

“Greek Piety in a Roman Context:
Aelius Aristides’s *Panathenaic Oration*”

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INTRODUCTION

During the Principate the Roman emperor served as the protector of the relationship between the gods and the inhabitants of the empire. Consequently, Rome actively encouraged the exercise of traditional state cult in the provinces in order to secure the blessing of the gods in return for their continual, accustomed veneration.¹ Rome’s double-sided approach to religion (that is, presenting itself in a position of religious superiority over against its subjects, as the supervisor of piety--while at the same time inciting its subjects to give of their very best to the gods) created the opportunity for what James C. Scott calls “a hidden transcript” to develop in Greek discourse.² By highlighting their own efforts toward the veneration of the gods in public discourse, subject populations could present themselves to their Roman overlords as enthusiastic partners in a momentous undertaking--keeping the gods happy. But at the same time, such self-congratulatory discourse had within it the potential to be heard on two levels; what Roman ears might perceive as acceptance of the role of subordinate partner in the quest for divine protection could ring in provincial ears as a challenge to this tributary status. In the *Panathenaic Oration* of Second Sophistic orator Aelius Aristides, his praise of Athenian piety is not just a rehashing of traditional

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¹ C. Ando (2000). *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press) 277; Ando (2008). *The Matter of the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press) 99.

² J. C. Scott (1990). *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press). Scott argues for a binary level of discourse which serves as mode of resistance to external sources of power. The subordinate entity communicates one message to its ruling power and another to its own group.

rhetorical motifs about Athens but is rather a response to Roman claims to religious supremacy. Aristides, I would argue, was reluctant to allow Rome to maintain its self-asserted monopoly on “best in piety.”

This work builds on the earlier analysis of the *Panathenaic Oration* by J. A. Oliver who noted in passing several of the points on which I elaborate here in light of more recent research on Roman ideology and Greco-Roman relations. Oliver, however, argues that the heart of Aristides’s work is the assertion that the gods have made Athens the vehicle for educating all mankind in the arts of civilization. He therefore reads Aristides’s stress on the religious superiority of Athens as a call to Hellenic re-commitment to the traditional gods. In Oliver’s view, this reflects Aristides’s belief that such was necessary if Greece was to combat the rising tide of barbarism (variously defined by Oliver) that confronted it. For Oliver, piety is a central theme of the oration but it forms part of the larger picture of Athens which Aristides is at pains to paint; Athens as a general symbol of Hellenic *paideia*. My approach is to shift the emphasis to Athenian religiosity as a specially charged marker of Athenian status claims.³

Rome consistently presented itself not only as the most pious nation the world had ever seen but as the ultimate arbiter of

³ J. A. Oliver (1968). “The Civilizing Power: A Study of the Panathenaic Discourse of Aelius Aristides against the Background of Literature and Cultural Conflict,” *TAPA* 58.1:1-223, esp. 32; 35-37; for Rome, identity, and religion, see especially Ando (2000) and Ando (2008) (cited in n.1); on state cult as a means of promoting and shaping autonomous self-identity for Greeks in the Roman imperial period see J. Elsner (2001). “Structuring ‘Greece’: Pausanias’ Periegesis as a Literary Construct,” in *Pausanias: Travel and Memory in Roman Greece* (ed. S. Common, J. F. Cherry, and J. Elsner; Oxford: Oxford University Press) 3-20 and Elsner (1992). “Pausanias: A Greek Pilgrim in the Roman World,” *PastPres* 135: 3-29; I. Rutherford (1992). “Tourism and the Sacred: Pausanias and the Traditions of Greek Pilgrimage,” in *Ibid.*, 40-52; G. M. Rogers (1991). *The Sacred Identity of Ephesos: Foundation Myths of a Roman City* (New York: Routledge).

piety in the here and now as well. Of all the cities that the Romans conquered, it can be argued that Athenian resentment at such claims would be peculiarly high. Athens would naturally see Roman claims to religious superiority as usurpation of a central component of its own civic identity that had long been accepted and established in the Greek world. In what follows I will argue that Aristides deliberately pulls out for repeated inspection the peculiar piety of Athens, drawing attention to both its pious actions in the past and its continued dominance of cult in the present, directing, as it did, not only the most prominent cults in Greece but also playing a supervising role in a distinguished cult celebrated across the empire, by Romans, provincials, and emperors alike, the Mysteries of Eleusis.

ROMAN CONTEXT

Religion was an essential ingredient of Roman identity. The Romans believed that they had won the right to rule because of their twin national strengths: superiority in arms *and* devotion to the gods.⁴ Several Roman authors of the late Republic and early Principate write about these two national traits. Virgil for instance writes that Aeneas, the archetypal Roman and founder of the city of Rome, is described as the foremost both in piety and in arms.⁵ That Rome was under divine protection appeared to be a widespread notion in the late Republic: Sallust, Livy, and Cicero are among the many who reflect this belief. Sallust for example writes: “Through valor and the favor of the gods you are mighty and powerful, all things are favorable and yield obedience to

⁴ R. Gordon (1990). “From Republic to Principate: Priesthood, Religion and Ideology,” in *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World* (ed. M. Beard and J. North; Ithaca: Cornell University Press) 176-198 discusses tensions in Roman culture about whether the defining characteristic of the Roman nation was military might or piety.

