



PLINY, TRAJAN AND THE INTRODUCTION OF THE *ISELASTICVM* FOR VICTORIOUS ATHLETES*

ABSTRACT

In two letters, Pliny and Trajan discuss a petition sent to the governor by the guild of athletes concerning their rewards after winning contests (Plin. Ep. 10.118–19). In his request, Pliny refers to a regulation by which Trajan had settled the rights of the victorious athletes in regard to their home cities. In his response, Trajan repeats the case with slight variations. The two letters pose both philological and historical difficulties, which this article aims to solve. The relevant passage in Trajan's letter is corrupt. As scholarship has misunderstood the historical background of the letters, no satisfying solution for the restoration of the text has been found to date. The argumentation of this article is twofold. First, it offers a new reading of the corrupt passage in the emperor's letter which respects both the textual transmission and the historical situation. Second, it is argued that the two letters refer to a Trajanic law which settled the regulations of iselastic contests for the first time, but left some details undecided. In sum, this article proposes a new reading of a damaged passage in Plin. Ep. 10.119 as well as offering a historical commentary on agonistic activities in imperial Asia Minor.

Keywords: Pliny; Trajan; Bithynia; contests; athletes; rewards; prizes; *iselasticum*

In a letter to Trajan, Pliny,¹ who served as *legatus pro praetore* of Pontus and Bithynia in c.110–13, is concerned with the rights of victorious athletes (*Ep.* 10.118).² These *athletae*, who were organized in a *synodos*, demanded the right of getting paid by

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¹ I refer to the following editions of Pliny's letters only by the editor's name: Bracci = F. Bracci (ed.), *Plinio il Giovane, Epistole, Libro X: Introduzione, traduzione, commento* (Pisa, 2011); Hardy = E.G. Hardy (ed.), *C. Plinii Caecilii Secundi Epistulae ad Traianum imperatorem cum eiusdem responsis* (London, 1889); Mynors = R.A.B. Mynors (ed.), *C. Plinii Caecilii Secundi Epistularum libri decem* (Oxford, 1963, repr. 1966); Schäfer = G.H. Schäfer (ed.), *C. Plinii Caecilii Secundi Epistolarum libri decem et Panegyricus* (Leipzig, 1805); Schuster = M. Schuster and R. Hanslik (edd.), *C. Plinius Caecilius Secundus, Epistularum libri novem; Epistularum ad Traianum liber; Panegyricus* (Leipzig, 1958³); Sherwin-White = A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford, 1966; repr. 1985); Stout = S.E. Stout (ed.), *Plinius, Epistulae: A Critical Edition* (Bloomington, 1962); Williams = W. Williams, *Pliny, Correspondence with Trajan from Bithynia: Epistles X* (Warminster, 1990). Inscriptions are abbreviated according to the *AIEGL* list.

² All dates mentioned throughout this article are A.D., unless otherwise indicated. For Pliny's status and the date of his governorship, cf. W. Eck, 'Jahres- und Provinzialfasten der senatorischen Statthalter von 69/70 bis 138/139', *Chiron* 12 (1982), 281–362, at 349–51; G. Alföldy, 'Die Inschriften des jüngeren Plinius und seine Mission in der Provinz Pontus et Bithynia', *AAntHung* 39 (1999), 21–44; R.K. Gibson, *Man of High Empire. The Life of Pliny the Younger* (New York, 2020), 190–221. Though an important source for agonistics, Pliny's letters are discussed only occasionally by Z. Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World: Victory and Virtue* (Oxford, 2005), J. König, *Athletics and Literature in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2005), F. Graf, *Roman Festivals in the Greek East: From the Early Empire to the Middle Byzantine Era* (Cambridge, 2015) and B. Fauconnier, 'Ecumenical synods: the associations of athletes in the Roman empire' (Diss., University of Amsterdam, 2018), 225.

their *πατρίς* directly after they had won a contest, rather than having to wait until they had returned to their home cities.³ In Mynors's edition, the beginning of this letter reads as follows:

(1) *Athletae, domine, ea quae pro iselasticis certaminibus constituisti, deberi sibi putant statim ex eo die quo sunt coronati; nihil enim referre quando sint patriam inuecti, sed quando certamine uicerint, ex quo inuehi possint. ego contra scribo 'iselastici nomine'. itaque ꝥeorum uehementer addubitem an sit potius id tempus, quo εισήλασαν, intuendum.* (2) *iidem obsonia petunt pro eo agone, qui a te iselasticus factus est, quamuis uicerint ante quam fieret.*

The athletes, my Lord, believe that the prizes for what you established regarding the *iselastic* contests shall be awarded to them from this very day on which they are crowned. It is by no means of importance when they have returned into their home town, but when they have won the contest, from which they may return. I instead file under 'iselastic name'. That is why I am in serious doubt, if it is not rather the point of time at which they entered. (2) Also, they are demanding prize-money for a contest they have won, before it was declared *iselastic* by you.

