were many other noble contemporaries who retained an "uneasy" memory of and relationship to Pompey and his sons (Welch, "Both" 21-2). She also notes that the oligarchic Senators still in Rome were aware of Sextus' activities, successes, and even his advertised relationship to his father, and were thus anxious that they might soon have another would-be dynast to deal with in addition to Octavian (17).

Hadas makes a similar claim that in general the Republican forces were not necessarily fighting for the "Pompeian tradition," and that even the Republican senators did not desire Sextus to play the political role of his deceased father, "with the result that, in case of victory, a Pompey would again be the indispensable First Citizen of Rome" (Hadas 41). In other words, it is Welch's and Hadas' contention that other resistance leaders, like the Republicans Brutus and Cassius, lumped Sextus Pompey and his family together with the emerging Julian dynasty as destroyers of the old form of the Republic, in which each senator held an equal place among his aristocratic peers. The Senate's leadership in Rome was dependent upon this equality among individual senators, as well as equality among influential groups of senators, and when certain men became too powerful the others felt that this equality

was threatened (Meier 59). It is likely that in Sextus the members of the Senate saw the ghost of his father, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, who had become a symbol for the potentially horrendous outcomes of any war between individuals competing for supreme autocratic power and authority. While Sextus desired the approval of the Senate, he had no desire to become dependent on it, due to the myriad shifting allegiances and political uncertainties of his time. With no clear policy or direction, precisely because there was no single or solidified power structure in Rome at the time, he pursued a course of “fluctuating and feeble politics that failed to convince” and maintained “a friendly face toward the Senate even while engaging in hostile actions” (60).

All this indicates that Sextus’ being born into the Senatorial class did not mean that he always fought for the conservative form of the Republic. Rather, Sextus concentrated on preserving his own resources and on emulating and avenging his father, all the while taking advantage of the Pompey the Great’s name and memory wherever he could for his personal advantage. Even when Sextus was snubbed by the same Senate which had initially given him a naval command similar in scope to that of his father, he managed to retain the new ships and use them to his advantage against those in Rome who were plotting to end his life. In this way, Sextus gained naval strength despite his loss of a senatorially approved military title. While harboring his navy at Sicily, he also gained further undisputed military strength by increasing the ranks of his devoted sailors and soldiers.

As we have seen, Sextus’ cause was not exactly the same championed by the conservative and oligarchic Republicans, and for this reason not all of the defectors to Sextus were of noble or senatorial rank. Many cities also sent him slaves because they “dreaded a victory of the Triumvirs more than anything else,” and a throng of wealthy non-patrician citizens “fled from a country that they could no longer consider their own” in order to join Sextus (App. *BCiv.* 4.85). The collection of refugees on Sicily also contained a large number of farmers whose land had been confiscated or destroyed by the Triumvirs, as well as military dissenters from a variety of camps, notably including Triumviral camps (Gabba 142). There were so many of these military desertions to Sextus Pompey that the Vestal Virgins at Rome prayed and sacrificed in order to slow them down (Cass. Dio

48.19.4).

The mixed composition of Sextus' military followers indicates that upheaval and social unrest were unavoidable for all Roman citizens and inhabitants at the time. This climate of uncertainty and misery prompted many to abandon their old modes of life and political beliefs, and to start concerning themselves more with self-preservation. Many of the military dissenters mentioned above reportedly thought that it made no difference whom they served, "since all service was Roman service," and joined Pompeius simply because it was their personal opinion that he represented the better cause (App. *BCiv.* 5.25). As this excerpt from Appian shows, there was a disturbing but prevailing thought among these men that it was possible to serve Rome by joining any of the available military parties or forces, since none of them could be distinguished as fighting against the Roman people's common foe (Gabba 143). Dio, with disgust, also notes this political ambiguity during the shift from Republic to Principate, as well as the tendency for individuals to switch sides as necessary: "So great, indeed, is the perversity that reigns in factional strife and war; for men [...] take no account of justice, but determine on friend and foe according as their own interests and advantage at the time dictate" (Cass. Dio 48.29.3). Dio's poignant character analysis may be applied to men from every level of society during the shift from Republic to Principate, from lowly farmers to self-absorbed *nobiles* like the Triumvirs and even Sextus, who did what was necessary to endure during times of change and political uncertainty. Actions which would have been considered reprehensible in former years—desertion, proscription, blockade—were now seen as understandable means for personal survival. In general, the Roman people were unsure where their allegiances ought to lie.

