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Augustus as Commander in Chief

Approaching Strategy and Leadership in (Civil) War

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Augustus as Commander in Chief: Approaching Strategy and Leadership in (Civil) War

Carsten Hjort Lange

Abstract: When focusing on Augustus as a commander in chief, a strategist, and a field commander – and especially the formative years of the civil war(s) –, there are numerous potential approaches. We know that he fought battles, campaigns, and wars. Sometimes he did well, sometimes less so. Traditionally, Augustus has not been viewed as a good general, but he was, or so this article claims, an excellent commander. We shall here discuss the actual *fighting* only when it has a direct bearing on what might be termed the ‘command structure’, in this case during the triumvirate and beyond, and its formulation of strategy. Rather, the main question is as follows: how did the learning curve followed by Young Caesar on his rise to power create a new, shared command structure as part of a monarchical system, with Augustus as commander in chief? If we look at political initiative in warfare and military campaigns, rather than just considering warfare from a tactical point of view, then leadership is always a learning curve. This is accordingly a question of how we, as scholars, approach ancient warfare, strategy, and the relationships between commanders: for example, the ‘high command’ or commander in chief in one theatre and the field commander in the other. This is thus an article on how we, as scholars, approach Roman military history in general.

Keywords: Augustus/Young Caesar, Agrippa, civil war, commander in chief, field commander, military leader, strategy, learning curve, attrition, Mutina, Perusia, Philippi, Naulochus, Illyricum, Actium, the Cantabrian Wars.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ego enim sic existimo, in summo imperatore quattuor has res inesse oportere,—scientiam rei militaris, virtutem, auctoritatem, felicitatem.

‘For I consider that a perfect general must possess four attributes – knowledge of warfare, courage, prestige [as in a reputation for leadership], and luck.’

(Cic. *Leg. Man.* 28).

Cicero’s words – spoken in favour of Pompeius Magnus – may help us to understand why many scholars (might) claim that Augustus was never a great general. Together with parallel evidence,¹ his words offer descriptions of ‘combat leadership’ (see below).

¹ Polyb. 10.13.5; Caes. *B Gall.* 1.25.1; 2.25; App. *B Civ.* 1.58; Lee (2020), 89-97 for further evidence.

Perhaps Augustus' greatest fault was that he was a very 'modern' commander, and at the same time very consciously aware of his own limitations. Consequently, it should not surprise that Lee's fine book on Roman warfare (2020), in a section entitled *Leadership and Command*, has two references to Augustus as a commander: 1) explaining his flight at Philippi as cheating death by divine intervention;² and 2) portraying Augustus refusing to address the soldiers as *commilitones* 'in order to emphasise his independence from the armed forces (Suet. *Aug.* 25.1)'.³ While this is a fairly traditional reading, it is certainly not, as this article hopes to show, the whole story. Augustus has traditionally been viewed as a poor general, and he was at times a poor combat leader (but he was an excellent commander). This position appears unusual only if we define 'command' narrowly, as *military* or *field* command. But as scholars, we need to debate how to approach ancient strategy and leadership in a more nuanced way that transcends what merely happens on the field of battle. The broader view of command and strategy offered here focusses on the formative years of the civil war(s). Looking beyond civil war we might indeed wish to discuss all the military ventures of Young Caesar/Augustus, but I restrict my focus to civil war, with two added test cases: Illyricum (because it earned Young Caesar a triumph), and the Cantabrian Wars (the last campaign with Augustus acting as field commander).

At the outset, some explanatory statements are in order. Augustus is best approached primarily as a strategist (although he was also a field commander), and Agrippa should first and foremost be approached as a field commander (but also as a strategist).⁴ Strategy is here understood as a practice: what needs to be achieved, how this will be done, and what resources will be used.⁵ They were, in short, a team. The two main extant historical narratives for this relationship are Appian and Cassius Dio. They seem at times to leave out certain details, for example the use of *legati*, and tend instead to focus on the principal characters. This fact should not surprise – their works were produced under a monarchy – but it does, helpfully, mean that the historian's understanding of who was principally in charge, whether strategic or field commander, is clearly visible in the evidence. There is certainly nothing to suggest that Young Caesar was not personally involved in formulating strategy; indeed he obviously was. Where our sources state that Agrippa was in charge of a campaign or battle, he was (the same applies for other generals mentioned *nominatim*). Yet in cases where such notice is added, Young Caesar generally had the initiative. Consequently, most of the time either Augustus or Agrippa were in charge of the actual fighting, as field commanders, but Augustus was always the commander in chief, and certainly so when fighting the

² Lee (2020), 93; Plut. *Brut.* 41; see also below.

³ Lee (2020), 96.

⁴ There is certainly no reason to take anything away from the exploits of Agrippa. See now Tan (2019). The period from the death of Caesar to the victory of Augustus is one civil war period, albeit with periods of peace; this includes campaigns such as the one against the 'liberators' and Sextus Pompeius and battles such as Philippi and Naulochus. The basic difference between battle and campaign is not always easily perceptible in the evidence.

⁵ Black (2020), xiii talks of the strategic practices of leading military figures; see definitions below.

campaigns and wars after Philippi (Agrippa's role would gradually be taken over by Drusus and Tiberius).⁶ A letter from Cicero dated to 2 or 3 November 44 BCE is telling:

Kalendis vesperi litterae mihi ab Octaviano. magna molitur. veteranos qui Casilini et Calatiae <sunt> perduxit ad suam sententiam. nec mirum, quingenos denarios dat. cogitat reliquas colonias obire. plane hoc spectat ut se duce bellum geratur cum Antonio. itaque video paucis diebus nos in armis fore. quem autem sequamur? vide nomen, vide aetatem. atque a me postulat primum ut clam colloquatur mecum vel Capuae vel non longe a Capua. puerile hoc quidem, si id putat clam fieri posse.

'On the evening of the Kalends a letter for me arrived from Octavian. He has great schemes afoot. He has won the veterans at Casilinum and Calatia over to his views, and no wonder since he gives them 500 denarii apiece. He plans to make a round of the other colonies. His object is plain: war with Antonius and himself as commander-in-chief. So it looks to me as though in a few days' time we shall be in arms. But whom are we to follow? Consider his name; consider his age. And now he asks me, in the first instance, for a secret interview in Capua or somewhere in the vicinity – childish, if he thinks it could be done secretly. I wrote pointing out that this was neither needful nor possible.'⁷

No lesser role than that of commander in chief, high commander, was acceptable for the heir of Caesar. This was never (only) a question of his abilities, of which Cicero evidently took a rather dim view at the outset. Rather, it was a question of political initiative and the balance of power. Young Caesar/Augustus was an integrated part of campaigns and wars fought between 44 BCE and CE 14, notwithstanding his actual involvement in the fighting itself. A few words on the concept of 'war' may help us to understand its specific historical context. We need to remember that before the First World War, war was widely understood as a productive force, as something that should be used for the purposes of creating peace.⁸ War was not necessarily a bad thing; similarly, empire-building was not always considered a bad thing either. *Civil* war, on the other hand, has a more ambiguous value in our sources. Civil war, to judge from Roman historiography, was surely always a negative thing.⁹ And yet from Sulla onwards, the claim of all dynasts – including Young Caesar/Augustus – was the same:

⁶ See now Vervaeke (2020), suggesting that they operated as proconsuls under the overarching *summum imperium auspiciumque* of Augustus. See also below. According to Vervaeke, Tiberius and Drusus already took on this role from 20 and 15 BCE respectively, alongside Agrippa and thus well before his untimely death in 12 BCE. The command structure of the triumvirate focuses on the respective zones of control; this is a political extraordinary magistracy, but one with a focus on military command (clearly visible in the assignments). Basically, there were at the outset three commanders in chief in their respective zones, with no or little political interference from the outside. At the outset, Italy was in principle under joint command, but we still see independent assignments and decision-making.

⁷ Cic. *Att.* 16.8.1–2 (SB 418). All translations are taken from those in the Loeb Classical Library (with minor emendations).

⁸ Bartelson (2017).