⁵ Verg. *Aen.* 6. 848-853; 1.544-545.

you.”⁶ Livy wrote that the city itself was founded under auspices and augury; Cicero, that the gods helped Rome against not only foreign enemies but also enemies on the home front.⁷ Moreover, in Cicero’s understanding, the gods protect not only the city but the empire as well.⁸

From here the natural progression of ideas suggested that the empire itself was the result of Roman piety. Cicero in *de natura deorum* writes: “[O]ur empire was won by these commanders who obeyed the dictates of religion.”⁹ Propertius, too writes, “For we stand a strong nation as much through humanity (*pietas*) as through the sword: our anger stays its hand in victory.”¹⁰ Victory and piety were thus connected—divine protection was provided because Romans were pious and victory (*victoriam*) was granted only when they were unceasing in their worship.¹¹

All ancient peoples believed in the protective value of traditional state cult. The citizens of each city honored the gods and in return they were protected and blessed by them. Roman religious policy worked within this belief system. It was the displacement of the twin notions of strength in arms and superiority in piety to the emperor that allowed the Romans to

⁶ Sall. *Iug.* 14.19. All translations are taken from the Loeb edition unless otherwise noted. Livy 5.51.3-4; Cic. *Cat.* 2.13.29; on Roman piety and acquisition of empire see also Cic. *Cat.* 3.8.21; *Dom.* 56.143; *Sest.* 23.53; *Nat. D.* 2.3.8; Prop. 3.21-22; Livy 5.51.9-10; Hor. *Carm.* 6.1-6.

⁷ Livy 5.51.3-4; Cic. *Cat.* 2.13.29.

⁸ Cic. *Cat.* 3.8.21; *Dom.* 56.143; *Sest.* 23.53.

⁹ Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.3.8.

¹⁰ Prop. 3.21-22.

¹¹ Livy 5.51.9-10; cf. Hor. *Carm.* 6.1-6: “‘Tis by holding thyself the servant of the gods that thou dost rule; with them all things begin; to them ascribe the outcome!” Brunt explores conceptions of empire in the late Republic through the writings of Cicero and Caesar, see P. A. Brunt, “Laus Imperii,” in *Imperialism in the Ancient World: The Cambridge University Research Seminar in Ancient History* (ed. P. D. A. Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker; Cambridge Classical Studies; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 159; 165.

develop a comprehensive, exportable, religious ideology that was acceptable to both itself and its subjects.¹²

This Roman approach is spelled out in Maecenas' advice to Augustus in book 52 of Cassius Dio.¹³ The speech is a list of do's and do not do's for the ideal ruler. Maecenas, friend and counselor to Augustus, explains how an emperor can become immortal the right (i.e., the Roman) way: not by encouraging worship of himself but by worshipping the divine everywhere and encouraging all others to do so as well: "Therefore, if you desire to become in very truth immortal, act as I advise; and, furthermore, do you not only yourself worship the divine Power everywhere and in every way in accordance with the traditions of our fathers, but compel all others to honour it."¹⁴

It was the acceptance of the association of emperor, piety, and victory that allowed provincials to meet the Romans half-way in their self-appointed mission; for the provincials too, thought the

¹² Cp. Gordon to Ando on this point, Gordon (1990). "Religion in the Roman Empire: The Civic Compromise and its Limits," in *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World* (ed. M. Beard and J. North; Ithaca: Cornell University Press) 235-255.

¹³ Gordon notes that during the Principate it was extremely rare to see anyone other than the emperor depicted in the act of sacrificing in Italian reliefs, Gordon (1990). "The Veil of Power: Emperors, Sacrifice and Benefaction," in *Ibid.*, 202-205.

¹⁴ Cass. Dio 52.36.1. Rome thus found a neat solution to the traditional belief that only rites performed at Rome could guarantee the success of the city would be sustained, see C. Ando (2007). "Exporting Roman Religion," in *The Blackwell Companion to Roman Religion* (ed. Jörg Rüpke; Oxford: Blackwell) 234; 239; cf. Ando (2003). "A Religion for the Empire," in *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Text* (ed. A. J. Boyle and W. J. Dominik; Boston: Brill) 339. The tie to place is firmly made in a speech by the Roman hero of the Veii wars, Camillus. The Romans, he declares, cannot abandon the city and remove to Veii, for to transfer the sacred rites from Rome to Veii would be a sin (Livy 5.52.8). "[I]s it possible at the feast of Jupiter that the couch should be spread elsewhere than in the Capitol? . . . The Vestals surely have but that one dwelling-place" (*Ibid.*, 5.52.6-13).

military swiftness and success of the Romans that gave rise to the empire were due to divine support.¹⁵ Plutarch offers solid evidence that Roman imperial Greeks were among those who saw the emperor as a mediator between men and gods. In *To an Uneducated Ruler*, he describes the ideal ruler in precisely these terms: “[R]ulers serve god for the care and preservation of men, in order that of the glorious gifts which the gods give to men they may distribute some and safeguard others.”¹⁶

PANATHENAIC ORATION

But if acceptance of the emperor as mediator can be demonstrated for some Greeks, it was not the only attitude. During the Second Sophistic, Greek *literati* reacted to Roman rule by cultivating a hyper-emphasis on local history and culture. Civic pride, however shrilly expressed, while it may denote dissatisfaction with the current state of subordination does not necessarily imply Roman critique. But something must lie behind Aristides’s insistence on the theme of Athenian religious superiority. Aristides naturally, in the tradition of the panegyric, drew on a pre-existing set of motifs for his oration on Athens which included Athens’ claims to religious superiority and included the themes of divine blessings for the city, Athens’ descent from the gods, Athenian devotion to the gods, and Athens’ many games and sacrifices, as well as its stewardship of the cult of the Mysteries at Eleusis.¹⁷ But Aristides’s oration highlights these themes more than any of his predecessors--in over fifty sections as

¹⁵ As demonstrated by Ando (2000) 277; see for example Polyb. 3.4.3-11.