Sextus at Sicily: Primary Texts versus Physical Evidence

Sextus' choice of Sicily as a base for controlling Sardinia and Corsica and also for launching operations against the members of the Triumvirate was purposeful and designed to lure in the aforementioned unaffiliated dissenters, precisely because the Roman peoples' positive memory of his father, Pompey the Great, was still fresh. Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus had fought against rebels on Sicily to preserve Rome's

grain supply from pirates and in doing so had likely shown his son how island might be strategically used as a base for cutting the grain supply (Powell 109). Powell supports this notion of filial imitation, suggesting that in choosing Sicily Sextus was attempting to “mirror” his father’s career and to strengthen the allegiance of his new troops by touting his family’s political and maritime legitimacy (110). This was an important step since these new troops could at any time become defectors to one or more of his Triumviral rivals, as noted above.

It is ironic, however, that in many ways Sextus’ own actions often tended to invert those of the father he sought to emulate. For example, it is strange that the son of the famed vanquisher of piracy in the Mediterranean would reportedly resort to blockading grain supplies on their way to Rome by using the same plundering, pillaging, and havoc wreaking tactics which Pompey the Great had suppressed. Although both were great naval commanders, Pompey was always remembered positively for his service to the Roman Republic, even after Caesar defeated him, whereas his son Sextus was remembered simply as a “pirate” and rebel after his defeat by Octavian at Naulochus in 36 B.C.E.

Powell excuses Sextus’ seemingly dishonorable behavior by asserting that in all cases “Sextus had resources far inferior to those his father had once had” (Powell 110). Statements like this suggest that Sextus, always assigned by “chance” to a “weaker” position than his father, was compelled to use whatever resources he had to make inroads against his enemies and to survive, both physically and politically (110). The legality or illegality of his seemingly piratical actions was of no consequence to Sextus, since there was not a single recognized ruling power in Rome at this time. As the attitudes of the dissenters demonstrate, even the Triumvirs did not conclusively represent the will of the Roman people as they fought vehemently amongst themselves. Sextus’ military actions against Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus were not, therefore, rebellion against the Roman state, but rather part of his struggle for survival and personal power in provinces like Sicily.

That Sextus Pompeius did institute the harmful naval blockade of grain shipments to Rome mentioned above is undeniable. Cassius Dio reports that it was because of Sextus’ navy pillaging the Italian

coast that the Romans were cutoff from their supply lines for grain and other provisions during the mid-30s B.C.E. (Cass. Dio 48.31.1). Dio's account of the blockade paints Sextus in a negative light, as a man with little regard for the suffering and starvation of his fellow citizens. His account also gives credence to interpretations of the rebellious Sextus more as a "pirate," or as Syme might say an "adventurer," than as a respectable member of the old order of the Roman *nobiles* (Syme 189, 228).

However, it is important here to take time to note that Dio, like other extant primary sources, is thoroughly focused upon consequences for the ultimate victor, Octavian. For this reason, before retracing the events on Sicily under Pompeian occupation any further, a few more words of warning must be said about the inherent weaknesses of Dio's account of the occupation, which often portrays Sextus disapprovingly. Scholars must read Dio's work with close critical attention and analysis, picking out the relevant information about Sextus Pompeius and his real place in contemporary Roman politics and events.

In his introduction to Cassius Dio's history, Meyer Reinhold cautions those desiring to study any aspect of Roman history using Dio's work to be constantly aware of the way that Dio imposes his own "ideological perspectives" upon his judgments of the past (Reinhold 6). Writing in the third century, after the governmental and symbolic conventions of the Roman Principate had been firmly established, Dio sought to remold or reshape the historic events he reported into some form more compatible with the imperial cultural and political system with which he was most familiar (10). This is a problem since during the civil wars power had not yet been solidified under a single, legitimate Roman leader. Dio, like Appian and other primary source authors, was an imperial "office-holder" for whom the struggles of the dying Republic and unformed Principate would have appeared "preposterous," and he naturally would have attempted to make his report of them conform to his personal conceptions of government and politics (Hadas 166).

What is more, as a subject of the well-established Roman imperial system writing centuries after the events reported in his history actually occurred, Dio is also particularly prone to anachronism.⁷ A general anachronistic error of Dio's is that he assumes the same Imperial powers

and importance for the young Octavian which he associates with the Roman Emperors of his own time. In fact, “the Augustan system represents for Dio the model of Roman monarchy,” both “in the person of Augustus as *princeps*” and in the “constitutional and social modalities” which Augustus himself created (Reinhold 12). Reinhold cites this as one important reason for Dio’s worshipful respect of the young Caesar as well as the prominence he attains in Dio’s narrative: “[Dio’s] eyes are rarely turned away from the ever-present figure of Octavian” (10).

