

The Emperor and the Ecumenical Synods of Competitors

In a recent contribution to an edited volume, Gordillo Hervás examines the reorganisation of two peculiar associations during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian: the so-called xystic and thymelic synods, which were the ‘international’ or, in their own terms, ‘ecumenical’ associations of respectively athletes and artists in the Roman empire.¹ As the term ‘ecumenical’ implies, these associations were active in every region of the empire where competitions of athletes and artists (*agones*) were organised. They contributed to the organisation of festivals, provided practical assistance to their travelling members and protected their professional interests.²

According to Gordillo Hervás, the associations were reorganised in the early second century AD by Trajan and Hadrian “with the aim of serving as an instrument of control over the main aspects of the agonistic events held across the empire.”³ This thesis is not new: ever since the earliest works on the ecumenical synods in the late nineteenth century, authors have stressed the omnipotence of the emperor, who would have actively used the associations as a tool to control the Greek agonistic world.⁴ However, a close analysis of the sources and a study of the broader context of Roman imperial rule have led me to different conclusions. In this paper, I will argue that the relationship between the synods and the emperor has to be defined anew, leaving more room for the agency of the associations in what was essentially a reciprocal system of exchange and communication.

A reorganisation under the Antonines?

The ecumenical synods of athletes and artists came into being in the late first century BC, when the entire Mediterranean became a single political and economic system under the aegis of Rome. This integration had its repercussions on Greek festivals, which had already in Hellenistic times expanded across the Eastern Mediterranean but which were now integrated into an ‘international’ festival network. Protected by the Roman peace, artists and athletes now

¹ GORDILLO HERVÁS (2017).

² For a detailed study of the ecumenical synods, see my PhD thesis FAUCONNIER (2018), which I am currently revising for publication. See also FAUCONNIER (2016); (2017); VAN NIJF (2006); ANEZIRI (2009); (2014); LE GUEN (2010). For the Hellenistic precursors of the ecumenical synods, see LE GUEN (2001); ANEZIRI (2003).

³ GORDILLO HERVÁS (2017), p. 84.

⁴ See for instance POLAND (1895), p. 20–21; (1909), p. 143–144; HARRIS (1966), p. 45; MERKELBACH (1974), p. 102; LAVAGNE (1986); HERZ (1997), p. 258; LE GUEN (2010), p. 238.

travelled from *agon* to *agon* according to the rotations of an official festival calendar. The emergence of the ecumenical synods has to be seen in this context. They were a *conditio sine qua non* for this complex system: the experiences of their travelling members gave them an unrivalled understanding and overview of the festival network, and competitors strongly depended on their practical assistance and information exchange.⁵

Inscriptions and papyri from the first century AD, albeit limited, reveal that they were already fully functional in that period.⁶ In membership certificates from the late second and third centuries AD, the synods themselves trace their institutional history back to the reign of Claudius by quoting imperial letters.⁷ Still, the number of sources from the first century AD pales in comparison to the number dating from the second century AD. This can be explained by two factors: 1) the epigraphic habit. The majority of our sources are inscriptions, the production of which peaked in the second century in the entire empire; 2) a new peak in agonistic foundations and thus the expansion of the festival network. Accordingly, the synods must have extended their activities in that period. This high number of sources, has, however, led some scholars to neglect the older material. Some went so far as to assume that the synods were in fact created by either Trajan or Hadrian.⁸ This is decidedly not correct, but can we assume, then, that they were reorganised by the Antonine emperors in order to better control the agonistic network?

It has been argued that the thymelic synod of the second and third centuries AD was the result of a drastic reorganisation by Trajan, who would have incorporated various minor associations such as the *collegium poetarum*, the *societas cantorum Graecorum*, the *parasiti Apollonis*, the *collegium cantorum*, the *corpus tragicorum* and *comicorum* and the *summa choragion* into it.⁹ This hypothesis, however, confuses two distinct artistic traditions: the Latin tradition, to which

⁵ On the emergence of the synods in the late first century BC, see FAUCONNIER (2016). STRASSER (2000) was the first to systematically study the agonistic circuits of the empire. See also GOUW (2009), p. 17–96.