As usual, Trajan's response (*Ep.* 10.119) repeats, with slight variations, the case,⁴ and is thus of high importance for both the textual structure and our understanding of the situation. What concerns us here is the question of how and when Trajan introduced *iselastic* contests (*ea quae pro iselasticis certaminibus constituisti*) and what privileges athletes obtained by winning such a contest.⁵

Before we address this problem, it is important to note that the solemn entry of a victorious athlete into his home city (*εισελαύνειν*) is already attested in Hellenistic times. A decree from Teos, dated to the last years of the third century B.C., shows that an athlete who had won an *ἀγὼν στεφανίτης*—one of the most prestigious contests in the Greek *periodos*⁶—was allowed to solemnly enter his home city.⁷ In these times, the ceremonial entry, however, was an honour conferred on the victor by his *patria*, but *iselasticus* did not yet denote any category of contests. It is striking, however, that we do not have any evidence for *iselastic* contests that predate Trajan.⁸ If we follow this track, it might lead us to a Trajanic law now lost.

³ For the synods, see now Fauconnier (n. 2).

⁴ Cf. Sherwin-White 730.

⁵ For the meaning of *εισελαστικός*, cf. T. Drew-Bear, 'Some Greek words, part II', *Glotta* 50 (1972), 182–228, at 195 and now W. Slater, 'The victor's return, and the categories of games', in P. Martzavou and N. Papazarkadas (edd.), *Epigraphical Approaches to the Post-classical Polis: Fourth Century BC to Second Century AD* (Oxford, 2013), 139–63, at 139–40, 143–51.

⁶ S. Remijsen, 'The so-called crown-games: terminology and historical context of the ancient categories for *agones*', *ZPE* 177 (2011), 97–109.

⁷ *SEG* 41.1003 C/D (J. Ma, *Antiochos III and the Cities of Western Asia Minor* [Oxford, 1999], 311–14, no. 18, at 312), lines 46–8 (Teos, c.203 B.C.): ὅσοι δ' ἂν νικήσαντες | [τοῦ]ς στεφανίταις ἀγῶνας εισελαύνωσιν εἰς τὴν πόλιν, παραγίνεσθ[ο] | [–]οὺς ἀπὸ τῆς {ἀπὸ τῆς} πύλης πρῶτον εἰς τὸ βουλευτήριον κτλ. For this phenomenon in the third and second centuries B.C., see now M. Tentori Montalto, 'Die Statuen und die Triumphrückkehr der Athleten in die Heimat: neue Überlegungen zum Epigramm des Deinosthenes', *Journal of Epigraphic Studies* 5 (2022), 9–27, at 24.

⁸ Cf. Remijsen (n. 6), 108; Slater (n. 5), 147; this seems even true for the *Capitolia* at Rome which seem to have received the privilege of *eiselasis* at a later stage; cf. M.L. Caldelli, *L'Agon Capitolinus. Storia e protagonisti dall'istituzione domiziana al IV secolo* (Rome, 1993), 107 n. 244. She refers to three victors who won this contest when it was already promoted *eiselastikos*, two of which were clearly competing in the reign of Marcus Aurelius: Caldelli (this note), 142–3, no. 40 (M. Aurelius Demostratos Damas; cf. J.-Y. Strasser, 'La carrière du pancratiaste Markos Aurélios Demostratos Damas', *BCH* 127 [2003], 251–99, at 292 who dates Damas' career to c.162–82) and 144, no. 43 (M. Aurelius Abas; cf. Moretti, *I agonistiche* 76, 6–8 'seconda metà di II sec.'). Caldelli's third example—132–3, no. 20 (Moretti, *I agonistiche* 69, 2–4: 'età di Traiano o di Adriano')—may predate

