

The Sebasteion at Aphrodisias: An Imperial Cult to Honor Augustus and the Julio-Claudian Emperors

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Augustus and the Julio-Claudian emperors' successful reign over the vast Roman Empire were due primarily to provincial loyalty and acquiescence. My research examines the intermingling of Roman, Hellenistic, and Aphrodisian art forms in the imperial sculptural reliefs of the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias in order to demonstrate the use of visual art forms to express provincial loyalty to the princeps. I argue that the diverse artistic styles of the Sebasteion's imperial reliefs represent definitive evidence of an imperial cult in the eastern provinces and signify imperial concordia, a primary aspect in the successful reign of Augustus and the Julio-Claudians emperors.

The successful reign of Augustus and the Julio-Claudian emperors over the vast Roman Empire was due in large part to provincial loyalty and acquiescence. In order to express their allegiance to Rome and distinguish themselves from the cities in the east, provincial leaders created imperial cults to honor the rulers of the empire. Cults dedicated to the worship of kings was a customary practice in the eastern provinces, but imperial cults established for Augustus and the Julio-Claudian emperors used distinct forms of art and architecture to publicly display their loyalty and worship to their new leader. Provincial populations also created imperial cults as visual acknowledgment of the emperor's imperial propaganda, including his *auctoritas*, *potestas*, and *pietas*.

My research paper argues that the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias, a temple and sanctuary dedicated to Augustus, Aphrodite Aphrodisias, and the Julio-Claudian emperors, represents definitive evidence of an imperial cult, based on the structures and sculptural program created in response to imperial conquest. Questions I will consider include, how was the creation of imperial cult viewed by the emperor, in what specific ways did imperial cult benefit Aphrodisias and the emperor, how did the intermingling of artistic styles promote imperial rule, and in what way did imperial cults in the East permit the provinces to elevate their status within the empire? My research examines the Sebasteion's distinct intermingling of Roman, Hellenistic, and Aphrodisian art and architectural forms, and focuses on three imperial reliefs within the sanctuary-temple's sculptural program. At the conclusion of my paper, I hope to have demonstrated that the Sebasteion in Aphrodisias represents a unique Eastern architectural design that provides strong evidence of a provincial imperial cult to honor Augustus and the Julio-Claudian emperors.

Excavations of Aphrodisias began in 1960 by New York University professor Kenan Dörmer, and inscriptions, uncovered on fortified city walls, dated Aphrodisias's founding between the late 2nd century and early 1st century B.C.E. based on decrees issued from Rome.¹ According to a large number of inscriptions discovered along the northern side of the city's theater, referred to as the "Archive Wall," many Roman Republic leaders, including Sulla and Julius Caesar, established political relationships with the city and many of its elite families. By the late 30s B.C.E., the city of Aphrodisias became a leading province in the East for the Roman Empire, in both strategic location and natural resources. In his *Annals*, the ancient historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus documents that Aphrodisias became an advantageous locale for Rome's military and political ventures throughout the East, and he states that the city received high praise from Augustus regarding the "fidelity to the Roman nation with which they had sustained the Parthian inroad."²

The concept of eastern imperial cult became an established religious and political practice long before the reign of the Roman emperors. Kings in the Hellenistic East legitimized their power and divine right as absolute rulers by their association with a state pantheon, and Roman republic leaders, including Lucius Cornelius Sulla and Julius Caesar, used eastern cults to validate their elevated status. Eastern imperial cults offered god-like honors, referred to as *isotheoi timai*, so that citizens could express *eusebeia* ('piety') and *eunoia* ('loyalty') to the *isotheos* ('one equal to the gods').³ The imperial cult that developed in the East to honor Augustus and his Julio-Claudian, although based on the same principles used to venerate Hellenistic monarchs and Roman Republic leaders, established different terminology and distinct forms of art and architecture to express their loyalty to the

rulers of the Roman Empire.⁴ The term *sebastos* ('holy/revered place') is the Greek equivalent for *augustus* and became the title bestowed upon the imperial emperor in the eastern provinces.⁵ Although the Roman princes never officially sanctioned the establishment of imperial cults in the east; the honors were positively received by the emperors, which were advantageous for their reign and provided visual acknowledgment of Augustan and Julio-Claudian propaganda in the East.