⁶ For the athletes' synod, see *I.Didyma* 201; *IMT Kaikos* 830 (= BEAN (1965), p. 588–593; ROBERT (1968), p. 406–417); *P.Oxy.* 79 5202, ll. 23–28; *P.Lond.* 3 1178, ll. 8–36 (= *Pap.Agon.* 6); *IvO* 436. For the artists' synod, see *BGU* 1074, ll. 1–3 (= *Pap.Agon.* 1); *P.Oxy.* 27 2476, ll. 1–4 (= *Pap.Agon.* 3); *Milet* I.3 156; *I.Side* 31; *CIG* 3082. The latter text has been up to this date interpreted as a decree of the artists' synod of Asia Minor known from Hellenistic times, as its title was in the 19th century restored by Boeckh as [οἱ περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον τεχνῖται | οἱ ἐπ' Ἰωνίας καὶ Ἑλλησπόντου] | καὶ οἱ τούτων συναγων[ισταί]. However, the preserved part mentioning the *synagonistai*, i.e. secondary actors and musicians, only occurs in the title of the thymelic synod of the empire. We should therefore restore something like [οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς οἰκουμένης περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον τεχνεῖται ἱερονεῖται στεφανεῖται καὶ] οἱ τούτων συναγων[ισταί]. The decree is very similar to the thymelic synod's decrees of the second century. The earliest sources of the ecumenical synods are also discussed in FAUCONNIER (2016).

⁷ *P.Lond.* 3 1178, ll. 8–36 (= *Pap.Agon.* 6); *BGU* 1074, ll. 1–3 (= *Pap.Agon.* 1); *P.Oxy.* 27 2476, ll. 1–4 (= *Pap.Agon.* 3).

⁸ GÉRARD (1970), p. 314; STRASSER (2002), p. 142; (2010), p. 192; PETZL / SCHWERTHEIM (2006), p. 31–32.

⁹ GORDILLO HERVÁS (2017), p. 88–89, drawing on JORY (1970). See also LAVAGNE (1986), p. 136–137, 143.

all those minor associations belong, and the Greek one. A significant social and cultural gap separated the two: whereas musicians and actors from the Latin tradition were often lower-class *performers* in spectacles who ran the risk of being branded with *infamia*, Greek artists were highly respected *competitors* in prestigious *agones*.¹⁰ The competitors carefully cultivated their higher status: in one inscription from the reign of Trajan, the thymelic synod explicitly draws a line between οἱ ἀγωνιζόμενοι, the artists competing in *agones*, i.e. the synod's core members, and οἱ θεατρίζοντες, 'those who perform in shows'.¹¹ There is, furthermore, no evidence of a drastic institutional overhaul in the thymelic synod in the reign of Hadrian – a synodic decree from the later first century AD, for instance, is very similar to the decrees of the Antonine period.¹²

As for the xystic synod, some scholars assumed that it was reformed not by Trajan but by Hadrian. In the latter's reign, the association was given new headquarters in Trajan's huge bath complex on the Oppian hill in Rome, as imperial letters from Hadrian and Antoninus Pius confirm.¹³ This donation would have gone hand in hand with the creation of an association called the *sympas xystos*, 'the entire portico', which would have been a kind of super-board responsible for all athletic affairs in the empire, being directly accountable to the emperor.¹⁴ However, as Remijsen has already shown, the *sympas xystos* was not an independent association. Neither decrees nor membership certificates were drawn up by the *sympas xystos*. Rather, it is a term for the entire athletes' *community*, including those who were not member of the xystic synod. The latter remained throughout the imperial period the only ecumenical athletes' association. As the xystic synod claimed to represent the interests of all athletes, whether they had paid the substantial membership fee or not, the term *sympas xystos* appears

¹⁰ See for instance the remarks of NEP. *Praef.* 5 on the difference between Greek and Latin performers. See also CALDELLI (2012), p. 154–155, who has argued that the *collegium cantorum Graecorum* had nothing to do with the artists around Dionysos: its members were *liberti*, whereas artists competing in Greek *agones* were all *ingenui*. In the course of the second century AD, some pantomime dancers were allowed to become member of the thymelic synod, as a number of Latin inscriptions reveal: *CIL* V 7753; *ILS* 5186; *AE* 2005 337; *CIL* XIV 2113; *CIL* XIV 2977; *CIL* VI.2 10117. This, however, does not point to a merging of Latin actors' associations with the thymelic synod. Rather, a limited number of pantomimes could become member of the synod because some prestigious Greek *agones* had come to incorporate pantomime contests. From that moment on, pantomimes could become sacred victors or *hieronikai* in the Greek tradition. Still, pantomime contests never became a standard discipline of the traditional Greek *agones*. See ROBERT (1930) and especially STRASSER (2004).

