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

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“The Greatest in Human Memory”

Reevaluating the Lydia Earthquake
The Lydia Earthquake

• Occurred in 17 A.D.

• “The Earthquake of the Twelve Cities”
  – (Aegeatia, Apollonidensia, & Hyrcanus unable to be located in the archaeological record.)

• Ranked a 10 on the European Macroseismic scale
Methodology

• Focusing on the primary literary sources
• Evaluated according to the three stages of disaster
  • The disaster
  • Relief efforts
  • Social and political adaptation
When these accounts from Strabo, Seneca, and Tacitus are evaluated together, an Imperial narrative emerges that disconnects Tiberius from the disaster, though the authors implicitly allude to possible dissenting interpretations.
Strabo’s Account of the Earthquake

• Strabo
  – c. 64/63 B.C. – c. 24 A.D.
  – From Amaseia in the province of Pontus, in northern modern Turkey

• Geography
  – Opus of the physical and human geography of the known world

καὶ τὰ περὶ Σίπυλον δὲ καὶ τὴν ἀνατροπὴν αὐτοῦ μύθον οὐ δεῖ τίθεσθαι: καὶ γὰρ νῦν τὴν Μαγνησίαν τὴν ὑπ᾽ αὐτῷ κατέβαλον σεισμοί, ἣνικα καὶ Σάρδεις καὶ τῶν ἄλλων τὰς επιφανεστάτας κατὰ πολλὰ μέση διελυμήναντο (Strabo, Geographica 12.8.18).

It is not necessary to tell the story of Mount Sipylus and its destruction: for also at that time earthquakes destroyed Magnesia at the foot of the mountain, while at the same time destroying Sardis and the other most famous cities throughout the region.
Seneca the Younger’s Account

• c. 4 B.C. – 65 A.D.
• Natural Questions
  • Explains natural disasters as part of the natural order
  • Separated from religion

Tyros aliquando infamis ruinis fuit; Asia duodecim urbes simul perdidit; anno priore achaiam et Macedoniam, quaecumque est ista vis mali quae incurrit nunc Campaniam, laesit (Seneca, Naturales Quaestiones 6.1.13).

Tyre at some time experienced infamous destruction; Asia lost twelve cities at the same time; in the last year it struck Achaea and Macedonia, whatever this disastrous force is, that now attacks Campania.
Tacitus: The Most Detailed Account of the Earthquake

In the same year twelve celebrated cities of the province of Asia collapsed by means of an earthquake at night, and for this reason it was a more unexpected and dangerous disaster. Nor in this case could people use the usual way of escape, rushing into open spaces, because they were being swallowed up when the land parted beneath them. People remember that large mountains sat down, things that were flat seemed elevated, and fires raged among the ruins.
Stage 1 Conclusion

• Together, these accounts demonstrate the potential interpretations of the gods condemning Tiberius’ rule through the earthquake which Tiberius and later Julio-Claudian emperors like Nero sought to suppress.
• The authors documenting the relief program show Tiberius as the continuation of Emperor Augustus, as he is presented in the *Res Gestae*. 
The Tiberian Relief Program in Strabo

επηνώρθωσε δ’ ὁ ἡγεμὼν χρήματα ἐπιδούσ, καθάπερ καὶ πρότερον ἐπὶ τῆς γενομένης συμφορᾶς Τραλλιανοῖς (ἡνίκα τὸ γυμνάσιον καὶ ἄλλα μέρη συνέπεσεν) ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ καὶ τούτοις καὶ Λαοδικεύσιν (Strabo, Geographica 12.8.18).

But the emperor restored the cities by giving them money, like and just as previously his father did before when disaster came upon Tralles (at the time when the gymnasium and the other parts fell together) and to the Laodiceians.

- Lydia earthquake compared to 27 B.C. Tralles and Laodicea earthquake that occurred under Emperor Augustus.
- Tiberius = Augustus
The Relief Program in Tacitus

aserrima in Sardianos lues plurimum in eosdem misericordiae traxit: nam centessesestertium pollicitus Caesar, et quantum aerario aut fisco pendebant in quinquennium remisit. Magnetes a Sipylo proximi damno ac remedio habit. Temnios, Philadelphenos, Aegeatas, Apollonidenses, quiue Mosteni aut Macedones Hyrcani vocantur, et Hierocaesariam, Myrinam, Cymem, Tmolum levari idem in tempus tributis mittique ex senatu placuit, qui praesentia spectaret refoveretque. delectus est M. Ateius e praetorius, ne consulari obtinente Asiam aemulatio inter pares et ex eo impedimentum orretur (Tac. Ann. 2.47.1-4).

A most cruel misfortune on the Sardians brought for the same people much sympathy: for Emperor Tiberius promised 10 million sesterces and for five years exempted the amount they paid in taxes or public revenue. For the Magnesians by Mount Sipylus were nearest in their harm and their use of aid. Temnians, Philadelphians, Aegeatians, Apollonidensians, who are called Mostenians or the Macedonians of Hyrcanus, and Hierocaesaria, Myrina, Cyme, and Tmolus, it was pleasing to lighten their tribute at that time and that someone be sent from the Senate, who would examine their present conditions and restore the cities. Marcus Ateius was chosen from the praetorians, lest a consul obtaining Asia raise up envy and turmoil among his equals.

