

## SYNODS OF ATHLETES AND ARTISTS

FAUCONNIER (B.) *Athletes and Artists in the Roman Empire. The History and Organisation of the Ecumenical Synods*. Pp. xii + 403, figs, ills, maps. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Cased, £90, US\$120. ISBN: 978-1-009-20283-1.

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In this revised dissertation F. performs an analysis with depth and care to present a compelling case for the key cultural impact of the ‘ecumenical synods’ in the Roman imperial period. These groups are attested epigraphically in about 200 inscriptions from southern Gaul to Egypt and Syria, primarily through honorific inscriptions for competitors, officials and benefactors, although there are some decrees from the synods themselves. The 35 extant papyri are more private in nature and provide a sense of the daily life and social background of association members. On the basis of these data F. examines two key questions (p. 12): how did the synods develop, evolve and decline temporally and geographically (Part 1), and how did they operate (Part 2)? Pushing back against earlier theories of multiple *ecumenical* associations, F. argues that there are only two ‘worldwide’ (*oikoumene*) associations, the first comprised athletes (the *xystic* synod) and the second artistic competitors (the *thymelic* synod). There is attestation for other groups, but these were based locally and did not have the reach of these two larger groups. Since these two groups acted in concert, F. rightly studies their development and organisation as part of the broader agonistic culture of the early Roman Empire, showing how they are branches of a single larger ecumenical association.

The initial two chapters build on earlier work, such as that by S. Aneziri and B. Le Guen, to examine developments of artists associations prior to the rise of Rome, showing how regional groups of artists fade away in the first century BCE, making room for the emergence of a new, more aggressive type of association in the imperial period, particularly in Asia. F. argues that the political, economic and cultural interconnectedness that came with the expansion of Rome contributed directly to the worldwide associations in the first century BCE. In the first century CE the synod of artists and that of the athletes developed differently, F. argues in Chapter 3. By the time of Claudius, however, the similarities became clearer, and on their membership certificates both groups trace their lineage back to him. From this time, they are operating together on a large scale, with ‘connections, prestige and influence, both at the imperial court and in the upper-class societies of the Greek East’ (p. 102). By the early second century CE the ecumenical synods centre themselves with their connection to Rome, where decisions about the festival calendar and competitor privileges were decided in consultation with the emperor, before being communicated to officials and members throughout the eastern empire (Chapter 4).

This leads to the peak in their political and cultural impact during the second and third centuries CE, when the synods truly are expansive, covering the entire empire. In order to demonstrate their reach, in Chapter 5 F. traces the footsteps of the athlete M. Aurelius Asklepiades in the 180s CE as he wins every competition in the international agonistic circuit. This historical yet personalised touch makes for a more interesting read than simply delineating the various festivals at that time. It sets up nicely the second part of the book by referencing the kinds of activities the synods engaged in beyond the competitions themselves, not to mention the regional and civic distinctions that can be discerned even within an ‘ecumenical’ synod. Alas, this peak period waned in the fourth century, eventually disappearing by the fifth, in part (although not entirely) in line with the rise

of Christianised emperors (so Chapter 6, although it is noteworthy that the titular 'ecumenical synod' lived on as the designation for church councils; pp. 179–80).

Overall, this historical overview is more comprehensive than previous ones, both in its temporal span and in its geographical reach. Rather than focusing primarily on Rome, F. includes data from the agonistic circuits throughout the provinces, most notably from the urban centres of Asia Minor. He demonstrates how competitors were mobile, travelling from city to city albeit accountable to the headquarters based in Rome.

The second part of the book takes a thematic approach to the ecumenical synods primarily in the second and third centuries CE. F. proposes a new framework for understanding the 'worldwide' nature of the synods. Chapter 7 focuses on organisational structure, showing how they had flexible local groups in many cities of the empire, which facilitated travel and competitions of the members. Nevertheless, they were centrally structured, with headquarters in Rome, which gave them internal coherence. Although they are not completely under imperial control, neither were they independent from it, subject not only to the rules of the state but also at times to emperors who could intervene in their affairs. To demonstrate this, F. examines the official functionaries, first in the *xystic* synod and then in the *thymelic* synod, showing that there were variations between the two branches (although he maintains that they are both part of a single larger organisation at that time). While both synods were structured on the model of the Greek *polis* and both had transregional organisation, the athletes were more clearly linked to their Roman headquarters than were the artists. Furthermore, the regional differences between the two branches are pronounced. Yet when it came to overall organisation – membership and finances – there was a large degree of uniformity (p. 238).

Matters of membership are taken up in more detail in Chapters 8 and 9, with the latter focusing on recruitment and what made people want to join. In sum, there were economic and social privileges attached to membership, most notably the networks of support while travelling as well as direct and indirect lines of contact with imperial authorities. This latter aspect was particularly important in the organisation of the festival circuit, as F. demonstrates in the final chapter.

In a clear and compelling presentation with thorough depth of research, including engagement with a broad range of secondary materials, F. makes a convincing argument for the translocal nature of the ecumenical synods of athletes and artists, especially during the heyday of the second and third centuries CE. That there was centralised authority at Rome with local variations and limited autonomy in the cities to the west and east not only makes sense of the data but also has some explanatory power as to how these (and a few other) groups flourished. Although not part of the book, it opens up a tangential line for examining how Christian groups developed to form their own ecumenical synods at a later period; the way had been paved for them in some respects by the athletes and artists groups in the Roman period. Scholars interested in the history and development of the actors and artists associations will be most interested in Part 1 while those who are interested in their function can delve into Part 2. The two parts work nicely together to demonstrate the complexity of the situation of these groups in the Roman world.

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