However, Dio’s approbation of Augustus in some places and his emphasis on the more unseemly actions of Sextus in others, does not mean that the historian blindly follows his own predilection for imperial rule, or that he always concedes to the Augustan propaganda contained in many of his probable sources.⁸ In *Actium and Augustus*, Gurval poignantly reminds his readers that the “denigration of one side in Roman civil war does not necessarily imply wholehearted support for the other” (Gurval 146). While Dio did, in fact, have deep respect and admiration for the ideal morally and politically responsible *princeps*,⁹ he was also wary of the self-serving and destabilizing personal motives of negligent or reckless Roman leaders during the transition from Republic to Principate.¹⁰ Octavian had not yet become the *princeps* Augustus during the final Republican civil wars, and any premature selfish or irresponsible act prior to the solidification of his power was undoubtedly seen by Dio as a hazard to Rome’s future stability (Reinhold 15). It is equally possible that the unharmonious and offensive actions of someone like Sextus Pompeius—which were themselves direct threats to the legitimacy and power of the emerging Principate—might also have seemed distasteful or undesirable to the historian. Dio’s frequent recognition and condemnation of the prevalence of self-serving actions among those competing for power constructs a comprehensive picture of the overall social and political climate of uncertainty. At any rate, Dio’s often confusing blending of devotion and disdain, alternately against or in favor of Augustus, suggest that he must be read with a certain degree of discretion (9). In examining whether or not Sextus’ actions on Sicily were truly piratical, lawless, and destructive for everyone, it will be informative to explore Dio’s report of living conditions on Sicily during Sextus’

occupation of that province, contrasting his account with some of the available archaeological evidence.

Sextus had taken over Sicily systematically after leaving Italy. Dio reports that Sextus seized many of Sicily's major cities, like Mylae and Tyndaris, without much effort, but was opposed at Messina by the then Roman Governor Pompeius Bithynicus, whom he eventually deceived by a false agreement and executed (Cass. Dio 48.17.5-19.1). Dio seems to believe that Sextus was only able to control the whole province within a short amount of time by using fear tactics on its inhabitants and anyone who came to their aid. Apparently Sextus overran the country by preventing any importation of provisions, and instilling fear in any who attempted to bring help to the Sicilians by setting up ambushes and injuring them (Cass. Dio 48.17.5). Dio piles the list of Sextus' supposed crimes against the subjugated Sicilians still higher when he claims that Sextus took away all their weapons and money (Cass. Dio 48.17.6). Here, scholars like Welch caution readers that Dio (in addition to Appian) has a tendency for exaggerating the amount damage inflicted by Sextus during the initial months of his occupation (Welch, "Sextus" 42). Welch also advises researchers to pay more serious attention to the parts of Dio's narrative which portray Sextus' takeover of the island as orderly and welcomed by the Sicilians. Gabba makes another interesting point about misrepresentation of Sextus as relatively violent and ruthless in Dio and in the propaganda directed at him, noting that even the most virulent anti-Pompeian literature can name just two Roman nobles whom he executed, including the aforementioned Pompeius Bithynicus—a small number when compared with the hundreds of innocent *nobiles* who perished at the hands of the Triumvirs (Gabba 155).

Archaeological research focused on the specific years of Pompeian occupation tends to agree with Welch's and Gabba's analysis and paints a far more pleasant picture of life on Sicily under Sextus. Stone uses a variety of archaeological data to create a chronology for the state of the island during its control by Sextus Pompey and immediately afterward, following his defeat by Octavian at Naulochus.¹¹ Based on the evidence he finds, Stone argues that even if Sextus was sometimes compelled to use violent force against Sicilians, their allies, and the Roman governor Bithynicus, his swift "takeover of the island implies

that his government was welcomed by at least some of the cities” (Stone 11). Furthermore, he claims that abusing the Sicilians in any way would not have served Sextus well or helped him to exploit memory of his father’s good reputation (12). On the contrary, the archaeological record and evidence points to general Sicilian prosperity under Sextus Pompey’s government, compared to the later destruction and punishment of many Sicilian towns by the victorious Octavian (12).

The Sicilians most likely would have known about the dire civil unrest, upheaval, and suffering under Octavian in Italy and therefore rejoiced at their own situation under Sextus. Stone further argues that Sextus would have necessarily increased the economic prosperity of the island as he simultaneously hurt the people of mainland Italy with his blockade of the Italian coast. To explain a significant collection of eastern Sigillata A and other types of imported eastern pottery at several sites on the island from about 42-36 B.C.E., Stone proposes that Pompey probably not only attacked grain ships, but also other Italian trading vessels (Stone 12). Decreased competition from the Italian merchants probably meant increased profits for Sicilian merchants, especially in the East; in addition, farmers would not have suffered from being unable to send their grain to Italy, as they could sell their harvested crop to the increasing number of Sextus Pompey’s followers on the island (13).

If Stone’s analysis of Sicily as prosperous under Sextus is correct, then Octavian might have begun a new civil war with Sextus in 38 B.C.E. not just because of his grain blockade which was weakening Italy, but also because he was unable to incite a revolt in Sicily or to face Pompey’s navy with equal strength (Stone 13). That the Sicilian people were either strongly loyal to Pompey or had gained some renewed sense of independence from Rome during his occupation is further suggested by the fact that even after Octavian conquered Sicily following the Battle of Naulochus, many of the cities on the island continued to resist him and were punished (22). Again and again, Stone mentions that certain coins minted by Sextus Pompey are the “latest” artifacts found in archaeological fills directly before periods of fiery destruction on the island (16-19). He attributes these disruptions in the archaeological record to Octavian’s castigation of

the province after the Battle of Naulochus in 36 B.C.E., because of its support for a 'pirate' and troublemaker like Sextus.

