

Boys Will Be Boys: Agonistic Graffiti from Iasos

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Agonistic graffiti, containing texts and/or images related to sport training and competition, are attested in numerous cities of the Hellenistic and Roman world, especially in the Aegean islands and western Asia Minor.¹ Most of the known agonistic graffiti from Iasos, in their majority victory acclamations, were published by T. Reinach and other scholars in the 1890s while more specimens were recently published mainly by M. Nafissi.² Much of the early discussion on these and similar texts revolved around the location and the medium on which such graffiti were inscribed as well as whether they represented good wishes or congratulations after a victory. In this paper I revisit these texts in the light of practices of sport competition and victory commemoration in Iasos and Hellenistic and Roman Asia Minor. The high number of agonistic graffiti in Iasos is commensurate with a prevalent local culture of athletic competition that revolved around the city's *gymnasia* and promoted sport and euergetism as primary constituents of civic identity. Moreover, I argue that by inscribing victory acclamations in civic buildings and monuments for distinguished citizens, the authors of agonistic graffiti imprinted themselves into the commemorative landscape of Iasos through a process of reconfiguration of the meanings articulated by existing monuments.

Friends and Victors

Most agonistic graffiti from Iasos were scratched on plain columns but some are to be found on statue bases or stones bearing civic decrees and honorific inscriptions. The best known examples come from a recently re-published column, in all likelihood originally from one of the city's *gymnasia*, that bears at least 22 sport graffiti, most of the type *νίκη* + name or names in the genitive.³ In this case the graffiti are accompanied by designs of palm leaves, a commonly identifiable token of athletic victory. Most graffiti seem to be victory acclamations for an individual (Nafissi 2010, 192-194, nos. B-G, J-L, N, R-V).⁴ However, some seem to wish or celebrate victories for a group of athletes. In all these cases, it seems most reasonable to assume that the authors of these graffiti were the

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¹ E.g. Moretti 1998 (Delos, most likely related to training in the *gymnasion*); Queyrel 2001 (Delphi); Miller 2001, 84-89 (Nemea); Blümel 2004, nos 24-26 (Mylasa); Romano 2007 (Brindisi); IG XII 3, 606-693 (Thera, most likely names of athletes and/or ephebes training in the *gymnasion*); Keegan 2014, 200-201 (Perge).

² Reinach 1893, 197-203; Iasos 285-369; Nafissi 2010; Nafissi – Masturzo 2010; Fabiani 2010.

³ Nafissi 2010, 192-195. According to Iasos 84, there were four *gymnasia* in Iasos.

⁴ In other contexts agonistic graffiti seem to indicate an anticipation/wish for victory, not a commemoration after the fact. See e.g. Miller 2001, 84-89.

athletes themselves.⁵ This is corroborated by agonistic graffiti in other parts of the Greek world, e.g. the graffiti from the tunnel leading up to the stadium in Nemea.⁶

An intriguing feature of the agonistic graffiti from Iasos is the reference to the *nike* of a group of young athletes. In two cases (Iasos 286; Iasos 287= Nafissi 2010, 192, A) they are designated as φίλοι. In other cases, the acclamation *nike* is simply followed by the names of two or three youths (Iasos 293; Nafissi 2010, 193, M and O). These particular graffiti raise some problems of interpretation: why are some groups of athletes designated as *philo*? Do these graffiti refer to the victories of these athletes as a group or individually? And finally, what do such texts imply about youth training practices in a *gymnasion*? The designation *philo* and forms of the verb *philō* are in fact frequently encountered in graffiti throughout the Greek world. Contextualization is crucial in gauging the import of *philia* in informal texts: in erotic and abusive graffiti *philō* might imply sexual desire, affection and/or hierarchical relationships.⁷ In the world of the *gymnasion*, however, *philo* probably refers to a spirit of camaraderie between individuals who trained together for long periods. Besides the Iasos material, in Priene a number of graffiti scratched on the wall of the *gymnasion* proclaim the *philia* and at times the *philia* and *sōteria* (in this case the latter perhaps denoting “bodily well-being”) of groups of males, ostensibly all *gymnasion* enthusiasts.⁸

