

PUPPES SINISTRORSUM CITAE*

Nisbet and Kraggerud make good cases for taking the ninth *Epode* as a dramatic recreation of the Actium campaign.¹ Horace begins in fearful anticipation; then the crisis comes, first on land and then on sea; Antony turns to flight; and – even though some danger remains, and there is *metus* as well as joy at the end of the poem – the celebrations can finally begin. On this reading there remains the familiar problem of vv. 17–20:

at huc² frementes uerterunt bis mille equos
Galli canentes Caesarem,
hostiliumque nauium portu latent
puppes sinistrorsum citae.

The first couplet clearly relates to the defection of Amyntas' Galatians, the decisive moment in the fighting on land; the second must describe the crucial battle on sea. There is no problem in *portu latent*. The fleet has withdrawn, and is skulking in harbour instead of fighting. But what of *nauium...puppes sinistrorsum citae*? The difficulty is notorious: the secondary sources do not clearly describe any movement 'toward the left', and it is hard to see why Horace chooses so enigmatic a phrase to capture the fighting. His audience would not make much of the topographical detail in any case: unless they had been at Actium themselves (and most of his readers of course had not),³ their reaction to the words would centre on other associations – the contrast between these magnificent *puppes* (Antony's ships were probably already famed for their size and grandeur)⁴ and their undignified sideways movement; the suggestions of ill omen in *sinistrorsum*.⁵ Still, in so visual a register it is hard to escape some real suggestion of leftward movement, and one would expect both the literal sense of the words and the symbolic suggestions to be important.⁶ In that case the battle

* I am grateful to the Craven Committee of Oxford University for financing a visit to Actium (made in connexion with my projected commentary on Plutarch, *Antony*, and my chapter on the Triumviral period in *CAH*²), and to Professor Nisbet for help and discussion.

¹ R. G. M. Nisbet, 'Horace's Epodes and history', in *Poetry and Politics in the Age of Augustus*, ed. Tony Woodman and David West (Cambridge, 1984), 11–17; Egil Kraggerud, *Horaz und Actium: Studien zu den politischen Epoden*, SO fasc. suppl. 26 (1984), 66–128. Kraggerud argues that this dramatic recreation is only one of the poem's 'two perspectives': the anxiety and indignation of vv. 1–16 are still relevant in the months after Actium, and Octavian's success in the fighting prefigures the final victory which is still to come. Cf. also L. P. Wilkinson, *CR* 47 (1933), 2–6, 'a dramatic representation of the supposed feelings, the changing moods, of a participant on the Caesarian side during those days at sea off Actium'; J. M. Pabón, *Emerita* 4 (1936), 11–23.

