A Roman Curator and the Games of Aphrodisias under Commodus

A local agent sent by the Roman administration discusses the financial viability of Greek games and its impact on the city of Aphrodisias in the reign of Commodus.

Typology (Honourific / Funerary / etc.): Letter
Original Location/Place: Walls of Aphrodisias, in a reused context. Geyre (Turkey)
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Unknown
Date: 180 CE to 189 CE
Physical Characteristics: Not given by the editors
Material: Not given by the editors
Measurements: Not given by the editors
Language: Greek
Category: Roman, Greek

Publications:
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Commentary:
Aphrodisias[2] was a city located in the inner Anatolian region of Caria and became a staunch supporter of Rome's expansion during the late Republican period. This is confirmed by documents concerned with the Mithridatic wars and, especially, the triumviral period (see Reynolds, Aphrodisias and Rome). Octavian strove to reward Aphrodisia's loyalty and kinship ties with Aeneas and the Julian family through their common patron goddess. In the year 39/8 BCE, the Roman Senate decreed that this community was “a friend and ally of the Roman people” (amicus sociusque populi Romanorum = ????? ?? ????? ????????? ???? ?????? ???? ??????????), and confirmed a broad range of benefits: e.g. special tax immunity, exemption from hosting Roman officials in the city's territory, and asylum status to the sanctuary of Aphrodite. To this city, M. Ulpius Appuleius Eurycles in the reign of Commodus sent a letter which sheds light on the status of privileged communities, the Roman control of local institutions, and the interests of provincial populations across the eastern Mediterranean that spent many resources on agonistic festivals.

Both the invocation to good fortune (?????/tychê) and the opening greeting formula are typical in the constant communications circulating between Greek cities – with their magistrates (?????????/archontes), council (????????/boulê) and assembly (?????????/ekklêsia) – and members of the imperial administration. However, Ulpius Eurycales is not referred as a member of the Roman senatorial or equestrian orders that normally held provincial offices as exemplified by the contemporary family of Aelius Zeuxidemus from nearby Hierapolis. Instead, the sender is designated with titles only pertaining to the local institutions of Asia; more precisely the seat of the imperial cult at Smyrna where he acted as high-priest (?????????/archiereus). This particular arrangement can be explained thanks to the reference to the term ??????????/logisteia made in line 9. The ??????/logistai or curatores were agents sent by the Roman administration to supervise local issues who became more frequent from the 2nd century CE (Dmitriev, City Government, p. 195-196). In order to perform their missions more effectively, they were normally selected among provincial celebrities such as Iulius Severus who were well acquainted with the particularities of Greek cities in the eastern Mediterranean. The appointment of Ulpius Eurycles followed this model as well, because he belonged to the elite of Phrygia and was renowned for his virtues – including paideia – as extolled in letters sent by the council of the Panhellenion (IGRR IV.573-4), and even the emperor Antoninus Pius (IGRR IV.575). Another inscription found not far from the famous temple of Zeus in Aizanoi records the setting up of honours by Eurycles himself for Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus already in 161; so there should be no doubt about his alignment with the imperial rule.
Ulpius Eurycles’s mission in Aphrodisias was, indeed, not entrusted to an inexperienced agent. We know that this man supervised the activities of the gerousia of Ephesus and sent a letter to Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. For his Ephesian assignment, the curator consulted the emperors – among other financial issues – on the possibility to reduce costs by re-casting and re-dedicating old silver images to the new rulers. In the case of Aphrodisias, the main subject of the communication was also related to the economic situation of the city but with regard to contests (??????/agônes). The local institutions requested Ulpius Eurycles to make a provision (???????/pronoia) for these events and he accepted because of Aphrodisias’s piety (???????/eusebeia) towards Commodus and his respect for the memory (?????/mnêmê) of the game founders. Even if no honorific inscriptions for Commodus survive from Aphrodisias, the general exaltation of Roman rulers by its citizens can be confirmed throughout the imperial period; for example when they sent a delegation to Ephesus to celebrate the setting up of a temple dedicated to Domitian in the provincial capital. Likewise, agonistic festivals provided local communities with good opportunities to display their loyalty to the emperors as perfectly illustrated in the foundation act of the Demosthenia. This last document is also important for attesting the role of individuals devoted to the imperial cult in the establishment of such contests which required the authorisation of the Roman administration. Accordingly, it is not surprising that a reference to “the everlasting preservation of Commodus” appears in a 2nd century CE list of the agonistic events held in Aphrodisias (I.Aph.2007 15.330 l. 10). Ulpius Eurycles also justifies his attention to this matter on account of the privileged reputation (????/doxa) of the city and the approaches of the synod. This last group comprised the associations of performers that lobbied for the promotion of agonistic culture as shown by their participation in the first festival organised in Gerasa and numerous inscriptions from Aphrodisias itself (see Roueché, Performers, p. 223-237).