¹¹ *I.Gerasa* 192, ll. 19–20, with ROBERT (1939), p. 736–738.

¹² See note 6 above.

¹³ *IGUR* 235–238. Whereas earlier scholars believed that the xystic synod's headquarters were situated in a building near the baths of Trajan (e.g. RAUSA 2004), it is more likely that the synod occupied parts of the huge bath complex itself, which not only provided assembly halls and archives but also running tracks (*xystoi*) and *palaestrae* for physical exercise; see VOLPE 2007.

¹⁴ GORDILLO HERVÁS (2017), p. 91–92, drawing on PLEKET (1973), p. 216, n. 64. Gordillo Hervás emphasises the role of the emperor more strongly than Pleket does.

sometimes in the synod's title and is used by the synod's top officials in Rome.¹⁵ It must furthermore be noted that the expression appears already in an inscription from the first century AD, and again in correlation with the xystic synod.¹⁶

The donation of the headquarters is no valid argument for an imperial reorganisation either: the letters from Hadrian and Antoninus Pius clearly show that the synod had taken the initiative by sending the high priest M. Ulpius Domestikos to the imperial court in order to request and negotiate the donation. After the initial request under Hadrian, the synod had to wait several years before Antoninus Pius finally executed the donation.¹⁷ The coming of the xystic synod to Rome was a reorganisation, but one that was carried out by the synod itself. This probably holds true for the thymelic synod too, which had acquired a *temenos* (precinct) on the Campus Martius probably in the early reign of Hadrian.¹⁸ It must furthermore be noted that the synods occupied the same kind of places in Rome as they were used to before. The xystic synod's previous headquarters were probably located in the harbour baths of Ephesus.¹⁹ It is unknown in which city the thymelic synod had its headquarters before moving to Rome, but artists' associations from the Hellenistic period equally had the tendency to settle in a *temenos* with a temple of Dionysos.²⁰

A last argument for imperial predominance concerns the synods' titles, which from the reign of Trajan and Hadrian on boasted a series of imperial names.²¹ A decree of the thymelic synod from the reign of Antoninus Pius, for instance, reads as follows: ψήφισμα τῆς ἱερᾶς Ἀδριανῆς Ἀντωνεῖ[ν]ης θυμελικῆς περιπολιστικῆς μεγάλης συνόδου τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς οἰκουμένης περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον καὶ Αὐτοκράτορα Καίσαρα Τίτον Αἴλιον Ἀδριανὸν Ἀν[τωνεῖνον] Σεβαστὸν Εὐσεβῆ νέον Διόνυσον [τεχνειτῶν ἱερoneικῶν στεφανειτῶν καὶ τῶν τούτων συναγωνιστῶν], “decree of the holy Hadrianic Antoninic thymelic wandering great synod of artists and sacred crown

¹⁵ REMIJSEN (2015), p. 235–237.

¹⁶ *IvO* 436.

¹⁷ *IGUR* 235-236.

¹⁸ The first clear evidence of the thymelic synod's Roman headquarters comes from two honorary decrees drawn up by the artists: *I.Heraclea Pontica* 2 from about AD 130 and *I.Ephesos* 22 from the early reign of Antoninus Pius. Some scholars have argued for an earlier settlement in Rome, as early as the reign of Augustus: MORETTI (1960); JORY (1970), p. 243; CALDELLI (2012), p. 132–134; (2013). Convincing evidence remains lacking, though. It is furthermore more likely that the artists, just like the athletes, only settled in Rome in the decades after the founding of the *Capitolia* (AD 86), the first permanent *agon* of the capital. As I have argued in FAUCONNIER (2017), the organisational structure of the synods was closely connected to the celebration of festivals.

¹⁹ Quite a few inscriptions dealing with the xystic synod were found there: *I.Ephesos* 1124, 1125, 1088, 1089 and 1155. *I.Ephesos* 1124 was erected in honour of Artemis and the emperor Nerva by the highest official of the synod, the high priest of the *sympas xystos* Ti. Claudius Artemidoros.

²⁰ LE GUEN (2001), vol. 2, p. 95–96; ANEZIRI (2003), p. 170–179.

