

Review

BRAM FAUCONNIER, *ATHLETES AND ARTISTS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE: THE HISTORY AND ORGANISATION OF THE ECUMENICAL SYNODS*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. xii + 403, illus., maps. ISBN 9781009202831 (hbk). £90.00. 9781009202855 (ebook).

Interest in the vibrant festival culture of the imperial period is enjoying something of a resurgence, as shown recently by J.-Y. Strasser's magisterial *Mémoires de Champions* (2021). While that work examines the victory lists of individuals, the volume under review offers an excellent complement by focusing on the crucial role played by the professional bodies which represented performers' interests, whose full titles are given as 'the holy thymelic wandering synod of artists of the whole world who take part and win in sacred crown games, gathered around Dionysos', and 'the holy xystic wandering synod of athletes of the whole world who take part and win in sacred crown games, gathered around Herakles'. As the titles suggest, these were two parallel but separate organisations dedicated to supporting musicians (including actors) and athletes, respectively.

Through a detailed analysis of the surviving evidence, mostly inscriptions and papyri, Bram Fauconnier provides a comprehensive discussion of the development and running of the synods in the Roman imperial period. Part I offers a chronological history of the two organisations, including in ch. 1 a brief review of the regional associations of artists in the Hellenistic period. Chs 2 and 3 look at the synods' development over the first centuries B.C./A.D., while chs 4 and 5 focus on the high imperial period and discuss interactions with Rome and the emperor (ch. 4) and across the empire (ch. 5). Ch. 6 turns to their decline and disappearance in Late Antiquity. Part II discusses the running of the synods, with separate discussions of their internal organisation (ch. 7) and membership (ch. 8), as well as the advantages of membership for competitors (ch. 9) and the integral role which the synods played in the organisation of *agones* across the Roman world (ch. 10). Useful appendices list officials, members and titles of the two synods.

While regional associations of artists already existed in the Hellenistic period, no similar associations are known then for the athletes. However, by c. 42–30 B.C., an international synod of athletic victors is attested in Ephesos, petitioning the triumvir Mark Antony for preservation of existing privileges. The first clear reference to an international (rather than regional) synod for artists comes later, from the reign of Claudius, but F. argues that there is already evidence of a trans-regional association in existence when Antony called the artists of Dionysos to Samos before the battle of Actium and apparently gave them a base at Priene.

By the mid-second century, both synods were based in Rome. The move was likely influenced by the importance of Domitian's Capitolia festival, and easier access to the emperor who often attended festivals in Rome and Naples in person. A key theme throughout is the close interaction the synods had with imperial power, which F. sees as a continuation of the role played by Hellenistic kings. In contrast to those scholars who see the synods (especially the athletic one) as owing their origins to imperial policy, F. argues instead for a model of petition and response: the impetus lay with the artists and athletes themselves and emperors responded to this, though some were certainly more involved than others.

One question which has been debated is whether there were originally two separate athletic synods — one for sacred victors, and another for other athletes — and some kind of dissolution and re-formation of the synod in Rome in the second century. F. rejects this and argues persuasively instead for a single synod which first consisted only of sacred victors, but later also welcomed in athletes aspiring to become sacred victors themselves. Nevertheless, membership was always only a small subset of the entire range of competitors, made up of those who could afford to pay hefty entrance fees and had the promise to realise international success.

Alongside the synods' activities in Rome, members also often came together in assemblies along the agonistic circuit to vote on decrees. There were regional bases around the Mediterranean where synod officials offered support to performers, who travelled from *agon* to *agon*, but these were part of the overall international synod rather than separate local branches. F. does, however, also identify the existence of some separate city-based associations whose membership may have overlapped at times with that of the international synods.

The second half of the book, as well as parts of ch. 5, outlines the roles played by the synods in promoting their members' interests and helping to organise *agones* around the Mediterranean. The athletic synod is particularly visible here, through the role synod officials played as xystarchs, yet we also hear of members of the thymelic synod getting involved in the scheduling of games — most notably in the letters of Hadrian from Alexandria Troas, but also in other festivals, such as the Lysimacheia at Aphrodisias (317–18).

Overall, F. paints a detailed picture of the functioning of the synods and the world of agonistic festivals they helped to support. The role of the synods was thus twofold — as well as ensuring the maintenance of privileges for their members, they also played an integral role in ensuring the success and development of an international festival circuit. When that circuit started to disappear, the synods went too.

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