

The Strategic Advantage of Panhellenic Games in Hellenistic Greece:
Aratos, the Achaian League, and the Nemean Games of 235 B.C.

In 235 B.C., as the city of Argos prepared to celebrate the sacred Nemean games, Aratos of Sikyon and the Achaian League staged rival Nemean games, capturing and selling into slavery those athletes who chose to compete at the games in Argos. The ancient historian Plutarch viewed this event as the first violation of the asylum which traditionally guaranteed the safety of competitors (*Aratus* 29), while twentieth-century historians have deemed it a vengeful act of terrorism (Walbank 1933, p. 61). This paper analyzes the games of 235 B.C. within the changing political landscape of Hellenistic Greece, and asserts that the conduct of the Achaian League in 235, transgressive on the surface and unpopular at the core, is not a complete violation of the norm; rather, Aratos essentially follows contemporary standards of interaction regarding the crown games. States forged networks of alliances and agreements through *asylia* decrees and *theorodokoi* inscriptions (discussed in Perlman 1995); if, as an Argive enemy, the Achaian League had no such agreement with Argos, they may not have been bound by a truce, and were “free” to act with hostility toward the athletes competing in the Argive Nemean games. The unusual circumstances of the Nemean games of 235 present an opportunity to discuss the (changing?) rules surrounding the attendance of Panhellenic competitions, as well as the crown games' special functions within the context of Hellenistic international politics and, by extension, their importance to confederations like the Achaian League. This reconsideration of the motives of the Achaian League demonstrates that Aratos does not set out to perpetrate a single act of terrorism against Argos, but stages the games in anticipation of alliance, as one component of a larger strategy to absorb more of the Argolid into the Achaian League and increase the league's standing with respect to other major powers of the time, primarily the Aitolian League and the

Macedonian Antigonids. The incident appears aberrant after the fact because Aratos fails to bring Argos into the league in the summer of 235..

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