

“Performances for Eye and Ear”: Hired Entertainment at the Greek Dramatic Festivals of the
Roman Imperial Period

Greek dramatic festivals flourished throughout the Roman Empire, particularly in the East, into the 3rd century CE. Imperial festivals are richly attested in the epigraphic record in the form of victory lists, honorifics and epitaphs for theatrical professionals, and contracts and wills dealing with the administration of the festivals. The centerpieces of these festivals were agonistic events: performances of classical and newly-written tragedies, comedies, and satyr-plays, musical competitions, and gymnastic events. However, entertainers on the margins were an important part of imperial festival culture as well: mimes, pantomimes, magicians, puppeteers, acrobats, and other marvel-makers were hired to entertain the crowds outside of the dramatic, musical, and gymnastic competitions. While interest in the post-Classical theater and the ancient acting profession has grown in recent years (Easterling and Hall [2002], Hugoniot et. al. [2004], Harrison and Liapis [2013]), these marginal festival entertainers have been generally overlooked (with the exception of pantomimes: Hall and Wyles [2008], Webb [2008]). In imperial Greek literature, hired entertainment categories are regarded with great scorn: Athenaeus, for example, mocks the jugglers, marionette-players, and magicians who have, in his eyes, disgraced the Greek stage (*Deipnosophistae* 1.19c-20b). Epigraphic sources suggest that these performers were not only a regular part of the Greek festivals, but also that a significant part of the festival budget could go towards providing these entertainments. At the Demostheneia at Oinoanda in N. Lycia, two full days of the month-long festival were reserved for hired entertainment, including mimes and “performances for eye and ear” (SEG 38-1462, cf. Wörrle [1986]). These performances were not intermission shows or sideshow entertainment, but were part of the official festival program,

at the end of the theatrical and musical competitions and before the single day of gymnastic competitions

In this paper I examine the epigraphic evidence for mimes, pantomimes, magicians, puppeteers, acrobats, and other marvel-makers at the imperial Greek festivals. I argue that even for marginal performers, success on stage could be a source of significant social mobility. Some non-elite performers, many slaves or freedmen and freedwomen, gained such reputations that they were honored with inscriptions by the towns and cities in which they performed (e.g. the 2nd c. CE honorific from for the acrobat Marcus Ulpius Kallinikos [SEG 29-807]). In the 1st and 2nd century CE, festivals in the Greek East also began to allow some of these types of entertainment into the festival competitions, and honorifics and epitaphs record festival victories for mimes, acrobats, and pantomimes. The international career of the fantastically successful celebrity pantomime, Tiberius Julius Apolaustus (IK Ephesus 6.2070-1 and FD III.1.511), in particular, who won festival victories from Boeotia to Asia Minor and had statues erected in his honor in at least 20 cities, should make us question the marginality of the performers of entertainment categories which had traditionally been hired at the Greek festivals.

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