



Dedication of Octavian's victory monument at Nicopolis

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Building inscription/votive

Original Location/Place: Michalitsi hills, north of Nicopolis, Greece; seven miles north of Preveza.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): in loco

Date: 29 BCE

Physical Characteristics: Sanctuary complex built over two artificial terraces on the slope of the hill, above the ancient city of Nicopolis, and at the site of Octavian's military camp. Approached from the south, first in sight was the enormous retaining wall, above which was the podium, measuring 63 x 50m. The front of the podium faced the city, on the façade of which thirty-six bronze rams were arranged in decreasing size from west to east, which had been taken from Anthony and Cleopatra's fleet. Above the rams, across the length of the façade, was the dedicatory inscription, spanning approximately 48m. The upper terrace was built with a horseshoe shaped stoa with a monumental altar in the central courtyard, that was decorated with reliefs, some of which of a Roman triumphal procession (for detailed discussion of the archaeology of the complex, see Zachos, "The *tropeum* of the sea-battle of Actium at Nikopolis," p. 65-92).

The dedicatory inscription was carved into blocks of ashlar masonry, which were decorated with carved bands at the top and bottom, to give the impression of a monumental frame.

Material: Limestone.

Measurements: Estimated length of total inscription: 56m

Letter heights: 30 cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications:

Murray, William and Petsas, Photios M., "Octavian's Campsite Memorial for the Actian War," in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 79 (1989), p. 62-77.

Commentary: Following his victory at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, Octavian constructed a number of monumental structures close to the site of the battle; according to Suetonius, he "built the city of Nicopolis on that part of the coast, and established games to be celebrated there every five years; enlarging likewise an old temple of Apollo, he ornamented with naval trophies the spot on which he had pitched his camp, and consecrated it to Neptune and Mars" (Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 18.2). The foundation of a 'victory' city was not a new practice, but rather one that followed well-established tradition in association with Alexander the Great, who had founded his own Nicopolis in northern Syria after his defeat of Darius at the Battle of Issus (Strabo, *Geography* 16.5.19). Pompey had emulated his example, founding a Nicopolis at the site of, or very close to his battle with Mithridates (Strabo, *Geography*, 12.3.38; Appian, *Mithridates*, 105, 115; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 36.50.3 and 49.36.3). Octavian's Nicopolis in Greece was one of two founded in association with his victorious battles against Mark Antony, with a second constructed in Alexandria which was given the same name and the same quinquennial games as the first city at Actium (Cornwell, *Pax and the Politics of Peace*, p. 106-107). The new city at Actium was populated by the forced movement, or synoecism, of neighbouring city-states such as Ambrakia, Anaktorion and Leukas, in a continuation of practice known in the Greek world since the 4th century BCE and used by Pompey in his reorganisation of the East. In the case of Octavian, the foundation and population of the cities were definitively linked with the commemoration of victory at both sites, whilst also drawing a link between Octavian and Alexander the Great (Cornwell, *Pax and the Politics of Peace*, p. 108).

This dedicatory inscription comes from the façade of the monumental complex constructed at Actium; it was inscribed on blocks of limestone ashlar masonry which must have been carved in situ given the overlap of letters carved over some of the blocks' joins (Cornwell, *Pax and the Politics of Peace*, p. 112). A total of thirty-three blocks survive, thirty of which are inscribed; although fragmentary, reconstructions for the dedication's text have been proposed by James Oliver ("Octavian's Inscription at Nicopolis," p. 178-182) and John Carter ("A new fragment of Octavian's Inscription at Nicopolis," p. 227-230) with that proposed by William Murray and Photios Petsas in 1989 usually considered the most reasonable ("Octavian's Campsite Memorial for the Actian War," p. 62-77). Hannah Cornwell has recently offered a re-reading of the inscription, based on the discovery of several new fragments since Murray and Petsas' 1989 publication, which is followed in this discussion (see Cornwell, *Pax and the Politics*



of Peace, p. 112-113, esp. n. 93). The inscription records that Octavian – identified by his official military titles *Imperator Caesar*, and by filiation, “the son of deified Julius” (*divi Iuli filius*) – dedicated the monument in celebration of his victory at Actium (*victor bello Actiaco*). The inscription states that the war was “waged on behalf of the *res publica*,” or the Roman state (*pro re publica gessit*) casting Octavian as the ‘protector’ of the Roman people and the rights of the Republic. The location of the monument close to the site of the battle is indicated by the inscription’s confirmation that the battle was waged “in this region” (*in hac regione*). The central part of the text describes the “peace won over land and sea” (*pax parta terra marique*) in a striking correlation with Livy’s description of the closing of the gates of Janus (*On the foundation of the city* 1.19.3: *post bellum Actiacum ab imperatore Caesare Augusto pace terra marique parta*). As most editors of the text have suggested “in his fifth consulship” (*consul quintum*) as a suitable restoration for the missing section between “in this region” and the statement of “on land on sea,” it is, as Hannah Cornwell notes, “tempting” to place the inscription in 29 BCE, with Livy’s language given in echo of it. However, the phrase was also included in chapter 13 of Octavian’s *Res Gestae*, indicating the “centrality of the concept in Octavian’s contemporary and later self-presentation” (Cornwell, *Pax and the Politics of Peace*, p. 113). The inscription goes on to dedicate the monument – the double terrace with stoa and altar – to Mars and Neptune (*Marti Neptunoque...consecravit*), on the site of “the camp from which he set out to attack the enemy” (*castra [?] quibus ad hostem insequendum egressus*); the decoration of the monument’s façade with “naval spoils,” or the bronze rams of Antony’s ships is also described (*navalibus spoillis exornata*).