¹⁶ Plut. *Ad princ. iner.* 780D.

¹⁷ These, as Oliver noted, are found in funeral speeches and previous panegyrics on Athens, see Oliver (1968) esp. 12-17; for Athens as host to the Mysteries see Isoc. 4.28-29; Athens as god-beloved: Plat. *Men.* 237c; Isoc. 4.29; Isoc. 12.125; Athens as a city filled with games and sacrifices: Thucy. 2.38; Isoc. 4.45-46; Athens as descended from the gods: Isoc. 12.124, 206; Athens as ever reverent toward the gods: Isoc. 4.33; Isoc. 12.124.

opposed to his predecessors who mention these in only one to five sections per speech.¹⁸

Piety is not the only Athenian trait Aristides praises. Over the course of his lengthy oration, Aristides discusses at length Athens' many gifts to the world: law, military prowess, education, and piety. He paints, for example, a vivid picture of the enduring nature of the true Athenian Empire: the empire of culture and education.¹⁹ But whatever else Aristides may be doing with his oration, Athenian piety forms a running theme throughout the piece and the language that he uses to describe it closely mirrors claims made by Rome which helped to legitimize its rule.²⁰

¹⁸ For Athens as host to the Mysteries, Aristid. *Panath.*: 330, 341, 342, 373, 399; Athens as descended from the gods: 38, 62, 154, 404; Athens as god-beloved: 33; Athens as ever reverent toward the gods: 21, 154, 155, 338, 341, 354, 363, 364, 372; Athens receiving gifts from the gods: 9, 12, 19, 21, 32, 34, 38, 40, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 217, 333, 338, 339, 340, 363, 366, 382, 399; gods contending to have the city: 40, 41, 42, 43; Athens as the common hearth of Greece: 14, 61, 401; Athens as a sacred location or entity or possessing aspects which are likened to the sacred: 25, 31, 34, 35, 36, 37, 47, 51, 401, 403; Athens as the first to offer cult: 35, 50, 51, 88, 360, 374; Athens as having the first and/or best games: 38, 362, 375, 395. Of these, if we count but once those passages which contain more than one theme, we are left with fifty-seven sections that discuss Athens in relation to the gods. There are also passages on the role Athenian piety played in the victory over the Persians: 104, 105, 108, 154, 155, 191, 192.

¹⁹ Beginning in Aristid. *Panath.* 327. The implied comparison must surely be to the Roman Empire, particularly as he remarks here on the fickleness of empires based on military hegemony contrasting it with the intellectual and cultural legacy of Athens.

²⁰ It should be noted that praise for Roman piety is conspicuously absent in the *Roman Oration* of Aristides. He instead praises Rome for bringing peace which has as one of its consequences the fact that the gods can now be honored as they are meant to be honored and that under Roman rule conditions are now such that all humankind can enjoy to the full the benefits the gods can bestow on them (Aristid. *Rom. Or.* 104-105); for the subversive nature of Aristides's writings on Rome see L. Pernot, "Aelius Aristides and Rome," in *Aelius Aristides Between Greece, Rome, and the Gods* (ed. W. V. Harris and B. Holmes; Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 33; Boston: Brill, 2008), 175-201.

AN ATHENIAN REPUTATION FOR PIETY

Athens' reputation for piety was well known in the Greek world. The city of Athens was said to have been founded by the gods and Aristides draws on these traditions in his opening paragraphs to explain the city's origins and earliest history.²¹ The city also had a long tradition of both dominating sacred space in panhellenic sites and investing heavily in spiritual capital in Athens itself and its properties. As early as the sixth century BCE, Athens was notable for its spectacular festivals. Under the Pisistratids the city began to invest heavily in state festivals such as the Panathenaea and the newly founded Greater and Lesser Dionysia.²² In the classical period, the Old Oligarch notes that Athens invested more heavily in festivals than any other Greek city.²³ Aristophanes's *Clouds* describes Athens as the home of the Mysteries, filled with shrines, pilgrims (πρόσοδοι), and festivals.²⁴ The tone is not matter of fact but boastful. Stratoniceus, a famous Athenian wit, joked that Athens should be placed in charge of the mysteries and processions of Greece since this was its special field of excellence.²⁵ Demosthenes, in *Against Meidias*, writes, "[A]ll your choruses and hymns to the god are sanctioned, not only by the regulations of the Dionysia, but also by the oracles, in all of which,

²¹ Aristid. *Panath.* 12; 34; 36-48; see also 360.

²² Or, if not specifically as a result of Pisistratid policy, at least during the second half of the sixth century BCE; on the Pisistratids and the cults of Athens see H. A. Shapiro (1989). *Art and Cult under the Tyrants in Athens* (Mainz am Rhein: P. von Zabern, 1989) 46-61; 86. R. Parker (1996). *Athenian Religion: A History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 78-79 notes the increases not only in the scale of the festivals (which now provided for distributions of meat to the general populace) but also in the level of organization with the introduction of the *hieropoioi*, the performers of rites, and the appearance of the board of the "Treasurers of Athena"; sixth century BCE treasurers of Athena: Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 8.1; 47.1; *IG I³* 510; 590; *hieropoioi* of the sixth century BCE: *IG I³* 507-508.

²³ [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 3.8.

²⁴ Ar. *Nub.* 300-310.