²¹ GORDILLO HERVÁS (2017), p. 88. More explicitly LE GUEN (2010), p. 238: “la titulature des associations œcuméniques d’athlètes et d’artistes traduit la mainmise que l’empereur a dorénavant sur elles.” For earlier works that linked imperial titles to imperial control, see POLAND (1895), p. 20–21; (1909), p. 143–144.

victors and their fellow competitors of the whole word, gathered around Dionysos and Emperor Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus Pius, the new Dionysos.”²² The xystic synod’s title sounds no less pompous: in a membership certificate from AD 194, it called itself ἡ ἱερὰ ξυστική περιπολιστική Σεβαστὴ Ἀδριανὴ Ἀντωνιανὴ Σεπτιμιανὴ σύνοδος τῶν περὶ τὸν Ἡρακλέα καὶ τὸν ἀγώνιον καὶ Αὐτοκράτορα Καίσαρα Λ(ύκιον) Σεπτίμιον Σευήρον Περτίνακα Σεβαστόν, “the holy xystic wandering Augustan Hadrianic Antoninic Septimianic synod of those around Herakles, the agonistic one (i.e. Hermes²³) and Emperor Caesar L. Septimius Severus Pertinax Augustus”.²⁴

Do these bombastic titles prove, however, that the synods were but tools in the hands of an all-powerful emperor? There are some arguments against this thesis. First, it is likely that the synods chose to adopt the names themselves, as a way to honour the emperor in the context of the imperial cult. A parallel can be drawn with the cities of the Greek East: they, too, had the tendency to adopt imperial names and titles after getting permission from the emperor. Thus, the thymelic synod’s title under Hadrian, ἡ ἱερὰ Ἀδριανὴ Ἀντινοεῖα περιπολιστικὴ θυμελικὴ μεγάλη νεωκόρος ἐπὶ Ῥώμῃς συνόδος (‘the holy Hadrianic Antinoean wandering thymelic great synod, which is temple-warden in Rome’), cannot be used to argue that it was under stronger imperial control than for instance the city of Cyzicus, which proudly carried the name ἡ λαμπροτάτη μητρόπολις τῆς Ἀσίας Ἀδριανὴ νεωκόρος φιλοσέβαστος Κυζικηνῶν πόλις (‘the most brilliant metropolis of Asia, the Hadrianic polis of Cyzicus, the emperor-loving templewarden’).²⁵ Second, it is telling that when Hadrian addressed the thymelic synod in his letters, he refrained from using any imperial epithet, preferring the neutral title σύνοδος θυμελικὴ περιπολιστικὴ τῶν περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον τεχνειτῶν ἱερoneικῶν στεφανειτῶν – the name the synod had been carrying since at least the middle of the first century AD.²⁶

As such, the sources offer no convincing evidence that the ecumenical synods were reorganised by the Antonine emperors. Nevertheless, it remains undeniable that the emperors, and not only the Antonines, played an essential role in the history of Greek *agones* and of the synods. Sources like Hadrian’s letters to the thymelic synod found in Alexandria Troas indeed point to an increased imperial interference in agonistic life from the second century on. Several

²² *IG II/III²* 1.2 1350.

²³ Cf. SCHMITZ (1880).

²⁴ *P.Lond.* 3 1178, ll. 37-39 (= *Pap.Agon.* 6).

²⁵ *I.Heraclea Pontica* 2, ll. 20-22 (with the restorations of LE GUEN (1990)); *CIG* 3665, ll. 5-7.

²⁶ *SEG* 56 1359, ll. 5-7, 58-59. These letters were discovered on a large stele in the city of Alexandria Troas in the early 2000s and contain a wealth of information on the agonistic world in the second century AD.

emperors enthusiastically promoted *agones* in the Greek East and simultaneously kept an eye on the cities' budgets.²⁷ Even if we cannot speak of an imperial reorganisation, the emperor looms large in the sources of the ecumenical synods of the second and third centuries: as shown above, imperial names featured prominently in their titles and the synod's headquarters were located close to the centre of imperial power. Furthermore, the synods received from the emperor far-reaching privileges such as tax-freedom and inviolability, which not only enabled them to travel across the empire in relative safety but also made up an important source of social prestige. In order to better understand this close relationship, it is necessary to take a look at the Roman art of governance in the imperial framework.