⁹ See Lange & Vervaeke (2019).

civil war, begun by others, was ended by the victorious dynast who wished to restore peace to Rome. From Caesar onwards the concept of *pax* became an integrated part of this development. Civil war could be presented as necessary, or even as a positive counter-*exemplum* to the more brutal narratives of internecine conflict.¹⁰

Traditionally, Roman foreign policy lay within the purview of the Senate. This is not the place to revisit the finer workings of the Roman war machine, but a few comments are in order. One much debated issue is whether the Senate could have formulated a policy of world conquest or dominance.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, local decision-making was always needed due to the long distances from Rome involved.¹² Burton is right to point to the major difference between diplomacy and warfare.¹³ As for foreign policy, it seems absurd to look for a decision taken at some specific point in time and emulated by everyone. The origins of Roman imperialism seem indeed a strange Holy Grail.¹⁴ One very likely approach to the origins of Roman imperialism is strategy: that is, what Rome did militarily, including actual fighting, and how. Such developments may arise without a specific ‘decision’ in the Senate and may arise instead from the initiative of a particular commander.

Having said that, who formulated policy and strategy is also a difficult question to answer. The first Punic War may help us to understand how this formulation of policy and strategy happened. The year 260 BCE marked a radical departure, rightly emphasized by Polybius. He states that the Roman objective was to drive Carthage out of Sicily (Polyb. 1.20.1–2; cf. 20–1), partly by preventing the Carthaginians from operating in the area. The fleet had turned into an aggressive tool. The context is as follows: after their success at Agrigentum (Polyb. 1.17), the Romans decided on a new strategic initiative, to raise a substantial fleet which would challenge Carthage at sea. Alternatively, the raiding of the southern coasts of Italy by the Carthaginians, vulnerable if they kept their naval ‘superiority,’ might have been at least part of the reason for the change in policy (Zonar. 8.10; Oros. 4.7.7). Surprisingly, the Romans waited three years to develop this new strategic initiative. Importantly, this will have been the joint work of the consuls and the Senate combined: this was a major change that involved a different use of Roman resources (Polyb. 1.11). This was in many ways a step towards total war. A fleet was an expensive and complicated tool of war. With the coming of the late Republic, dynasts, including the triumvirs, drastically changed this senatorial consensus system. Dynasts, often with extraordinary commands, to some extent took over the architecture of republican government, including the role of the Senate.¹⁵

Despite his limitations, Polybius is valuable evidence for Roman expansion and strategy. His assessment of Roman warfare at 1.37.7, where he writes that the Romans use violent force for all purposes, also nicely tells the story of Roman triumphalism.

¹⁰ Lange (2019a); Cornwell (2017).

¹¹ Polyb. 1.3.6, 3.2.6, etc.; Harris (1979), 107; Gruen (1984), 203; Eckstein (1987), 232, 267, 296; Burton (2019), 49–51.

¹² Cassius Dio was well aware of this too; cf. especially Caesar’s speech at Vesontio. See Burden-Strevens (2020), 248–305.

¹³ Burton (2019), 51.

¹⁴ Burton (2019), 93; cf. Terrenato (2019).

¹⁵ See now mainly Vervaeke (2014).

That is not a criticism, for at 3.4.10 he explains that such violence was strategic: ‘since no man of sound sense goes to war with his neighbours simply for the sake of crushing an adversary’ (οὔτε γὰρ πολεμεῖ τοῖς πέλας οὐδεὶς νοῦν ἔχων ἕνεκεν αὐτοῦ τοῦ καταγωνίσασθαι τοὺς ἀντιπατομένους). Imperial expansion was not, in the words of Burton, ‘objectless.’¹⁶ More than anything, this quotation shows that the Romans according to Polybius *understood* strategy and did not expand for its own sake.

A few more introductory comments are needed at the outset. The Roman way of looking at wars through the lens of ever-changing consuls had a profound impact on the way they, and consequently we, approach warfare. Annalistic history and magisterial annuity helped to create an understanding of wars and campaigns that often comes across as fragmented. There can also be little doubt that the idea of ‘decisive’ battles (see below) is helped along by the Roman institution of the triumph, clearly favouring battles to end wars.¹⁷ Commanders thus naturally favoured a fragmented take on campaigns and wars in order to legitimize a triumph: they created, perhaps deliberately, a narrative according to which decisive victories ‘belonged’ to an individual commander and were his distinctive contribution to the polity. This makes us potentially forget attrition as an important and standard part of Roman warfare: the narrative of Roman valour may have sought to sidestep it, but waiting for attrition to take its toll on the enemy was an important strategy. This was also about waiting for the right moment and preserving manpower; it was, in short, about winning. The best example of this Roman strategy is Pyrrhus’ invasion on behalf of Tarentum in the 280s BCE.

Last but not least, the cultural turn has had an enormous effect on military history. Battles, campaigns, and wars are no longer popular amongst professional historians.¹⁸ Traditionally, military history emphasizes politics, chronology, and commanders (Hans Delbrück, Johannes Kromayer, William Tarn etc.). Contrary to this, the ‘Beyond the Battlefield’ approach is popular, often related to the ‘War and Society’ or ‘New Military History’ approach. Instead of strategy, battles, tactics, and weapons, the focus is now on social structures, military attitudes, and the relationship between the military and civic society, which pursues the relationship between war and memory studies, gender studies, and the social dimensions of soldiery such as comradeship, army medicine, and so forth. New Military History has thus emerged with an interest in the social and institutional context of warfare. The subject has embraced new sources and new methods of investigation. This is positive. At the same time, these developments have rightly been criticized for risks of demilitarizing the subject of military history. War does after all equal fighting. The prime concern of the military is waging war and thus this should play a central role in military history.¹⁹ Similarly, historical experiences of warfare and the construction of narratives about it are obviously intertwined, then as

¹⁶ Burton (2019), 23.

¹⁷ Westall (2014); Lange (2016).

¹⁸ So MacMillan (2020); see Black (2012) for a sceptical view on the cultural turn as an analytic tool in military history.

¹⁹ Black (2004), 49–59; for a critique of New Military History, see also Tatum (2007); Nolan (2017) (Introduction); Harari (2007), 252. As noted by Wheeler (2006) in his review of Lendon, the cultural approach to war tends to assume that culture, rather than technological progress and hardware, shapes the conduct of war.

now. War is chaos and narratives of war are created out of that chaos. Again, multiple approaches are a positive thing, but descriptions of warfare and battles in texts were never only a literary device, but a reflection of reality: of real battles, wars, and death, reconstructing battle with characteristics that our sources thought to be real.²⁰ As Gallagher writes on the American Civil War, what occurred on the battlefield profoundly influenced almost every aspect of life behind the lines, including of course in politics.²¹ With this in mind, before we look at the military career of Young Caesar, we need to look at the concept of strategy.

2. STRATEGY AND MILITARY HISTORY

Definitions are notoriously difficult and always open to criticism. However, a few examples of definitions of strategy should suffice in order to make a coherent case. Heuser defines it as follows: ‘... the link between political aims and the use of force, or its threat.’²² Strachan talks of the use of engagement for the purpose of war.²³ It is a military means. Adding to this, Gaddis emphasizes strategy as ‘the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities.’²⁴ If we go beyond our means, we need to scale back: strategy is a question of seeking balance.

An even more problematic issue is the fact that ancient strategy, albeit vital, is a poorly understood part of ancient warfare. According to Gray, ‘the idea that history was devoid of attempts at strategic thought and practice prior to the late eighteenth century is absurd.’²⁵ In general, Gray defines strategy as ‘the direction and use made of force and the threat of force for the purpose of policy as decided by politics,’²⁶ adding that it is critically important to clarify the ‘master role’ of politics. Regarding the Greeks and Romans specifically, he adds that we can view both Greek and Roman approaches to cementing their own security ‘in the light shed by a general theory of strategy.’²⁷ Consequently, the Greeks and Romans were not educated in strategy as such, but we

²⁰ Harari (2007), 266: ‘For the reality of battle is truly extraordinary, and the abnormally dichotomical nature of battle is not a mere literary device, but rather a real characteristic of battle.’

²¹ Gallagher (1996), 42, adding: ‘Millions of people North and South eagerly followed the progress of Union and Confederate armies on a daily basis, according more attention to strategic maneuvers and battles than to any of the non-military topics favored by modern scholars.’ This may not be entirely comparable to ancient Rome, but scholars’ relative lack of interest and understanding of the impact of war (and civil war) can cause problems.

²² Heuser (2010), 3.

²³ Strachan (2013), 26–45, esp. 26.

²⁴ Gaddis (2018), 21.

