



Marcus Aurelius and Commodus on the imperial images of the Athenian Gerousia

Sacred_Gerousia_Athens_Oliver.jpeg



[1]

Marcus Aurelius and Commodus instruct what type of imperial images needed to be produced by the recently instituted Athenian *gerousia* in order to facilitate their display and transportation.

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

Original Location/Place: Discovered in re-used contexts of the Agora and Acropolis of Athens

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Epigraphical Museum of Athens (Greece)

Date: 179 CE

Physical Characteristics: Large block containing several imperial letters and now broken in fragments. The name of Commodus initially suffered *damnatio memoriae* but was restored at a later stage.

Material: Marble

Measurements: 66 cm in height and 53.5 in width.

Language: Greek

Category: Roman, Greek

Publications:

Oliver, James H., *The Sacred Gerousia* (The American Excavations in the Athenian Agora: Hesperia, Suppl. VI.) American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1941, p. 111-112, no. 24 [SEG 21.509]

Commentary:

Visual representations of the ruling family populated the cities of the Roman Empire. Normally produced in valuable materials such as marble or metal, these images have for the most part disappeared today and their magnitude can primarily be envisaged from the vast amount of carved stones recording their setting up (see Højte, *Roman Imperial Statue*). This inscription from Athens, whilst not a statue base, will offer an even better insight into how the Roman emperors wanted to be represented by the local institutions.

The format of the text is that of the imperial chancellery completely developed by the end of the Antonine period (see Millar, *The Roman Emperor*, p. 213-228). The letter opens with the names and titles of the sending emperors: Marcus Aurelius and Commodus (l. 1-5). Even if the stone has numerous and important lacunas, the reference to the second consulship of Commodus dates to 179 CE; i.e. during the early stages of the co-regency with his father. They are presented as members of a dynasty that started with Nerva until the more recent death of Lucius Verus, who was also considered a god (????/theos) at this point (see Hekster, *Emperors and Ancestors*, p. 80-96). The completeness of the fragments improves from line 6 on and it is clear that the Athenian ????????/gerousia was the recipient of the letter. This institution literally translated as “council of elders” had been present in many Greek cities such as Ephesus since at least the Hellenistic age (Strabo, *Geography* XIV.1.21, see Zimmermann, *Les origines*). In Athens, however, it did not belong to the structures of the ancestral constitution. The development of this *gerousia* is deeply related to the Roman control of the city. The first attestations of the institution do not appear until the end of the 170's and it has subsequently been connected to the imperial visit of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus in 176 CE. During this stay, the emperors are known to have performed the mystery cults of Eleusis (see Follet, *Athènes*, p. 136-141), and to have



instituted two permanent chairs of philosophy and rhetoric (Philostratus, *Life of Sophists* II.2 [p. 183]; Cassius Dio, *History of Rome* LXXII.31.3). Immediately prior to this period, we also know that Marcus Aurelius tried to impose new regulations in the selection of the Areopagus' members (see Oliver, *Greek Constitutions*, no. 184) and the creation of a new *gerousia* in the Lycian city of Sidyma is attested a bit later (*TAM* II.176); so imperial interference should be conceivable in this local issue too. James H. Oliver (*Marcus Aurelius*, p. 84) has accordingly sought to link this initiative with Marcus Aurelius' greater intention to further favour Athens as a cultural hub of the Empire after the sponsorship of Herodes Atticus.

The positive attitude of the emperors towards the Athenian *gerousia* is confirmed by a series of letters attached to the dossier to which our inscription belongs (Oliver, *Greek Constitutions*, no. 193-203). These letters date between 177 and 184, and are mostly concerned with the sources of funding that were necessary for the success of the new institution. For example, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus dealt with the cutting of trees in estates that contributed to the maintenance of the *gerousia* and were supervised by the imperial procurator, Caelius Quadratus, who also appears at the end of our inscription (l. 16; for his possible identification with a Sicilian official see *CIL* VI.13913, X.7191). All these communications would therefore illustrate the first stages of the institution straight after its creation and the issue of the imperial images belongs to this context. The introductory remark in line 7 shows that Marcus Aurelius and Commodus were responding to a matter brought up by the *gerousia* itself and transmitted through letters (????????/grammata). Before commenting on the images (????????/eikones), the emperors highlighted a contribution (????????/chorégia) to distributions (????????/dianomai) which would also be related to the aforementioned grant of benefits. As for the proposal of the *gerousia*, it was concerned with the preparation of representations in gold not only of the emperors but also their wives, if the restorations in line 9 are right. Marcus Aurelius and Commodus rejected the offering and recommended using bronze (????????/chalkai) instead. This refusal belongs to a long imperial tradition to decline excessive signs of provincial devotion. Tiberius, for example, did not accept divine honours after the death of Augustus as reported by the Sacred Law of Gytheion. Claudius also reacted negatively to a similar proposal of Thasos and he unambiguously rejected the use of gold in statues proposed by the Alexandrians (*P.Lond.* 6.1912). In the case of the Athenian *gerousia*, the further specification of the type statue instructed by Marcus Aurelius and Commodus is rather unique and this makes our inscription particularly interesting. Indeed, not only needed these images to be made of bronze and remain equal in size (????????/synmetros, ???/isai), but they also had to be produced as "busts" (????????/protomai). Thereby, they could be more easily transported to public gatherings such as the assemblies (????????/ekklêsiai).

