

Commemorating Actium at Ancient Corinth?

Monuments commemorating Octavian's naval victory at Actium extended beyond his elaborate tropaeum north of Nikopolis. The so-called Guilford Puteal, observed by Dodwell in 1804 at ancient Corinth, later brought to England and now in the British Museum originally may have been an altar, but was later reused as a wellhead. Ten archaizing figures including the triad of Apollo, Artemis, and Leto, the Three Graces, Hermes, Herakles, Hera or Hebe, plus Athena correspond to those adorning a semicircular base discovered at Nikopolis. It is likely that the "Puteal" once displayed at Corinth also memorialized Octavian's naval victory at Actium.

Fragments of another relief, in the apotheke at Corinth, may also have commemorated Octavian's maritime victory, providing a glimpse of Roman propaganda in the province Achaia just before he became the emperor Augustus. Four fine-grained marble fragments with similar scale and tool marks back and front belong to a frieze with a preserved height of ca 0.15 m. One piece (S 2151) preserves the upper torso of a draped, bearded male personage, his mantle billowing behind him, *velificato*. Poseidon appears this way, especially in Roman mosaics, but this man is draped. Perhaps he is a personified wind or the sky itself. On another fragment (S 1998), a draped woman preserved from the waist up, perhaps Artemis, wears a crown and holds a large torch. She turns away from the *aphlasta*, the stern ornament, of a ship which probably had occupied the space to her left. Surviving on a smaller fragment are the ankles and feet of a seated male figure wearing *calces*, his feet supported by a footstool. Another piece (S 2102) presents the shod left foot of a man, possibly rushing.

Two fragments (S 1998, S 2151) belong to the top of the relief; the top edge in back is finished with an ovolo moulding and underneath, the surface preserves the marks of a very fine claw chisel. Both top and bottom are worked flat with a projecting edge framing the relief

scenes. These details suggest the panel was not a revetment, but no cuttings survive to reveal how it was attached in its original setting. The carving is detailed; the remains of the small relief figures carefully finished.

As for findspots, all four fragments were found in the 1930's in Byzantine levels at the east end of the excavated Forum at Corinth. S 2151 is associated specifically with the so-called South Basilica (ca first century A.C.), south of the South Stoa. Yet it was found in high fill above this structure, so it is not possible to pin down its original placement. On the other hand, at Corinth, joining pieces of the same marble sculptures, relief or in the round, are often discovered at disparate spots throughout the Forum, so this "cluster" of pieces from the same sculpted frieze might point to a possible ancient setting at the east end of the Forum.

The scale and format of this fragmentary relief resemble that of the so-called Casa de Pilatos marble state reliefs, now in Seville and Budapest. The pieces of this frieze were reunited for the first time in 2013, and displayed in the international exhibit that celebrated the 2000th anniversary of Augustus' birth. These panels portray naval battle scenes at Actium, Apollo overseeing the action, also Victoria, Mars, and Roma. Octavian's triumph at Actium was illustrated, along with the triumphal chariot, the *tensa*, bearing a wax image of the deified Augustus, possibly alluding to his funeral. The panels have been tentatively associated with an imperial cult shrine and assigned a Claudian date on stylistic grounds.

Perhaps the suggestive fragments from a small relief frieze at Corinth also belonged to a state relief commemorating Octavian's momentous sea victory at Actium. More gods may have been involved, and more ships. The fragments suggest that mortals as well as divine personalities participated. The style is classicizing, like that of the Casa de Pilatos reliefs. Just as the Guilford Puteal reflects the archaizing gods on the base found at Nikopolis, the Corinth reliefs hint at

another way of memorializing Actium. Pushing this tentative argument a bit further it is worth noting that the marble reliefs were found not that far from the Julian Basilica, a possible site of imperial cult at Corinth.