Stone's archaeological and anthropological exploration tempers Dio's conception of Sextus as a maniacal and violent ruler in Sicily. Whereas Octavian ordered his generals to decimate non-compliant areas after he defeated Sextus Pompey (Cass. Dio 49.12.4), Pompey's own occupation of the island had obviously stimulated economic growth, prosperity, and nationalistic pride among the Sicilian people. Surely they did not see him as a pirate, regardless of what their conqueror Octavian thought. However, those Roman citizens starving in Italy because of his protracted grain blockades had every right to a different opinion. But did the people living in Rome really see Sextus as the evil rebel and "pirate" causing their suffering? And what had Octavian's real reasons been for renewing hostilities with Sextus in 38 B.C.E.?

Popular Support for Sextus and Augustan Propaganda

After the formation of the Second Triumvirate, the people of Rome were greatly outraged by the negative consequences of Antony and Octavian's continual strife with Sextus and with each other. This was particularly true since the Triumvirate insisted on imposing new taxes upon already starving and unhappy citizens (Cass. Dio 48.31.1). Octavian especially wanted to use revenues from these taxes to finance wars with the other Triumvirs and with Sextus' navy, which was prominent and all but ruled the sea, hindering the importation of grain supplies and reducing Rome to famine (App. *BCiv.* 5.15).¹² The situation was aggravated by the fact that the number of the urban proletariat was increasing sharply, due to the simultaneously increasing number of dispossessed land owners who moved into the city in search of work and food (Gabba 142). This migration exacerbated an already overwhelming strain on resources within the city, since even in 46 B.C.E. it is thought that as many as 320,000 of the city's inhabitants were receiving free grain from the state (Vitelli 56). Since approximately 85% of the grain needed to feed Rome was obtained by sea, any noticeable influx of Roman citizens newly dependent upon the grain dole because their land had been seized, coupled with Sextus' blockade in the 30s B.C.E., would have made life in the city truly unbearable

(Finley 199).

The people were chiefly angry that the appointed Triumvirs were fighting “not against the common enemy, but against private foes; not against foreigners, but against fellow-citizens, their equals in rank” (App. *BCiv.* 5.17).¹³ Sextus fit into the category of their “equals in rank.” He was born into the same Roman aristocracy as the members of the Triumvirate. This quote from Appian indicates that Sextus must be mistreated and misrepresented in propagandistic accounts of the time period simply because in the end he lost to the future *princeps*, Octavian. Before this defeat, however, Sextus had widespread popular support from a range of social strata. This is partially because the people felt alienated when the leaders Octavian and Antony did not heed their persistent requests or cries for peace, and reacted in a strange way by favoring Sextus instead — though he was the literal cause of their empty bellies! Even Dio admits this unusual admiration for Sextus in his history when he states that the Roman people not only talked about him daily, but also expressed their delight in him and honored him at the Circus by applauding a statue of Neptune carried in procession to the games being held there (Cass. Dio 48.31.5).

Sextus’ personal identification with the god of the sea, Neptune, was partially a way for him to show that he, like Octavian, could claim divine favor and even divine ancestry (Zanker 39). Sextus was clearly reacting to contemporary propaganda designed by the young general Octavian to tout himself as the son of the Divine Julius (*Caesar divi filius*) (40). After Sextus managed to defeat some of Octavian’s boats under the commander Rufus early-on in the straits off Rhegium in 42 B.C.E. (Carter 105), he produced mock naval battles to relive his victory, and also began to believe that he had incurred the favor of the gods who had given him this victory because of his own merits, and also the past naval achievements of his father Pompey the Great (Cass. Dio 48. 19.1-2). Sextus played with the idea that the young general Octavian, because of the crime he had committed in proscribing innocent men, was divinely opposed by the gods in all his efforts against him (Powell 115). The wickedness which Sextus perceived in Octavian was an invaluable political asset, for Romans commonly thought that *pietas* affected a man’s luck (115).

Around this time Sextus also introduced the image of Neptune

into the coinage¹⁴ which he was minting at Sicily for circulation. His coins portrayed the sea god as the guardian of Sextus' fleet (Evans 110). It is relatively well-established that all the coin issues minted by Sextus and struck on Sicilian soil can be closely dated anywhere from 43 to 36 B.C.E (97). Powell emphasizes that this body of coinage is a valuable resource for any historian examining Sextus' place in contemporary political events because it contains rare political messages about Sextus, free from contamination by his victorious opponent, Octavian (Powell 119).