The last remark raised by the emperors is to be closely connected with two other documents of our collection: the Salutaris's Foundation and the letter of Marcus Aurelius with Lucius Verus to the *gerousia* of Ephesus. The first inscription records a huge donation of a local knight that included – among others – five silver images of Trajan and Plotina weighting several pounds. Additionally, a local decree enforcing the foundation instructed that these were to be paraded in many local festivities of the city. Under Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, a Roman supervisor exposed the difficulty of identifying worn silver images stored in the Ephesian *gerousia* and asked about the suitability of recasting the precious metal for the new emperors. The proposal of Ephesus was rejected but demonstrates that such imperial representations were supposed to be displayed and acknowledged by the local population. In the Demostheneia festival of Oinoanda, we also know that local officials called *sebastophoroi* were in charge of carrying images of the Roman emperors. All these testimonies show the significance of this kind of visual artefacts to share messages and consensus with the Roman ruling institutions. In addition to the images, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus also accepted the engraving of their names; probably to prevent the problems of identification that had previously affected the capital of Asia. The instructions were therefore twofold and slightly paradoxical. On the one hand, they did not reject the production of such representations, but, on the other hand, they wanted to prevent the envious (????????/epiphthona) consequences of their use and divinization. After all, in a race to prove imperial loyalty through silver and gold, the finances of local communities were most likely to be affected and even depleted. And yet, despite such warnings, one of the very few surviving golden busts of Roman emperors represents precisely Marcus Aurelius (Pury-Gysel, Brodard, *Marc Aurèle, L'incroyable découverte*).

When all these aspects regarding imperial images and their symbolism are considered, the precautions that



rabbinic sources such as Mishnah, Avodah Zarah 3:1-2 place on the re-use of Roman statues – even if fragmentary – should become easier to contextualise.

Keywords in the original language:

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Højte, Jakob Munke, [Roman Imperial Statue Bases: from Augustus to Commodus](#) [36] (Aarhus : Aarhus University Press, 2005)

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Zimmermann, Klaus, [Les origines de la Gérousie de l'époque impériale](#) [41], in Acta XII congressus internationalis



epigraphiae graecae et latinae (ed. M. Mayer Olivé ; Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 2007), 1523-1528

Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

[Re-casting imperial images at Ephesus under Marcus Aurelius \[42\]](#)

Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus instruct not to re-cast silver for their representations, even if the old images were worn and not easily identifiable.

- [Read more about Re-casting imperial images at Ephesus under Marcus Aurelius \[42\]](#)

Inscription

[The Salutaris Foundation and the Roman Representations in Ephesus \[43\]](#)

Caius Vibius Salutaris, an Ephesian member of the equestrian order, establishes a foundation in which images of the Roman emperors, the Roman people, and the Senate are prepared.

- [Read more about The Salutaris Foundation and the Roman Representations in Ephesus \[43\]](#)

Inscription

[Sacred Law of Gytheion \[44\]](#)

- [Read more about Sacred Law of Gytheion \[44\]](#)

Inscription

[Thasos and the refusal of a temple by Claudius \[45\]](#)

Claudius sends a letter to the local institutions of Thasos giving thanks for their honours but rejecting the dedication of a temple. The emperor also confirms the privileged status of the island following Augustus's precedent

- [Read more about Thasos and the refusal of a temple by Claudius \[45\]](#)

Inscription

[Imperial images and the Demostheneia under Hadrian \[46\]](#)

Iulius Demosthenes founds a new agonistic festival under Hadrian combining local motifs of Oenoanda and the imperial cult

- [Read more about Imperial images and the Demostheneia under Hadrian \[46\]](#)

Realized by:

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