Because of the varied agonistic life of Aphrodisias the Roman curator faced a severe problem. The provision of funds (??? ???????? ?????????/?tôn chrêmatôn paraskeuê) to support the continuation of several games was not sufficient and needed to be halted. As Ulpius Eurycles informs, the survival of such celebrations did not only depend on the intentions of founders such as the aforementioned Demosthenes of Oenoanda, but also on the maintenance and increase of resources after their deaths. It is precisely for this reason that Antoninus Pius praised the Ephesian Publius Vedius Antoninus after investing in durable and complex construction projects instead of games granting “immediate popularity.” In Aphrodisias, only one foundation – comparable to that of Salutaris – was robust enough to reach the authorisation of the Roman officials. It belonged to Flavius Lysimachus who is attested in other inscriptions of the city as a cultured man (I.Aph.2007 11.513), benefactor and perpetual president of his games (I.Aph.2007 12.325). Like Demosthenes of Oenoanda, he founded a homonymous musical contest called Lysimachea for which one of the few surviving schedule of agonistic prizes exists (I.Aph.2007 11.21, see Roueché, Performers, p. 173-175). Victors of the choral competitions or comedians could claim up to 1500 denarii which would be covered by the interests accruing from the initial endowment (l. 13-21). With such financial sureties, the final condition of Ulpius Eurycles was that the Lysimachea were held in a four-year cycle (????????????/?tetraetêris) and prior to the Balbillea of Ephesus; an older festival with a higher rank.

All these instructions confirm the Roman control over local activities which required certain conditions and were to be inserted in a wider provincial network of festivals, rivalries, and incompatibilities. The Aphrodisians aspired to celebrate more agonistic competitions and needed to seek the authorisation of imperial representatives despite the privileged free and autonomous status of the city. Nevertheless, the acceptance of such structures of subjection and power should not automatically be interpreted as negative impositions. Indeed, the institutions of the “free city” themselves asked Commodus later in his reign not only for the presence of Roman curators but even for the visit of the provincial governor (I.Aphr.2007 8.35, see Reynolds, Rome, p. 119-124).

Keywords in the original language:

- ????????? [3]
- ????? [4]
- ????? [5]
- ????? [6]
- ???????? [7]
- ???? [8]
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- Aphrodisias
- Commodus
- agonistic culture
- Roman administration
- curator
- freedom
- intervention
- autonomy
- imperial cult
- preservation
- money
- foundation
- benefaction
- benefactor
- music
- festival
- calendar

Thematic keywords:


Roueché, Charlotte, *Performers and partisans at Aphrodisias in the Roman and late Roman periods: a study based on inscriptions from the current excavations at Aphrodisias in Caria* (London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1993)

Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

**Re-casting imperial images at Ephesus under Marcus Aurelius**

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
**Letter of Octavian to Ephesus concerning Aphrodisias** [48]

Octavian requests the Ephesians to return a statue of Eros dedicated by his father Julius to Aphrodite in the city of Aphrodisias

- Read more about Letter of Octavian to Ephesus concerning Aphrodisias [48]

**Aphrodisias and the imperial temple of Ephesus under Domitian** [49]

The free and autonomous city of Aphrodisias sets up a monument in Ephesus commemorating the grant of neokoria by Domitian

- Read more about Aphrodisias and the imperial temple of Ephesus under Domitian [49]

**Sebasteion from Aphrodisias (20-60 CE)** [50]

- Read more about Sebasteion from Aphrodisias (20-60 CE) [50]

**Imperial images and the Demostheneia under Hadrian** [51]

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 [51]

**The Salutaris Foundation and the Roman Representations in Ephesus** [52]

Caius Vibus 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 [52]

**Antoninus Pius and the Meleagria Games of Balboura** [53]

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

**Publius Vedius Antoninus and Antoninus Pius [54]**

The Roman emperor Antoninus Pius praises the Ephesian benefactor Publius Vedius Antoninus for investing in works for the future

- Read more about Publius Vedius Antoninus and Antoninus Pius [54]

Inscription

**Gerasa and the Games under Trajan [55]**

Establishment of the first agonistic festival in Gerasa for the salvation of Trajan

- Read more about Gerasa and the Games under Trajan [55]

Inscription

**Hadrian and Zeus in Aizanoi [56]**

Hadrian restores the ancient lands of Zeus in Aizanoi using Hellenistic precedents and members of his administration

- Read more about Hadrian and Zeus in Aizanoi [56]

Inscription

**Hierapolis and a Greek Sophist in the Roman Administration [57]**

Honours for a member of a prominent and cultured family from Hierapolis which was given Roman citizenship and participated actively in the Roman administration.

- Read more about Hierapolis and a Greek Sophist in the Roman Administration [57]

Inscription

**Iulius Severus, Hellenistic descendant, and Roman Governor in the Bar Kokhba Revolt [58]**

Career of Iulius Severus, one of the Roman officials in the East during the Bar Kokhba revolt.
Read more about Iulius Severus, Hellenistic descendant, and Roman Governor in the Bar Kokhba Revolt [58]

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