Sacred Law of Gytheion

Local law of Gytheion in Laconia concerning celebrations and ceremonies related to the imperial cult under Tiberius

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Local law
Original Location/Place: Near the Theatre of Gytheion (Greece)
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Unknown
Date: 15 CE

Physical Characteristics: The stele is broken on top and damaged on the right side. The cutting of the letters is slightly irregular but was clearly readable to Kougeas when he made the first edition. These letters are larger on the upper side and get smaller at the bottom

Material: Local grey stone
Measurements: 70 centimetres in height, between 60 and 64 centimetres in width, and 15 centimetres thick

Language: Greek

Category: Roman, Greek


Commentary:
Like most documents produced by the local institutions of Greek cities, the exact nature of our inscription is not revealed until the final lines. In this case, we have to wait for line 38 to know that this is a “sacred law” (?????/hieros nomos). The document states (l. 36-40) that an inscribed copy had to be prepared and, for this reason, the surviving fragment is available to us. It also emphasises that the inscription will prove the “everlasting gratitude of the people of Gytheion towards the rulers.” Consequently, the inclusion of this document in our collection will allow us to analyse directly the way in which local institutions of the Greek world could regulate religious life in order to show their devotion to Roman rulers.

The upper part of the stone is lost, and the available text starts in media re indicating the setting up of three different statuses: one of Augustus, one of Julia Augusta (i.e. Livia), and one of Tiberius. This arrangement follows what Tacitus tells us about dedications produced in the transitional period between Augustus’s death in 14 CE and the first steps of Tiberius’s new reign. In Rome, for example, Livia herself dedicated a statue not far from the theatre of Marcellum, in which her name also preceded that of Tiberius (Annals IV.64). In the provinces, Tacitus reports that the cities of Asia immediately dedicated a temple to Tiberius, his mother and the Senate (Annals IV.15). This places our sacred law most likely at the beginning of 15 CE, even if only a terminus ante quem in 19 – Germanicus’s death – can be established with the information provided by the text (see Seyrig, “Inscriptions,” p. 88). In addition to the statue group paid for by the city, several ceremonial items were to be placed in the middle of the theatre because sacrifices were to be completed for the “salvation (???????/sôtêria) of the rulers.” All such procedures preceded the celebration of “performances” (?????????/akroamata), and lines 7 to 33 deal with their organisation in detail.

The city of Gytheion, on the southern coast of the Peloponnese, decided to establish several days of musical contests (?????????/thymelikoi agônes, l. 25) and relate them to the commemoration and worship of Roman rulers. The first day was dedicated to Augustus, who is referred to as a god (?????/theos), saviour (?????/sôtêr), and liberator (?????????/eleutherios). These epithets are clearly connected with the divine attributes of Zeus and need to be linked with a concrete historical episode reported by Pausanias (III.21.6; cf. IG V.1, 1160), who records that Augustus freed Gytheion from Sparta, the biggest city controlling Laconia. The second day of the festival was dedicated to Tiberius, who appears with the civic titles of emperor (???????????/autokratôr) and father of the fatherland (?????/patêr patridos). As will be emphasised below, this lack of unequivocal supra-human references is important to understand the context of this celebration, because another related inscription from Gytheion specifically records Tiberius’s refusal to receive god-like honours (SEG 11.922). Julia Augusta, on the other hand, is identified with the divinely inspired personification of the local Fortune (?????/Tychê) as it is also recorded in the inscribed base surviving from her statue (SEG 11.925). After the third day...
dedicated to her, the fourth was for another divine personification, Victory (??????/Nikē), who is associated with Germanicus. He was Tiberius’s nephew and renowned for his successful military campaigns first in northern Europe and later in the eastern Mediterranean, for which he earned much popularity among provincials (see e.g. Hõet-van Cauwenberghè, Kantiréa, “La popularité”). The combination of Drusus Caesar, Tiberius’s son, with Aphrodite to whom the fifth day was dedicated is not as straightforward. While it should now be evident that the competitions were primarily dedicated to members of the Julian family for which the association with Venus-Aphrodite was standard (see Weinstock, Divus Iulius), the reference to Drusus may perhaps convey the local hopes of Gytheion for the continuation of a dynasty that also integrated members of the Claudian lineage (see Kantiréa, Les dieux, p. 68-69). The sixth day transcends the limits of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and commemorates T. Quinctius Flamininus. Like Augustus, he was another Roman “liberator”, in this case of the whole of Greece according to the speech that he delivered during the Isthmian games in Corinth after the Second Macedonian War (see Polybius, Histories VIII.46; Livy, XXXIII.32-33; cf. Ferrary, Philhellénisme et impérialisme, p. 58-117). One statue base of the great general has been discovered in Gytheion (IG V.1, 1165), so we can confirm that his heroic memory (??????/mnêmê) was kept even after the end of the Republican period. The inclusion of Flamininus in the series of days is particularly interesting because it can be interpreted as a way to link the idea of freedom not only to the current rulers, but also to the collectiveness of the Roman people. This connection will again play a prominent role when Nero proclaims a new liberation of Greece.