²⁵ Gray (2015), 9–10. Cf. Black (2020), xv; cf. 23: ‘[T]he idea and practice of strategy predated the vocabulary, which is essentially nineteenth and twentieth century.’

²⁶ Gray (2015), 21.

²⁷ Gray (2015), 5. Black (2020), 13: ‘The claim that because there was no term for strategy Rome lacked strategic thinking fails to give sufficient weight to the lasting need to prioritise possibilities and threats, and, in response, to allocate resources and to decide how to use them.’; regarding prioritisation, see Eckstein (2006).

should not be misled by their (relative) silence on this issue.²⁸ Gray's view is supported by Tacitus' fine description of Roman strategy (*Ann.* 4.5). Tacitus starts with a description of Rome's naval strategic capability. Importantly, the navy features here as part of a wider description of Rome's mobile defence and command of the empire at a strategic level (giving naval protection of mainland Italy and the surrounding islands).²⁹ The legions at the Rhine were to defend the empire against the Germans and could handle trouble in Gaul, if this was needed. The rest of the army was deployed according to potential trouble. Even Italy had the Dalmatian legions close by, as well as praetorians close to Rome itself. As for Rome, it clearly outlived its role as the main naval base. It had serious limitations, due partly to the difficulty of deployment from Rome to Ostia – where there was no permanent harbour – and partly due to the growth of the empire. In this context, Rome was too distant from prospective areas of operation. The system described is the one put in place by Augustus. He may not always have formulated strategy on his own (does that matter?), but he certainly played his part as commander in chief.

A short description of the Second Punic War may add to this picture of Roman strategy. Strategy was traditionally, as mentioned, the prerogative of the Senate in collaboration with magistrates or generals in the field. It made sense for the Romans to look at the effects of war through the lens of the Punic Wars, especially so the Second Punic War. Hannibal lost in spite of his brilliant victory at Cannae. It was in many ways a decisive moment in Roman history, but Hannibal still lost the war. He was clearly not a great commander: though a tactical genius, the strategic dimensions of his command faltered. Pyrrhus and Hannibal did not understand, or perhaps only understood too late, that astonishing success in battle was not necessarily decisive. The manpower reserves of Rome meant Roman victory in the long run. In modern terms this might be described as a strategy of attrition. But again, strategy or not, this could never be convincing when selling the drama at home. In a world of victories and triumphs, decisive battles were a vital part of the culture of war. The strategy of attrition earned Q. Fabius Maximus the cognomen *Cunctator* (the Delayer).³⁰ This was not an honorary brand, at least not at first. Roller attractively suggests that Fabius 'encodes a degree of moral change.'³¹ Originally, the delaying strategy was evaluated negatively, but this later changed. Livy (22.12.12, 22.23.1, 22.39.20) emphasizes cunctation as a virtue. Florus agrees – following Livy – and puts emphasis on Fabius as the bringer of safety to the community (1.22.27: *rei publicae salutare Cunctator*). He adds that this was a novel way of defeating Hannibal.³² Livy of course was writing during the age of Augustus.³³ The

²⁸ Gray (2015), 44.

²⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 4.5; cf. Veg. *Mil.* 4.31: *Italiam utroque mari duae classes, Misenum apud et Ravennam, proximumque Galliae litus rostratae naves praesidebant, quas Actiaca victoria captas Augustus in oppidum Foroiuliense miserat valido cum remige* ('Italy, on either seaboard, was protected by fleets at Misenum and Ravenna; the adjacent coast of Gaul by a squadron of fighting ships, captured by Augustus at the victory of Actium and sent with strong crews to the town of Forum Julium.');

³⁰ Enn. *Ann.* 363 Skutsch; see below.

³¹ Roller (2018), 163–96, here at 163.

³² See Roller (2018), 175–7, with more evidence.

moral change in attitudes toward strategic delay (and thus the reception of *Cunctator*) seems to be connected to Augustus himself. Another level of the ancient discussion is related to victory without fighting.³⁴ It must be emphasized that from a strategic point of view there is a difference between waiting for the right moment, attrition, and not fighting, especially when *not* fighting in fact creates a beneficial situation where there is no longer a need to fight (as with Naulochus and Actium; see below). Whether attrition or delaying, both are part of the same basic idea of winning without having always to fight great/or win great battles: waiting for or creating the right moment for victory. Such strategies may also enable one to survive in a difficult situation, and to live to fight another day. There simply is no paradox in *winning without fighting*, at least not from a strategic point of view.³⁵

What then about grand strategy, a concept closely connected in ancient history to Luttwak's classic exposition in *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*?³⁶ Dzino suggests that while the Romans could not organize grand strategy empire-wide, they could do so in a specific regional theatre of war.³⁷ One issue here is our modern perception of a Roman grand strategy, which makes us misunderstand the ever-changing strategy of Rome. For a start, we ought rather to speak of grand *strategies* than a single policy.³⁸ Dzino wisely uses the concept of buffer zones (strangely with no reference to Luttwak) when describing the Roman strategy in Illyricum.³⁹ The word 'grand' has not helped this discussion either. Yet strategy evidently existed in Roman military and diplomatic thought – a basic issue of how to use military means to ensure political ends, – and those ends are what was at stake.⁴⁰

To connect these reflections on Roman 'grand strategy' to Augustus and the world of politics, the first emperor's will and testament is of especial interest. According to Suetonius (*Aug.* 101.4; cf. Cass. Dio 56.33.1) he left his will including directions (no doubt meticulous!) for his funeral, his *res gestae*, plus a summary of the condition of the empire, including the number of soldiers in active service, and, vitally, where they were stationed; this latter point no doubt, at least in this specific case, asserted his continuity with republican times, where magistrates with *imperium* would have done the same. Nothing was left to chance. Cassius Dio states at 56.33 that Augustus decided against a

³³ For the alleged implausibility of Livy's description of the strategy of Fabius, see Erdkamp (1992). cf. Rosenstein (2012), 138, on Fabius waiting for the opportunity to strike.

³⁴ Roller (2018), 178–80.

³⁵ *Contra* Roller (2018), 180, emphasizing culture.

³⁶ Luttwak (1976). LeDonne (2004), vii–viii emphasises an integrated military, geopolitical, economic and cultural vision in his definition of grand strategy; cf. Black (2020), 8. For a defense of Luttwak, at the same time revealing the problem of scholars using but not understanding modern concepts of war (especially strategy), see Wheeler (1993), with Lacey (2012 and 2014). They effectively and persuasively dismantle the notion that the Roman did not really have a strategic understanding of warfare (Lacey (2014), 39, with references; cf. Burton (2019), 78–83). See also Mann (1979); Isaac (1992), chapter 9.

³⁷ Dzino (2010), 1.

³⁸ See Dzino (2010), 2, with references to scholars who believe that the Romans could think strategically.

³⁹ Dzino (2010), 2.

⁴⁰ Gaddis (2018), 21.

continuous imperial expansion (cf. Tac. *Ann.* 1.11). However, the *Res Gestae* hardly shows Augustus being against imperial expansion (e.g., *Res Gestae* 26.1).⁴¹ The Cassius Dio quotation tells us more about the historian's own cautious attitude to imperial expansion – not necessarily an aversion to it, however – and less about Augustus himself. Even if Dio is accepted, Augustus certainly did not follow this advice himself. Lacey rightly declines to follow the idea that Augustus only fought wars of necessity (the old tale of 'defensive' imperialism again).⁴² Importantly, fighting wars (with large number of soldiers), expanding the empire, and managing the empire, would have been impossible without a strategic understanding of sorts. This is more than anything about lessons learnt. In order to formulate an effective strategy, commanders need to look towards the next potential war, but they often prepare to fight the last war.⁴³ We may ask, with Finer,⁴⁴ what the lessons are. In a similar vein, Black emphasises *strategic culture*, thus enabling scholars to discuss the context within which military tasks were (and indeed are) shaped: in so doing, Black creates a context within which statecraft and strategy – in some respects the same – can be approached, even if the period in question did not have a strategic vocabulary.⁴⁵ It is time to look at Young Caesar/Augustus as a commander and a strategist with a particular focus on his proactivity, i.e. how he personally initiated actions to anticipate future threats.

