

The Romance Between Greece and Rome in Aelius Aristides' Orations on Smyrna (*Orr.* 17-21)
and Corinth (*Or.* 46)

When scholars consider how Roman rule was perceived by individuals and communities in the Greek east during the imperial period, they frequently use the polarizing language of acquiescence and resistance. The response of Greek authors to Rome is generally described as being positive, negative, or – at best – mixed (Swain 1996). Two recent assessments of Aelius Aristides' perspective on the Roman empire illustrate this tendency: Francesca Fontanella has characterized Aristides' attitude towards the imperial power as one of “tacit resignation” (Fontanella 2008) and Laurent Pernot detects an “attitude of reserve,” in tension with the “approval and loyalty” for which Aristides is generally known (Pernot 2008). In this search for views on, and attitudes towards, Rome, less attention has been paid to precisely how writers describe the dynamics of the imperial relationship, the images they draw upon to characterize it, and the variety of contexts in which they engage this topic.

In this paper I argue that in key diplomatic moments, Aelius Aristides figures the relationship between Greece and Rome as a romance. In his Smyrna orations (*Orr.* 17-21), he aims to foster a romantic relationship between the emperors and the city, and in his *Corinthian Oration: To Poseidon* (*Or.* 46) he engages this model obliquely: by way of a digression on the myth of Leucothea and her relationship with Poseidon, he introduces a political subtext into this speech of celebration.

The paper has two parts. I begin from the observation that Aristides' interest in Roman power generally centers on the relationship between Rome and the eastern provinces, and I discuss several passages from his Smyrna orations to show that there he imagines this relationship in romantic terms. In the second part of the paper I turn to the *Corinthian Oration*,

where the trope of imperial romance is introduced in a mythic digression. The *Corinthian Oration* was written by invitation for performance at the Isthmian games, perhaps in 156 CE. Over most of the speech, Aristides celebrates the Isthmus as a geographic and cultural center, and he celebrates Poseidon as a divine boundary crosser and sponsor of cosmic exchange and access. Yet, he never acknowledges the complicated place Corinth had played in the history of Hellenic Roman conquest: sacked by the Roman consul Mummius in 146 BCE, the city was later refounded by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony. Aristides passes over this problematic history of Roman conquest in silence, but at the end of the speech, in an excursus on the mythological figures Melicertes-Palaemon and Ino-Leucothea, he becomes suddenly cautious and exceedingly self-conscious. Scholars have paid little attention to this passage, except to note that Aristides refers to the important cult dedicated to Palaemon at Isthmia in the imperial period. In fact, however, he devotes most of his attention to the figure of Leucothea. Claiming to fear both his material and his audience, he wrestles with the problem of Leucothea's divine status, and the power dynamic of her relationship to Poseidon: "there is likely to be embodied in her person," he says, finally, "a kind of supreme rule over the kingdom of the sea and for Poseidon himself to have no power, except with her consent" (*Or.* 46. 38). I argue that this self-conscious and idiosyncratic rationalization of the story of Leucothea's romance with Poseidon carries political implications. It offers an allegory for the relationship between Corinth and Rome and, by extension, between the Greek cities more generally and imperial power.

Scholars have usually looked at the relationship between Greek culture and Rome as Aristides presents it in major speeches such as *To Rome* and the *Panathenaicus*. In the *Corinthian Oration*, and in his orations on Smyrna, he engages the issue more subtly. Here it is a matter neither of idealizing the relationship, nor of expressing veiled hostility or resistance.

Rather, Aristides turns to the image of romance as a way of describing complex power dynamics in a nuanced way. His repeated use of this narrative trope links imperial political thinking to the plot lines and sensibility of the contemporary Greek novels.

Bibliography

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