To ascertain what role Trajan played in establishing *iselastic* contests, we have to get philological for a moment, as, in contrast to Books 1–9, the text of Book 10 is based not on manuscripts but on two early sixteenth-century editions by Hieronymus Avantius (Verona, 1502) and Aldus Manutius (Venice, 1508), respectively. Both editions, however, directly refer to a manuscript from the sixth century.⁹ The textual evidence of these early printed editions is thus of high value for the constitution of the text, and the variants transmitted there should not be easily dismissed. Despite later attempts to rescue the text of this passage or to interpret its meaning on a weak textual base, Peter Weiß, in 1982, has offered the best solution for an adequate understanding of this passage, and we must not go beyond his achievements.¹⁰ In *Ep.* 10.118.1 he identified a gloss which has to be eliminated; according to him, the letter reads: *ego contra uehementer addubitem an sit potius id tempus, quo εἰσήλασαν, intuendum*. The Greek term was explained by the commentary *scribo: iselastici nomen eorum*, and this phrase later became part of the main text.¹¹ This solution is convincing, as it both construes a correct Latin phrase and suits the circumstance that a rare Greek word such as εἰσήλασαν needed further explanation in Late Antiquity. Therefore, the gloss may have been introduced into the text already at a very early stage, most probably before the fifth century, when the—now lost—Parisinus manuscript, which eventually became the base for the early prints of Avantius and Manutius, was written.

Now we can discuss the agonistic background of this passage. At the beginning of *Ep.* 118.1 Pliny writes that Trajan had settled some issues ‘regarding the *iselastic* contests’ (*pro iselasticis certaminibus constituisti*) before. How and when did Trajan’s reform take place? From Pliny’s letter, written at the end of his governorship in the province, we only get a *terminus ante quem* of c.113. As there is only scarce evidence for agonistic festivals in Bithynia and Pontus in the first and second centuries, we cannot say to which contests Pliny and Trajan refer; although Clemens Bosch and Sencer Şahin have studied the festivals of Nikaia, and Louis Robert has analysed the rivalries of Nicaea and Nicomedia in the third century, we still lack a critical and thorough survey of agonistic activities in Pontus and Bithynia.¹²

the previous; see also G.E. Bean and T.B. Mitford, *Rough Cilicia 1964–68*, 44, no. 21b, lines 19–25 (*I.Side I Tep 4; I.Westkilikien Rep.* 395, Thr.1b), which dates to 243; S. Şahin, ‘Inscriptions aus Seleukeia am Kalykadnos (Silifke)’, *EA* 17 (1991), 145, no. 1a, lines 7–18 (*SEG* 41.1407A; *I.Westkilikien Rep.* 376, Sel 147a); this inscription was put up between the time of Antoninus Pius (138/61) and the beginning of Commodus’ reign. An update is needed for the list of *eislastikoi agōnes* in L. Robert, *Études anatoliennes: Recherches sur les inscriptions grecques de l’Asie Mineure* (Paris, 1937), 119–20 n. 3.

⁹ For the textual tradition of Book 10, the best account is still S.E. Stout, ‘The basis of the text in Book X of Pliny’s letters’, *TAPhA* 86 (1955), 233–49. Cf. too Alan Cameron, ‘The fate of Pliny’s letters in the Late Empire’, *CQ* 15 (1965), 289–98; ‘Pliny’s letters in the Later Empire: an addendum’, *CQ* 17 (1967), 421–2.

¹⁰ P. Weiß, ‘Textkritisches zur Athleten-Relatio des Plinius (*ep.* 10, 118)’, *ZPE* 48 (1982), 125–32. For later studies, see e.g. W.S. Watt, ‘Notes on Pliny *Epistulae* and *Panegyricus*’, *Phoenix* 44 (1990), 84–7, at 86 (without knowledge of Weiß); M. Jońca, ‘The Emperor Trajan and the petition of the Bithynian athletes, (Plin., *ep.* 118–119): *lex retro non agit...?*’, *Zeszyty Prawnicze* 18 (2018), 161–72. Weiß’s results are, however, generally accepted by Slater (n. 5), 147 n. 33; although Bracci, in his 2011 edition, mentions Weiß’s article (298) and discusses this passage (299–300), he does not draw any conclusions and eventually prints: *ego contra † scribo ‘iselastici nomine’: ita ut uehementer † addubitem*.

