

Iconography of the Battle of Actium: Understanding Augustan Propaganda through Images in the Ancient and Modern Worlds

Nina Perdomo, Research Director: Dr. Nancy de Grummond
Florida State University Department of Classics

Introduction

The Battle of Actium (31 BCE) was a definitive moment in the ancient world that led to the formation of the Roman Empire. The famously regarded battle marks the transition from the Triumviral Period (43-32 BCE) to the Principate (27 BCE – 284 CE), that is, from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire. The battle ensued after various years of political and military tension, with the main protagonists of it being Mark Antony and Octavian, the latter of whom came out victorious, and became the first emperor of Rome in 27 BCE. Augustus' celebrated successes led to the creation of many references to the Battle of Actium in material culture, creating a need to study its iconography and effects.

Abstract

What do primary sources with iconography such as coins, reliefs, and monuments, referencing the Battle of Actium, reveal about the time period from the Triumvirate to the early Principate (44 BCE - 27 BCE)? How do we use iconography from the Battle of Actium in primary sources to better understand Augustan propaganda today? Although there is much existing scholarship regarding the Battle of Actium through a historical perspective, there is significantly less research on the impact of iconography referencing the battle from an archaeological perspective. By researching material culture and exhibition displays, this study will provide insight as to how iconography of the Battle of Actium influenced ancient people, and how these messages according to the Roman perception should be interpreted in the modern world.

Methods

Material Culture Analysis

This study examines symbols on various artifacts, while also exploring the ways people interacted with them in the ancient world. Analyzing artifacts from a perspective of material culture allows for more developments of concepts like economic and social relationships with items.

Exhibition Analysis

To explain how symbols of the Battle of Actium should be recognized in the modern world, it is important to see examples of existing portrayals of iconography. The two exhibits that will be studied are the exhibition in Florence, Italy “Coins, Pots, and a Castle at Cetamura del Chianti”, and the “Treasure of Chianti” exhibit in the Santa Maria della Scala Museum in Siena, Italy. I was personally involved with the curation of “Coins, Pots, and a Castle at Cetamura del Chianti”, and my work there taught me the importance of organizing a display of artifacts. The flow of an exhibit and item placement can determine the overall message being presented to visitors. The valuable hands-on experience of curating the space and giving tours allowed me to portray my own understandings of the Battle of Actium for guests, further highlighting the importance of fully comprehending the impact of iconography on the ancient world in order to properly display it in a modern context.



Fig 2. Nina Perdomo
Discussing Effectiveness of
Layout with Professors
(Photo: Perdomo).

Conclusion

The Battle of Actium was a battle that strongly shaped the course of classical antiquity and led to the period of history that many think about today when mentioning the Roman Empire. To fully understand the Battle of Actium and messages ancient political figures wished to convey through iconography, it is important to look at both the existing material culture, and how modern exhibitions display the information today. Figures in this battle, such as Augustus and Cleopatra, are well documented, studied, and known in the mainstream. Consequently, it is highly important to comprehend how they interacted with the Battle of Actium, and the messages they wished to popularize. The analysis of material culture and exhibitions through archaeological contextualization can grant classical academia deeper understandings of the Battle of Actium, and knowledge for properly displaying, and therefore teaching ancient experiences to the modern audience.

References

- Holland Goldthwaite, Lora. *Treasure of Chianti: Silver Coinage of the Roman Republic from Cetamura del Chianti*, with contributions by N.T. de Grummond, J. Tabolli, N. Marosi, J. Mazzoni, F. Ponchio, and M. Callieri, Livorno, 2021.
- de Grummond, Nancy T. “Treasure of Chianti: Silver Coinage of the Roman Republic from Cetamura Del Chianti.” *Cetamura del Chianti Excavations and Research*, September 8, 2021.
<https://www.cetamura-del-chianti.com/treasure-of-chianti-silver-coinage-of-the-roman-republic-from-cetamura-del-chianti/>.



Figure 1. Denarius of
Mark Antony's Fleet
(Goldthwaite).