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that agonistic graffiti had their origins in often arduous and long-term training and competition. In that sense, viewed in the proper light the Iasos graffiti can illuminate patterns of such training and competition in a small city in the early imperial period. As in most cities of the Greek-speaking world Iasos could showcase a rich and vibrant schedule of contests for youths who frequented the city’s *gymnasia* and participated in the civic *ephebeia*. Two honorific decrees for *paidonomoi* of the early imperial period refer to contests open to *gymnasion* trainees: Iasos 100 mentions γυμνικὸς ἀγῶνας while Iasos 99 (= Fabiani 2010, 189-191) refers to games and prizes. It is a distinct possibility that besides the staple program of individual athletic events, contests in Iasos might have included some team events or performances. Throughout the Greek world it was common practice that such contests were held among young *gymnasion* trainees. They were considered an integral part of the training regime but also constituted a crucial stage in the process of identifying youths with athletic potential. Hence in second-century BCE Athens the Theseia included torch-races for boys (παῖδες), epebes and young men (νεανίσκοι, possibly over the age of twenty). The relevant inscriptions suggest that teams competed representing the city’s *gymnasia* and *palestrae* and as a result competitors in torch-races were also assigned a corporate identity on the basis of the facility in which they trained, e.g. “the boys (παῖδας) who trained in the *palaistra* of Timeos” (IG II² 956, 61-2 and IG II² 957, 46-7), the boys who trained in the *palaistra* of Antigenes (IG II² 958, 60-1) or the young men (νεανίσκοι) who trained in the Lyceum

⁵ Contra Nafissi 2010, 195.

⁶ See Miller 2001, 84-89. On the other hand, in the case of the graffiti for gladiators in Pompeii the authors were almost certainly fans, see Hunink 2011, nos. 327-349.

⁷ For the possibility of expressing hierarchical relations through graffiti see Chaniotis 2011, 205 with reference to the material from Aphrodisias.

⁸ IPriene 313, 725; 313, 726; 313, 727; 313, 729; 313, 730II. The same wall also bears a graffito of a crown and palm leaf, see IPriene p. 161.

gymnasion (IG II² 956, 67; IG II² 958, 65).⁹ The same sense of group identity is conveyed by the fact that groups training in a certain facility often acted as an association. In practice, that meant that such groups elected representatives and voted for decrees as, for example, in an early first-century BCE honorific decree from Thessaloniki issued by those who frequented the *gymnasion* (τοῖς ἀπὸ τοῦ γυμνασίου; IG X, 2, 1, 4, l. 20).¹⁰

The Iasos group victory graffiti, therefore, could very well reflect both this well-documented group identity forged among members of a particular *gymnasion* as well as an acclamation of victory in a local team competition. This inference is further corroborated by the fact that, as pointed out already in 1893 by T. Reinach, most of the names appearing in the Iasos *philoï* victory graffiti are also included in ephebic lists that date to the late Hellenistic-early Imperial period.¹¹ This suggests that the groups designated as *philoï* in Iasos were more or less coeval and that they underwent together the various stages of the Hellenic cultural education that usually included athletic training and a spell in the city's *ephebeia*.¹² It is very likely, therefore, that the authors of these *philoï* victory graffiti were *gymnasion* habitués who wished to single out themselves and their companions as members of a particular group of youths that devoted themselves to sport practices. The importance of *gymnasion* training is emphatically expressed in honorific decrees of the period. An early case in point is the eulogistic life narrative of Polemaios of Colophon inscribed on the base of a spectacular late second-century BCE monument that was dedicated at the sanctuary of Apollo at Claros.¹³ Polemaios, we are told, trained diligently in the *gymnasion* since an early age and competed successfully as a youth in sacred games. Following the completion of his *gymnasion* education Polemaios went on to study in Rhodes and then embarked on a distinguished public career of civic service and benefaction.

For men like Polemaios the activities of the *gymnasion*, including the civic *ephebeia*, were crucial and indispensable stepping-stones in the formation of their public persona. If the Polemaios monument in Claros constituted the symbolic, state-sanctioned culmination of a life-time of public distinction, then the agonistic graffiti in Iasos could be perceived as the informal traces of the incipient steps towards civic achievement and recognition. In other words, the authors of the agonistic graffiti in Iasos did not merely situate themselves in the agonistic world of the *gymnasion* but also negotiated their social status as members of a group that could generate future civic leaders.