Ancient historical texts document that citizens in the provinces were encouraged to honor the emperors, and express gratitude and loyalty to Rome. Pliny states in his *Natural History* that the Roman Empire was the "nurse and mother of all the lands...and joined together scattered empires," implying that Rome and the emperors had established a *communis patria* for all citizens.⁶ The quote insinuates that the numerous political and economic improvements, at least based on Roman standards, put in place after the conquest of the East by the Roman Empire brought prosperity and peace to these impoverished or barbaric regions. Due to the strong relationship between Augustus and the leaders of Aphrodisias prior to the Roman conquest, the prosperity that the city experienced after Augustus became emperor, and the citizenship bestowed upon many of the Aphrodisian aristocracy, certainly validates Pliny the Elder's notion that Rome was the nurturer of all lands.

The Sebasteion, discovered during a 1979 excavation of Aphrodisias, not only signifies evidence of an imperial cult in name, but also in its design, function, and sculptural decoration. According to inscriptions found on the temple's architrave, construction began during the reign of Tiberius, but due to numerous earthquakes during the mid-1st century C.E. reconstruction and completion of the temple-sanctuary did not occur until the reign of Nero. The east-west

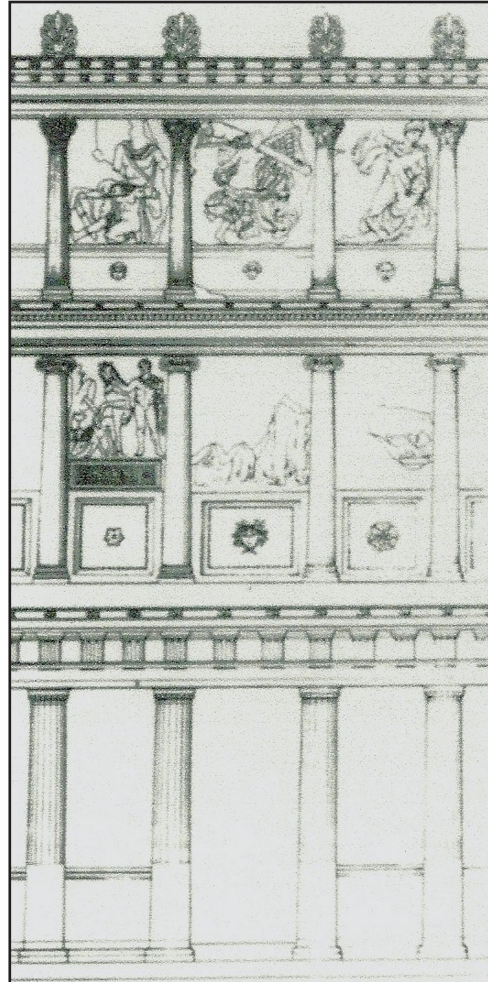


Figure 1: Partial reconstructed elevation of South Portico

oriented Sebasteion combined Hellenistic and Roman architectural conventions, but unusual architectural elements and decorative forms reveal the development of an innovative Aphrodisian style.⁷

The axial-symmetrical plan appears to be modeled on imperial fora, most notably those created in Rome for Caesar and Augustus; both contain temples axially placed at the end of symmetrically flanking porticoes.⁸ Each portico contains superimposed columns, a different order

signifying each story, but the height of the porticoes, and their placement flanking a long processional or sanctuary way represents a distinct Aphrodisian architectural design (Fig. 1); this unique format of elements was not replicated in any other cities in the Greek East. The use of Roman building forms in the construction of the Sebasteion implies that the Aphrodisians wished to demonstrate their desire to simulate Roman structures and sculpture. However, either because of their limited accessibility to actual Roman models or a desire to maintain a certain level of artistic freedom, builders and sculptors implemented Hellenistic and Aphrodisian art and architectural forms in their construction of the Grand Sanctuary-Temple.

