

**Who Won the Battle of Actium
and Lost the War**

by R.L. Porter

Actium is on a small promontory on the southern shore of the Gulf of Ambracia (Arta), just at the entrance to the Gulf. There in September of 31 BC the former Triumvir (his official power had lapsed at the end of 33 BC) Marcus Antonius and his regal paramour Cleopatra VII of Egypt had marshalled their forces for a show-down with Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus and his right-hand man, Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa. On that famous day, in that storied place, in one of the great battles of the Western World, Marc Antony first succeeded in his military goal—and then lost the entire war. After the war the patriotic poets of the Augustan court (Octavian's new name was Augustus) Propertius, Horace and Vergil, put a new spin on the battle, making it into the crowning day of victory for the new Augustan Age—which it was—at least from a certain point of view.

By the fall of 32 BC, fresh from his ground defeats in the East, Marc Antony had ordered to the western shore of Greece a huge joint force of 30 legions (only one third of whose soldiers were Italians), 12,000 cavalry and 400 war galleys. Cleopatra, the financial backer of the enterprise, later joined her partner, and rather than risk invading Italy, the hopeful couple decided to await an attack across the stormy Adriatic by Italy-based Octavian. This was a big mistake, as it later appears.

In the spring of 31 BC the whole fate of the war was won by an extremely risky gambit on the part of Admiral Agrippa. He sailed away from land (very risky because of storms) and made diagonally for Antony's main support base at Methoné in the southern Peloponnese. He captured the base and cut Antony's supply line to Egypt. On that day and on that occasion Antony became a living dead man, although he did not yet know it. Later other Antonian naval bases were captured on the isles of Leucas and Corcyra, shutting Antony off from any supplies coming west out of the Corinthian Gulf. Antony's men now began to starve and sickness also broke out among his forces. The desertion rate of his officers and men began to climb seriously.

Eventually Octavian's land army appeared on the north shore of the Gulf of Ambracia, but Octavian wisely would not engage Antony's legions in any decisive land battle; he didn't need to at this juncture. Early in August of 31 BC Antony made an attempt by land and sea to break out of what was now clearly a death trap. Both attempts failed and a bad situation proceeded to grow worse.

Finally, in September, after being penned up for 14 weeks, Antony ordered his army to retreat eastward toward Asia Minor while he and Cleopatra attempted to break out of the Gulf with as many ships as possible, and after sailing to Egypt, re-equip the fleet for further hostilities. And that is exactly what happened at Actium. After Antony's ships had engaged the numerically superior enemy, Cleopatra with 60 Egyptian ships (all that was left of 200) broke through Agrippa's centre, and since her galleys had taken their sails (not used in a sea battle) with them on board they easily got away. After losing his flagships, Antony with luck and skill was able to follow her—quite according to plan. Antony thus won the battle—from a certain point of view.

However, in the aftermath, everything crumbled and fell apart for the hapless pair. The huge legionary force of Antony's general, Canidius Crassus, totally deserted him, to join Octavian. All hopes of serious resistance to Octavian had now vanished and though Antony and Cleopatra had escaped to Egypt, they were only to live another year, another anxious year which ended with their joint suicides.

Clearly the master-mind of the whole operation was none other than Agrippa. Agrippa's loyalty was recognized and rewarded and his descendants ruled from the Palatine. But then again so did Antony's, through his two daughters. At Actium, Antony had won his battle but lost the war. The legend that Cleopatra had deserted her lover out of cowardice and treachery while a bewitched Antony had followed after her like a love-crazed puppy, deserting his own men, is clearly an Augustan fabrication. But, as we all know, history has always been written for the most part by the winners.