Lines 12 to 18 continue with more concrete regulations deriving from the celebration of this local festival. Essentially, the preparation of musical contests generated expenses, and the organiser had to present the account (???????/logos) to the assembly (???????/ekklêsia) in order to prove his good management. The following clauses of the law provide further details more related to the current affairs of Laconia rather than Rome. The magistrate in charge – the ?????????/agoranomos or market-supervisor, in this case – is given the possibility of adding two extra days to the festival. These were to be dedicated to Gaius Julius Eurycles and his son Laco. Eurycles – who also features in Flavius Josephus’s works (Jewish War I.425, 513-531; Jewish Antiquities XVI.300-310) – is particularly important for the history of Laconia between the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Empire. His origins were obscure, but he became a protégé of Augustus after the battle of Actium with Roman citizenship, and was given the control of the region and even the neighbouring island of Cythera as a gift. In return, we know that he contributed to the spread of Augustus’s ideals and regime in Laconia, and was most likely responsible for the first manifestations of the imperial cult in Sparta. The people of Gytheion treated him as a benefactor and continued to honour his son because he managed to establish a lineage – the Heraclids – which played a leading role in the history of the Peloponnesse during the Roman imperial period (see Cartledge and Spawforth, Hellenistic and Roman Sparta, p. 99-104; Balzat, “Les Euryclides”).

Once the dedications, days and internal procedures of the festival have been set, our document begins regulating other ceremonies that were attached to the musical contests (l. 24-36). This is a particularly interesting section because it allows us to measure the degree of participation among the local population. We can see that the festival involved not only the magistrates responsible, but virtually all the groups taking part in the civic life of Gytheion. This is best represented by the clauses referring to the organisation of a procession (???????/pompê) from the temple of Asklepios and Hygeia (see Pausanias 3.21.8) to the Kaisareion. Here, all the ephebes parading, the rest of the youth and citizens were to wear laurel crowns and dress in white. Both this specific colour and the crowns resemble closely the account of another festivity related to the imperial cult that Sardis organised under Augustus. In the case of Gytheion, we are even informed of the participation of women with “sacred dresses” (??????/?ierai esthêseis). Everything culminated in the sacrifice of a bull “for the salvation of the sovereigns and gods, their everlasting rule (???????/aidion hêgemonia) and endurance (???????/diamonê).” These are all motifs recurrent in documents relating to the imperial cult; for example, the Cypriot oath of alliance to Tiberius included a reference to the eternal nature of Rome, and, under Augustus, the Paphlagonians already prayed for the continuity of his dynasty. The magistrates of Gytheion supervising the sacrifice were called ????????/ephoroi, and they also had to take care that other local groups, such as the ?????????/phideitia – a Laconian tradition (see Aristotle, Politics II.9 and Plutarch, Life of Lycurgus 12) – followed them at the city square. In the theatre, they were responsible for getting the audience facilities fit for purpose (l. 36-37). There should therefore be no doubt that the entire ceremony was both public and very visual, and required the involvement of the population, not just a selected elite. Furthermore, the law also provides instructions on how the statues mentioned in the first lines of our fragment should be commissioned (l. 35-36). Likewise, we have already mentioned the clear procedure included in order to produce inscribed copies and make Gytheion’s commitment to this particular celebration even more conspicuous. Indeed, the event was not a one-off, and other local inscriptions confirm that a festival related to the cult of the Caesars, or K???????/Kaisarea, continued to be held after 15 CE. (e.g. IG V.1, 1167; see Camia, Kantiréa, “The Imperial Cult,” p. 382-389).
The sacred law of Gytheion sheds light on several important aspects related to the impact of Roman rule on the Greek world. First, it illustrates the institutional procedure involved in the organisation of festivals in which Augustus, the subsequent emperors and their families were commemorated. Second, it confirms the quick spread of the imperial cult in Greece. While our collection includes the most relevant documents under Augustus, these mainly come from the province of Asia that was already used to the structures of a Hellenistic ruler’s cult. Consequently, the presence of temples and ceremonies dedicated to Augustus and authorised by him after Actium is not surprising. In the Peloponnese, however, such previous practices were not as widespread (see Kantiréa, Les dieux, p. 11-17) and the transforming nature of these developments is more visible, as also attested in the contemporary decree of Messene concerning the domus Augusta (SEG 42.328). At the same time, it is interesting to note that, even from such early stages, similar behaviours and practices can be found in Asia Minor, Greece and other regions both in the eastern and western Mediterranean.