Full sculptural reliefs, as well as a multitude of fragments, have been recovered from the Sebasteion site, and the organization of these artworks within the temple has been recreated by scholars from New York University and Cambridge University, specifically Kenan Erim and Christopher Ratté from the former, and R. R. R. Smith from the latter, based on the excavated materials from the site. On the second and third stories of each portico, a complex series of 180 reliefs, 90 for each portico, originally decorated the processional walkways.⁹ Along the north portico, six relief panels and fifteen inscribed bases have been reconstructed from excavated fragments, but archaeologists have reconstructed the north portico's visual program.¹⁰ The second storey reliefs depicted *ethnē*, or personifications of the lands defeated by Augustus. A series of single standing draped women, differentiated by costume, attributes, and inscriptions located on the bases, were most likely modeled from a catalog of reproductions produced in Rome and distributed throughout the provinces.¹¹ The third storey of the north portico most likely contained a series of allegorical figures personifying time

and place, based on two recovered reliefs depicting personifications of Day and Ocean, Hermera and Oceanus.¹²

The second storey reliefs contained prototypical scenes from the standard canon of Greek religion and mythology, including Herakles, Dionysus, and Apollo, although a few restored panels contain images that refer specifically to Rome or Aphrodite, such as a relief recreating the scene of Romulus and Remus with the She-wolf.¹³ The third story relief panels contain imperial narrative scenes of Augustus and the Julio-Claudian emperors with their family members, gods, or symbolic personifications, juxtaposed next to panels of mythological figures, such as Nike and Roma.¹⁴

Three imperial reliefs I have selected to analyze for my research reflect Aphrodisias's perception of imperial rule, as well as Augustan and Julio-Claudian propaganda, and the design of the reliefs reveal the unique style of Aphrodisian sculptors. Three important elements appear in each sculptural panel: the nudity of the emperor, specific imperial portrait types, and a defined narrative that honors different attributes of each emperor. I will briefly explain the importance of these three elements, and then proceed with my analysis of the individual imperial reliefs.

Nude images were a well-established artistic practice in antiquity to honor figures of prestige or power. In Rome, the emperor was only represented nude after his death, signifying his divine status. In provincial imperial cults, nudity became a common means of visual representation to honor the emperor as a divine leader, as well as imperial attributes of *pax*, *concordia*, stability, and prosperity that he brought to the provinces. Although the nude image of the emperor was representative of their divinity in the East, they were not meant to be represented as actual gods. Imperial



Figure 2: Augustus, Nike, and Trophy, South Portico

leaders were given “honors equivalent to the gods,” or *isotheoi timai*, meaning that they were venerated and bestowed sacred honors, but acknowledged as mortal men; the key word is ‘equivalent,’ indicating a level of separation between emperor and god.¹⁵

The emperors’ portraits used in the Sebasteion reliefs demonstrate that Aphrodisian sculptors had access to reproductions of imperial portrait types, but local sculptors replicated them with their own personal style and techniques.¹⁶ For instance, Augustus’s image resembles his *Prima Porta* type, but his three pincer locks are positioned in a direction that diverges from his imperial portrait. Identification of the princeps was essential to understand the meaning of each relief,

and the three imperial relief panels examined in this research paper, although not exact likenesses, would be identifiable by all visitors who came to the Sebasteion to honor the emperors.

The iconography, personifications, and motifs used in the narrative scenes of the reliefs were essential elements in conveying the intended meaning of each panel, and they provided the most conclusive evidence that the Sebasteion was an eastern-designed imperial cult to honor Augustus and the Julio-Claudian emperors, unique to the Greek East. Themes found within the three relief panels include military victory, conquest of barbaric nations, peace, and unity. Sculptors carefully intermingled Roman, Hellenistic, and Aphrodisian images to depict each emperors’



Figure 3: Claudius and Agrippina, South Portico

accomplishments, and the positive changes they brought to the East.

Imperial triumphs by the princeps achieved stability and peace throughout the provinces, and the sculptural relief, Augustus with Nike and trophy (fig. 2), exemplified the pax and concordia that Augustus brought to Aphrodisias due to his many victorious conquests. Augustus's victories and resulting dominion is conveyed through the symbolic images of the relief: an eagle situated along his right leg, and the personification of trophy positioned to his left, standing atop a bound

captive, presented to him by the Greek goddess Nike. Augustus's facial features and hair, although not exact likenesses of his imperial portrait types, appears loosely modeled on the Prima Porta and Forbes type. The size of the emperor's ear and modeled physiognomy appear accurate in size and shape to his imperial portraits, but the placement of his three pincer locks of hair, a standard element of his sculpted image, lacks the precise placement on his upper forehead. The emperor's classically nude body, signifying his divinity, is presented in a relaxed contrapposto stance, his head turned to the left toward trophy