Celebration and Co-optation: An Alternative View of the Iasos Agonistic Graffiti

The *gymnasia* of Iasos were vibrant locations of athletic and cultural activity. Youths and older men engaged in physical education as well as in more specialized athletic training with an eye towards local and interstate competitions. Sport activities were complemented by lectures and other intellectual pursuits. The activities on offer were thought to provide a holistic approach towards the

⁹ In Athens, older age groups could also be identified collectively, e.g. the *andres* who trained in the Lyceum *gymnasion* IG II² 957, 51.

¹⁰ Cf. also the case of the *presbyteroi* from Iasos, a group of men over thirty that also identified with a *gymnasion* and acted as an association. See Fröhlich 2013.

¹¹ E.g. graffito Reinach 1893, no. 44a = Iasos 286; ephebes list Iasos 271, with a discussion on the possible dates of ephebeia lists in Iasos, Teil II p. 36.

¹² For cultural elite identity through athletics in the Roman east see van Nijf 1999 and 2001.

¹³ Robert – Robert 1989, 11-17.

decorous upbringing of youth. This view of the *gymnasion*, extensively documented for the Hellenistic and Roman Greek-speaking world, is exemplified in Iasos in the honorific decree for Melanion Theodorou: an offspring of a family of *euergetai*, from a tender age Melanion exhibited a love for knowledge and devoted himself in an industrious manner to the activities of the *gymnasion*. This led, always according to the decree, to a righteous and exemplary upbringing, followed by a distinguished record of service as *ephebarchos*.¹⁴ The decree concludes with the resolution to set up at least three monuments of Melanion accompanied by the appropriate honorific inscriptions. One of these monuments was to be displayed in the Ptolemaion *gymnasion* (Iasos 98, 35-41). Numerous other Iasians were honored in similar ways due to their achievements and service in civic athletics and other community matters.¹⁵ As a result, the *gymnasia* and other public settings of Iasos were virtually transformed into sites of remembrance (*lieux de mémoire*) whereby collective and individual memories and identities were forged over time.¹⁶

Even though a wider trend towards monumentalization and commemoration was spreading quickly in the Greek east in the Hellenistic and Roman imperial period, there are some distinct patterns of commemoration that emerge in particular cities and regions.¹⁷ Regional differences might be due to aesthetic or purely practical reasons, e.g. related to space constraints and availability of materials. For instance it appears that in some communities it was common practice to turn architectural elements of publicly accessible structures into “billboards” that paid homage, through texts and images, to individual achievements. Moreover, free-standing statuary monuments for distinguished individuals could also be seen in public spaces throughout the city. As it is to be expected, often the two types of monuments (free-standing or embedded in architectural elements) competed for public visibility. Whenever it can be accurately documented, the spatial distribution of monuments into civic space is also indicative of local values and priorities of commemoration. In the case of Iasos, due to the fact that the majority of the extant remains of honorific monuments were transferred to Istanbul during the late Ottoman period, it is difficult in many cases to pinpoint with accuracy from which building complex individual monuments originally came from.¹⁸

What does all the above mean for agonistic graffiti? The target audience of these texts was first and foremost other Iasians who frequented the *gymnasia*: youths of various ages, gymnasiarchs, trainers and *gymnasion* personnel. Yet, given the centrality of *gymnasion* athletics in civic upbringing, in a sense these texts also addressed issues and concerns of the community at large. The fact that Iasian youths so eagerly produced agonistic graffiti is by itself suggestive. As I have already pointed out, a great number of these graffiti were scratched on the shafts of smooth-surface columns while others were inscribed on statue base blocks or columns that contained other honorific inscriptions. The recent re-edition of a column containing an honorific decree (Iasos 99) for the *paidonomos* Gaius Iulius Capito records the texts of two legible *nike* graffiti, a crown as well as several other graffiti

¹⁴ Iasos 98, c. first century BCE.