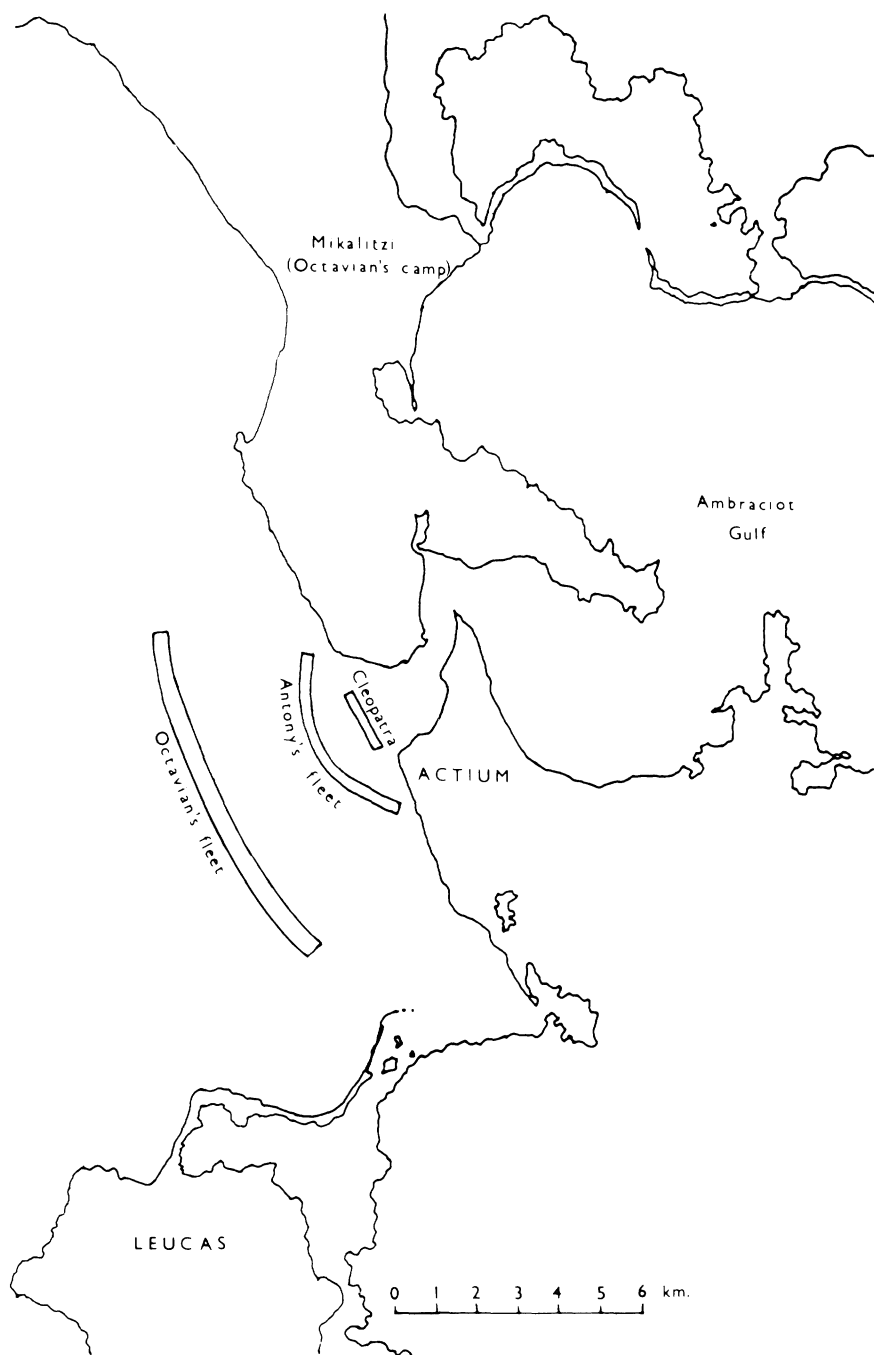
² The disputed reading is important to several aspects of the poem, but not very relevant here. I favour *at huc* for reasons similar to those set out by Nisbet, 12–13.

³ Nisbet, 14 makes too much of the '700 senators' who 'served under my signals at that time' (*R.G.* 25.3). That phrase need not mean that all were at Actium, nor even that all left Italy or Rome; and anyway this was surely not the audience which Horace envisaged.

⁴ Cf. Woodman on Vell. 2.84.1 (although it is not clear that this is the right interpretation of *Epode* 1.1–2), Nisbet–Hubbard on Hor. *Odes* 1.37.30.

⁵ Cf. esp. F. Wurzel, *Hermes* 73 (1938), 374; F. Cairns, *Illinois Classical Studies* 8.1 (1983), 90–1; Kraggerud, 125 n. 65.

⁶ R. G. Ussher, *SO* 37 (1961), 68–71 compares Plaut. *Rudens* 368, *nos cum scapha tempestas dextrouorsum differt ab illis*, where both the literal ('to the right') and the metaphorical or symbolic ('propitiously') senses of *dextrouorsum* should be felt.



must have included a phase which could be so described; and, if most of Horace's audience was not to be bemused, it should be a phase which had been distinctive and important enough to be talked about in Rome.

Kraggerud revives the suggestion that the words describe the retreat of Antony's fleet into the Ambraciot gulf.⁷ *Seen from the viewpoint of Octavian's camp*, that would indeed appear as a move 'to the left'. This interpretation is possible, perhaps. But it is most natural to take *sinistrorsum* as meaning 'to port', as it must have done in everyday usage;⁸ it is not likely that reports in Rome would have dwelt on the direction of the retreat from the observers' viewpoint; and this interpretation anyway reduces the paradoxical quality of *sinistrorsum citae*. Ships had been swift since Homer, but there is nothing very special or shaming in moving swiftly leftwards rather than rightwards across one's field of vision. But it is strikingly undignified if they only move quickly 'sideways', to port rather than straight ahead. Great ships should not move like crabs.

Nisbet's suggestion is more novel. Like Kraggerud, he rightly insists that *navium puppes citae* should mean that the ships *backed water*. (This has been seen by most Horatian commentators since Bentley, though it has been largely neglected by the historians.) Nisbet goes on:⁹

After Cleopatra and then Antony had fled, other ships would have followed if they had not been outflanked by Octavian; if they were pointing south, and there was no room or time to wheel round, perhaps they turned their sterns to port and reversed eastwards into the gulf.