For the design of the issues which portrayed Neptune, Sextus followed a trend which had only recently appeared by putting his own facial features on the face of Neptune (Evans 110). Evans carefully notes that the image seen on Sextus' coinage, despite this incorporation of specifically human traits, is nevertheless still that of the divine god Neptune, whereas Zanker contends that often the image in these issues is of a victory statue or monument to Sextus (Zanker 40). Regardless, these coins undoubtedly provoked Octavian to respond, and he did so by issuing his own coins in a mutual "jostling for divine favor" and continuation of a deeply ingrained ancestral rivalry (Evans 111). Sextus' coins had shown the Neptune/Pompeius figure grasping the decorative *aplustre*, or stern, of a ship to signify divinely sanctioned dominance over Octavian's fleets. In response, and so that he might prove to the Roman people that he was not so completely corrupt and sinful that the gods had forsaken him entirely, Octavian issued some coins depicting Jupiter's thunderbolt and the tripod of Apollo in 40 and 37 B.C.E., respectively (111).

The Roman historian Suetonius, who aims at portraying the personality and character of each of the twelve Caesars in his works (Brunt 8), claims that Octavian was criticized for shouting when he heard that his fleets were sunk by a violent storm on their way to engage Sextus at the beginning of renewed hostilities in 38 B.C.E, "I will win this war, even if Neptune does not want me to!" and then for removing the god's image from the procession to the next Games held in the Circus (Suet. *Aug.* 16). This was a similar procession to the one in which the statue of Neptune had been applauded by the people on previous occasions, as noted above. Naturally, according to Zanker, this incident inspired the Roman people to riot and overturn statues

of Octavian and the other Triumvirs in retribution (Zanker 40). Because most marine imagery and symbols of the sea god were associated with Sextus during this period, public resentment at the removal of Neptune's statue from the procession reflected the Roman people's enduring support of Sextus (40).

Appian criticizes Sextus for not invading Italy at this time, while it was wracked by famine and disorder and while the people might have accepted him as leader if only he would reopen the grain trade and bring them peace (App. *BCiv.* 5.25-6). According to Meier, the historian and imperial subject Appian many years later viewed the period of suffering during the civil wars as the perfect opportunity for a potential monarch desiring to gain a following. If this potential monarch could posture himself as the only person capable of returning peace to the Roman people, he might have easily won power and state control (Meier 63). At that point Sextus certainly had the resources and public support necessary to defeat a demoralized and weakened Octavian, and to bring to the Roman people the same prosperity which he had brought to the Sicilians. So why did he not invade Italy?

Gabba takes issue with Appian's claims about the seemingly "irresolute" Sextus, and writes that Appian's condemnation of his inaction is not a serious historical evaluation, since it is obvious that Sextus was not foolish (Gabba 155). Rather, Sextus tried time and again to reinstitute for himself a place within Roman politics through diplomacy, instead of risking the power which he had gained since Julius Caesar's assassination. Hadas asks his own readers a similarly aimed, thought provoking question about the situation: "May it not be suggested that Sextus preferred to gain his ends by blockade rather than by bringing a bloody war into Italy?" (Hadas 161). In a way, this is exactly what Sextus did, assuming that his ends were personal, and not necessarily imperial. Sextus did not strive to achieve the same kind of autocratic rule which Antony and Octavian so vehemently desired, or he would have attacked Italy and the Triumvirs while they were vulnerable. Instead, Sextus was motivated by the need to protect his own sea-power. This resource was most valuable and precious to him — especially because of the memory of his father as a great admiral — and he had no desire to risk losing it, whether by defeat or even by victory, since this too would mean that he would have to govern in

landlocked Rome. On the contrary, when Sextus did not invade Italy and did not cease from blockading its coasts, Octavian and Antony were forced by the ire of the hungry Roman people into a kind of public peace and reconciliation with him.¹⁵

Despite this new truce, it was not long until war was begun anew between Sextus and Octavian since they had made this tenuous agreement for peace “not of their own free will or by choice, but under compulsion” (Cass. Dio 48.45.4). Appian assigns partial responsibility for breaking the armistice with Octavian to Sextus. According to Appian, the famine raged on as mysterious robberies and other crimes continued at sea in 38 B.C.E. The Romans naturally complained that the treaty had not brought them relief from their suffering, but rather had added Sextus as a fourth partner in the “tyranny” of the Triumvirs (App. *BCiv.* 5.77). Appian continues to reveal his pro-Augustan bias by claiming that the innocent Octavian, in order to ascertain who exactly was instigating this unrelenting blockade and pillaging towns, caught some pirates and extracted explanations from them using torture (App. *BCiv.* 5.77). The bias against Sextus Pompeius as instigator of renewed hostilities with Augustus is even apparent in some modern commentaries on the time period, including Carter’s commentary in his notes on Suetonius’ *Divus Augustus*. Carter claims that it was, in fact, Sextus who picked a fight with Octavian by increasing his piratical activities, primarily because of his anger at not receiving power over the province of Achaëa which had been promised to him as one of the conditions of the treaty he made with Octavian and Antony (Suetonius 105).