¹⁵ Iasos 84; 87; 99; 100; 114; 121; 122; 123; 124.

¹⁶ For the conceptualization and multivocality of sites of memory, including individual monuments, see Nora 1989; Gillis 1994; Winter 2009.

¹⁷ For the practice of monumental commemoration, especially in connection with civic euergetism and identity in Hellenistic and Roman Asia Minor see Ma 2013; Zuiderhoek 2009 and 2014.

¹⁸ Aspects of the process of rediscovering and transferring antiquities from Iasos to Istanbul are discussed in Berti et al. 2010, 148-156.

that could not be clearly deciphered.¹⁹ The graffiti were scratched throughout the column, mostly around the text of the decree for Iulius Capito, which indicates that they are chronologically posterior to the text of the formal decree. It is notable that Iulius Capito is specifically praised for “setting up games and providing prizes” (Iasos 99, 7) for boys, which in this case should perhaps be understood in the wider sense of young men. It is possible that some of the *nike* acclamations that were inscribed on the same column referred to victories at the contests provided by the generosity of Iulius Capito.

Even more telling is the case of a statue base honoring the *periodonikes* Titus Flavius Metrobios, the most notable athlete that, on the basis of the current evidence, Iasos ever produced (=Metrobios monument A).²⁰ Following the dedication of the monument, three *nike* graffiti were inscribed on the rear and left sides of the statue base (Nafissi and Masturzo 2010, B-D). It is important for the purposes of our discussion that this was not a newly commissioned monument but that the statue base was originally manufactured in the mid/late Hellenistic period (2nd/1st century BCE), and it was then reused for the monument of Metrobios in the late first century CE. The original Hellenistic statuary complex consisted of two male statues standing side by side. There is no indication as to the identity of the original honorees or the exact spot of display of the earlier monument. There is, however, another statue base that is quite revealing of the process of re-assigning the character and meaning evinced by a monument in Roman Iasos. I am referring to a pedestal that originally formed part of a larger monument for the Hecatomnids, the family that ruled Caria for most of the fourth century BCE. The pedestal originally bore a statue of Aba, sister of Hecatomnus and founder of the dynasty. The Hecatomnid monument consisted of statues for several members of the family and was located in a portico west of the agora. In the late first century CE the statue base honoring Aba was relocated and converted as well into a monument for Metrobios (= Metrobios monument B).²¹

Hence both of these monuments honoring Metrobios appropriated earlier memorials and both appear to have been endorsed by the *boule* and the *demos* of Iasos – the dedicatory formula survives in Metrobios monument A and it is reasonably restored in Metrobios monument B. Since it is likely, given the agonistic graffiti that were inscribed on the statue base, that Metrobios monument A stood in a *gymnasion*, Metrobios monument B might have stood in the *agora* or another public and easily accessible location. In other words, as it was commonly practiced with benefactors and distinguished citizens, Iasos honored Metrobios with two publicly displayed monuments. Metrobios’ commemoration was supplemented by two private memorials dedicated by the athlete himself: one consecrated to Zeus Olympios (Iasos 107 = Metrobios monument C) and one consecrated to Heracles Prophylax (Iasos 108 = Metrobios monument D). Monuments A-C emphasize the highlights of Metrobios’ career, e.g. being the first Iasian to ever gain the coveted title of *periodonikes* and the first person ever to win the *dolichos* in the Roman Capitolia. Monument D recaps some other important victories by Metrobios in regional games and gives a total number of over one hundred and twenty crowns for his entire career.²²

¹⁹ Fabiani 2010, 189-191.

²⁰ Nafissi – Masturzo 2010 = SEG 48, 1333; see also Habicht 1998. For T. Flavius Metrobios and his athletic career see also Iasos 107 and 108.

²¹ Fabiani – Masturzo – Nafissi 2010.

²² For the recording of unique achievements as a strategy of recognition by athletes see Brunet 2011.