3. MUTINA AND PERUSIA

At Mutina in 43 BCE against Antonius, Young Caesar took part in the actual fighting as a field commander (in this case as a propraetor, supplying the soldiers from his private army together with the two consuls; *Res Gestae* 1.2–3). Suetonius (*Aug.* 10.4) relates that Antonius wrote that Young Caesar did not do well in the first battle, but apparently he did in the second.⁴⁶ Cicero was positive (*Phil.* 14.28, 14.37). However, whether he

⁴¹ Rightly so Lacey (2014), 53–4. Mattern (1999), 202 suggests that the lack of competition which had fueled the expansion of the late Republic slowed the pace of expansion during the principate. The changing nature of aristocratic competition may be a contributing factor to the changing *nature* of Roman expansion between 31 BCE and 14 CE, but as a whole there was no 'slowing down' under Augustus.

⁴² Lacey (2012), 23. Roman warfare was at times defensive, but certainly not always (Rich (1993); Burton (2019), summing up debates). Frank, the first classical scholar to offer a systematic analysis of imperialism, developed the thesis of 'defensive' imperialism. Frank learned from Mommsen. It is perhaps worth adding that in the end an American – the USA was and is even today an imperial state which more often than not seeks to hide the fact (Immerwahr (2019)) – was always the most likely candidate for such a theory. Mommsen similarly tried to legitimize aggressive German imperialism, including the annexation of parts of Denmark, or more precisely, Hertugdømmerne Slesvig and Holstein, duchies under the Danish crown (see Mommsen (1865)).

⁴³ Finer (2019), 184.

⁴⁴ Finer (2019), 191.

⁴⁵ Black (2020), 6–9; cf. 77: 'accumulated experience of the past.'

⁴⁶ Cf. App. *B Civ.* 3.67–72; Cass. Dio 46.35–8; Flor. 2.15; Oros. 6.18.3–5; Wardle (2014).

did well or not is not the issue here.⁴⁷ The story told by Suetonius that Young Caesar carried the eagle for a while seems at first overly heroic (cf. Flor. 2.15.5; App. *B Civ.* 3.71; Oros. 6.18.5), and perhaps suspiciously so. The most likely source for this information is in fact the autobiography of Augustus himself.⁴⁸ But that fact alone is hardly enough to discount the information entirely. As pointed out by Wardle, it is in fact only one of two acts of conspicuous valour by Augustus attested in our evidence; it is therefore safe to assume that his autobiography did not invent widely on this topic (see further below).

Later in 41 BCE, at Perusia, Young Caesar defeated Lucius Antonius. This civil war campaign is most interesting due to the huge differences in the historiographical testimony.⁴⁹ Appian mentions Augustus' *hypomnemata* with reference to the surrender of Lucius Antonius and the speeches of the two protagonists Lucius and Young Caesar.⁵⁰ Cassius Dio's account (48.14.3–6) is dramatically different. He reports that most of the inhabitants of Perusia and three hundred Roman knights and senators were murdered on the altar of the deified Caesar. This is not mentioned by Appian. Dio's account is however supported in the parallel evidence of Suetonius (*Aug.* 14–15) and Seneca (*Clem.* 1.11.1). The Perusia killings might indeed have happened and were very likely a consequence of the lack of control and challenge to the power of Young Caesar. Violence, both selective and indiscriminate, is a conspicuous part of civil war, modern as well as ancient, and there is a distinct logic to it: the elimination of personal enemies and the securing of power. Because Young Caesar was not in full control in Italy in 41–40 BCE, he chose indiscriminate violence.⁵¹ What can we learn from Mutina and Perusia? More than anything that there was always a battle for control of the past: for control of history and memory-creation (especially through writing). How much this says about strategy may seem less obvious, but it is part of the evidence showing Young Caesar/Augustus' role and actual participation in the civil wars, even if it is unsatisfactory.

4. PHILIPPI

There can be little doubt that history and historians favour the heroic general.⁵² The story of Young Caesar at Philippi is in some ways the odd one out, mainly because it offers a simplistic take on the man as a military commander. Augustus of course did not help himself by writing in *Res Gestae* 2 that he had defeated the assassins of Caesar in battle twice. If not necessarily untrue, then this is certainly not the whole truth.⁵³ Ridley concludes that the 'truth is difficult to determine, and that is enough to excite suspicion,

⁴⁷ Most interesting is the list of civil wars fought by Young Caesar as related by Suetonius (*Aug.* 9): Mutina, Philippi, Perusia, Sicily and Actium. Orosius (6.18.2) has the exact same list. Two possibilities spring to mind. Either this derives from Livy, or alternatively from the autobiography of Augustus himself (see now Lange (2019a)).

⁴⁸ Rightly so Wardle (2014), 125.

⁴⁹ Lange (2018); (2019a); (2021a).

⁵⁰ App. *B Civ.* 5.42–5; *FRHist.* 60 F8.

⁵¹ Regarding different kinds of violence during civil war, see Kalyvas (2006).

⁵² Nolan (2017), 573; King (2019), see below.

⁵³ Ridley (2003), 166–9. Antonius seemed to be the main victor.

especially as some accounts draw upon Augustus' *Memoirs*.⁵⁴ In an unbalanced comment, Ridley here misrepresents the whole story. This was a battle of memory: a battle to create the right narrative through history and memoirs. The triumvirs were naturally on the same side – allies – but looking back, they disagreed on what had happened. If there is suspicion, it goes both ways. As for Augustus' self-perception and *Selbstdarstellung*, the autobiography and the *Res Gestae* unsurprisingly tell the story of a great politician and commander.

There can be little doubt that Young Caesar/Augustus would always be compared to the great heroic general Caesar.⁵⁵ The story is often told through the battle of Philippi, where the evidence does suggest that the young man did not do well at all.⁵⁶ Galinsky suggests that he was in any case too ill to fight at Philippi; it was Antonius who won the battle.⁵⁷ Again, at Actium the man was perhaps seasick (Galinsky acknowledges that this imputation may have come from his opponents); but it did not matter, Actium being in any case a 'rather lame affair'.⁵⁸ But at Naulochus there was certainly no doubt: he lost his (naval) battle and did not act heroically. This is not the story of a military hero. Whether Galinsky is right or wrong is not the main focus here. What is important – as this article hopes to show – is that we as scholars need to be careful when isolating commanders' efforts in war to single battles. In this case one problem springs to mind: ignoring Illyricum and the Cantabrian Wars, among others, gives the wrong impression. There are related questions of naval battles vs. land battles, as well as an issue of how Young Caesar/Augustus, as commander in chief, fought and/or orchestrated battles and campaigns. Using a modern concept to describe the commander Augustus, we might even talk of collective command (see below). Augustus was the commander in chief, but at times others did the bulk of the fighting.

At Philippi all of this went wrong; or, more accurately, at Philippi Young Caesar had still not yet put a tried-and-tested system in place.⁵⁹ In his *Life of Brutus*, Plutarch tells the story that Augustus in his autobiography wrote that a friend's dream made him withdraw and leave camp.⁶⁰ He mentions this also in the *Life of Antonius*, adding that Caesar lost the camp.⁶¹ This is hardly a glorious reflection on his strategic abilities, but evidently shows also how he attempted to explain it away. We may add illness to the story.⁶² This is also at the centre of Pliny's narrative of Philippi (*HN* 7.148). Stories

⁵⁴ Ridley (2003), 167.

⁵⁵ See Havener (2016), 35–50.

⁵⁶ Havener (2016), 51.

⁵⁷ Galinsky (2012), 32.

⁵⁸ Galinsky (2012), 32. Galinsky echoes Syme, who in his classic account famously called the battle 'a shabby affair' (Syme (1939), 297). Scholars with little or no understanding of naval warfare sadly far too often reproduce, uncritically, this extreme misrepresentation of the battle and campaign (see also Beard (2015), 348: 'a rather low-key, slightly tawdry affair').

⁵⁹ Years ago, I heard a fascinating paper by Andrew Drummond, who was trying to explain what had actually happened at Philippi: Young Caesar's role in the battle rationally made sense and could be explained. Sadly, Drummond never published the piece.

⁶⁰ Plut. *Brut.* 41.5–8; *FRHist.* 60 F7a.

⁶¹ Plut. *Ant.* 22.2; *FRHist.* 60 F7b. Cf. App. *B Civ.* 4.110.