This does have the merit of giving real sense to *sinistrorsum*, and of defining an undignified manoeuvre which might have figured in reports. But there is one great difficulty: the island of Leucas. As Carter brings out,¹⁰ this must have played an important part in the strategy of the battle. Jutting out just south of Actium, it was a great obstacle to Antony's flight, particularly under sail with prevailing winds from the west and north-west. Antony's ships would have to make considerable progress to the west before they could turn to the south, for only then could they make use of a north-west wind. By this stage of the campaign Antony's fleet was surely much smaller than Octavian's,¹¹ and it was only safe from outflanking while it remained close to shore: in making that distance to seaward, Antony's fleet would certainly leave both flanks extremely exposed. It is hard to think that Octavian's more manoeuvrable craft would let them get away with it. (Octavian's ships may not have been very different in bulk or construction – they were presumably the great ships which had defeated

⁷ Kraggerud, 94, though he is one of those who define the movement as 'leftward' to an observer *on the open sea*; so also e.g. R. Hanslik, *Serta Philologica Aenipontana* (1962), 341–2, D. Ableitinger-Grünberger, *WS* 81 (1968), 81, C. Bartels, *Hermes* 101 (1973), 296–7, A. Setaioli, *ANRW* 31.3 (1981), 1729. But in fact it would appear 'leftward' only to the left wing of Octavian's fleet. Page and Wickham more plausibly assume an observer in Octavian's camp; so also A. Ferrabino, *RF* n.s. 2 (1924), 449–51, and E. Wistrand, *Horace's Ninth Epode and its Historical Background* (Göteborg, 1958), 25–6, though both refer the words to naval actions preliminary to the main battle.

⁸ Cairns (n. 5), 90 oddly remarks that *sinistrorsum* 'seems to have no technical status in Roman naval or military language'. When a ship goes to starboard, it goes *dextrouorsum* (Plaut. *Rudens* 368; cf. n. 6 above); when it goes backwards, it goes *retrosus* (Vitr. 10.16.9). How does Cairns think a sailor said 'to port'?

⁹ Nisbet, 14.

¹⁰ J. M. Carter, *The Battle of Actium* (London, 1970), 218–20.

¹¹ Cf. esp. J. Kromayer, *Hermes* 34 (1899), 30–32. This was questioned by W. W. Tarn, *JRS* 21 (1931), 173–99, but unconvincingly: cf. G. W. Richardson, *JRS* 27 (1937), 154–7; J. Leroux, *Les Problèmes stratégiques de la bataille d'Actium*, *Rech. de phil. et de linguistique* 2 (Louvain, 1968), 31–7.

Sextus five years before – but Antony's crewing difficulties must have affected his own manoeuvrability: Octavian's craft were surely more fully manned, and his crews included many very experienced men.) And, even if Octavian did allow the enemy to make this distance to seaward, 'turning to the south' was itself a perilous manoeuvre. Antony's ships were most difficult to attack when they were directly facing the enemy: they could then keep close order, and – as we shall see later – their artillery and other defences were then at their most effective. They would hardly turn when Octavian's ships were poised ready to attack: they would have to fight their way through first.¹² It follows that, if they *had* gone as far as turning to the south, they would virtually have won their battle, and returning to the harbour would indeed be a paradoxical move. True, we know very little of this battle, and there may well have been some movement to west before the fighting began, as Plutarch and possibly Dio suggest.¹³ But nothing in the secondary sources indicates any movement as extensive as Nisbet would have to suppose, and the low casualty figures¹⁴ do not suggest the sort of engagement that must have taken place before Antony's ships were in a position to make their southern turn. And if Antony's left and centre had 'backed water to port' before turning south, they would simply have run aground on the swampy northern banks of Leucas, and the southern shore of Actium itself.