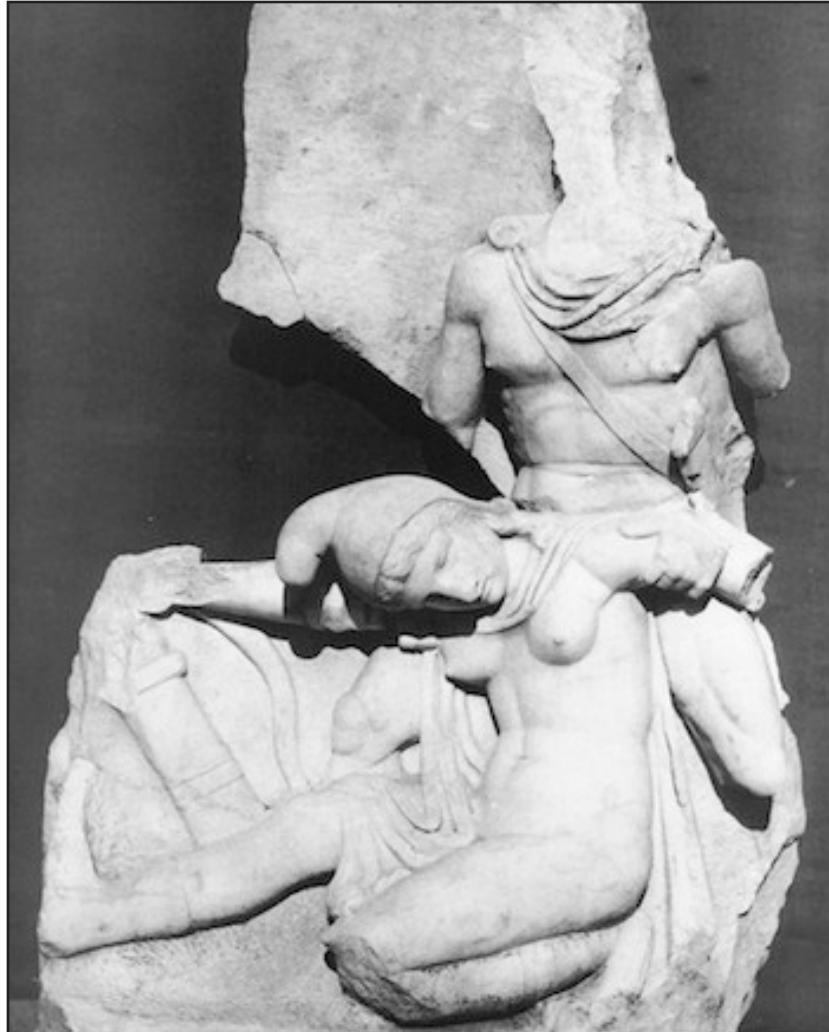


Figure 4: Nero and Armenia, South Portico

and Nike. Augustus holds a scepter in his right hand, which conveyed imperial rule, and his head is decorated with a wreath, most likely made from oak leaves, that signified the emperor's victorious triumphs that saved the lives of the Roman citizens, and referred specifically to the people of the eastern provinces.

Augustus depicted with images of Nike, a trophy, or a conquered prisoner, was not

an uncommon subject matter in Augustan art, but the unique narrative of the Sebasteion panel. In Figure 2, Augustus with Nike and trophy, the intermingling of Roman and Hellenistic forms represents a distinctly Aphrodisian design, as these were not typical imperial representations in the Greek East, and may allude to Aphrodisias's close relations with the Roman Empire. The image of Augustus surrounded by accolades and attributes of

his imperial reign provides strong evidence of an imperial cult to honor the peace and stability Augustus brought to the Roman Empire through his military victories and conquests.