²⁵ Plut. *Lyk.* 30.6. Parker notes that the Greater Panathenaea of 410/409 BCE cost more than 6 talents (*IG I³* 375, lines 5-7), see Parker (1996) 129.

whether given at Delphi or Dodona, you will find a solemn injunction to the State to set up dances after the ancestral custom, to fill the streets with the savour of sacrifice, and to wear garlands.”²⁶

In addition to holding magnificent local ceremonies, Aristides praises Athens for being very active at panhellenic cult sites.²⁷

The Samothracians are proud of their sacred ceremonies, and these are the most famous of all except for the Eleusinia. Well, Delos has been dedicated to the gods; but it belongs to the city. What would you say of the fact that the road to Delphi is the work of the city and that the Pythian Mission is native only to the Athenians, except that all this comes from the gods who wish in every way to honor Athens and for the city to have a hand as it were in all fair things?²⁸

In this, too, Aristides was praising Athens for an aspect of its identity as a city state which had already drawn attention. In the

²⁶ Dem. *Meid.* 51; cf. 52-55.

²⁷ The importance of interstate sanctuaries as locations for competitive display has been established with respect to early Greek history in C. Morgan (1990). *Athletes and Oracles: The Transformation of Olympia and Delphi in the Eighth Century BC* (New York: Cambridge University Press) 2-3; A. Snodgrass (1986). “Interaction by Design: The Greek City-State,” in *Peer Polity Interaction and Sociopolitical Change* (ed. C. Renfrew and J. F. Cherry; New Directions in Archaeology; New York: Cambridge University Press) 47-58. Such studies were made in reference to sanctuaries of the pre-Roman period but the conclusions reached are equally true of the later era. Marinatos classifies sanctuaries into three types each of which is tied to wealth, prestige, and competitive display, N. Marinatos (1993). “What Were Greek Sanctuaries? A Synthesis,” in *Greek Sanctuaries: New Approaches* (ed. N. Marinatos and R. Hägg; New York: Routledge) 229-232.

²⁸ Aristid. *Panath.* 363. All translations of Aristides’s orations are taken from the edition by C. A. Behr (1986). *P. Aelius Aristides: The Complete Works* (2 vols.; Leiden: E. J. Brill) unless otherwise noted.

Hellenistic period the city began sending elaborate processions to Delphi, one of which numbered as many as five hundred participants among them the city's famous band of musical performers, the *technitai*.²⁹ Athens controlled the cult of Delian Apollo on Delos, and was dominant for much of the Hellenistic and Roman periods in the cult associated with the koinon of the Hellenes, an association of Greeks that met at Plataea to worship Zeus Eleutherios and to commemorate the victory of the war for Greek freedom against the Persians.³⁰ Athens was also extremely active at Plataea, Marathon, Munichia, and Delphi.

The reputation for piety extended into the age of the Second Sophistic. Pausanias, for example, states that the Athenians are beyond others in *eusebeia* toward the gods and a Thyateiran decree from the second century CE blesses Athens for its role in the Mysteries.³¹

Aristides often praises Athens as the first to perform cult or the model for imitation in cult. Its temples are the greatest and fairest and Athens moreover serves as a model in the care and maintenance of temples, being not only the best in these endeavors but the first city to establish the habit.³² Athens was also, according to Aristides, the first to establish games which, even today, he writes, are elaborately celebrated. In addition to which, the city has the largest number of first class contests.³³ Of these, he writes, the Panathenaea and the Eleusinia are the most famous.³⁴ But since, as

²⁹ *FD* III.2.49-50 (106/5 BCE).

³⁰ N. D. Robertson (1986). "A Point of Precedence at Plataia: The Dispute between Athens and Sparta over Leading the Procession," *Hesp.* 55: 88-102.

³¹ Paus. 1.17.1; 1.24.3; C. P. Jones (1999). "A Decree of Thyatira in Lydia," *Chiron* 29: 1-21; see below for discussion of this decree.

³² Aristid. *Panath.* 21; 354; cf. 560-561.

³³ *Ibid.*, 38; 338; 375.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 362. Four important games were held there in the Roman imperial period: the Panhellenia, the Olympia (at Athens), the Hadrianea, and the Panathenaea.

he asserts, the games in Greece are the most famous of all, Athens' great games are in fact the best in the world.³⁵

It is surely significant that the two games which were associated with Roman benefaction (the Panhellenia and the Hadrianea) are passed over by Aristides who chooses instead to single out for especial notice only traditional Athenian games. This noticeable silence combined with the universal nature of the claim being made here raises the suspicion that Aristides may be speaking on two levels. It would be appropriate for a Greek to make such a pointed reference to ownership of the best in traditional Greek games since Rome had been increasingly involved in this sphere. Romans, despite senatorial disapproval, were increasingly enchanted with the games and in the Roman imperial period, Greek style games sprang up all over the empire.³⁶ There is also much to support the argument not just for Roman encouragement of Greek games but for Roman control over Greek games. The granting of sacred status became over time the gift of the emperor.³⁷ A rescript of Diocletian limiting the festivals which

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 362.

³⁶ On Roman enthusiasm for Greek-style games, see J. König (2005). *Athletics and Literature in the Roman Empire* (Greek Culture in the Roman World; New York: Cambridge University Press) 207-253; S. Müller (1995). *Das Volk der Athleten: Untersuchungen zur Ideologie und Kritik des Sports in der griechisch-römischen Antike* (Bochumer altertumswissenschaftliches Colloquium 21; Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier) 216-223. On the games in the Roman imperial period see L. Moretti, *IAG*; L. Robert (1969). "Aristos Ellēhnōn," in *Opera minora selecta: Épigraphie et antiquités grecques* (Amsterdam: A.M. Hakkert) 2:758-767; S. Mitchell (1993). *The Celts in Anatolia and the Impact of Roman Rule* (vol. 1 of *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*; New York: Oxford University Press) 219-225; A. J. Spawforth (1989). "Agonistic Festivals in Roman Greece," in *The Greek Renaissance in the Roman Empire: Papers from the Tenth British Museum Classical Colloquium* (ed. S. Walker and A. Cameron; Bulletin Supplement 55; London: Institute of Classical Studies) 193-197.