⁶² Cf. Vell. Pat. 2.70.1; Val. Max. 1.7.1–2; Suet. *Aug.* 9.1; Flor. 2.17.9; Tert. *De anim.* 46.8; Cass. Dio 47.41.3–4; Lactant. *Div. inst.* 2.7.22; Oros. 6.18.5.

found in Plutarch (*Ant.* 22.3; *Brut.* 42.3) suggest that there was a battle for words, which later turned into a battle of memoirs. This was, in short, a contention for control of politics through memory; we ought not to be too surprised.

Looking briefly at something closer to our contemporary world, Sheffield's book, *The Chief. Douglas Haig and the British Army*, is a reassessment of the man by one of the foremost historians of the First World War. In a section entitled *The Battle of the Memoirs*, he raises questions of great relevance when looking at the late Republic, especially regarding political justification through writing: 'During the early 1920s Haig and Doris [his wife] carried out the huge task of typing up and adding to his wartime diary, which he intended to be 'his personal account of the war' to be published after his death.' Sheffield adds, 'Naturally, he wished it to be as complete a record as possible' (366).⁶³ This wartime account was added to the *Final Dispatch* from 21 March 1919, emphasizing a single continuous campaign from 1914–18. The main weakness of the *Final Dispatch* according to Sheffield was the imposed degree of coherence on events absent from his war diary. Whatever the case, the validity of much of the case set out is accepted by Sheffield.⁶⁴ Even so, the context of Haig's writing is his reputation as an incompetent military leader.⁶⁵ Returning to Young Caesar, the question arises of what such discussions have to do with political initiative and, one may add, strategy. Not very much in the end; but writing is all that has come down to us. The battle of memoirs becomes our benchmark. Without a proper historiographical approach and without a proper context, we may misunderstand what we read. Illness or poor tactical judgment cannot be the *whole* story of Young Caesar/Augustus as a military commander, and certainly not so as a strategist. Indeed, our evidence usually imputes personal cowardice rather than strategic incompetence. One may add that this does not show that he was a competent strategist, but this I would claim reflects a modern debate about personal leadership on the battlefield more than an ancient one (see below). Much of this seems to be Antonian propaganda and there are generally balancing statements from more favourable accounts. The case may never be decided – and whether we take the Ridley or the Sheffield route may in the end be down to subjective preferences – but it is worth repeating my above comment: isolated negative stories about Young Caesar/Augustus' military ability in the field have little or no bearing on the way we should look at him as commander in chief and as a strategist. Perhaps in the end Augustus' main problem is that he won: in a peculiar reversal, it is the loser who takes it all, and subsequent generations have attempted to explain the remarkable success of Young Caesar *in spite of* himself. The campaign against Sextus Pompeius to which we must now turn has much more potential.

5. NAULOCBUS

Considering the campaign of the triumvirs against Sextus Pompeius, begun in 38 BCE, there can be little doubt that Young Caesar was ill prepared and consequently lost the

⁶³ Sheffield (2011), 366.

⁶⁴ Sheffield (2011), 363–4.

⁶⁵ *Lions Led by Donkeys, Blackadder Goes Forth*, and others. This view of the abilities of Haig is however wrong and simplistic at best; see *Introduction* in Sheffield (2011).

first round of fighting.⁶⁶ Better planning would be needed in order to secure victory: a huge undertaking of unprecedented preparations was called for, including the building of a naval infrastructure: harbours, ships, trained sailors, ship-sheds, and a complex naval organization. All too often, logistics is forgotten; it is an essential part of warfare.⁶⁷ Agrippa was handed this momentous task. Young Caesar had thus suffered a setback in 38 BCE, but it was never more than that. In order to invade Sicily a fleet was of course required, including transport ships; again, we should remember that this was never only a question of winning naval battles.⁶⁸ We can clearly follow Young Caesar's (and Agrippa's) learning curve. This is visible in Young Caesar/Augustus' later campaigns.

When the war finally came (or returned) in 36 BCE, Sextus naturally focused on naval matters. Appian writes: 'Pompeius, as I have already said, guarded all the landing places on the island and retained his fleet at Messana, in order to send aid where it might be needed.'⁶⁹ The main role of the fleet was not necessarily to fight naval battles, but in this case to keep the enemy from embarking on Sicilian land. In the end, Sextus Pompeius needed to stake all on a major engagement, not on land – where, intimidated by the force of Young Caesar's infantry, he would certainly lose and expected to do so – but at sea. This was his chance, at least to live to fight another day; the fleet would never be able to win him the war.

Seen from the triumviral point of view, there was no assurance that the war against Sextus was ever going to be predominantly a naval battle (of Naulochus). Planning was needed and the raw numbers are essential in explaining this anomaly. Since a victory on land was necessarily part of the equation, so too was a numbers game.⁷⁰ The invasion force is one matter, but the total number of troops available to Young Caesar was something rather different. After Agrippa had taken Tyndaris, Young Caesar ferried 21 legions across (App. *B Civ.* 5.116; cf. Cass. Dio 48.49.1). Appian is the key to what happened at Sicily. There were apparently skirmishes all over Sicily, but no decisive battles (*B Civ.* 5.118). This reveals Sextus Pompeius' response to his strategic handicap; he could never hope to be able to defeat the joint forces of Lepidus and Young Caesar in a pitched battle.⁷¹ This would in the end lose him the war. This of course would have been the triumviral plan all along. A strategy of attrition if needed, but certainly one where Young Caesar/Agrippa, together with Lepidus, only gave battle when necessary; if in the end tactical delay made a pitched battle unnecessary, so much the better. A land battle would always be preferable only when victory had been secured in principle before the actual fighting began. The missing land battle shows just how outnumbered and outmanoeuvred Sextus was. No land battles were needed. Naval warfare is much

⁶⁶ Welch (2012), 266–7. See Suet. *Aug.* 16; App. *B Civ.* 5.81–92; Cass. Dio 48.46.5–48.4.

⁶⁷ Roth (2012).

⁶⁸ App. *B Civ.* 5.92, 98, 104; cf. Caes. *B Gall.* 4.22; Zos. 2.22, etc. For a more detailed account, see Lange (2019b and 2022).

⁶⁹ App. *B Civ.* 5.103: ὁ δὲ Πομπήμιος, ὡς μοι προείρηται, τάς τε ἐς τὴν νῆσον ἀποβάσεις ἐφύλασεν ἀπάσας καὶ τὰς ναῦς ἐν Μεσσήνῃ συνεῖχεν ὡς βοηθήσων, ὅποι δεήσειεν.

⁷⁰ Brunt (1971), esp. 498–500, 507–8 on the fleets.

⁷¹ Brunt (1971), 499 estimates that Lepidus had fourteen legions. After the defeat of Sextus Pompeius and Lepidus, Young Caesar had forty-five legions (App. *B Civ.* 5.127; Oros. 6.20.6). At Messana, eight of Sextus Pompeius' legions capitulated to Lepidus (App. *B Civ.* 5.122–3; Vell. Pat. 2.80; Suet. *Aug.* 16; Oros. 6.18.30).

more than the sum of battles, notwithstanding the tendency of naval historiography to focus on them.⁷²

We may, with Galinsky (see above), emphasize that Young Caesar did not do well in battle against Sextus, but his strategy – formulated together with Agrippa no doubt, after the initial setback in 38 BCE – won the day, and won the campaign. Even if it is accepted that Agrippa was behind naval strategy and command (as he was at Actium), it seems foolish to suggest that there was no overall plan that included a land battle. This is about combined forces and strategy. Why exclude Young Caesar from this? There simply is no evidence suggesting he was not planning an engagement on land also; there was no need to spell it out, as it is obvious for everybody. The essential component here was preparation, not necessarily battle. Whether we call it Young Caesar’s initiative or part of his ‘learning curve,’ it worked. And herein lays perhaps the problem once more. Using the words of Waugh on Ulysses S. Grant: ‘Clearly, Grant’s [or in this case Augustus’] reputation was tied to the Union’s numerical superiority.’⁷³ In the ancient world, personal leadership was important, even vital. This was also the case in Europe and the Western World until around the time of the First World War.⁷⁴ In modern times, this dependence upon the charismatic leadership and tactical genius of the field commander has begun to ebb away (see below), in favour of the general staff, hierarchies of responsibility and, of course, technology. Perhaps when we look at Augustus’ role as commander in chief in this way, he appears not ineffective, but rather even ahead of his time.