The agonistic graffiti in the column bearing the decree for the *paidonomos* Iulius Capito and the statue base of the Metrobios A monument further illustrate the process of appropriating old memorials and reconfiguring the commemorative landscape of early imperial Iasos. Re-assigning the priorities of established *lieux de mémoire* can be a complex and slow process. Old and new memorials often co-exist at the same site, often generating diverse meanings and memories. Dedicatory landscapes can therefore be conceptually muddled and perplexing locales for viewers who at times have to work hard to sort out the messages emitted by individual or groups of monuments. Civic authorities can interfere with this process by eliminating or recycling what were perceived as historically obsolete monuments to make way for new ones that better accommodated contemporary needs. In Iasos, the decision of civic authorities in the late first century CE to transform the fourth-century BCE monument for Hecatomnid Aba into a monument for the athlete Metrobios is indicative in the shift of political loyalties and civic identities. The fourth-century complex honoring the Hecatomnids was a monument that formed part of a systematic policy of celebration and commemoration of Hecatomnid achievements, evidence of which can be detected in several cities in the region of Caria. These monuments, the one from Iasos included, signified political affiliation and articulated, through statuary and honorific inscriptions, a regional Carian identity infused with Hellenic tinges.²³

The conversion of the monument of Hecatomnid Aba into a monument for an Iasian *periodonikes* typified a different political landscape but also a new set of civic values that were publicly and extravagantly - with at least four monuments - extolled in the person of Metrobios. It is worth noting, in connection with the wider political framework imposed by the *imperium romanum*, that in both of the state monuments for Metrobios (monuments A and B) his victory at the Roman Capitolia is mentioned before any victories in other games, including those in the admittedly more prestigious “big-four” games in mainland Greece. Moreover, the honorific inscription in Metrobios monument A contains a *rasura* that was the result of the *damnatio memoriae* suffered by Domitian after his death. Text and image contributed in this case into the creation of a monument that was firmly embedded into the vicissitudes of the late first century CE.

Through repeated use and modification, public memorials in Iasos became palimpsests of meanings that articulated the intentions of the authors. Hence the addition of agonistic graffiti on the surface of inscribed statue bases and columns signified a further stage in the negotiation of memories and identities of early imperial Iasos. This intervention on identity politics and civic discourses claimed by graffiti could operate on many levels. In the case of a column in the *gymnasion* bearing the graffiti of youths celebrating or wishing for athletic victories, the act of inscribing the names of individuals and groups could signify a sense of group-belonging shaped by training patterns but could also be construed as an combative gesture in the spirit of competition between enthusiastic youths. In the case of graffiti added on an already existing monument, as in the case of the Metrobios B monument statue base, graffiti authors created a canvas for the performance – this time primarily through text – of the prevalent cultural values (Hellenicity, civic loyalty and service) associated with elite civic athletics during the Roman imperial period. This discursive performance complemented the practices of athletic training and competition in the *gymnasion* wherein the monu-

²³ Cf. the use of the term *basileis* instead of “satrap” or some other non-Greek term, to refer to the Hecatomnids in a recently discovered epigram from the Hecatomnid monument in Iasos, see Fabiani – Masturzo – Nafissi 2010, 175-177.

ment was in all probability displayed. By inscribing their names on the monument of a celebrated athlete of international caliber, Iasian youths also registered their aspiration to comparable athletic achievements for themselves.

Conclusion

Graffiti have recently been defined as “images and texts of unofficial character scratched on physical objects, whose primary function was not to serve as bearers of such images and inscriptions”.²⁴ This and similar definitions are by necessity interpretatively limiting because they espouse the perspective of the manufacturer or sponsor of the physical objects who eventually became the bearers of graffiti.²⁵ But who is entitled to decide what images and texts to inscribe on e.g. a public memorial? The question is complex and involves various vantage points. The material from Iasos suggests that physical objects, especially publicly displayed monuments are multivocal in the meanings and memories they generate. Hence from the perspective of the *boule*, the *demos* and the *gerousia* of Iasos that endorsed and commissioned the Metrobios B monument, the agonistic graffiti that were added on the statue base after it was consecrated in one of the *gymnasia* were perhaps considered as a breach of civic authority and a defacement in the public domain of Iasos. By the same token we can safely assume that at an earlier stage of the life of the monument, a similar inference regarding the monument of Metrobios would have been reached by the individuals commemorated on the same statue base before the original statues were removed and the monument was converted, with the blessings of civic authorities, into a memorial of the most successful Iasian athlete of all time. In other words, for the original honorees of the monument and their descendants the conversion of the statue base into a memorial for Metrobios was probably felt as an assault towards their family traditions and the memory of the original honorees.

