"The Greatest in Human Memory": Reevaluating the Lydia Earthquake

In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder referred to the Lydia earthquake of 17 AD as "*maximus terrae memoria mortalium… motus*," the largest, or alternatively the greatest, earthquake in the memory of humanity, with twelve major cities of the province of Asia being destroyed (Plin. *HN*. 2.86.3-4). Yet, for many modern historians, the Lydia earthquake forms only a small point of interest in monographs on the Roman province of Asia or on the provincial architecture and iconography of the Imperial cult (Magie 1950; Ratte, Howe, and Foss 1986; Rubin 2008). This gap may stem from the fact that ancient historical narratives seem to discount the societal consequences of earthquakes. By concentrating their documentation of earthquakes on catastrophic narratives and benevolent relief programs by Imperial rulers, Pliny the Elder and other ancient authors seem to assume their readers' understanding of the social significance of such natural disasters (Keitel 2010). This silence on the human impact of earthquakes has sometimes led modern historians to assume their cultural insignificance (Guidoboni 1994). This interpretation, however, requires adaptation when examined in conjunction with sociological and anthropological studies on the social effects of natural disasters (Oliver-Smith 1999; Vollmer 2013). A close examination of ancient sources on the Lydia earthquake reveals the longer-term human and political impact of this natural disaster on the province of Asia. Specifically, this paper demonstrates how writers during the Julio-Claudian era see the Lydia earthquake as a primary catalyst in its role in establishing the power of the Roman emperor and the Imperial cult in the Greek East.

The institutionalization of Roman regional dominance following the Lydia earthquake is traceable through three phases of human responses: the immediate panic and discord present during the timing of the event, the subsequent relief efforts, and finally the reknitting of social

and cultural ties (Hoffman 1999). The human responses documented in the ancient sources suggest that the Lydia earthquake thrust the favor of the province away from the local Greek magistrates and towards Emperor Tiberius (Price 1984; Ando 2000). For example, Tacitus in his *Annals* refers to the fame and importance of the twelve cities destroyed in the earthquake in asserting the need for Emperor Tiberius' relief program, implying Asia's inability to restore the social order of such a powerful and widespread natural disaster without the addition of Roman aid (Tac. *Ann*. 2.47.1-4). The ancient historian Velleius Paterculus notes relief efforts by Tiberius, hailing him as the savior and re-founder of the province after the earthquake. At the same time, he praises Tiberius' post-earthquake removal of corrupt local Greek officials from their positions of power (Vell. Pat. 2.126.4-5). By contrast, the Greek epigrapher Bianor believes the earthquake indicates the end of the East's autonomy and its need to submit to Imperial Rome in post-disaster social constructions (*Anth. Pal.* 9.423). The tilting of Asia's political scales, as articulated by these authors, then suggests a more nuanced understanding of the Lydia earthquake as a catalyst of change: it was not only *maximus* in terms of its physical effects, but also in its political and cultural impact on the province of Asia.

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