The synods and the Roman art of governance

The thesis of imperial control over the ecumenical synods retains a specific view on the Roman emperor: he would have been an absolute monarch, directly controlling all aspects of ancient society with the help of an efficient administration, which according to some scholars even came to incorporate the associations of athletes and artists.²⁸ However, studies on the Roman art of governance of the last decades rather tend to downplay the absolute power of the emperor. As Syme put it, "some students of the Principate are prone to set a high value on administration. The Romans did very little of it."²⁹ Most influential in this respect were the views of Millar. In *The Emperor and the Roman World*, he described the Roman emperor as a rather 'passive' ruler, who governed the empire chiefly by responding to petitions and letters presented to him by his subjects, be they senatorial or equestrian functionaries, cities, provincial *koina*, associations or private persons. In other words, the emperor was mostly reactive, ruling the empire on a generally *ad hoc* basis.³⁰ Even if Millar's work was criticized by some scholars, his general thesis has found widespread acceptance.³¹

An analysis of the communication between the emperor and the ecumenical synods, now, seems to corroborate Millar's petition-and-response model. In every case, the emperor reacted to concrete requests by the synods, which sent ambassadors to the imperial court to plead their

²⁷ Cf. PLEKET (2010), p. 195–199.

²⁸ E.g. MERKELBACH (1974), p. 102, who somewhat anachronistically calls the xystic synod 'das kaiserliche Büro für den Sport'; GORDILLO HERVÁS (2017), p. 92 talks about 'an imperial regulatory body for all agonistic activities'.

²⁹ SYME (1982), p. 195.

³⁰ MILLAR (1977), p. 6.

³¹ Millar's methodology was more often criticised than his overall conclusions: e.g. HOPKINS (1978), p. 180; BLEICKEN (1982); EICH (2005), p. 78–84. For acceptance and further application of Millar's thesis, see for instance LENDON (1996); also KOLB (2006), p. 12 for a general endorsement. For applications in agonistic studies, see MANN (2011), p. 78; REMIJSEN (2015), p. 203.

case. Because the synods were of high status, they had the right to correspond with the emperor by letter, as did important senators and equestrians, powerful cities and provincial *koina*.³² The main reason for the synods to approach the emperor concerned their precious privileges such as tax-freedom, inviolability and exemption from liturgies, which the synods continually sought to protect and expand. The very first source of the ecumenical athletes' association is in fact a response by Mark Antony to a petition of two prominent synod members, granting them a set of such privileges.³³ One of the last sources of the ecumenical synods was equally the result of an embassy to the imperial court: an ordinance by one of the tetrarchs from ca. AD 300, which limited the privilege of *aleitourgesia* to athletic and artistic victors in a select number of first-class *agones*, was issued at the request of the two synods.³⁴ As such, it appears that the synods actively sought to establish good connections with every successive Roman ruler: the thymelic synod, for instance, congratulated Septimius Severus when he ascended the throne, using the opportunity to get their privileges confirmed.³⁵

Most of the imperial letters that have come down to us were written by Claudius and Hadrian. In their membership certificates, both synods quote letters of Claudius that were written in response to various embassies. One embassy of the xystic synod congratulated him for conquering Brittany, while another reported that two Asian client kings had received the athletes exceedingly well during the *agones* they had organized in Claudius' honour.³⁶ Another document reveals that the emperor was not always easy to reach: the thymelic synod at one point even had to call in one of Claudius' courtiers on order to bring their requests to his attention.³⁷ As for Hadrian, we have already seen that he granted a headquarters to the xystic synod only after the synod's high priest M. Ulpus Domestikos had requested one, and even then the synod only received it by petitioning Antoninus Pius again. Furthermore, the letters of Alexandria Troas in which Hadrian dealt with malpractices in the agonistic world was only written after the synods had made complaint, probably on various occasions.³⁸ The reorganisation of the festival calendar discussed in the second letter was not a personal

³² Cf. MILLAR (1977), p. 462.

³³ *SB* 1 4224.

³⁴ The imperial decision is preserved in a mutilated papyrus text (*P.Lips.* 1 44) and in the Codex Iustinianus (*Cod. Iust.* 10.54.1). The synods' request is referred to on l. 8 of the papyrus: *ad praeces vestras*. See REMIJSEN (2015), p. 243–345 for a more detailed discussion.