In the aftermath of Naulochus and the campaign against Sextus Pompeius, another important development is visible in the evidence. Agrippa was rewarded with the *corona navalis* for his role.⁷⁵ The main naval commander would from now on be Agrippa. But the commander in chief was of course Young Caesar.

6. ILLYRICUM

During the war in Illyricum in particular Young Caesar does seem to have made an effort to show personal valour – perhaps to counter the snide stories from Philippi. There is no denying that Northern Italy was weak strategically,⁷⁶ but this hardly explains the two annual campaigns of the Illyrian War (35–33 BCE).⁷⁷ Velleius Paterculus suggests that Young Caesar may have been afraid of the potential idleness of his soldiers (2.78.2): this may of course be a retrospective preparation-for-the-final-war comment. Dzino’s suggestion that Antonius would use Apollonia, Dyrrachium, Oricus, and Brundisium to invade Italy is interesting.⁷⁸ I dismissed the potential invasion as a possibility in 2009, but perhaps too quickly; if nothing else Young Caesar may have feared this possibility.

⁷² Sicking (2010), 237.

⁷³ Waugh (2009), 188. This numerical game was for a long time connected to the *Lost Cause* rhetoric of butcher Grant. See Simpson (2000). Contrary to this view, attrition in this article is used in a more neutral way, describing an often very effective military strategy.

⁷⁴ See Sheffield (2011); Nolan (2017).

⁷⁵ See Bergmann (2011); Dart & Vervaet (2018); see also Tan (2019).

⁷⁶ Dzino (2010), 29.

⁷⁷ See Dzino (2010), 102; smaller campaigns by *legati* are not visible in the evidence (103).

⁷⁸ Dzino (2010), 104.

Dzino also talks of an opportunity for Young Caesar to prove himself in battle.⁷⁹ He adds here that Young Caesar wanted to stop civil war and begin a foreign war in its place. But that seems mistaken. Young Caesar had in fact ended the civil war in 36 BCE; the assignment of the triumvirate had been accomplished.⁸⁰ The foreign war was if anything an effective means of telling the world that he had completed his part in that task, and that Antonius must now make the next move.⁸¹ This is in fact what Appian tells us, undoubtedly from the autobiography of Augustus:

καὶ ἔλεγεν ἐν καιρῷ τε ἀπολύσειν σὺν Ἀντωνίῳ, καὶ ἄξειν νῦν οὐκ ἐπ' ἐμφύλια ἔτι, πεπαυμένα σὺν τύχῃ χρηστῇ, ἐπὶ δ' Ἰλλυριοῦς καὶ ἕτερα ἔθνη βάρβαρα, σαλεύοντα τὴν μόλις κτηθείσαν εἰρήνην, ὅθεν καταπλουτιεῖν αὐτοῦς.

'He said, also, that he would not engage them in any more civil wars, which had fortunately come to an end, but in war against the Illyrians and other barbarous tribes, who were disturbing the peace which had been gained with so much difficulty; from which war the soldiers would acquire great riches.'⁸²

This was, unsurprisingly, highly political from the outset. The soldiers (who, according to Cass. Dio 49.13.1, revolted after the war against Sextus Pompeius); triumphalism; a new task for the triumvir who had accomplished his part of the deal. In reality, the Illyrian War was part of the series of campaigns of Young Caesar/Augustus that incorporated all the regions bordering northern Italy (cf. Tac. *Ann.* 4.5, as above). Dzino does not think the autobiography of Augustus good evidence, as Augustus wanted to clear his name for accusations of cruelty and treachery in the civil wars. He also strangely criticizes Augustus for focusing on his own deeds.⁸³ What else would he do in an autobiography? The tradition was by this time long established among the great dynasts of the late Republic: Sulla's memoirs and Caesar's *commentarii* spring to mind. Dzino's interpretation of events articulates a rather typical negative view of Augustus. Even Appian (*Ill.* 15) unsurprisingly has Augustus focus on Augustus. The critique of Augustus is as predictable as the *Selbstdarstellung* of Augustus.⁸⁴

Two further comments are in order. Young Caesar was in overall command (as commander in chief and as field commander). Appian sums up the war as follows:

ὁ δὲ Σεβαστὸς πάντα ἐχειρώσατο ἐντελῶς, καὶ ἐν παραβολῇ τῆς ἀπραξίας Ἀντωνίου κατελογίσατο τῇ βουλῇ τὴν Ἰταλίαν ἡμερῶσαι δυσμάχων ἐθνῶν θαμινὰ ἐνοχλούντων.

⁷⁹ Dzino (2010), 105–6.

⁸⁰ App. *B Civ.* 5.130; Lange (2019a).

⁸¹ App. *B Civ.* 5.132: he was willing to lay down his powers when Antonius should return from Parthia.

⁸² App. *B Civ.* 5.128; Dzino (2010), 9, 99, 106; Kos (2018), 41.

⁸³ See Dzino (2010), 9.

⁸⁴ On the importance of Illyricum for the triumvirs, see App. *B Civ.* 5.132.

‘When Augustus had made himself master of everything, he informed the Senate, by way of contrast with Antonius’ slothfulness, that he had freed Italy from the savage tribes that had so often raided it.’⁸⁵

Besieging the city of Metulum, Young Caesar was wounded (App. *Ill.* 20; cf. Flor. 2.23; Suet. *Aug.* 20). He was not, it seems, able to continue the campaign.⁸⁶ If scholars want to disrepute this information, surely it is not enough just to claim that it cannot be right because Augustus wrote this himself. More interestingly, the war seems to follow a path already seen against Sextus Pompeius: a strategy of attrition. In the War against Hannibal, Appian makes the following observation:

οἱ μὲν δὴ μερισάμενοι τὴν στρατιάν πλησίον ἀλλήλων ἐστρατοπέδευον, καὶ τῆς γνώμης ἐκάτερος εἶχοντο τῆς ἑαυτοῦ, Φάβιος μὲν ἐκτρύχειν Ἀννίβαν τῷ χρόνῳ καὶ πειρᾶσθαι μηδὲν ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ παθεῖν, ὁ δὲ Μινούκιος μάχῃ διακριθῆναι ... ὁ δὲ Μινούκιος αὐτοῦ καταγνοῦς ἀπειρίαν ἀπέθετο τὴν ἀρχήν, καὶ τὸ μέρος τοῦ στρατοῦ παρέδωκε τῷ Φαβίῳ, ἡγουμένῳ πρὸς ἄνδρα τεχνίτην μάχης ἕνα καιρὸν εἶναι τὴν ἀνάγκην. οὗ δὲ καὶ ὁ Σεβαστὸς ὕστερον πολλὰκις ἐμέμνητο, οὐκ ὦν εὐχερῆς οὐδ’ οὗτος ἐς μάχας μᾶλλον τόλμῃ ἢ τέχνῃ χρῆσθαι.

‘They accordingly divided the army and encamped near each other; and each held to his own opinion, Fabius seeking to exhaust Hannibal by *delay* and meanwhile to receive no damage from him, while Minucius was eager for a decisive fight ... Then Minucius, recognizing his own want of experience, laid down his command and delivered his part of the army to Fabius, who held to the belief that the only time to fight against a consummate military genius is when necessity compels. This maxim, at a later time, was often remembered by Augustus, who was slow to fight and preferred to win by art rather than by valour.’⁸⁷

Whatever we make of this, it suggests that Augustus imitated Fabius. Once again it seems reasonable to assert that this in fact comes from the autobiography of Augustus. War was less about heroic battles and more about attrition and waiting for the right movement after careful planning. It must of course be said that the Illyrian and later Spanish campaign were cases of asymmetrical warfare and insurgency: the enemy would stand no chance in an open battle. Fabius had famously used a similar strategy against Hannibal. Minucius had criticized Fabius of cowardice for not giving battle (App. *Hann.* 12), but after his defeat at Hannibal’s hands, he laid down his command and gave back command to Fabius.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ App. *Ill.* 16.

⁸⁶ Dzino (2010), 113.

⁸⁷ App. *Hann.* 13.

⁸⁸ Having received shared command after his criticism of the dictator; for context, see Vervaeet (2007), 212 n. 45: ‘[T]he emperor’s admiration of Fabius Maximus’ military doctrine would, among other things, perfectly explain the amount and detail of Livy’s attention to the particularities, the nature and the outcome of the clash between the dictator and his wayward *magister equitum*.’; cf. Livy 22.30.1–6.

