

Roman hegemony and local agency in Asia: from Republic to Principate

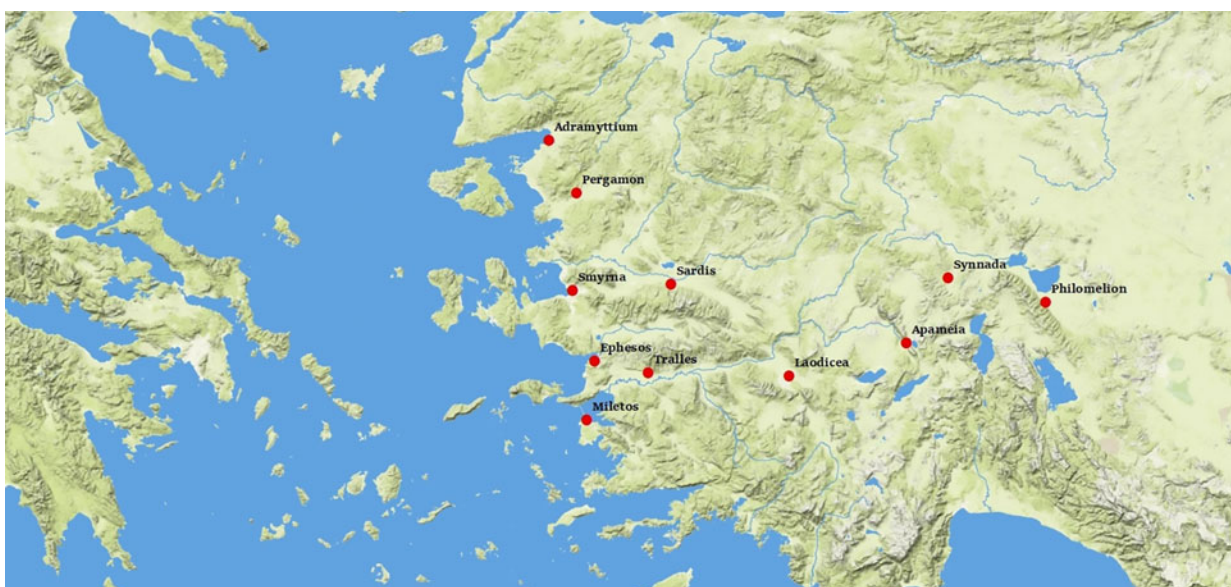
Bradley Jordan | British Institute at Ankara Postdoctoral fellow 2021–22; University of Oslo

The formative period of Roman administration in western Anatolia, especially the province of ‘Asia’, overlaps substantially with the turbulent transition from Republic to Principate. The evidence from this region offers a window onto the shifting priorities and the capacity of the Roman state and interested individuals to conceptualise, implement and maintain an administrative framework in a provincial context. Much modern scholarship conceives of Roman government as a self-consciously organised and adaptive administrative regime, intended to effectively extract resources while maintaining firm political control. However, concurrently, others emphasise the limited capacity of such governance and the significance of local processes and agents to generating ‘imperial administration’. During my Fellowship at the BIAA, I sought to analyse this crucial issue, asking the question of how the Roman empire came effectively to establish and maintain control over provincial territories, through a case study of the province of Asia (see map). Under the rubric of BIAA’s current research initiative ‘Migration, minorities, and regional identities’, my project concentrated on the intense cultural diversity across Anatolia and its role in shaping regional institutions and identities. It tested the hypothesis that the administrative institutions of Roman empire emerged in the dialectic between local communities, the Roman state and the individual agents representing them.