³⁵ Cf. *BGU* 4 1074, ll. 1–9 (= *Pap.Agon.* 1); *P.Lond.* 3 1178, ll. 8–36 (= *Pap.Agon.* 6).

³⁶ *P.Lond.* 3 1178, ll. 8–36 (= *Pap.Agon.* 6).

³⁷ *Milet* I.3 156.

³⁸ *SEG* 56 1359, ll. 1–57. See for instance l. 19: τὰ περὶ τὰ ἄθλα καὶ τὰς συντάξεις δικαίως αἰτιᾶσθαι, “as for the prizes and the pensions, you are making a just request.” (see JONES (2007), p. 147–148 for the reading of αἰτιᾶσθαι as αἰτιᾶσθε).

initiative of Hadrian, but it was decided upon after Hadrian had met with representatives of the cities, the provincial *koina* and the ecumenical synods during the *Sebasta* of Naples.³⁹

As such, this evidence does not correspond to the image of an emperor seeking to directly control all agonistic affairs. Rather, I would define the activities of the synods as *lobbying*: they used their good connections to the imperial court in order to influence the decision-making process.⁴⁰ Hadrian's decisions in the first letter from Alexandria Troas were almost entirely in favour of the synods: for instance, cities no longer had the right to cancel *agones* and use the money for something else. Competitors did not need to return to their home cities to claim *opsonia* – monthly pensions as reward to a victory in a first-class *agon* – but were allowed to send letters detailing their victory and travel on to other festival cities. They got extra tax freedom, successfully denounced fraudulent festival organisers and obtained the right to publish stelae with their rights wherever they wished. In short, they had managed to curtail the cities' authority over their festivals with imperial back-up – in theory at least.⁴¹

The synods' lobby work also explains why they were so keen to participate in the imperial cult. All over the empire, they participated in sacrifices and processions in honour of the emperor.⁴² They adorned their precincts and meeting halls with imperial statues and images and used the emperor's portrait on their seals.⁴³ The thymelic synod was even *neokoros* in Rome, i.e. temple-warden of the imperial cult, a privilege normally only granted to Greek cities.⁴⁴ Moreover, emperors like Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Caracalla were worshipped by the thymelic synod as 'new Dionysos', thereby establishing a connection between Dionysiac cult, imperial power and the world of the theatre.⁴⁵ All this was essentially a means of communication between the

³⁹ SEG 56 1359, ll. 60-61: ὡς ἔδοξέ μοι τετάχθαι τοὺς ἀγῶνας, περὶ ὧν ἐν Νεαπόλει λόγοι καὶ ἀξιώσεις ἐπ' ἐμοῦ ἐγένοντο, ὑμεῖν τε ἐδήλωσα καὶ πρὸς [ς] τ[ὰ] ἔθνη καὶ τὰς πόλεις, | ἀφ' ὧν πρεσβεῖαι περὶ τούτου παρήσαν, ἐπιστέλλω, "I have indicated to you (i.e. the synods) how I decided that the *agones* should be held, about which there were speeches and petitions before me in Naples, and I am writing to the provinces and *poleis* from which delegations were present on this matter."

⁴⁰ I use the term 'lobbying' in its broadest, general sense, defined by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as "any attempt by individuals or private interest groups to influence the decisions of government."

⁴¹ SEG 56 1359, ll. 1-57.

⁴² E.g. *I.Ephesos* 22, ll. 29-34 (early reign of Antoninus Pius): ἐπεκόσμησε μὲν [ν | τ]ὴν ἀθάνατον Ἀδριανοῦ μνήμην, ἐνδ[οξο]τ[έ]ραν δὲ τὴν σύνοδον ἀπέφηνεν ταῖς | αὐτοῦ δωρεαῖς πομπάς τε ἐέμπουσα[ν | με]γαλοπρεπῶς καὶ πολυτελεῖς ἱερομνήα[ς | ἐ]πιτελοῦσαν, "he has celebrated the imperishable memory of Hadrian and with his gifts he made the synod highly esteemed, which holds magnificent processions and organises costly festive days."

⁴³ E.g. the statue bases *IGUR* 235, 236 and 242, which once supported imperial statues; *IGUR* 248 is a seal of the xystic synod with a portrait of Septimius Severus.

⁴⁴ *I.Heraclea Pontica* 2, ll. 20-22 (reign of Hadrian).