However, after the pirates captured by Octavian reportedly said that they had been charged to commit the crimes by Sextus and Octavian had written to him about the matter, Sextus “disavowed” any knowledge of their deeds (App. *BCiv.* 5.77). Nevertheless, Octavian seized upon the suspicions created by his questioning of these supposed pirates as the perfect opportunity for renewing his military quarrel with Sextus. The previously mentioned incident with the statue of Neptune probably persuaded him to act quickly and rid himself of Sextus once and for all. He wrote succinctly to those in Rome that “Pompeius had violated the treaty by encouraging piracy, [and] that the pirates had confessed this” (App. *BCiv.* 5.80).

Modern historians, like Gabba, contend that these accusations made by Octavian against Sextus Pompey were generally known to be false (Gabba 156). This did not stop Octavian, writing years later as Augustus, from referring to Sextus contemptuously as a “pirate” in the text of an inscription outlining his accomplishments, briefly mentioned above. This inscription, known as the *Res Gestae*, is a unique primary source in that it is our only extant autobiographical source written by Augustus about the events of his reign. The format of the text, intended for inscription upon bronze tablets in front of Augustus’ mausoleum in Rome, is modeled after other common examples of *elogia*. These *elogia* are the texts of funeral orations that commemorated the virtues and achievements of a dead man, inscribed in order to preserve a catalog of the man’s deeds (Brunt 2). While Brunt and Moore contend that the *elogia* would not have contained blatantly untrue claims, since there would have been too many people still alive who might disprove them (3), Cooley argues that at certain points in the *Res Gestae* Augustus exhibits “a masterly economy with the truth”(Cooley 25). Brunt and Moore concede this, writing that it is obvious that Augustus made certain omissions for mainly propagandistic reasons by leaving out anything inconsistent with his desired public image (4). They include Augustus’ accusation that Sextus Pompey was a “pirate” among their other examples of deliberate omissions and twisted facts (3). The specific passage from the *Res Gestae* which deals with Sextus Pompey reads as follows:

Mare pacavi a praedonibus. Eo bello servorum qui fugerant a dominis suis et arma contra rem publicam ceperant triginta fere millia capta dominis ad supplicium sumendum tradid. (“I made the sea peaceful and freed it of pirates. In that war I captured about 30,000 slaves who had escaped from their masters and taken up arms against the Republic, and I handed them over to their masters for punishment.”) (Aug. RG 25.1)

Furthermore, the war “against pirates and slaves” mentioned in the *Res Gestae* 27.3, is the same war mentioned in 25.1, and is also connected to the memory of Sextus. By eschewing intricate details of the Sicilian War which he fought with Sextus Pompey between 38 and

36 B.C.E., Augustus attempted to color public memory of his often haphazard early victories as Octavian, subsuming and concealing them in a text meant to commemorate him as the inviolable and supremely moral *princeps* he had become in subsequent years. Brunt and Moore caution readers against believing Augustus' claim that the war against Sextus might be characterized as a "slave" war, despite the fact that Sextus' powerful navy was mainly manned by slaves and deserters (66, n. on 25.1). Instead, they suggest that Sextus Pompey's eminence and renown among his fellow *nobiles* and members of the Senate indicate that Augustus' belittling of the whole affair and of Sextus ought to be considered propaganda (66).

The Sicilian War

Regardless of the inaccuracy of labeling Sextus a "pirate," Octavian successfully used deception and false accusations in order to renew hostilities with Sextus, breaking their truce. In this way, Octavian set out in 38 B.C.E. to vanquish Sextus at Sicily because of his supposed discovery of Sextus' continued support for piracy and crime. Dio describes the nuances of this so-called Sicilian War in book 49 of his history, beginning with the preparations of Octavian's fleets. Octavian adopted the strategy of transporting his infantry to fight Sextus' forces on land where he was weakest, whereas Sextus busied himself with strengthening his fortifications, and adopted a mainly defensive military strategy (Reinhold 21).

The first major naval engagement between the two sides occurred at the Battle of Mylae, which matched Sextus' 155 ships with a fleet of 150 of Octavian's ships under the command of Octavian's admiral, Agrippa (Reinhold 24). While the two forces were engaged at sea, Octavian realized that a part of the shore near Messana had been left unprotected by Sextus, and he proceeded to disembark some of his infantry troops onto the Sicilian coast (Cass. Dio 49.5.1). Although Octavian's troops landed successfully on the island, Sextus' fleet quickly returned to the nearby waters around Messana and cut these men off from their fellow soldiers who subsequently escaped to the mainland, leaving the infantry detachment stranded on Sicily (Cass. Dio 49.5.4). For days this abandoned force was besieged and harassed by Sextus' cavalry and light-armed troops as it attempted to march to

safety, before being relieved by help from Laronius under the orders of Agrippa (27). The tactics employed by Sextus' troops against the defenseless Augustan detachment sound surprisingly like the tactics of "guerilla warfare" which Sextus had supposedly used in Spain against the officials and military forces of Octavian's adopted father, Julius Caesar.