³⁷ Mitchell (1990). "Festivals, Games and Civic Life in Roman Asia Minor," *JRS* 80:189.

might crown sacred victors includes those of *antiqua Graecia*.³⁸ The rescript demonstrates that the emperor controlled the number of games held in the empire and it displays the Roman predisposition to categorize Greeks using labels of their own making (i. e., “Old Greece”): henceforth Rome would decide what constituted a traditional Greek-style game.³⁹

Roman perspectives on traditional Greek piety likely lay behind the imperial decision to make Athens the headquarters of

³⁸ C.x.54 (53). Romans admired Greeks for being the cradle of true civilization but they also considered modern Greeks to be “too civilized” and thus in need of Roman temperance. Woolf in G. D. Woolf (1994). “Becoming Roman, Staying Greek: Culture, Identity and the Civilizing Process in the Roman East,” *ProcCambrPhilSoc* 40 (1994): 116-143 argues that Roman elites applied a moralistic framework to Greece and over time there developed a sliding scale delimiting acceptable and unacceptable degrees of Hellenization for Romans. At the same time, the Romans operated with a limited fund of preconceived notions about the defining characteristics of the Greece of yesteryear, or Old Greece. This was in part shaped by their moralistic approach: only certain aspects of old Greece were considered authentically Greek, namely the parts most palatable to Rome.

³⁹ Scholars have tended to see Greek festivals and the agonistic tradition as a forum for communicating with Rome. Simon Swain writes: “Many media in which the past was a particular focus were encouraged and licensed by Roman government--for example, the prolific festivals which celebrated ancient gods and city founders or quasi-political institutions like Hadrian’s panhellenic council, or the granting to cities of old or old-sounding names” (S. Swain (1996). *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World, AD 50-250* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 66). For van Nijf the games became a means of accommodating the realities of Roman power, the Greeks being careful to shape their vision of Greek-ness in conformity with Roman notions of its idealized past (O. van Nijf (2001). “Local Heroes: Athletics, Festivals and Elite Self-fashioning in the Roman East,” in *Being Greek under Rome: Culture, Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire* (ed. S. Goldhill; New York: Cambridge University Press) 314; 329-333; cf. Spawforth (1989) 196-197; E. L. Bowie (1974). “Greeks and Their Past in the Second Sophistic,” in *Studies in Ancient Society* (ed. M. I. Finley; Past and Present Series; Boston: Routledge and K. Paul) 167; 206; 208-209); cf. König (2005) 226, who calls “spectacle culture” a vehicle for reinforcing imperial power and Roman as well as Greek hierarchies.

the newly created Panhellenic League. The Panhellenic League, thought to be the creation of the emperor Hadrian, is a somewhat shadowy institution but two things stand out about this league: 1) it took over some administrative and financial functions at the sanctuary of Eleusis and 2) it was somehow considered to be a benefaction *for Athens*. Athens was not only to host the delegates but also the great Panhellenic games associated with the league. Hadrian had soft spot for this city, on which he lavished money, but no doubt Athens' pre-existing connection to the Mysteries and its reputation for extreme piety were contributing factors.⁴⁰

A second-century Thyateiran decree found at Athens on the Acropolis refers to the league praising both emperor and host city. The pertinent lines appear to attribute the league to the intervention of Hadrian, on behalf of a Greek request, before the Roman Senate, but the language of the decree also acknowledges and praises Athens in its role as the supervisor of the Mysteries:

[S]ince [simultaneously] he benefited all the Greeks in common when he summoned the council from among them, as a universal gift, to the most brilliant city of Athens, the Benefactress, who gives reward of the Mysteries to all equally, and when, on his proposal, [the Romans] approved the most venerable Panhellenion [by decree] of the senate; and individually he [gave] the tribes and the cities [a share] in this most honorable council.⁴¹

⁴⁰ A. J. Spawforth and S. Walker (1985). "The World of the Panhellenion. I. Athens and Eleusis," *JRS* 75: 78-105; A. J. Spawforth (1999). "Panhellenion Again," *Chiron* 29: 339-352; L. Nasrallah (2008). "The Acts of the Apostles, Greek Cities, and Hadrian's Panhellenion," *JBL* 127: 551-552; M. T. Boatwright (2000). *Hadrian and the Cities of the Roman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) esp. 101; K. Clinton (1999). "Eleusis from Augustus to the Antonines: Progress and Problems," in *Acta, XI congresso internazionale di epigrafia greca e latina, 18-24 Settembre 1997* (Rome: Edizioni quasar) 99.

⁴¹ Lines 13-18, translation by Jones (1999) 12.

Emperors could hardly be unaware in any case that Athens also had a special relationship with the great sanctuary of the Mysteries of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis since emperors were regularly inducted into the cult under the aegis of Athenian priests. Athens provided the leading officials for the Eleusinian Mysteries and seems to have been generally responsible for conducting the Mysteries.