Personal attributes of the emperor, admired and honored by provincial populations, represented the theme conveyed in the imperial relief, Claudius and Agrippina (Fig. 3). The panel depicts the third princeps of the Roman Empire shaking the hand of his fourth wife, Agrippina the Younger, while a togate stands at the same height, an eastern interpretation of equality between these three figures. Shaking hands in Roman art commonly symbolized marital concordia or fides between political leaders, but in eastern iconography this action typically denoted death or parting.¹⁷ The imperial relief, Claudius and Agrippina, certainly honored Roman concordia between the emperor and his wife.

Portraits of Claudius did not appear until 41 C.E. when he became emperor at the age of fifty-one, which typically depicted the middle aged princeps with wrinkles above his eyebrows and around his mouth, as well as fringed hair across his forehead. The image of Claudius's advanced age implied his pietas, or even his modestia, two important qualities emphasized in imperial propaganda. The emperor's wife Agrippina the Younger appears loosely modeled on her imperial portrait type with four deeply cut, elaborate rows of curled hair. Despite missing an idealized head, the sculptural image of the Roman State or People places the corona civica upon Claudius's head, signifying that the emperor had saved the lives of not just a single Roman citizen, but the entire Roman Empire. The imperial relief panel, Claudius and Agrippina, conveyed concordia and protection within the empire, two key qualities honored in an imperial cult, but the image of imperial husband and wife shaking hands, and the togate sculpture

signifying the Roman State, represented a sculptural format unique to Aphrodisian sculpture.

The final imperial relief, Nero and Armenia (Fig. 4), contains Roman and Eastern iconography, and includes not only images that honor dominance and peace, but acknowledges the emperor's compassion toward conquered nations. Nero's nude, muscular physique, adorned with only a short cloak draped around his neck, and fastened with a round brooch, as well as a baldric carrying an empty scabbard hanging along his side, towered above the personification of the Armenian nation. The portrait and torso appear modeled from young imperial portrait types of Nero, but this relief presented a non-typological representation of the center-part fringed hair along his forehead.

The personification of Armenia, whose slumped, defeated figure sits up on the ground, supported by Nero's legs and hands, contained numerous iconographical elements that identified her as a barbarian nation. A short cloak on her shoulders and short boots with ribbon-like ties, coupled with her soft 'phrygian' placed atop her long, unbound hair that fell down past her shoulders, represents a barbaric figure; a quiver and bow propped next to the conquered figure represented iconography typically associated with Armenia.¹⁸ In the Sebasteion relief panel, the emperor appears ready to lift up the conquered nation and welcome her into the empire, although the personified Armenia had suffered defeat. Nero's successful campaigns against Armenia received significant publicity and notoriety throughout the Roman Empire.¹⁹ The Sebasteion relief panel, Nero and Armenia, provided definitive evidence of an imperial cult to honor the emperor's potestas, pietas, and auctoritas, and the unique format of the figures in the imperial sculptural panel demonstrated an innovative Aphrodisian aesthetic that

reflected the artist's and city's perception of the emperor and his accomplishments in the East.

The successful reign of Augustus and the Julio-Claudian emperors depended on the loyalty and acquiescence of the eastern provinces. Although not demanded by Roman leaders, the creation of temples and sanctuaries to honor the princeps also expressed visual acknowledgment and acceptance of the propagandized values and virtues of the emperors. The extensive sculptural program of the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias, and more specifically, the imperial relief panels on the third storey of the south portico, represented a unique intermingling of Roman, Hellenistic, and Aphrodisian artistic styles that presented evidence of an imperial cult to honor Augustus and the Julio-Claudian emperors, and documented a unique local aesthetic of the city's sculptors, and their interpretation and support for imperial reign.

Endnotes:

- 1 Reynolds 1982, 2-4.
- 2 Tacitus 3.62.
- 3 Price 1984, 88.
- 4 Taylor 1975, 244-245.
- 5 Taylor 1975, 168.
- 6 Pliny 2.3.39.
- 7 Smith 1987, 92-94.
- 8 Smith 1987, 94.
- 9 Smith 1988, 51,53.
- 10 Smith 1988, 95-96.
- 11 Smith 1990, 92-94
- 12 Smith 1988, 51.
- 13 Smith 1987, 97.
- 14 Smith 1987, 96-98.
- 15 Price 1984, 88.
- 16 Price 1984, 100.
- 17 Price 1984, 107.
- 18 Smith 1987, 118.
- 19 Smith 1987.

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