¹¹ For Pliny’s preference for Greek terms, see L. Vidman, ‘Einige Bemerkungen zu Trajans Stil’, *LF* 110 (1987), 107–10.

¹² C. Bosch, ‘Die Festspiele von Nikaia’, *Jahrbuch für kleinasiatische Forschung* 1 (1950/1951), 80–99; S. Şahin, *I.Nikaia* II.3, pages 66–78 (T 34); L. Robert, ‘La titulature de Nicée et de Nicomédie:

In the governor's bureaucratic language, *constituere* is used here as a technical term for an imperial order, as it becomes clear from a constitution of Marcus Aurelius for the Milesians in which the emperor states (*in eo constitui iure*) how victorious athletes are to return correctly into their *patria* (*certam]ina ex quibus uictores reduces patriam suam*).¹³ In his response to Pliny's letter, Trajan rules that these respective honours should be bestowed upon the contestant only after re-entering his home city (*cum qui in ciuitatem suam ipse εἰσήλασεν*), in contrast to the prizes given by the *agōnothētēs* at the festival site. In the following, he further explains this regulation (in Mynors's edition): *nec proficere pro desiderio athletarum potest, quod eorum, quae postea iselastica non esse constitui, quam uicerunt, accipere desierunt*. By using *constitui*, Trajan here makes use of the juridical language of the administration and, in doing so, recalls Pliny's own words. But what measures did Trajan take to arrange these matters? Here, again, we first have to face textual problems, and a discussion of these may offer a historical explanation.

In his 1502 edition, Avantius printed Trajan's response (*Ep.* 119) as follows: *nec proficere pro desiderio Athletarum potest: quod eorum quae postea Iselastica non lege constitui: quam, qui ierant, accipere desierunt*. Aldus Manutius gives merely the same text (1508, page 337): *nec proficere pro desyderio athletarum potest, quod eorum, quae postea iselastica non lege constitui, quam, qui ierant, accipere desierunt*. The reading of *non lege*, though attested by both witnesses whose texts go back to the oldest single manuscript, was contested by Arnold Schäfer in 1844 who, without any detailed discussion, replaced *non lege* by *non esse* and changed the strange relative clause *quam, qui ierant*, to *quam uicerant*.¹⁴ Corresponding to Pliny's letter (*Ep.* 118.2–3), the latter emendation can be accepted without hesitation,¹⁵ but the first one deserves further discussion. The conjecture *non esse constitui* instead of *non lege constitui* was put forward by Schäfer, because the verb *esse* seemed necessary to him and, more importantly, 'a law seems not suitable at this place'.¹⁶ He thought *lege* to

la gloire et la haine', *HSPh* 81 (1977), 1–39 = *Opera Minora Selecta VI* (Amsterdam, 1989), 211–49 = *Choix d'écrits* (Paris, 2007), 673–703. The best discussion is that by Ch. Marek, *Pontus et Bithynia: Die römischen Provinzen im Norden Kleinasien* (Mainz, 2003), 95–100, who also offers a list of festivals in north-western Asia Minor (103 n. 11).

¹³ P. Herrmann, 'Eine Kaiserurkunde aus der Zeit Marc Aurels aus Milet', *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 25 (1975), 149–66, at 150–1 = P. Herrmann, *Kleinasien im Spiegel epigraphischer Zeugnisse: Ausgewählte kleine Schriften* (Berlin, 2016), 323–41, at 324 (*AE* 1977, 801), lines 30–1. A second fragment of the emperor's speech reveals, according to Herrmann's restoration, the status of the contest as *iselastic*: P. Herrmann, 'Fragment einer Senatsrede Marc Aurels aus Milet', *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 38 (1988), 309–13, at 313 = *Kleinasien*, 343–8, at 347 (*SEG* 38.1212), lines 40–1: *certamen quod* | [– – – εἰσελαστ]ικὸν [*f*]acimus. For *constituere*, cf. Herrmann (this note), 'Kaiserurkunde', 156 = *Kleinasien*, 329 n. 22: '*constituere* ist in solchem Zusammenhang offensichtlich terminus technicus' (with further references among which are Pliny's letters discussed here). For a detailed analysis of Pliny's bureaucratic language (but not of *constituere*), see K.M. Coleman, 'Bureaucratic language in the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan', *TAPhA* 142 (2012), 189–238.