There is another way of taking *puppae sinistrorsum citae*. One phase of the fighting does seem clear: both northern flanks, Antony's right and Octavian's left, moved further to the north.¹⁵ This seems to have been the wing where the most decisive fighting was expected: this was where Agrippa was stationed and Antony had his flagship, and it is natural to suppose that Antony's other grandest ships were close to him.¹⁶ Perhaps Agrippa enforced this northern move by trying to outflank, as Plutarch suggests; perhaps both Antony and Agrippa were trying the same tactic, as Tarn supposed, each trying to 'get the wind' of the other.¹⁷ At all events, it was this move which opened the gap in Antony's centre through which Cleopatra sailed. Once Cleopatra had gone and Antony had transferred ship and followed, what happened to these northern wings? The casualty figures do not suggest that they fought very hard; perhaps many ships did not come to grips with the enemy at all. But this would be the wing of Antony's fleet which would now have most difficulty in regaining harbour, for the centre and left would still be close to the harbour-mouth. This right wing would be in difficulties. They would not want to turn, given their vulnerability to Octavian's nimbler craft. In any case, their great strength was their catapults, on which they must have relied to prevent Octavian's ships from coming close enough to board. We do not know much about ship-mounted catapults, but they were probably not very manoeuvrable. Even on big ships like these, a 'comparatively small

¹² As Cleopatra's squadron presumably forced its way through before hoisting sail for the south. Too much weight has been laid on Plut. *Ant.* 66.5–6, the story of Cleopatra's sudden and (apparently) unhindered break away from the mêlée: cf. e.g. Kromayer (n. 11), 45–7; Carter (n. 10), 221–4. It is characteristic of Plutarch's technique to capture a critical moment with a strong, frozen visual tableau: cf. note on *Ant.* 14.3 in my forthcoming commentary (C.U.P.). This moment was one to dwell on: the dramatic impact of the sudden sight of the sails, with both fleets gazing on bewildered, was too good to miss. This is surely Plutarch himself, and he may have extensively recast his source-material.

¹³ Plut. *Ant.* 65.6–8, Dio 50.31.6.

¹⁴ Plut. *Ant.* 68.2, 'not more than 5000 dead'.

¹⁵ Plut. *Ant.* 66.4 (cf. Serv. *in Aen.* 8.682); Leroux (n. 11), 50.

¹⁶ Plut. *Ant.* 65.1–2, 66.4.

¹⁷ Tarn (n. 11), 188–90; cf. Carter (n. 10), 218–20.

stone-thrower weighing two tons'¹⁸ was an extraordinarily cumbersome thing, and a great threat to a ship's stability. They must have been firmly fixed on platforms or towers,¹⁹ and we do not hear of any swivelling apparatus: they were probably fixed in such a way that they could only fire in one direction, here presumably forward. Even if they *could* be moved in some way, it would be a very awkward business: one can imagine the chaos on board, and also imagine how Agrippa would exploit it. Another device to prevent boarding was the suspended fire-pot:²⁰ as an enemy vessel approached, the pot could be dropped on its deck. But these pots, it seems, were hung forward, ahead of the bows: once again, if a ship turned tail, they would be useless. In fact, 'backing water to port' is exactly what we should expect this right wing to do, as it nervously edged back to harbour.²¹ This would have been the most conspicuous manoeuvre, and certainly the most undignified, of the battle – excepting only the flight of Cleopatra and Antony, something to which Horace is going to turn in the following lines. It would also be the manoeuvre which took place before the eyes of Octavian's force on the hill of Mikalitz, perhaps before the eyes of Horace himself. The grandeur of these *puppae* indeed contrasted tellingly with their awkward halting movement to port. It would have been talked about in Rome; and it was worth Horace's epigram.

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¹⁸ E. W. Marsden, *Greek and Roman Artillery* (Oxford, 1969), i.171. Marsden thinks that a quinquereme might have two such catapults, together with perhaps ten three-span arrow throwers. It was the bigger catapults which would matter more at Actium. Many of Antony's ships were bigger than quinqueremes, but he was probably short of skilled operators.

¹⁹ Plut. *Ant.* 66.3; cf. L. Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Princeton, 1971), 103, 121–3.

²⁰ Casson, 123 and fig. 115.

²¹ Richardson (n. 11), 160–1 seems alone in relating Horace's words to these ships, but he does not bring out the importance of 'backing water'. Tarn's later view (*JRS* 28 [1938], 165) is not far from that presented here, but he wrongly links it with his thesis that most of Antony's fleet deserted ('I am sure no galley ever fled from a lost battle stern first'); and he thinks that all Antony's fleet took up a position north of the harbour-mouth before the battle, so that they all finally 'backed water to port'. That is not impossible (a northern position would give the fleet more leeway for sailing round Leucas), but Antony's left wing would be vulnerable to outflanking, and Horace's epigram has point even if only some of the fleet carried out the manoeuvre (cf. Nisbet, 14).