To address these questions, I employed frameworks borrowed from the political sciences, including especially new institutionalism. These approaches emphasise the importance

of sequence in analysing incremental change, focusing attention on self-reinforcing developments, changing agent preferences, and the unintended consequences of agent choices. One example of this is the formation of the so-called *koinon* (‘league’) of Asia, a representative body of communities in the province, which was an organic development out of existing practices. From the 90s BCE, this group of communities, some of which already shared common religious festivals, began, under a kaleidoscope of names, to organise common celebrations honouring Roman magistrates. In turn, their common experiences of Roman rule intensified their co-operation in both the religious and the political spheres, using the nascent institution as a bridge to co-ordinated action. Communities actively chose to cede autonomy to the body to increase their collective influence. As the *koinon* emerged as a significant voice within the province, it was increasingly co-opted by Roman actors as a means to communicate with the province, culminating in its responsibility for the earliest provincial imperial cult under the Principate. This new framing is critical to understanding the drivers, both endogenous and exogenous, which pushed civic actors from diverse communities to form and sustain new institutions across the province as a whole.

The project involved utilising a broad base of evidence, including epigraphic, numismatic, historiographic, and archaeological material, in order to trace the establishment or co-optation, and subsequent evolution of regional institutions in the province over the period. While Roman sources, such as Cicero’s speech *pro Flacco* and letters, reveal an imperial



Map of *provincia Asia* (created by the author with tiles from CAWM under CCA BY 4.0 Licence).



Honorific decree for Polemaios of Kolophon at Klaros, c. 120 BCE (*SEG* 39.1243).

perspective on how provincial actors should and did interact with Roman political and social institutions, I placed material from the provinces at the centre of this study. For example, a collection of Roman documents – including senatorial decrees and a governor’s letter – referring to the establishment of the province of Asia, inscribed near modern Arızlı in deeply rural Phrygia, demonstrates how communities proactively used Roman pronouncements and institutions for their own purposes. This small community, in the highlands between Synnada (modern Şuhut) and Antioch-in-Pisidia (modern Yalvaç), almost certainly did not entertain Roman officials on a regular basis. Instead of engaging a Roman audience, these monuments must have had a local audience, potentially asserting the community’s longstanding integration into the province as compared with nearby *poleis* to the east or as a point of civic pride.

Furthermore, analysis of the coin evidence points towards a slow, fitful and organic process culminating in Roman administration of provincial minting. Initially, the cities which served as Attalid mints, including the unambiguously free city of Ephesus, continued to produce so-called *cistophori*, a regional silver coinage with a distinctive type and its own weight standard inaugurated by the former dynasty. However, the well-attested fiscal crisis during the 70s and 60s BCE corresponds to the collapse of this monetary system in the province in the mid-60s. Surprisingly, rather than importing Roman weight standards, the coinage was revived a decade later, albeit with Latin inscriptions showing their authorisation by Roman proconsuls. This implies intervention was necessary to support the monetary needs of the region, but a conscious choice was made to retain local types. During the chaos of

the civil war period, the coinage disappears again, before the final revival under Augustus, this time bearing types imitating those used in Rome and associated with the Princeps’ successes. It became an unambiguously imperial coinage, but in incremental and unplanned fashion and retaining its unique weight standard.

A further method involved the use of a soft comparative lens drawing on the scholarship and rich archival material pertaining to 16th-century Spanish America as prompt to analyse the problem of local jurisdiction under Roman rule. The evidence for judicial practice under Roman hegemony is limited largely to the cases of free cities, such as in the honorific inscriptions for Polemaios (pictured) and Menippos at Klaros (*SEG* 39.1243–44), or cases involving Roman citizens. This comparative evidence, in conjunction with the historiographical sources, emphasises how the practical solution of relying on local agents, customs and legal processes could take shape. While not suggesting that governors could or did not intervene, especially in response to demands from litigants, such intercessions appear to have been undertaken by magistrates on their own terms and in an erratic fashion.

Overall, the evidence indicates that throughout the first century of Roman hegemony in Asia Minor, there was a vibrant dialogue between local elites, Roman actors in the provinces and powerbrokers in Rome which generated and sustained flexible practices of administration. Self-reinforcing institutions, as well as individual agent-choices in response to the dynamic political environment of the so-called ‘Roman revolution’ during this period, ensured that Roman governance emerged precisely at the intersection of local and imperial interests.