



The Ancient World: Extraordinary People in Extraordinary Societies

Actium, Battle of

Date: September 2, 31 BCE

Locale: Actium, a promontory at the mouth of the Gulf of Ambracia on the western coast of Greece

Related civilizations: Republican and Imperial Rome, Ptolemaic Egypt

Significance: Ended the era of the civil wars and made Octavian (later Augustus) master of the Roman world.

Background: After the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, the rivals Marc Antony and Octavian were reconciled and, with Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, formed the Second Triumvirate. In 32 BCE, the Triumvirate ended and the two were again enemies. Octavian returned to Rome, gained power, and had war declared on Marc Antony and Cleopatra VII.

Action: Marc Antony was camped at Actium (AK-tee-uhm) with 70,000 infantry and 500 ships. Octavian, advancing from the north with 80,000 infantry and 400 ships, blockaded Antony. Antony drew up his fleet outside the gulf, facing Octavian's fleet to the west, with Cleopatra's more than 60 galleys behind him in reserve. Both fleets tried to outflank each other to the north. While the sea battle was going against Antony, Cleopatra (perhaps on Antony's orders) broke through the center and suddenly fled from battle with her galleys. Antony fought through to the open sea with a few ships to reach her and followed her to Egypt. The battle continued until the rest of Antony's fleet was set on fire. Antony's land forces surrendered a week later.

Consequences: The battle was a decisive victory by Octavian over Antony and Cleopatra, who fled to Egypt. Octavian's final victory over them in Alexandria marked the beginning of his reign as emperor. Octavian instituted games in honor of the battle at Actium, and poets such as Horace and Vergil published writings that celebrate Antony's defeat.

See also: Antony, Marc (10.3331/CWEP_0515); Augustus (10.3331/CWEP_0531); Cleopatra VII (10.3331/CWEP_1285); Egypt, Ptolemaic and Roman (10.3331/CWEP_1290); Rome, Imperial (10.3331/CWEP_0736); Rome, Republican (10.3331/CWEP_0738).

—Thomas McGeary

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