

# The *tropaeum* of the sea-battle of Actium at Nikopolis: interim report

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## Note to the reader:

This article comprises a translation of large parts of the author's guidebook *To Μνημείο του Οκταβιανού Αυγούστου στη Νικόπολη* (Athens 2001), adding more recent information taken from the author's lecture "The power of images in the age of Augustus: the *tropaeum* of Actium at Nikopolis" delivered at the J. Paul Getty Museum in February 2003, itself based upon a presentation given by the author and his colleagues at the Second International Symposium on Nikopolis held in September 2002 at Preveza.

## Introduction

On September 2, 31 B.C., the heir to Julius Caesar's political legacy defeated the joint naval forces of Antony and Cleopatra off the coast of NW Greece (fig. 1), marking the commencement of a new era.<sup>1</sup> In his *Life of Augustus* (18.2) Suetonius recorded his work at Nikopolis as follows:

Quoque Actiacae victoriae memoria celebratio et in posterum esset, urbem Nicopolim apud Actium condidit, ludosque illic quinquennales constituit et, ampliato vetere Apollonis templo, locus castrorum, quibus fuerat usus, exornatum navalibus spoliis Neptuno ac Marti consecravit.

And to exalt the fame of his Actian victory and to perpetuate its memory, he founded the city of Nikopolis near Actium and established quinquennial games there. He enlarged the ancient temple of Apollo and adorned the area where he had set up his camp with naval trophies and consecrated it to Neptune and Mars.

The new city was created from a synoecism of neighbouring city-states such as Ambrakia, Anaktorion, Leukas and others, and received the status of a *civitas libera*. Soon it became the political, economic and social centre of NW Greece, and the Actian games were held every four years in a sacred precinct to the north of the city.

Close to the site of the naval battle stood the sanctuary of Apollo Actius, a venerable shrine of the Akarnanians. Underlining his piety and his gratitude to his patron god, and perhaps to try to win over the local population which was not particularly friendly to Caesar's heir, Octavian enlarged and renovated the ancient sanctuary, and in arsenals located close by the sanctuary he dedicated the *principia* of the spoils of the sea-battle in the form of 10 whole war ships, a *dekanaia* that represented one from each category of ships that participated in the battle, from the smallest, the "ones", to the "tens" (*monokrotai* to *dekeris*). Strabo (7.7.6) reports that a few years after the dedication both ships and arsenals were destroyed in a fire.

Secondly, in the Michalitsi hills north of Nikopolis, on the spot where he had pitched his tent before the battle and where the leaders of Antony's decimated army had come to declare their submission, he erected a magnificent trophy monument (*tropaeum*) with 36 bronze *rostra* on its façade in an open-air sanctuary dedicated to his protector gods Mars, Neptune and Apollo. The complex of structures which made up this open-air sanctuary was both a symbol of Octavian's victory and power and also a monument of political and religious propaganda. His dominance was by the will of the gods who had assisted him in the victory and in creating the new order of things, bringing peace on land and sea, as is confidently inscribed — doubtless on the victor's orders — on the monument's votive inscription.

From the side of this hill overlooking the Preveza peninsula one can see (fig. 3) the coastline of the Ionian sea and the shores of the Ambracian Gulf, and on a clear day one can plainly see the promontory of Actium and the mountains of Akarnania and Leukas. Below the hill in the plain, in the neck of the Preveza promontory, lie the ruins of the city of Nikopolis (fig. 2),

1 See R. A. Gurval, *Actium and Augustus. The politics and emotions of civil war* (Ann Arbor 1995), with review by W. M. Murray, *JRA* 10 (1998) 372-76.