The Illyrium campaign is often overlooked, mainly because there were no (famous) battles. Harari fittingly calls this fascination with battles ‘Battle world history.’⁸⁹ In *The Allure of Battle*, Nolan rightly corrects the entrenched emphasis on war as equalling obvious turning points and ‘decisive’ battles which settle the war or dramatically change its course. Instead of using the (vague) concept of ‘decisiveness,’ Nolan proposes that an emphasis on attrition – especially in longer wars – may be much more fruitful for our understanding of war. Attrition has often been considered pointless and useless, especially so in connection to the First World War.⁹⁰ This needs to be contrasted to the period after 1815 and the German Wars of Unification with Moltke’s (relatively) quick decisive battles.⁹¹ The allure of battles was central amongst politicians and officers in the intermediate period and beyond.⁹² At the same time, historians (and writers of strategy such as Jomini and Clausewitz) still today celebrate Napoleon, notwithstanding the fact that he lost due to attrition; his Russian campaign betrays a vague understanding of strategy.⁹³ Great victories made him emperor, but attrition made him lose in the end. Moltke and Bismarck had shown that limited war was obsolete,⁹⁴ as is shown with the two World Wars. Drawing again on the tradition of ‘decisive battles,’ Schlieffen wanted Germany to win with a modern Cannae.⁹⁵ Yet Pyrrhus and Hannibal had clearly shown that this was never enough! Of course, there are decisive battles, but campaigns and wars are more than the sum of battles, and depend also upon important structural factors.

7. ACTIUM

As already mentioned, Syme famously wrote that the battle of Actium was a shabby affair.⁹⁶ Two things need to be emphasized. First, it was a campaign – begun with the declaration of war against Cleopatra – and not just a battle; secondly (and importantly), it all more or less went according to the strategy of Young Caesar: his ‘foreign’ war turned into a civil war when Antonius helped Cleopatra. The main problem with Syme’s and similar comments are their lack of understanding of military matters, including strategy. Mahan believed that sea control through naval operations was gained ‘less by the tenure of a position than by the defeat of the enemy’s organized force – his battle fleet.’⁹⁷ Contrary to this, Corbett claims: ‘By maritime strategy we mean the principles which govern a war in which the sea is a substantial factor. Naval strategy is but that part of it which determines the movements of the fleet when maritime strategy has

⁸⁹ Harari (2007), 252.

⁹⁰ Nolan (2017), 323–403. See also Philpott (2014); Sheffield (2011); Nolan (2017), 393 on Haig and the wearing down of enemy reserves. This was however always going to be a story that was hard to sell to politicians, soldiers, and the public alike.

⁹¹ Nolan (2017), 12: ‘the short war illusion.’ Denmark, Austria and France were defeated.

⁹² Nolan (2017), 7. Accordingly, the American Civil War is strangely often forgotten as a war of attrition.

⁹³ Nolan (2017), 189–253.

⁹⁴ Nolan (2017), 315.

⁹⁵ Nolan (2017), 340.

⁹⁶ Syme (1939), 297.

⁹⁷ Mahan (1911), 176. See Till (2009), 158–63; Vego (2016), 81–2 on decisive naval engagements.

determined what part the fleet must play in relation to the action of the land forces; for it scarcely needs saying that it is almost impossible that a war can be decided by naval action alone.⁹⁸ Corbett realized that navies fight at sea mainly to secure strategic effects on land.⁹⁹ Referring to Augustus' reforms, Kienast was absolutely correct to emphasize that the lessons from the campaign against Sextus Pompeius had been learned by Young Caesar/Augustus.¹⁰⁰ This is also one reason behind the establishment of the permanent navy and the naval bases as mentioned above. Rome and Italy had to be protected, partly with naval bases.¹⁰¹

The tendency to focus on the main battle is in this case a problem. Similar to the campaign against Sextus Pompeius, the naval engagement at Actium was only part of the intended battle and to the surprise of everybody Cleopatra ran away (followed by Antonius), as suggested by Plutarch (*Ant.* 68.2–3); consequently, the land battle never materialized.¹⁰² The troops changed sides, seeing their commander retreating and later being abandoned by Canidius Crassus and the other officers (Plut. *Ant.* 68.1–3; Cass. Dio 51.1.4). They had been ordered into Macedonia by Antonius (Plut. *Ant.* 67.5) and remained intact as a fighting force for seven days (*Ant.* 68.3). Naulochus and Actium were naval battles (with Agrippa in the lead) and the land battles are missing in both cases. Young Caesar would have been the main field commander, or high commander, in those land battles. At Naulochus, the land battle never materialized due to numbers; at Actium it never happened due to the flight of Cleopatra and Antonius. This may seem speculative, but again, it would have been extremely foolish to go to war without a plan for the land battle. There seems little reason to disagree with Corbett on the matter. The fleet functioned in joint operations, supporting the legions.¹⁰³

There is more. In a previous article on this subject, I did not fully realize the implications of the preliminary campaign prior to the battle at Actium.¹⁰⁴ In early summer 31 BCE, Young Caesar crossed the Adriatic to the region of Actium. The two sides then spent the ensuing months facing each other and engaging in indecisive encounters. Dio's narrative depicts Antonius' situation as progressively worsening (50.11–3; cf. Plut. *Ant.* 62–3). Agrippa was harassing the enemy. Even before the main force arrived at Actium, he had captured Methone, later followed by the taking Leucas,

⁹⁸ Corbett (1911), 15; cf. 16 ('The paramount concern, then, of maritime strategy is to determine the mutual relations of your army and navy in a plan of war'); Speller (2008), 124 ('Navies attempt to use the sea in order to influence events in land'), 142; Till (2009), 21–2.

⁹⁹ Cf. Black (2004), ix; cf. 22–3 on the problematic and artificial separation of land and sea warfare.

¹⁰⁰ Kienast (1966), 48.

¹⁰¹ Strabo 4.1.9 (184C); Suet. *Aug.* 49; Tac. *Ann.* 4.5; see above.

¹⁰² The alternative story of a plan to escape, as mentioned by Cassius Dio (50.15, 30.3–4), is unlikely and contradicted by the historian himself (50.33.1–2). For a fully developed argument on the battle of Actium, see Lange (2011). The Victory Monument at Actium was dedicated to Mars and Neptune = *terra marique*. For the monument, see Zachos (2003). The concept *terra marique* was used often in Augustan times; see Lange (2022).

¹⁰³ According to Keegan (2004), 273, most naval engagements through history were part of a land operation. See also Lange (2021b); footnote 98 above.

¹⁰⁴ Lange (2011).

Patrae and Corinth.¹⁰⁵ During the summer skirmishes happened in order to ‘agree’ on battle (Cass. Dio 50.13.5 tells us that Young Caesar did not accept battle). In the end, Antonius withdrew his army south of the straits and was suffering defections. I concluded: ‘However, although disruption of Antonius’ supplies is attested by Velleius (2.84.1) and Dio (50.14.4), it is unlikely that Agrippa retained the bases he had captured and used them to mount a blockade, since this would have involved a dangerous dispersal of Octavian’s forces.’¹⁰⁶ Even though I stand by this conclusion, it seems that I slightly underestimated the power of attrition warfare, waiting when possible for the right moment to strike. The art of waiting for the right moment is also visible in 32 BCE with Young Caesar waiting for Sosius and others to make their move in the Senate; there was no conflict in this case between political strategy and military strategy. This was strategy, in the chamber, but at the same time being prepared to use military force when war came. I may inadvertently have underestimated Young Caesar’s strategy – a strategy he had developed mainly during the fighting against Sextus Pompeius.

There is a common tendency to give the main credit for Naulochus and Actium to Agrippa, and rightly so as he was in charge of the naval battles as such. Yet letting Agrippa command these battles shows, more than anything, the learning curve of Young Caesar. Augustus commanded as commander in chief, it must be assumed with special interest in strategy. Again, as a brief appendix, after Actium Agrippa received additional honours: according to Cassius Dio (51.21.3), Agrippa was granted ‘among other distinctions, a dark blue flag in honour of his naval victory’ (καὶ τὸν τε Ἀγρίππαν ἄλλοις τέ τισι καὶ σημεῖω κυανοειδῆ ναυκρατητικῷ προσεπεσέμνυνε). He will have paraded these naval honours in 36 and in 29 BCE, but the ovation and triumph went to the *man in charge* of the campaign, Young Caesar.