- Εὐεργά crucial for legacy and claim for future deification.
  - 10 million sesterces donation to Sardis mimics Augustus’ donations in Res Gestae 5, 15, & 18.
- Tiberius fails to show his “foreknowledge” as pontifex maximus in Tacitus’ account
Suetonius on Tiberius’ Relief Efforts

Ne provincias quidem liberalitate ulla sublevavit, excepta Asia, disiectis terrae motu civitatibus (Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum* 3.48).

Not even the provinces did he assist with any liberality, with the exception of Asia, because its citizens had been ruined by an earthquake.

- c. 69 A.D. - c. 126 A.D.
- *Lives of the Caesars*
  - 121 A.D.
- Tiberius cultural antithesis of Augustus
Stage 2 Conclusion

- Strabo, Tacitus, and Suetonius then all invite a comparison between Tiberius’ actions after the Lydia earthquake and Emperor Augustus’ in his *Res Gestae*, whom they identify as the litmus test for a successful emperor.
• While Romans celebrate the expansion of their Republican values in Asia following the Lydia earthquake, the Greeks mourn the end of their political power under the Roman Empire.

Image of an emperor conquering a nation, Sebasteion of Aphrodisias
Bianor

- Birth date unknown - death date 18 A.D. at the earliest
  - Lived under Augustus and Tiberius
- The nature of the Lydia earthquake shows Sardis’ considerable impiety

Sardis, once the city of Gyges and Alyattes; Sardis, who was for the great king a second Persia in Asia Minor; you who built yourself in ancient times a hall of golden bricks, winning wealth from the stream of Pactolus; now, ill-fated city, enveloped all of you in one disaster, you have fallen headlong into the depths, swallowed by the fathomless cavern. Bura and Helice too were engulfed by the sea, but you, Sardis, the inland city, have met with the same end as these which rest in the deep (tr. W.R. Paton).
Strabo on the Aftermath of the Earthquake

μετὰ δὲ Λυδοὺς εἰσιν οἱ Μυσοί καὶ πόλεις Φιλαδέλφεια σεισμῶν πλήρης. οὐ γὰρ διαλείπουσιν οἱ τοίχοι δυστάμενοι καὶ ἄλλο τῆς πόλεως κακοπαθοῦν: οἴκουσιν οὖν ὁλίγοι διὰ τούτο τὴν πόλιν, οἱ δὲ πολλοὶ καταβίοντες ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ γεωργοῦντες, ἔχοντες εὐδαίμονα γῆν: ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ολίγων θαυμάζειν ἔστιν ὅτι οὕτω φιλοχωροῦσιν, ἐπισφαλεῖς τὰς οἰκήσεις ἔχοντες: ἐτὶ δ᾽ ἄν τις μᾶλλον θαυμάσει τῶν κτισάντων αὐτὴν.

(Strabo, Geography, 13.4.10.)

And after the Lydians are the Mysians and the city of Philadelphia full of earthquakes. Not only do the walls contain gaps but they also, being divided in this part or that throughout the city, suffer terribly; thus few people live throughout this city, but many live out in the surrounding area as farmers, possessing flourishing soil: but even so it is marveled about the few that live in the city that they so love it, having homes prone to destruction: but still one may marvel more about the founders of the city.

• Characteristics of Strabo’s ideal Polis
  – Clear foundation history
  – Productive and defensible land
  – Mixed constitutional government

• Philadelphia fails in all three respects
  – Illustrates the fall of Greek identity under the Roman Empire
The munificence of the emperor claims not only the casualties of the citizens, but also the losses of the cities. The cities of Asia were restored, they were claimed from the injustices of the magistrates of the province: honor is most provided for the worthy, punishment upon the evil is slow, but comes in some way or another: favoritism is overcome by justice; for the highest first citizen teaches his people to do rightly by doing, and as he is the greatest in the empire, he is greater by his example.
Pliny the Elder

- 23/24 A.D. – 79 A.D.
- Tiberius destroyed Augustus’ Pax Romana
- Phlegon of Tralles’ reference to the colossus of Tiberius in the Roman forum

• Maximus terrae memoria mortalium exstitit motus tiberii caesaris principatu, xii urbis asiae una nocte prostratis. “The greatest earthquake in human memory came forth in the rule of Emperor Tiberius, with twelve cities of the province of Asia knocked flat in one night in one night.” (Pliny the Elder, Naturalis Historia 2.86)

Copy of the statue base Phlegon of Tralles references, found at Puteoli, Italy
Stage 3 Conclusion

• The sources illustrate the firm solidification of Roman rule in Asia following the Lydia earthquake, which Tiberius could celebrate, though he needed to be aware of the negative interpretations concerning his involvement with the disaster itself.
Final Thoughts

- Having explored these literary sources, this project has found that through the Lydia earthquake, Tiberius began to lose the confidence of his fellow Romans while simultaneously failing to gain a sustainable base of support in the provincials of Asia.

Coin commemorating Tiberius' relief program