⁴⁵ Hadrian: *Sardis* VII.1 13; *SEG* 48 1844; *IG* XIV 2495 (= CALDELLI (1997), no. N1); *I.Aphr.* 12.27; *I.Ancyra* 141, 143; Antoninus Pius: *IG* II/III² 1.2 1350; Caracalla: *CIG* 6829, ll. 11-12; Gallienus: *P.Oxy.Hels.* 25 (= *Pap. Agon.* 4). Honouring rulers as 'new Dionysos' is a practice that goes back to Hellenistic times: see LE GUEN (2010), p. 236-237. It is a strong element of continuity between the Hellenistic artists' associations and the ecumenical synods of the empire.

ruler and his subjects: as Lendon has shown in his book *Empire of Honour*, the imperial cult not only served to prove one's loyalty to the emperor, but also as a reciprocal system of exchanging honour.⁴⁶ This was, after all, the world of *philotimia*, in which *poleis* and upper-class subjects ceaselessly rivalled amongst each other for honour and status.⁴⁷ The synods actively sought imperial recognition and goodwill, for this enhanced their own social status and influence vis-à-vis other actors such as civic elites or Roman officials. The imperial names and epithets in the synod's titles, therefore, do not prove that the emperor reached out to the synods in order to take them in a stranglehold. Quite the contrary: it was the synods who reached out to the emperor in order to enhance their influence and prestige in society at large. They had joined the fray in the battle for honour and privileges by deploying an array of honorific strategies, just like individual *poleis* used to do.

Furthermore, *do ut des* remained a key feature of the imperial cult, as noted by several scholars.⁴⁸ When honouring the emperor with statues, sacrifices and contests in his name, the synods could expect something in return from the prime dispenser of honour: the ever-repeated promise of 'upholding and increasing your ancient privileges'.⁴⁹ Honouring the emperor through costly rituals was an investment that could be very profitable in the long run. Finally, the synods' enhanced status secured by their activities in the imperial cult undoubtedly facilitated their access to the imperial court. A few inscriptions reveal that the synods had excellent contacts with powerful men belonging to the emperor's closest circles, who could put in a good word for them. For instance, one of the thymelic synod's benefactors was T. Aelius Alkibiades, the son of Hadrian's chamberlain.⁵⁰ In the Severan period, one of the xystic synod's high priests was well acquainted with M. Cn. Licinius Rufinus, a famous jurist and *amicus Caesaris* who had held a row of prestigious offices in the imperial administration.⁵¹ Another athletic official had contacts with the *ab epistulis Graecis* under Marcus Aurelius and Lucius

⁴⁶ LENDON (1997).

⁴⁷ See especially LENDON (1997), p. 166.

⁴⁸ CHANIOTIS (2003), p. 21, with further literature.

⁴⁹ E.g. the promises of Vespasian and Septimius Severus towards the xystic synod and thymelic synod, respectively: *P. Lond.* 3 1178, l. 34-36 (= *Pap.Agon.* 6): πάντα ὅσα [θεῷ]ς Κλαύδιος αἰτησάμενοις ὑμῖν συνεχώρησε καὶ αὐτὸς φυλάττειν [π]ροαιροῦμαι, "I too am willing to uphold all the (privileges) that the divine Claudius has granted to you *on your request*" (my italics); *BGU* 1074, l. 6 (= *Pap.Agon.* 1): ὅποσα εἵ[χ]ετε ἐξ ἀρχῆς [ὑ]πὸ τῶν πρὸ ἐμ[ο]ῦ αὐτοκρ[ατο]ρῶν δεδομένα ὑμῖν δίκαια καὶ φιλόανθρωπα, ταῦτα καὶ αὐτὸς φυλάττω, προσάυξειν ἐθέλων, "those rights and benefactions, granted by the emperors before me, which you enjoyed from the beginning, I will uphold them too and try to increase them."

⁵⁰ *I.Ephesos* 22, with ROBERT (1938), p. 49-51. The chamberlain, called *cubicularius* in Latin and ὁ ἐπὶ τοῦ κοιτῶνος in Greek, had a major influence on who could gain access to the emperor: PATERSON (2007), p. 142.

⁵¹ *TAM* V.2 984. For Rufinus and his offices, see MILLAR (1999).