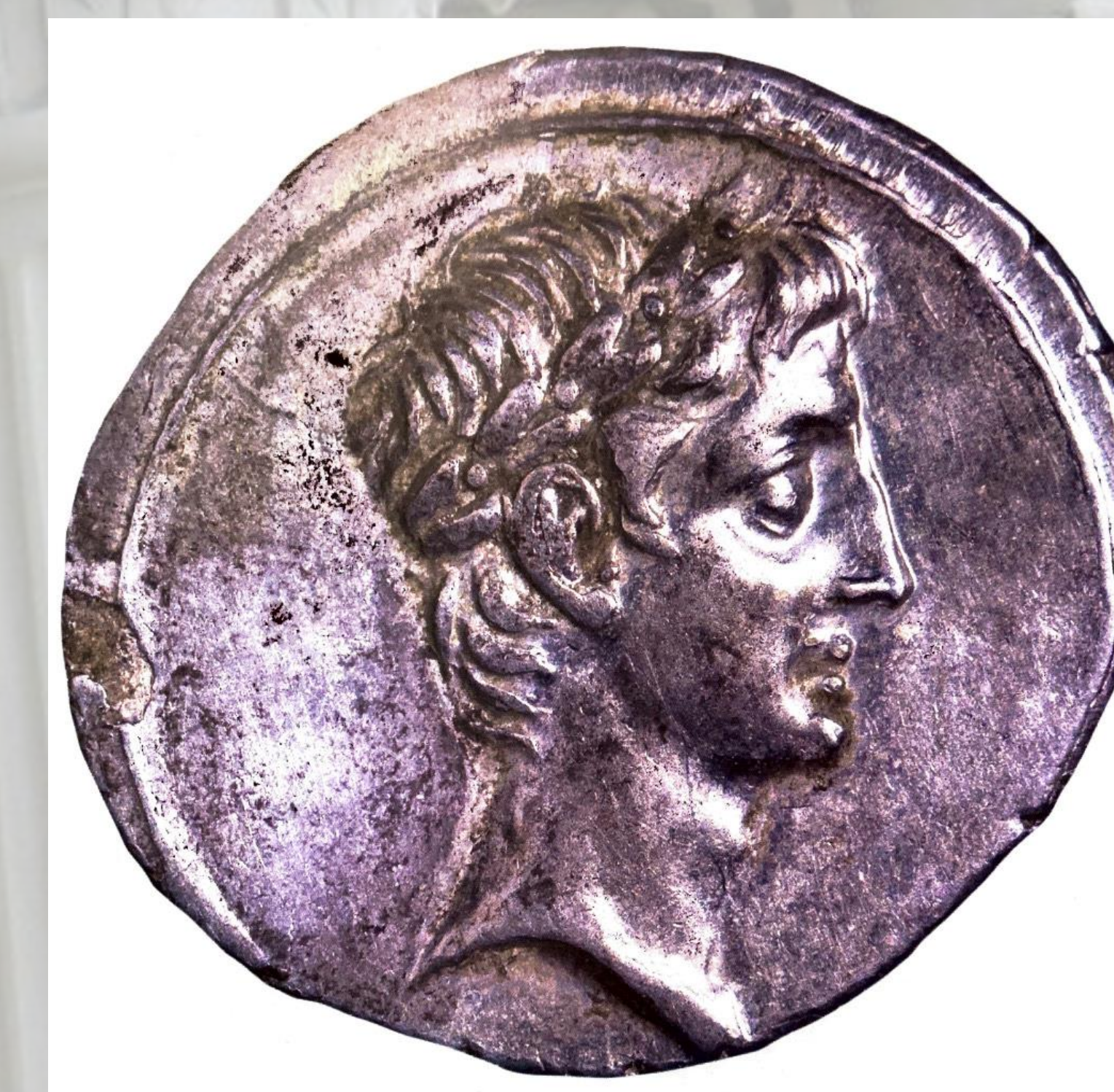


Figure 3. Denarius
with Laureate Bust of
Octavian
(Goldthwaite).