The inscription and the victory monument that it adorned were physical symbols of Octavian’s military power, as well as permanent statements of his political and religious propaganda (Zachos, “The *tropeum* of the sea-battle of Actium,” p. 65). The wording of the inscription emphasised the positive will of the gods – Mars and Neptune – that had brought Octavian his victory, which he repaid by dedicating the complex to them. The inscription also highlighted the “accomplishment of victory by means of peace as an expression of Roman power, virtually as an absolute” (Cornwell, *Pax and the Politics of Peace*, p. 86). Roman hegemony is presented in terms of geographical control – “land and sea” – or the extent of Roman imperium; “peace” was the result of the subjugation of enemies, with Rome’s claim to sovereignty therefore based on both the physical exertion of military power as well as the guardianship of the “whole world,” the *orbis terrarum*, which only Rome was able perform. This rhetoric was not new to Octavian’s reign either, but rather followed a precedent set as early as the third century BCE, when the Romans were described by a Hellenistic poet as taking hold of the “sceptre and monarchy of land and sea” (“??? ??? ????????” in Lycophron of Chalcis, *Alexandra*, 1229-1230). In the second century BCE, Polybius described how Rome had taken power over the entire *oikoumenē*, or “inhabited world” (*The Histories*, 1.1.5; 1.3.10; 3.1.4; 6.50.6) and Cicero celebrated Pompey for having brought large swathes of the Mediterranean under Roman control in the 60s BCE, after his *clarissima victoria terra marique* (“most renowned victory on land and sea” in *Pro Balbi* 16). Under Octavian, the idea of control over the land and the sea was joined with “the accomplishments of peace because of the victories he achieved,” but in a reworked format that justified his power as a result of civil, rather than foreign, war (Cornwell, *Pax and the Politics of Peace*, p. 89; for full discussion of the evolution of the concept from Republic to empire, see p. 87-90). In any case, the impressive nature of the victory at Actium was emphasised by the physical display of the rams seized from Anthony’s fleet, indicating the scale of the battle, but also from the geography of the space in which the monument was set up; the inscription drew attention to the landscape by referring explicitly to *hac regione* (“this region”), telling its reader to consider the spoils “in the actual geographical context of the victory” (Cornwell, *Pax and the Politics of Peace*, p. 115). However, the monument was also careful to declare its Romanness within the context of a Greek concept, that of the ‘victory-city’ or *Nicopolis*; the complex itself took the form of a Greek sanctuary, with a stoa and altar facing the impressive landscape over which it looked, but the Latin inscription that ran across its façade ensured that the specific nature of the victory could not be mistaken nor overlooked. It stressed, as Hannah Cornwell has aptly noted, “the appropriation of Greek culture and art to act as a vehicle for the expression of Roman power” (*Pax and the Politics of Peace*, p. 118). It was a monument that spoke to both sides of the Mediterranean, to both Roman and Greek audiences, but which was presented in unequivocally Roman terms. The construction and dedication of the victory complex at Nicopolis confirmed the end of the civil strife that Rome had suffered for much of the first century CE, and announced the dominance of Octavian and his ruling ideology.

Keywords in the original language:

- Iulius
- victor
- bellum
- res publica



- pax
- terra
- mare
- Mars
- Neptunus
- hostis
- castra
- navalis
- spolia
- exorno

Thematic keywords:

- Octavian
- Actium
- Mars
- Neptune
- battle
- civil war
- Mark Antony
- Roman army
- Roman victory
- victory monument
- Roman imperialism
- land
- sea
- Roman power

Bibliographical references: Carter, John M., A new fragment of Octavian's Inscription at Nicopolis, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 24 (1977) : 227-230

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Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

Augustus, Res Gestae Divi Augusti (General Background)

- Read more about Augustus, Res Gestae Divi Augusti (General Background)

Inscription

Altar of Augustan Peace at Narbo (CIL XII, 4335)

- Read more about Altar of Augustan Peace at Narbo (CIL XII, 4335)

Architecture



Ara Pacis (13-9 BCE)_Architecture

Reconstruction of the Ara Pacis



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Relief / Sculpture

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