Octavian was apparently discouraged by what had happened to his fleet and to the stranded detachment following Mylae. However, according to Dio, an auspicious omen suddenly presented itself and revived his spirits. A fish leaped from the water and landed at Octavian's feet (Cass. Dio 49.5.5). This omen gave him courage because he trusted in the interpretations of his soothsayers who asserted that the sign meant he would "make the sea his slave" (Cass. Dio 49.5.5). Sextus' personal association with the sea and the sea god Neptune would have led Octavian to assume that by making the sea his slave, he would, by extension, make Sextus his slave as well. This religious or supernatural explanation for Octavian's renewed motivation against Sextus leads me to believe that Dio may have been using a pro-Augustan source at this point. A pro-Augustan source would have intentionally tried to justify Octavian's fight against Sextus as newly approved or sanctioned by the Roman gods who had shown favor to Sextus in the past, as noted above. Octavian's renewed confidence would have propelled him to his imminent victory over Sextus.

Eventually, either Sextus or Octavian—reports differ (Cass. Dio 49.8.4-5 and App. *BCiv.* 5.118)—decided to risk it all on a final, decisive battle. Regardless of which commander initiated it, this battle was the famed Battle of Naulochus, fought at sea on September 3, 36 B.C.E. (Suetonius 105). Dio and Appian's respective accounts of the ensuing battle are disappointingly regarded by Melber as stereotypical literary models often used by classical authors to describe various naval engagements. According to Melber, their prefabricated pictures of the naval battle are also "heavily indebted to Thucydides in the use of individual words, phrases, and rare expressions" (qtd. in Reinhold 29). Based on this assessment of Dio and Appian's accounts of the Battle of Naulochus, it is apparent that scholars should not take their detailed descriptions of any minute events that occurred during the battle

literally. However, broad movements of ships as well as the general outcome of the engagement can be deduced from the information which the two primary source authors provide.

According to Dio, despite the fact that the forces of Sextus and Octavian seemed “evenly matched” for a long time, the allies of Sextus were ultimately routed by Octavian’s forces (Cass. Dio 49.10.1). When Octavian saw that he had attained the victory, he did not stop, but rather pursued the Pompeian men and ships that had been vanquished and cast upon the shore, and even went back into the sea in order to incinerate whatever Pompeian ships had not managed to reach the beach. He set fire to these ships, which had run aground in shallow water (Cass. Dio 49.10.2). As Stone deduced from his archaeological investigation of various sites on Sicily, Octavian, having regained control of the island, ordered his soldiers to systematically destroy any cities that resisted his victory (Cass. Dio 49.12.4). The prosperity and independence which Sextus had brought to the province were no more.

Seeing no way out, and motivated by self-preservation, Sextus resolved to flee on one of his remaining swiftest ships, and to live to fight another day. Sextus’ successful escape was apparently a great embarrassment for Octavian, despite his victory (Cass. Dio 49.11.1). During his flight to the East, Sextus employed a tactic he had used previously on many other occasions: exploiting Pompey the Great’s name and ties of friendship or patronage wherever he went (Reinhold 42-43). He followed a path from Messana to Corcyra, and finally moved on to Cephallenia and Lesbos (App. *BCiv.* 5.133). At some point he divested himself of the blue general’s robe which he had earlier adopted as a symbol of his connection to Neptune and the sea, for the sake of remaining inconspicuous (Cass. Dio 49.17.3). Although his guardian god had failed him, and he had divested himself of this robe, for a time Sextus retained his surviving ships and continued sailing east. He thought he might find refuge with Antony, who was also beginning to quarrel with Octavian around this time.

However, after some double-dealing and deceptive maneuvering with Antony, in fear for his life, Sextus burned his ships and sought refuge on land. He was pursued and overtaken at Midaeum in Phrugia, where he was surrounded and captured alive (Cass. Dio 49.18.4). In

anger, Antony ordered his captor, Titius, to execute him, although Dio's account of two divergent letters from Antony to Titius which alternately discourage and encourage his punishment, is contradicted in other primary sources like Appian (Reinhold 45). Sextus was executed by Titius regardless of Antony's true orders, and Octavian commemorated his defeat and subsequent death with games held in the Circus (Cass. Dio 49.18.6).