Verus.⁵² In the same vein, it should not be argued that the emperor settled the synods in Rome, but rather that the synods *were allowed* to settle in Rome, which was undoubtedly a clever strategy of the synods' top officials to get easier access to the imperial court. As Paterson wrote, "proximity to power endows individuals with power and influence in their turn."⁵³ Hadrian's letters from Alexandria Troas reveal very well how the synods turned this power and influence to their advantage.

In general, therefore, there seems to have been no proactive imperial policy of control towards the ecumenical synods and the agonistic world at large. Still, imperial interest and interference in the agonistic world increased in the second century AD, undoubtedly because more *agones* were being organised and more money circulated in the agonistic world. Hence, the emperor was undoubtedly petitioned more often to settle problems. Not surprisingly, the emperors interfered most often when financial aspects were at stake: since *agones* and agonistic rewards could severely compromise city budgets, and since cities were a main source of tax revenue, the emperors started appointing *curatores* to check the cities' available funding for *agones*.⁵⁴ Similarly, *curatores* were at one point appointed to check the thymelic synod's finances, as two inscriptions indicate.⁵⁵ Some scholars have interpreted this as evidence for direct and far-reaching imperial control over the thymelic synod.⁵⁶ However, there is no evidence that *curatores* constantly controlled the synod's finances, nor that they did this across the entire empire. No *curatores* appear, for instance, in the membership certificates of the late third century AD, which shows that the synod managed the payment of the membership fees itself.⁵⁷ I suspect, therefore, that *curatores* were temporarily appointed in cases of financial problems, malpractices or corruption.⁵⁸

Conclusion

⁵² *I.Side* 62. The *ab epistulis* was head of the imperial chancery, and therefore one of the most powerful people in the emperor's entourage.

⁵³ PATERSON (2007), p. 141; also 148-149. Cf. also LENDON (1997), p. 133-136.

⁵⁴ Very revealing are two inscriptions from Aphrodisias with letters of a *curator reipublicae* who investigated which *agones* could be celebrated with the available funding: *I.Aphr.* 12.538; 15.330. For *curatores* in general, see BURTON (1979).

⁵⁵ *CIG* 6829, ll. 15-16 (late second or early third century AD); *IG XII.1* 83, l. 4-6 (early third century AD).

⁵⁶ POLAND (1934), col. 2533-2534.

⁵⁷ *BGU* 4 1074 (= *Pap.Agon.* 1); *P.Oxy.* 17 2476 (= *Pap.Agon.* 3); *P.Oxy.Hels.* 25 (= *Pap.Agon.* 4).

⁵⁸ When one of the thymelic synod's benefactors Septimius Tryphon embellished a statue of Dionysos – probably in the synod's headquarters – the name of a *curator* is mentioned right after, but separate from, a list of synod officials in office at that time. In this way, Tryphon probably wanted to show that no synod assets were misused for the embellishment of the statue: *CIG* 6829, with MERKELBACH (1985).

In sum, the sources point to a more complex image than the unilateral imperial dominance advocated by earlier scholars. I have argued that the ecumenical synods of athletes and artists were neither created nor reorganised by the Antonine emperors: rather, they were already fully functional in the early first century AD. One century later, they had managed to expand their activities across the empire and to increase their status, influence and power in society at large. They managed to do this because they had become indispensable: new agonistic foundations relied on their organisational experience and on the first-class competitors they could direct to the newly-founded festival. Furthermore, they were the only body that could keep an overview of the entire agonistic network. They had the necessary information to attune the schedules of *agones* to each other and manage the flow of competitors throughout the festival world.

In addition, the synods managed to raise their social status through careful manoeuvring in the highest echelons of the empire. The synods, of course, were not fully autonomous, for they had to operate within the borders set by the imperial system. The emperor had the last word: he could give privileges and take them away, he could intervene in agonistic affairs if he wanted to do so, he could reward or punish, support or remain indifferent. And yet, the system allowed for a lot of agency for the synods and other subjects. This agency was hardwired into the reciprocal relations of honour on which imperial rule ultimately depended. The emperor had neither the means nor the ambitions to totally control the agonistic world. The ecumenical synods' officials, by making effective use of the symbolic language of the imperial cult, by establishing relations with powerful people and by ensuring physical proximity to the emperor, knew very well how to manoeuvre within this system. Thus, the synods' manoeuvrability appears to have been due to the limited possibilities and the reactive nature of the Roman state as well as to the reciprocal nature of relations of power and honour in Graeco-Roman society.

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