



## [Antoninus Pius and the Meleagria Games of Balboursa](#) [1]

The emperor Antoninus Pius confirms the foundation of games that followed the precedent set by the neighbouring city of Oenoanda / Oinoanda

**Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.):** Imperial letter

**Original Location/Place:** On the stylobate of the so-called Meleager exedra, Balboursa

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):** In-situ (Turkey)

**Date:** 158 CE

**Physical Characteristics:** Rectangular statue base, with mouldings and foot cutting still visible. The front face was originally inscribed with a longer text, now illegible. Lettering very weathered but evenly distributed. The forms are squared and bold.

**Material:** Limestone

**Measurements:** Length: 190 cm, width: 63 cm, depth: 61 cm

**Language:** Greek

**Category:** Roman, Greek

**Publications:** SEG 38.1447 [IGRR III.467]

**Commentary:** Festivals and agonistic celebrations were an integral element of Greek cities. Rivalry and competition to organise them did not decrease in the Roman imperial period. Indeed, this testimony shows that such aspirations might take a great share of the relations established between ruling authorities and local communities in the eastern Mediterranean.

Our statue base was discovered in the southern Anatolian city of [Balboursa](#) [2] (see Coulton, *The Balboursa Survey*) and records a letter sent by Antoninus Pius to the local civic institutions in the year 158 CE. The Roman emperor appears with a very comprehensive titulature that firstly highlights his dynastic connections with Hadrian, his (adopted) father and lineage up to Nerva (see Hekster, *Emperors and Ancestors*, p. 78-95). Secondly, the series of offices, particularly the 21<sup>st</sup> tribunician powers, enable us to date the document precisely. Antoninus Pius contacts the archons (????????/archontes), council (?????/boulê), and people (?????/dêmos) of Balboursa regarding a benefaction (????????????/philoteimia) given to them by a man called Meleager, son of Castor. By virtue of additional inscriptions referring to latter, the restoration of line 14 as an ???? ????????? ?????????/agôn gymnikon mousikon ("gymnastic and musical contest") can be confirmed. The same inscriptions show that the full nomenclature of this man was Meleager, son of Castor, son of Gaius. So, even if he was not a Roman citizen because of the absence of the *tria nomina*, Latin names such as Gaius already appeared among his immediate ancestors. Likewise, the lack of Roman citizenship did not prevent this member of the local elite from contributing to the monumentalisation of the small community of Balboursa; an euergetic attitude that is best illustrated by the contemporary activity of Opraomas in southern Lycia. For example, we know that Meleager provided the necessary funds for a new exedra and the statues decorating it (see Coulton, "Balboursa Survey II"). In the inscription recording this construction (SEG 38.1446), Meleager is also praised for being the first and perpetual prize-giver (????????????/agonothetês) of a quadrennial festival (????????????/panêgyris) called ????????????? ?????????????/Antôneinia Meleagria. This sequence is particularly interesting because it honours the Roman emperor who approved (????????/epênesa) the celebration of the gymnastic and musical contest according to line 13 of our letter. Moreover, Antoninus Pius confirmed the terms (????????????/horisthenta) of the benefaction fulfilled (????????????/epiteleia) by Meleager. As shown by lines 18-20, this confirmation was facilitated by the precedent set by Antoninus Pius's (adoptive) father, Hadrian, when he ruled over a similar initiative taken at Termessos.

Considering that a great proportion of epigraphic production from the Graeco-Roman world has been lost, the opportunity to further explore this last reference is always slim. In this case, nonetheless, we are fortunate enough that the foundation text of the games established at Termessos and authorised by Hadrian has survived: the Demostheneia. Indeed, this exceptional document records not only a detailed and lengthy local decree on the terms and conditions of the donation given by the equestrian Iulius Demosthenes for this purpose, but also the letter sent by the Roman emperor to the community of the "Termessians living by Oenoanda". This settlement most commonly referred to as [Oenoanda](#) [3] / Oinoanda in modern literature was a former colony of Pisidian



Termessos (or Termessos Maior) and was located in southern Anatolia; merely 15 km away from Balboursa. Such a degree of proximity between both cities enable us to better understand why the institutions of Balboursa decided to mention precisely this precedent in their decree (???????/psêphisma) sent to Antoninus Pius (I.21-22). As perfectly illustrated in the case of Zeus and Aizanoi, the existence of such precedents facilitated new imperial approvals and grants. Consequently, one can see here how a local community intelligently deployed a diplomatic strategy which linked their aspirations for games with the imperial claims of ancestral succession. This means that, if Antoninus Pius wanted to corroborate the heritage of his father Hadrian, he needed to accept the burden of previous policies. The brilliance of the Balboursan plan is even better shown by the fact that, after the establishment of the *Eusebeia* festival at Puteoli in honour of the defunct Hadrian (Artemidorus, *Oneirokritika* I.26; *HA, Hadrian* 27.), Antoninus Pius apparently authorised the bestowal of his epithet *Antonineia* only to the games founded by Meleager.

This statue base therefore does not simply illustrate the growing relevance of agonistic culture across the eastern Mediterranean during the Roman imperial period – commonly known as “explosion agonistique” (see Robert “Une vision,” p. 38; cf. Mitchell, “Review: Festivals”; Pleket “Mass-Sport”; and Nollé, “Stadtprägungen”), but also provides us with a testimony of the fierce and dynamic competition existing between neighbouring communities. In this case, the Termessians by Oinoanda had reached the imperial authorisation of the games donated by Iulius Demosthenes already by Hadrian. Under the succeeding Antoninus Pius, Balboursa also launched an initiative that was initiated by the euergetic spirit of another local benefactor called Meleager. With the financial support of his foundation and the imperial endorsement, the celebration of these *Antonineia Meleagria* games is known to have lasted for almost another century when the descendants of Meleager continued to contribute to the memory of his ancestor and members of the local elite excelled with their victories (see Milner, “Victors in the Meleagria”). At the same time, by analogy with the surviving instructions set in the *Demostheneia* precedent, one must assume the exaltation of the imperial cult in agonistic festivals where images of the ruling house were paraded and “pious rites where performed” in order to demonstrate “devotion towards the emperor who has supported them”.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords:

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- [local autonomy](#) [29]

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### [The Balboursa Survey and Settlement in Highland Southwest Anatolia](#) [33]

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### [Victors in the Meleagria and the Balboursan E?lite](#) [34]

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**Other sources connected with this document:** Inscription

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Inscription

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Inscription

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