We have previously mentioned the regional importance of the parade, the high degree of participation and the very visual components attached to such celebrations. Now, we can add that this document is equally relevant to answering central questions about the history of Rome. Ancient authors famously remarked that Tiberius ended up refusing divine honours (Suetonius, Tiberius 26; Tacitus, Annals IV.38). Greek inscriptions such as ours contribute to understanding the circumstances and context in which this refusal occurred. In the case of Gytheion, we have a civic community from Laconia who, upon Augustus’s death, decided to continue following the trend favoured and promoted by the imperial dynasty founder. One precedent was that set by the Asians in Pergamum, who started to dedicate a festival to the Roman ruler in 29 BCE and devised a legitimate way to demonstrate their devotion and loyalty (Cassius Dio, Roman History LI.20.9). The ultimate result of this innovation was the subsequently spectacular increase in the attestation of local festivals called Kaisareia and Sebasteia, which combined the Greek agonistic tradition and the celebration of Roman hegemony (e.g. in Naples: IvO 56; Cassius Dio, Roman History LV.10.9; Suetonius, Augustus 98.5; Velleius Paterculus, II.123.1). This process coincided with the preparation of spaces dedicated to the rulers, or Kaisareion, one of which is also attested in Gytheion (l. 28). The chronology and motifs of other signs of provincial devotion, such as inscribed oaths, is analogous. It has been mentioned above that the references to Rome’s eternity and the salvation of her leaders can be found in the examples from Cyprus and Paphlagonia, which are also dated between the last years of Augustus’s Principate and the beginning of Tiberius’s reign. A common feature of all such local displays was that they were normally communicated to Rome through embassies (e.g. Sardis or Epaminondas’s reorganization of the Ptoia, IG VII.2712). The sacred law of Gytheion and the festival it regulated was not an exception. Even if the preparation of the diplomatic mission is not explicitly mentioned as in the case of Sardis, we have an imperial response of Tiberius (SEG 11.922) dating after the 10th of March 15 CE. (because of the title pontifex maximus). He expresses gratitude for the efforts made, which many provincials most likely replicated, but concludes: “I consider it fitting that all mankind in general and your city in particular should observe special honours, commensurate with the size of my father’s benefactions to the whole world, honours fit for the gods, but as for myself, I am satisfied with honours more modest and of a human sort”.

Keywords in the original language:

- ??????? [3]
- ??????? [4]
- ????? [5]
- ?????? [6]
- ???????? [7]
- ??????? [8]
- ???????? [9]
- ?????????? [10]
- ???? [11]
- ????? [12]
- ??????? [13]
- ?????? [14]
- ???? [15]
- ????? [16]
- ????? [17]
- ????? [18]
Thematic keywords:

- Tiberius [37]
- Augustus [38]
- imperial cult [39]
- agonistic culture [40]
- sacred law [41]
- religion [42]
- parade [43]
- civic institution [44]
- Roman rule [45]
- Roman hegemony [46]
- eternity [47]
- freedom [48]
- loyalty [49]
- Laconia [50]
- Sparta [51]

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Other sources connected with this document: Inscription
Sardis sends an embassy to Augustus [62]

The League of Greek Cities in Asia and the assembly and elders of Sardis honour Menogenes for conducting a diplomatic mission in Rome. Augustus acknowledges the receipt of the embassy carrying a local decree which celebrated Gaius Caesar’s coming of age.

- Read more about Sardis sends an embassy to Augustus [62]

Inscription

A Cypriot Oath of Allegiance to Tiberius [63]

The island of Cyprus takes an oath showing their loyalty to Tiberius, praising Rome’s eternity and emphasising the kinship relations between the local Aphrodite and the Roman Venus.

- Read more about A Cypriot Oath of Allegiance to Tiberius [63]

Inscription

Oath of loyalty to Augustus in Paphlagonia [64]

The inhabitants of Paphlagonia and the Roman traders among them swear an oath of loyalty to Caesar Augustus.

- Read more about Oath of loyalty to Augustus in Paphlagonia [64]

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