The life of Sextus Pompeius was reflective of the tumultuous political and social times in which he lived. Although many of his actions against the second Roman Triumvirate were hostile, including his naval blockade of Roman grain shipments, Sextus' actions cannot be written off as the criminal activities of a lawless "pirate," despite Octavian's desire to erase his importance from the people's memory after becoming Augustus and firmly establishing the Principate. It is important to remember that Augustus, along with other powerful *nobiles* like his colleague Antony, perpetrated just as many, if not more, misdeeds and atrocities as Sextus Pompeius. Based on information from primary sources like Dio, we see that around this time instability frequently forced men from every rank in society to consider self-preservation before the preservation of an ambiguous Roman state. In light of our understanding of the shifting political climate, it seems natural that Sextus Pompey would have used the only resources available to him—his sea power and family name—for personal and political survival during the shift from Republic to Principate.

Notes

¹ For much more on the details of Sextus' childhood and probable education, which will not be treated here, see sections II-IV of Moses Hadas' seminal work, *Sextus Pompeius*. Hadas reconstructs various aspects of Sextus' life by piecing together excerpts from the primary sources with information about general Roman educational and family practices.

² See the attached timeline for a reconstruction of the events comprising Sextus' life.

³ As expected, the conquered party in any war or conflict is relegated to an inferior place in subsequent accounts. But should histories like

those written by Dio and Appian be dismissed as propaganda? For more specific in-depth analysis of the legitimacy of Cassius Dio as a reliable source of information about Sextus, see the section titled “Sextus at Sicily: Primary Texts versus Physical Evidence.”

⁴ See also Syme 103. Like Gabba, Syme labels Sextus’ tactics in Spain “guerilla warfare.”

⁵ For more narrative information about Sextus’ loss of the Senatorial naval command, see Cass. Dio 47.12.2.

⁶ This section of Appian includes a supposed speech of Cassius made before the Battle of Philippi. In the speech, Cassius inextricably links himself to Brutus and Sextus in a common cause for the conservative form of the Roman Republic, though in reality it is doubtful whether or not Sextus wholeheartedly supported Brutus and Cassius’ political agenda.

⁷ Anachronism is the insertion of a device, object, or concept existing in one time into a completely different era in which it did not originally exist. See Reinhold 10.

⁸ See Reinhold 7 and 17 for more on the “fruitless” attempt to indentify the sources used by Dio.

⁹ Reinhold suggests Marcus Aurelius as another of Dio’s primary models for the exemplary Roman Emperor.

¹⁰ For example, in 47.39.2 of his history, Dio recognizes that the civil war between the Republican forces of Brutus and Cassius and the forces of the Triumvirate was also a war between “self-government” and “autocracy,” respectively.

¹¹ Catherine Reid Rubincam summarizes Stone’s dating of different periods of Sicilian history based on archaeology alone as lacking in firm literary support from the primary sources: “This reconstruction [...] concentrates the destructive phase of Octavian’s interest in Sicily in the years between the battles of Naulochos and Actium, and the constructive phase approximately 10 years later” but “the literary testimonia [...] do not necessarily support such a neat division of this period of Sicilian history” (521).

¹² For more on the dire situation, see Gabba 141.

¹³ See also Gabba 143.

¹⁴ These coin issues were some of the same issues mentioned in the section titled “Sextus at Sicily: Primary Texts versus Physical

Evidence,” found by Stone in archaeological strata throughout Sicily.

¹⁵ See Cass. Dio 48.45 for more information on the treaty.

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Timeline: Selected Events from the Life of Sextus Pompeius

- 76/5 B.C.E.* Birth of Sextus Pompeius
- 67 B.C.E. Pompey the Great given naval command for elimination of piracy
- 48 B.C.E. Pompey the Great dies in Egypt
- 45 B.C.E. Battle of Munda
Gnaeus Pompeius defeated by Caesar and killed
Sextus remains in Spain, perpetrating "guerilla warfare"
- 44 B.C.E. Julius Caesar assassinated
Lepidus arrives in Spain as governor

Sextus gets Senatorial naval command to check Antony

43 B.C.E. Formation of the Second Triumvirate (Octavian, Antony, Lepidus) PROSCRIPTIONS

Sextus stripped of command, flees to Sicily with fleet

42 B.C.E. Battle of Philippi

Brutus and Cassius defeated

Remnants of Republican cause defect to Sextus

Sextus defeats Octavian's commander, Rufus, at sea

39 B.C.E. Triumvirs forced into short-lived truce with Sextus

38–6 B.C.E. Sicilian War with Octavian

38 B.C.E. Octavian's fleets destroyed by violent storm and rebuilt

36 B.C.E. Battle of Mylae

Sept. 3rd, 36 B.C.E.** Battle of Naulochus

Sextus defeated by Octavian, flees to the East

35 B.C.E. Death of Sextus Pompeius

* For the debate about Sextus' date of birth, see Hadas 3-5.

** Exact date found in Carter 105.