



Decree of Halicarnassus celebrating the arrival of Caesar Augustus

halicarnassus_decree.jpg



[1]

The league of Greek cities prepares a decree praising the peace, good-order, concord, and prosperity brought by the arrival of Caesar Augustus

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Local decree

Original Location/Place: Turkish home near the acropolis of Halicarnassus (modern Bodrum)

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): British Museum (not in display, no. 1859, 1129.64)

Date: 2 CE to 14 CE

Physical Characteristics: Slab; the top and right hand bottom are broken away. The inscription stops at line 55. The letters are very worn in many parts, especially from lines 15 to 40, which are now mostly unreadable. On the reverse several holes have been drilled, probably at a later period when it was used for building purposes

Material: Marble

Measurements: 113.03 centimetres in height, 53.34 in width, and 15.24 thick

Language: Greek

Category: Roman, Greek

Publications: Hirschfeld, Gustav, *Greek Inscriptions of the British Museum*, no.894 (MacCabe *PHI Halikarnassos* 4)

Commentary:

This marble slab originally found in [Halicarnassus](#) [2] contains a decree of the League (?????/*koinon*) of Greek cities in Asia. Even if the name of this organisation is not explicitly stated, the second fragmentary part of the inscription – not recorded in our collection – states that “a copy is to be placed in the precinct of Rome and Augustus by a high-priest (?????/*archiereus*) and in the other cities by the magistrates.” Already in 29 BCE, Octavian had authorised this temple dedicated to him in Pergamum which had begun to act as a centre of the imperial cult for the Greeks in the province (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LI.20.6-9). The institutions of Halicarnassus – member of the league – are therefore complying with the procedure spelled out in the resolution by preparing this inscription.

The decree attributes the bringing of Caesar Augustus to the eternal and immortal nature (?????/*physis*). This supra-human arrival is explained with those aspects in which he represents the “greatest good” and benefaction towards mankind. Namely, this father of his motherland Rome – echoing the *pater patriae* title granted by the Senate in 2 BCE – was a saviour (?????/*sôtêr*). He had managed to pacify the territory under his control and the cities were flourishing because of extraordinary conditions which exceeded expectations and generated “good order, concord, and prosperity” (l. 9-10). Such hyperbolic praise of Augustus’s actions is clearly related to the religious tone in which the resolution is presented. The Greeks of Asia are bestowing a god-like character, equated to that of Zeus, on a Roman ruler who adopts decisions following his ??????/*pronoia*: a concept strictly meaning “foresight” but with important divine connotations. This religious tone also explains the performance of the festivals, sacrifices and hymns recorded in lines 12-13. Such activities correspond to the rites associated with the



imperial cult that Augustus promoted when he authorised the dedication of several temples to him in Asia Minor, as mentioned above. Nevertheless, the peaceful and prosperous state of the region proclaimed in this decree is not only produced by mere exaggeration of devout followers. The events leading up to such celebrations are fundamental for understanding the relevance of this document in assessing the impact of Augustus's rule on the eastern Mediterranean.

The ancient geographer Strabo (*Geography* VI.4,2, p. 288) remarked that “never have the Romans and their allies thrived in such peace and plenty as that which was afforded them by Augustus Caesar, from the time he assumed the absolute authority (cf. Philo, *Embassy* 309)” At the beginning of his *Annals* (I.2), Tacitus also reported that before this period the state of affairs was unpopular in the provinces, “where administration by the Senate and People had previously been discredited by the conflicts of the powerful and the greed of the officials, against which there was no protection in a legal system because this was troubled by force, by corruption, or in the last resort by gold.” The Anatolian peninsula had particularly experienced such difficulties. As Augustus himself denounces in the *Res Gestae* 24, Mark Antony plundered the temples of Asia and he could only restore their treasures after the Battle of Actium. In 31 BCE, an inscription from Mylasa – a *polis* in Caria not far from Halicarnassus (*I.Mylasa* 602) – laments that “the city had been taken and many captured citizens were lost, many murdered, some even burnt with the city, the barbarism of the enemy not even sparing the holiest shrines and temples.” In 40 BCE, we also know that another Roman general called Quintus Labienus ravaged, in collaboration with the Parthians, many territories such as Aphrodisias. The contrast between Augustus's regime and the many immediate and previous episodes of violence in the Civil and Mithridatic wars was real and patent. As a result of this rapid transformation, heavily advertised ideals such as the *Pax Augusta* (Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome*, II.126; Eck, *Augustus und seine Zeit*, p. 89-99; Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 148-150) had better chances to permeate through local populations enjoying a significant improvement in their living conditions and expectations. Indeed, this process of pacification was not just propaganda, but actually witnessed in Anatolia. For example, successful military campaigns waged against the rebellious tribes inhabiting the mountains of Pisidia, where Roman colonies were later founded (Tacitus, *Annals* III.48; *RGDA* 28; Levick, *Roman Colonies*).

This document, moreover, is important for attesting the establishment not only of Augustus's peace, but also elements of his provincial cult. As noted above, the League of Greek Cities in Asia already had a high-priest attached to the temple of Rome in Pergamum before the end of the 1st century BCE Likewise, they had the capacity to organise celebrations of a religious nature which equally started to appear in other places of the empire, both East and West; for instance, the games provided in Achaëa in 2 CE (*SEG* 23.206), or the sacrifices before the altar of Narbo in Gaul dating to 22 September 12/3 C.E. (*CIL* XII 4333 = *ILS* 112). As indicated in the latter testimony, this ceremony was to be held one day before the “date of happiness on which he (Augustus) was produced as the world's ruler.” This reference naturally alludes to his birthday on the 23rd of September. Another important resolution adopted by the Asian League of Greek Cities is very related to the celebration of this important moment in the history of Rome. I refer to the acceptance of Paullus Fabius's proposal to make all the local calendars in Asia start on this date from 9 BCE. The decree bears many similarities with the document found in Halicarnassus. In both cases, extraordinary praises of Augustus's birthday and arrival into this world are made. The peace, order and happiness of mankind are exalted and celebrated with religious elements, exactly as the previously worshipped divinity of Rome. Most importantly, they show us the early development of a system of imperial worship which became a key connector between Roman rule and provincial societies (see Price, *Rituals and Power*).

Keywords in the original language:

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- [sacrifice](#) [37]

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Galinsky, Karl, [Augustan Culture](#) [39] (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1996)
Levick, Barbara, [Roman Colonies in Southern Asia Minor](#) [40] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967)
Price, Simon R. F., [Rituals and power: the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor](#) [41] (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1984)

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