Cicero, one of our main sources for the Roman point of view in the first century BCE, points to Athens' role as the bringer of the Mysteries as the very crowning achievement of human civilization. He writes:

For in my opinion your Athens seems not only to have produced many distinguished and divine things and to have brought them into the life of humankind, but also it has produced nothing better than those mysteries, in which we have been refined from a rustic and savage life to humanity (*humanitatem*) and have been civilized, and as they are called *initia*, we have learned in truth the beginnings of life, and we have received not only with joy a method of living but even of dying with better hope.⁴²

Cicero's language here is the language of the Roman mission--the desire to bring the proper amount of civilization to the world--but it is applied not to Rome but to Athens.⁴³ The language seems to suggest that Athens, not Rome, is the ultimate source of *humanitas* in the world.⁴⁴ It has achieved this not through law or

⁴² Cic. *Leg.* 2.36; translation by B. S. Spaeth (1996). *The Roman Goddess Ceres* (Austin: University of Texas Press) 61.

⁴³ On the Roman mission in Greece, see Woolf (1994).

⁴⁴ *Quibus ex agresti immanique vita exculti ad humanitatem et mitigati sumus*; cp. Cic. *Flac.* 62: *adsunt Athenienses, unde humanitas, doctrina, religio, fruges, irua, leges ortae atque in omnis terras distributae putantur*; cp. Cicero, this time in respect to Rome: Moreover if we care to compare our national characteristics with those of foreign peoples, we shall find that, while in all other respects we are only the equals or even the inferiors of others, yet in the sense of religion,

good government as the Romans would do but through serving as dispenser and as priest of a universal cult: a cult which could be celebrated by all the inhabitants of the empire.

One could argue that in the case of this cult, Rome displays some misgiving or jealousy about leaving this cult, which attracted adherents from across the empire, in Greek hands. Two emperors, in fact, Hadrian and Claudius, were both rumored to have made attempts to either move the Mysteries to Rome or else to recreate them there. A brief comment in Suetonius informs us that Claudius tried unsuccessfully to move the Mysteries to Rome.⁴⁵ And Hadrian made a cult of Demeter and Kore (Ceres and Libera) at Rome.⁴⁶

Aristides was aware of the special place of the cult and he notes its universal appeal and its universal scope.

But now, you sustain simply all mankind and every race with the fairest of benefits, becoming the leaders of all education and wisdom and purifying all men everywhere. For in the ceremonies of the Eleusinian mysteries you have been called the interpreters and guides of the sacred ritual for those who attend. But for all men you have always been interpreters and teachers of this sacred and public offering.⁴⁷

By focusing on the city's role as a mediator between the gods and humankind, Aristides is attributing to the city of Athens the

that is, in reverence for the gods, we are far superior (*multo superiores*) (Cic. *Nat. d.* 2.3.8). In the *Aeneid* 11.291-292, Aeneas is said to be the equal of the Greek Hector in arms but his superior in piety (*pietate prior*).

⁴⁵ Suet. *Claud.* 25.

⁴⁶ Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 14.4.

⁴⁷ Aristid. *Panath.* 330.

primary function of the Roman emperor, the key to legitimizing his rule.⁴⁸

It is worth noting that Aristides does not discuss the Panhellenion directly in this oration but only the Mysteries. Just as he passed over the Roman-granted games, the Panhellenia and the Hadrianea, so he consistently talks around the Panhellenion. It is as if Aristides considers the Panhellenion to be “tacked on” to the traditional cult of the Mysteries and therefore not worth discussing. For Aristides, this Roman benefaction was no benefit at all, its creation superfluous. The cult of the Mysteries did not need reorganization and Athens did not need to be confirmed in its status as facilitator of this cult. Athens had always played the central role in the Mysteries and would continue to play after it the Panhellenion became defunct (which it quickly did).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Oliver had noted that Aristides had, as he put it, substituted “Athens and Zeus” in for “emperor and Jupiter” in the usual configuration of the “theology of power.” He also notes that several phrases suggest that Rome occupied a role as “junior partners” in the empire, in that their maintenance of order allowed Athens to carry out the god-ordained role of bringing civilization to the world but he does not flesh out the implications seeing the real targets of the oration as barbarians which stand, he argues, for conversion to non-traditional faiths, such as Christianity and Cynicism, the increasing barbarization of the army, and the Parthian threat (Oliver (1968) 37-44).

⁴⁹ This oration is generally dated to the mid-second century, after the Panhellenion had been created. Interest in the Panhellenion significantly decreased after the death of Hadrian. By the reign of Marcus Aurelius, freedmen sought to become delegates (as opposed to men of higher rank) and the emperor and his co-regent were obliged to threaten punishments for athletes who shunned the Panhellenic games; on freedmen and the Panhellenion see Oliver (1989). *Greek Constitutions of Early Roman Emperors from Inscriptions and Papyri* (Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society 178; Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society) no. 184, lines 57-81 and Spawforth and Walker (1985) 87-90 where they note (though “with caution”) that it appears that the Panhellenion’s highest officials were comprised of those who had not made a career for themselves in the Senate and that at least half (fourteen or fifteen of the twenty-five identified to date) were not Roman citizens; see also N. M. Kennell (1997). “Herodes Atticus and the Rhetoric of Tyranny,” *CP* 92:

There is one place in the oration where Aristides may reference the Panhellenion but the reference is oblique and uncertain. He appears to be alluding to the bust-crowns worn by delegates of the Panhellenion when he writes “The goodwill and favor of the gods themselves is also evident through the medium of the common seer of the race and the ancestral interpreter of the city, when the gods ordered it to offer the pre-plowing sacrifice on behalf of the Greeks and named it ‘the mother city of the crops,’ and also thought that it should wear a crown, as if it were a lifelong victor.”⁵⁰ If this sentence is indeed meant to invoke the Panhellenion, then, according to Aristides, the city was chosen for this role by the gods, not by Rome, as a result of the special connection Athens had always had with the gods. In this way, the Roman benefaction of the Panhellenion, one of the biggest benefactions ever given to Athens by an emperor, is undercut, and the choice of Athens as the headquarters of the Panhellenion is presented as only its just due.