8. THE CANTABRIAN WARS

The remaining question to be asked is what Augustus had learned from his military career during the triumviral period, i.e. his role as one of two or three commanders in chief during the civil war (Antonius, Lepidus, and himself). As sole ruler, he separated commanders from ‘their’ soldiers: he imposed regular terms of service and taxes for salaries and bonuses, so severing the link between soldier and commander which had so damaged the (late) Republic.¹⁰⁷ After 27 BCE, the trend of supreme and subordinate commander continued (Cass. Dio 53.15.4; cf. 53.16.1). Vervaeke has expertly suggested that Augustus retained the *summum imperium auspiciumque* in consular as well as public provinces.¹⁰⁸ In January 27, Augustus thus retained the *summum imperium auspiciumque* in all provinces alike, imperial (the so-called *provinciae Caesaris*) as well

¹⁰⁵ Methone: Strabo 8.4.3 (359C); Cass. Dio 50.11.3; Oros. 6.19.6 (disruption of Antonius’ supplies). Leucas, Patrae, Corinth: Vell. Pat. 2.84.1; Cass. Dio 50.13.5.

¹⁰⁶ Lange (2011), 612.

¹⁰⁷ Ando (2008), 44.

¹⁰⁸ Millar’s suggestion that the division of ‘imperial’ and ‘senatorial’ provinces was largely nominal should also serve as a cautionary note ((1973), 63). Vervaeke’s view on the nature of the settlement of 28–27 BCE confirms Millar’s (Vervaeke (2014), 253–88).

as public (the so-called provinces of the Roman People, administered by consular or praetorian proconsuls nominally appointed by the Senate, under normal circumstances). As from the *lex Julia* of that same year, the consular provinces were Asia and Africa, administered by consular proconsuls entitled to twelve lictors with fasces, as opposed to their praetorian counterparts, who henceforth only received six.¹⁰⁹ This is similar to the powers of the triumvirs, under which the proconsuls sent by the triumvirs to govern individual provinces in the respective triumviral zones of control would operate under their high command (*imperium auspiciumque*). The learning curve is again clearly visible. A system with a commander in chief, in charge of strategy – not necessarily on his own – but also a system where the local commander could take decisions when needed. Rome was far away.¹¹⁰

What springs to mind is just how modern this system is. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have transformed modern military command (perhaps more than anything because they were based on unsuccessful and flawed strategies). According to King, a new phenomenon of collective command is being developed.¹¹¹ The basic idea is that command is so complex today that collective command is a necessity. We are not only moving away from ‘heroic’ individualism typical of the twentieth century, but also, historically, towards ‘a more professionalized, collective practice’.¹¹² Whether King and others are right in seeing a transformation in the twenty-first century is not the point here. The fact remains that ‘combat leadership was a ubiquitous feature of human history and the great captains like Alexander, Caesar or Gustavus were outstanding generals.’¹¹³ As a strategist, Augustus had his strengths while at the same time realizing his command weaknesses, whether to do with illness or poor tactical ability.

The final campaign that needs mentioning are the Cantabrian Wars. They should not be forgotten, even if there were once again no famous battles. They were also the last campaign with Augustus in actual command. In 26 BCE, Augustus travelled to Spain to oversee the war begun in 29 under the command of Statilius Taurus.¹¹⁴ Most fighting was completed by 19 BCE under the command of Agrippa.¹¹⁵ As attested by Cassius Dio, the Cantabrian Wars were extremely violent and may be considered another example of attrition warfare.¹¹⁶ Florus (2.33) and Orosius (6.21.1–11) both agree that the

¹⁰⁹ See Vervaeke (2012).

¹¹⁰ Take Varus in 9 CE. Morgan (2019) in a fine article suggests that Varus’ decision-making as soon as the battle commenced was not all that bad; the debate about whether he was foolish to put his faith in Arminius’ counsel and march through that particular tract of land remains ongoing, but one may suspect Varus had no reason not to trust Arminius, a trusted and long-standing member of the Germanic auxiliaries. His reputation as a poor military commander may after all be undeserved.

¹¹¹ King (2019); cf. McChrystal (2013); 2015.

¹¹² King (2019), 14.

¹¹³ King (2019), 40.

¹¹⁴ Vell. Pat. 2.90; Strabo 6.4.2 (287C); Flor. 1.33.5; Rich (2009).

¹¹⁵ Flor. 2.33; Cass. Dio 53.25, 29, 54.5; Oros. 6.21.1–11.

¹¹⁶ Cass. Dio 53.29.2: land devastated; 53.29.2: cutting off the hands of defeated enemies of Rome; 54.5.1–3: many Cantabri chose to commit suicide rather than surrender. For an overview of the campaign, focusing on battlefield archaeology, see Fernández-Götz et al.

26 BCE campaign was under the personal command of Augustus (most likely deriving from Livy, and consequently at least in part from the autobiography of Augustus). What looks like a difficult campaign – which it undoubtedly was – shows us perhaps also the strategy of attrition used time and again by Augustus. Time was not of the essence, neither were the famous battles: in this case the enemy, as so often, knew that guerrilla warfare was their only chance against Rome’s manpower.

9. CONCLUSION

Most of Young Caesar’s military career had a relatively simple political goal: to win the civil war. What specific civil war may have changed slightly, but the goal did not. This was always about war as a whole much more than about individual battles. This is hardly the place to restart the discussion of when he knew this would be a struggle of dynasts between Antonius and himself, but the basic goal was the same – first in alliance with, and then later against, Antonius. In accomplishing this goal, Young Caesar developed and changed his strategy over time as he learned and adapted. This was possible because as commander in chief he had more or less unrestricted initiative for political action, almost without any political interference; previously, as dynast he had of course to think of his followers as well as his fellow triumvirs to some extent. These changes in strategy have been a central issue in this article. This developed into his main strategy of attrition (App. *Hann.* 13). This may at first seem to be a critique; after all this kind of strategy was hardly a noble *exemplum*, his admiration for Fabius Cunctator notwithstanding. But when looking at the campaigns of Young Caesar/Augustus it becomes apparent that this was indeed the strategy of choice. Nothing shows this better than the following quotation from Suetonius:

nihil autem minus perfecto duci quam festinationem temeritatemque convenire arbitrabatur. crebro itaque illa iactabat: σπεῦδε βραδέως· ἀσφαλῆς γάρ ἐστ’ ἀμείνων ἢ θρασὺς στρατηλάτης, et: “sat celeriter fieri quidquid fiat satis bene.”

‘He thought nothing less becoming in a well-trained leader than haste and rashness, and, accordingly, favourite sayings of his were: “Make haste slowly”; “Better a safe commander than a bold”; and “That is done quickly enough which is done well enough.’¹¹⁷

A conscious commander no less, employing a strategy of attrition and working towards a goal without haste. This clearly worked.¹¹⁸ The *elogium* of Fabius on the Forum of Augustus states: ‘the most cautious general of his age and the most skilled in military

(2018), 131–9: the *oppidum* of Monte Bernorio – a large hilltop fortification – was all but destroyed in connection with a Roman attack, most likely after battle.

¹¹⁷ Suet. *Aug.* 25.4. Cf. *Tib.* 21.5.

¹¹⁸ See also Wardle 2014, 196–7, with more evidence.

affairs.¹¹⁹ This is a reflection of Augustus' own opinion on military strategy and on Fabius Cunctator (so already Geiger (2008) and Wardle (2014)). At Naulochus and Actium less was needed than expected, partly due to the missing land battles – and this advantage undoubtedly emerged because of his own thorough preparations. Importantly, if we focus on campaigns and strategy, not just battles, Young Caesar/Augustus generally looks much more competent. The overemphasis on battles and the heroic leader is one thing, but it emphasizes a military leader different from Augustus. He has hardly an Alexander nor a Caesar. To state that Agrippa won his wars for him is a basic misunderstanding. Adding to this, decisive battles are and were culturally important – not forgetting that Actium is one of the defining turning points in world history – but we should not confuse that with military matters and strategy. In the end Augustus' ideas of power sharing, at least when it came to military matters, tactically and even at times strategically, was rather progressive and even modern.

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¹¹⁹ Copy from Arezzo: Degrassi 1937, 80 = ILS 56; Geiger 2008, 145–6: *dux aetatis suae cautissimus et re[i] militaris peritissimus habitus est*.

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