CHAPTER 11

Land at Peace and Sea at War: Landscape and the Memory of Actium in Greek Epigrams and Propertius’ *Elegies*

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1 Introduction

Between 2014 and 2018, the world is looking back on the First World War a century ago, and the battlefields of France and Flanders provide focal points for this commemoration. The scars of trenches and explosions remain visible in the landscape even today, memorials and seemingly boundless cemeteries have inscribed war remembrance into the landscapes, and literature, photography, and film have shaped andreshaped their image.

This chapter examines the landscape of another ‘Great War’, a war that would be remembered as changing the course of Roman history forever. On the 2nd of September of 31 BCE, Octavian’s fleet defeated that of Antony and Cleopatra in the battle of Actium, at the entrance of the Gulf of Ambracia on the coast of Epirus. The final naval victory in the *bellum Actiacum* may not have been, on its own, entirely decisive in the protracted civil war between Octavian and Antony, but it began to be constructed as its crucial turning point soon after the event. For Romans, it came to mark the end of the bloody civil wars which had rent Rome almost ceaselessly since Caesar had crossed the Rubicon 18 years earlier. The victory in the Actian war was celebrated in Octavian’s triple triumph two years later and it underwent a rapid mythification during the Augustan age.1 Key elements of this emerging Actium myth were the role

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1 On the process of how this myth formed throughout the Augustan age, see most extensively Gurval 1995, who rightly stresses changes over time, rather than an immediate ‘foundation
of Apollo Actius (who had a small sanctuary overlooking the gulf and was depicted as having helped Octavian gain this victory), the role and image of Cleopatra, who had allegedly ensnared and enslaved Antony in order to gain control of the Roman empire herself, and the idea that the fate of the world hung in the balance at Actium, that this victory had preserved Rome from Eastern domination and brought about peace on land and sea (*terra marique*).2

This chapter does not revisit the well-researched political role or representation of the battle of Actium, but focuses specifically on the *terra* and *mare* of the battle—the Gulf of Ambracia in northern Greece—and the role that this landscape played in the formation of the literary memory of Actium. Focusing on representations of the landscape and seascape of Actium in the works of Greek epigrammatists and the elegiac poet Propertius, I examine the interplay between physical and literary landscaping that occurred at Actium in the decades after the battle, and the different ways in which this landscape was turned into a physical and literary memorial of a ‘Great War’.

2  **A Landscape of Victory: Nicopolis and the Actian Monuments**

The seabattle of Actium took place in the entrance to the Gulf of Ambracia in Epirus in northern Greece. Octavian’s campsite lay to the north of the bay, Antony’s to the south. The Antonian troops initially held the interior of the bay. When the battle seemed lost, a significant proportion of them (including the commander himself and the Egyptian queen) broke through and escaped towards the south, while others retreated into the bay.3 Almost immediately after the war, the site of the battle of Actium was completely reconfigured and monumentalized in a variety of ways (Fig. 11.1).

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2 The formula *terra marique parta pax* is connected with the closing of the temple of Janus in 29 BCE (see Liv. 1.19.3, Aug. Mon. Anc. 13, Suet. Aug. 22). On the history of the phrase, see Momigliano 1942. It also occurs on the inscription of the Actium monument, according to a likely conjecture (see n. 10 below): Lange 2009, 109–111, 144–148.

3 Different reconstructions of the course and military tactics of the battle are compared in Murray and Petsas 1989, 131–136.