To be sure, I do not claim that one can confidently reconstruct in all their complexity the emotional and ideological context of the Metrobios monuments or any other fragmentary and partially understood memorials. What is evident, however, is the multifarious nature of the process of assigning, generating and mediating the meaning of a monument. Honorees, civic authorities, viewers and users clearly thought that monuments were not merely good to think *about* but also good to think *with*. As part of this process, the authors of agonistic graffiti in Iasos most likely thought that their texts “belonged” to the surfaces and monuments on which they were scratched, e.g. that the already once reused surface of the statue base that hosted the honorific decree and statue of Metrobios was an appropriate bearer of sport victory acclamations.

Ultimately, by inscribing their names and victory acclamations on the memorials of *gymnasion* benefactors and top-level athletes, young athletes embedded themselves into a dominant social script that promoted athletic success and euergetism as preeminent components of elite Hellenic status. Furthermore, by scribbling their victory acclamations on architectural elements of public structures and on the surfaces of already existing monuments, graffiti authors contributed into the process of negotiating and re-shaping the commemorative and civic landscape of Iasos. In this way, agonistic graffiti allied with formal, state-endorsed narratives of athletic achievement (inscriptions, honorary monuments) in articulating personal and collective memories and identities.

²⁴ Chaniotis 2011, 196.

²⁵ See also the comments by Baird – Taylor 2011, 3-7.

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Delikanlılar Delikanlı Olur: Iasos'tan Agonistik Grafitiler

Özet

Iasos'taki agonistik grafitiler, atletlerin ve hayırseverlerin başarılarının anıldığı anıtlar üzerinde olduğu gibi, kent gymnasium'unun mimari parçaları üzerine de kazınmıştır. *Gymnasium*'lardaki genç atletler ve eğitim alanlar kendileri ya da olasılıkla beraberindeki diğer eğitim alanlarla birlikte guruplar halinde zafer övgüleri kazınmışlardır. Zamanla agonistik grafitiler Erken İmparatorluk Dönemi'nde o dönemin önemli isimlerini anmak üzere yenilenen Hellenistik Dönem anıtlarının üzerine kazınmıştır. Yazar, Iasos'taki genç atletlerin, gymnasium hayırseverlerinin ve üst düzey atletlerin anıtlarının üzerine isimlerini ve zafer övgülerini kazıyarak, kendilerini elit Hellenik statünün üstün bileşenleri olan sportif başarı ve hayırseverliğin teşvik edildiği hâkim sosyal yapının içerisine yerleştirdiklerini ileri sürmektedir. Ayrıca, grafiti yazıcılar Iasos'taki anıtsal ve sivil peyzajın görüşülüp yeniden düzenlenmesine de katkıda bulunmuşlardır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Iasos; grafiti; atletler; gymnasium; Hellenizm; euergesia; anıtlar.

Boys Will Be Boys: Agonistic Graffiti from Iasos

Abstract

In Iasos agonistic graffiti were inscribed on architectural elements (columns) of the city's *gymnasia* as well as on monuments commemorating the achievements of athletes and benefactors. Young athletes and trainees at the *gymnasia* inscribed victory acclamations for themselves or small groups, possibly their fellow training partners. At times, agonistic graffiti were inscribed on memorials of the Hellenistic era that were refurbished in the early Roman imperial period to commemorate contemporary luminaries. I argue that by inscribing their names and victory acclamations on the memorials of gymnasium benefactors and top-level athletes, young athletes from Iasos embedded themselves into a dominant social script that promoted athletic success and euergetism as preeminent components of elite Hellenic status. Furthermore, graffiti authors contributed into the process of negotiating and re-shaping the commemorative and civic landscape of Iasos.

Keywords: Iasos; graffiti; athletes; gymnasium; Hellenism; euergetism; monuments.