THE PERSIAN WARS AND ATHENIAN PIETY

In his *Panathenaic Oration* the Romans are not explicitly mentioned as the point of comparison. Why then should praise of Athenian piety be perceived as a response to Roman claims of religious superiority? I have argued so far that Rome had presented itself as, and had been embraced throughout the empire as, the arbiter of piety. I have also argued that Rome was intervening in traditional Greek cult in several ways including areas traditionally dominated by Athens, namely, panhellenic games and the cult of the Mysteries. Now it remains to be added that Athens had one

346-362, esp. 350; for the letter of Marcus Aurelius and co-ruler on the Panhellenia see *IG* II²1106 = Oliver, (1989) no. 188.

⁵⁰ Aristid. *Panath.* 399; on delegates and bust-crowns, see L. A. Riccardi (2007). “The Bust-Crown, the Panhellenion, and Eleusis: A New Portrait from the Athenian Agora,” *Hesp.* 76: 365-390.

other essential ingredient that allowed Aristides to make the substitution of Athens for emperor in the theology of victory: Athens was the one city in Greece, in the entire Roman empire, that had a victory in its past so spectacular that it could compete with the story of Rome's amazing dominion. Rome had conquered the world with its piety and its arms but they were latecomers to the game: Athens had already established this precedent by its victory in the Persian Wars when it had become the savior of Greece.⁵¹ The twin themes of piety and military, combined so often in the Roman self-presentation, are combined and applied throughout the section on the Persian Wars to Athens.⁵²

The Athenian-led victory in the Persian Wars is not the only military history that Aristides recounts in his oration but the victories of Marathon and Salamis are held by him to be paradigmatic. Not only were they the greatest military challenges in human history but they also paved the way for the truest, most-enduring form of victory, that of the cultural and religious victory of Greece over all humankind.⁵³

⁵¹ A. J. Spawforth (1994). "Symbol of Unity? The Persian Wars Tradition in the Roman Empire," in *Greek Historiography* (ed. S. Hornblower; Oxford: Clarendon Press) 237-247 argued that the Romans encouraged commemoration of the Persian Wars because they could recast the Persians as Parthians and place themselves in the role of triumphant defenders of freedom. It was therefore advantageous for Greek cities to establish a connection to their own past victory over barbarian forces and it quickly became a popular move to cultivate such associations in a bid for imperially bestowed honors and privileges; Augustan reenactment of the *naumachiae* of Salamis: Ov. *Ars am.* 1.171-172; Nero's *naumachiae* between Persians and Athenians: Cass. Dio 61.9.6; Suet. *Nero* 12; see also S. E. Alcock (2002). *Archaeologies of the Greek Past: Landscapes, Monuments, and Memories* (W. B. Stanford Memorial Lectures; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 82-87; on Athenian commemoration of its naval supremacy over Persia see Z. Newby (2005). *Greek Athletics in the Roman World: Victory and Virtue* (Oxford Studies in Ancient Culture and Representation; New York: Oxford University Press) 179-192.

⁵² Aristid. *Panath.* 92-184.

⁵³ Since if Athens had lost then Greece would not have continued to flourish, Aristid. *Panath.* 111.

Aristides in his *Panathenaic Oration* repeatedly extols the Athenian leadership at these great battles of the past. He writes, “But so great was the glory of those men of yours and so great the distinction of the victory, that they even made the place, as it were, a symbol of virtue. Nor is there anyone who, hearing the name Marathon, does not feel his heart rise, and who does not welcome the words as a gift and revere it with joy.”⁵⁴

Aristides attributes the Athenian-led victory to the city’s relationship with its patron goddess and its overall piety toward the gods. As the Persian army approached, Aristides declares, the city took on the aspects of a city arranging a religious procession rather than an army gearing up for battle.⁵⁵ The victory over the Persians is attributed to both the providential care of the gods for Athens and to the Athenians devotion to them:

But the people of Athena, who had already often and in many ways showed that they were rightly named after her and that they found the goddess’ intentions most kindly disposed toward them, and who had recognized that the city’s protection lay without, passed a decree, to entrust the city to the Goddess City-Holder, and to deposit their wives and children at Troezen, and themselves stripped of excess encumbrance, to use the sea as their shield, in one day giving proof of all the qualities which are called the greatest among mankind, piety, moral strength, intelligence, generosity, and nobility.⁵⁶

Aristides also explicitly pairs Athenian predominance in the wars with the city’s predominant cultic activities of thanksgiving and commemoration after the war. “Moreover, even in these matters the city obviously will have excelled as much as in

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 154-155.

the action itself ... it conferred the other honors due to the gods in a way beyond the power of all Greece, some at home and some abroad.”⁵⁷ Athens, according to Aristides, took a leadership role “in the erection of dedications and thank offerings” which he sees as further evidence of its “piety” and “a testimony to its beauty and greatness.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 192. The combination of cult and commemoration is also seen in the description of Athenian ceremonies by Plutarch. In one essay Plutarch debates whether Athens was more famous for its intellectual or military achievement. In the following passage we see how closely the veneration of official state gods was intertwined with the celebration of the city’s heroic military past:

Nor is the day celebrated when Carcinus was successful with his *Aëropê*, or Astydamas with his *Hector*, but even yet the State celebrates the victory at Marathon on the sixth of Boëdromion. On the sixteenth of this month they pour a libation of wine in memory of Chabrias’ victory at Naxos. On the twelfth they used to sacrifice thank-offerings for the recovery of their liberty at Phylê. On the third they won the battle of Plataea. The sixteenth of Munichion they dedicated to Artemis, for on that day the goddess shone with full moon upon the Greeks as they were conquering at Salamis. The conflict at Mantinea has made the twelfth of Scirophorion more sacred; for in this battle, when the other allies were overpowered and routed, it was the Athenians alone who defeated the force opposed to them and erected a trophy taken from the victorious enemy. These are the things which have uplifted Athens to heights of glory (Plut. *De glor.*

The combination of divine providence, victory, and piety is not confined to the defeat of Persia but is present in all of Athenian history: “The following is the greatest sign of all of divine favor. When the power of the Greeks flourished, it was always triumphant over the Greeks and the barbarians.”⁵⁹ We might note here that in his thirty-seventh oration, on Athena, Aristides states that Athena alone among all the deities is synonymous with Victory: “For Victory is not entitled to the name Athena, but Athena is always entitled to the name Victory.”⁶⁰

ATHENS AS EMPEROR

Aristides ends the oration with a heavy emphasis on Athens’ special relationship to the gods. Athens has surpassed all the Greeks in matters concerning the gods, in being honored by them and in showing care for them.

Again in respect to their care for the gods, there are on the one hand the temples and on the other the annual sacrifices and processions, some of which took place first among you, and others still take place in the most elaborate way. And who would deny that the secret ceremonies, whose

Ath. 349B-350B; cf. Lesbonax who wrote that it was at Salamis, Mycalê, and Plataea that the Athenians secured the freedom of all Greece (*Lesbon. Protrep.* 5-6).

⁵⁹ Aristid. *Panath.* 333.

⁶⁰ Aristid. *Or.* 37.17; 37.26. We might add here that Athenian bronze coins, dating from the second century CE, also support a connection between Athens, victory, and piety. Several coins depict the head of Athena on the obverse and Athena on the reverse with her armament, holding Nike over bucranium; see for example *BMC* 689.

followers, it seems, have a better life after death, are sufficient by themselves to weigh against everything?⁶¹

Having now established Athens' cultic supremacy, Aristides now advances the unavoidable, triumphant conclusion: formerly, Athens was known simply as the seat of knowledge or the hearth of Greece (with cultic connotations) or its bulwark (military connotations). But (now) Athens represents the best of all mankind, providing an "image and model" for imitation; the city serves as the "lieutenant of the gods" and their "kinsman."⁶² Aristides presents the city itself, like the Roman emperor, as a deified entity. In the final lines of the speech, Aristides urges other Hellenes to consider that in praising Athens he is in fact praising them, too, but he ends with this note: "I believe it causes the Athenians themselves no shame either, if anyone worships their Acropolis."⁶³ Like the emperor, the city itself is offered up as a proper object of worship and Aristides presents himself as a worshipper of Athens, describing his oration as an ornament for the city that rivals the festival offering of a *peplos* for Athena.

CONCLUSION

What impact did Aristides intend his oration to have? Nothing concrete, that is certain; no rebellion or attempt to replace the Roman Empire with an Athenian one. Greece, and Athens in particular, on the whole enjoyed good relations with Rome, and there is no good evidence to suggest that Athens stood against Roman rule.⁶⁴ But it is also common for subject peoples to

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 338; cf. 38.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 401.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 403; translation by Oliver (1968) 90; Oliver takes *προσβέω* in the sense of "to worship;" Behr as "to prefer" in Behr (1986) 77.

⁶⁴ On the predominantly good relations between Athens and Rome see K. A. Hendrick (2006). *Roman Emperors and Athenian Life, from Augustus to Hadrian* (diss; University of California, Berkeley).

experience more than one feeling toward their conquerors, appreciating new advantages while at the same time regretting some aspects of their past independence.⁶⁵ There is no denying that Rome intervened in Greek cultic practices and that it approached Greece with a set of culturally constructed categories, creating new religious leagues, new councils, and a new headquarters at Rome for associations of musical artists who performed at festivals.⁶⁶ The period of Roman expansion and then rule was a period of change for the traditional state cult of the Greek *poleis*, as they struggled to come to terms with Roman expectations. Aristides stands as a voice of protest, an attempt to re-assert Greek religious supremacy, celebrating and commemorating what was soon to be lost for good to the demands of the Christian state. The Romans considered themselves as the bearers of culture and the guarantor of divine protection was the Roman emperor. Aristides suggests that this position belongs by rights to Athens. Rome was great: “may it be immortal!” Aristides writes; but Greece was great, too.⁶⁷ If Rome had a special relationship to the gods, so too, incontestably, did Athens.

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⁶⁵ See for example the discussion by Alcock (2002) 83-87 in which she analyzes the multivalent nature of the commemoration of the Persian Wars by Roman Greece. The commemoration of the past was something about which the Greeks could hold competing feelings simultaneously and it could also work on different levels simultaneously.

⁶⁶ Oliver (1947). “The Sacred Gerusia,” *HespSuppl* 6 (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies); for Roman involvement with the Dionysiac artists see *P. Oxy.* 2476; *FD* III.2.69-70; *IG* II² 1134; D. J. Geagan (1972). “Hadrian and the Dionysiac Technitai,” *TAPA* 103: 133-160; for emperor involvement in the appointment of Eleusinian priesthods see Oliver (1989) no. 184, lines 1-15; *IG* II² 3592, lines 21-22.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 332.