¹⁴ Cf. A. Schäfer, 'De nonnullis locis Ciceronis Plinii Frontonis', in C.J. Blochmann (ed.), *Philologiae Germaniae Congressus Dresdae m. Octobri a. MDCCCXLIV* (Dresden, 1844), 8–16, at 12.

¹⁵ Already in his 1805 edition, G.H. Schäfer proposed *uincerent*; in 1844, A. Schäfer (n. 14 above) suggested *uincerant*; Mynors, however, prefers Hardy's *uicerunt* which seems the best choice; Bracci non opts for *uicerant* (cf. his commentary, 301). For a profound discussion of this relative clause, see S.E. Stout, 'An athlete's reward', *CJ* 49 (1954), 361–2, although he does not know of the contributions by A. Schäfer and G.H. Schäfer.

¹⁶ Cf. Schäfer (n. 14), 12: 'Pro lege scripsi esse, quum verbum reponi necessarium, legis autem mentio ab hoc loco aliena est.'

be an interpolation. Though his observation concerning *esse* is undoubtedly correct, *esse* might be omitted in such a case. Schäfer's conjectures were accepted by many of the later editors, for example Hardy, Mynors, Sherwin-White and Williams. Sherwin-White even called the 'notion ... of an "*iselastic* law" ... [an] absurd intrusion'.¹⁷ But referring to a law is far from being 'absurd', as, on the one hand, it is supported by the oldest textual testimonies and, on the other hand, as I will argue, we know of several imperial regulations concerning agonistic problems so that a *lex iselastica* seems plausible.¹⁸ Such a decree, consequently, would offer a valuable explanation of the agonistic setting of letters 118 and 119.

Before discussing the historical background, we might recall, at this point of the discussion, Wilamowitz's 'first commandment of philology', which says that 'one must not proceed from the vulgate but from the transmission'.¹⁹ If we do so, *non lege* should not easily be dismissed as it is attested by the earliest testimonies which directly go back to a late antique manuscript now lost.²⁰ A simple yet correct solution was offered by Gottfried Heinrich Schäfer, who, in his 1805 edition, printed *eorum, quae postea iselastica lege constitui* (though the rest of his text is not satisfactory).²¹ Hence, he kept *lege*, but deleted *non*. Considering his suggestions and the emendations of later editors, the passage (*Ep.* 119) should read:

nec proficere pro desiderio Athletarum potest, quod eorum [sc. certaminum], **quae postea iselastica lege constitui**, quam uicerunt, accipere desierunt.

It is insignificant concerning the desire of the athletes that they did not receive anything for the victories at such [sc. contests] which I declared later as *iselastic* by law.

This text offers three improvements. First, it respects the textual transmission as far as possible and, second, it fits with Trajan's statement in the previous sentence that his order is not retroactive. Here, the emperor decrees that neither the contests which have not yet been of *iselastic* status at the time of the victory (*quae ... ante iselastica non fuerunt*) nor the competitions which have been upgraded to this status at a later time (*quae ... postea iselastica lege constitui*) are relevant for the victors' *obsonia*, viz. their *συντάξεις*.²² Only if the games held *iselastic* status at the moment of the victory, would the champion be allowed to get these rewards. Third, there is much

¹⁷ Sherwin-White 730, followed by Bracci 301. Nevertheless, M. Schuster, in his Teubner edition, printed *quod eorum, quae postea iselastica non lege constitui, quam quierant, accipere desierunt* (a phrase Sherwin-White 729 marked as 'nonsensical'), but also S.E. Stout, the best expert on the textual tradition of Book 10, kept *non lege* both in his article (n. 15), 362 and in his 1962 edition when he opted for *quod eorum quae postea iselastica non lege constitui quam uicerant accipere desierunt*.

¹⁸ Strangely enough, Sherwin-White 731 also admits later that 'the phrase *lex iselastica* for a schedule of rules is not impossible'. For Pliny's use of official documents, especially *senatus consulta*, in his letters, see now M. Haake, "'How to do things with *senatus consulta*". Die Autorität des Rechtsdokuments und die Stimme des Autors im Briefcorpus des Jüngeren Plinius', in P. Buongiorno and G. Traina (edd.), *Rappresentazione e uso dei senatus consulta nelle fonti letterarie del principato* (Stuttgart, 2019), 117–42.

¹⁹ U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, 'Lesefrüchte 92–116', *Hermes* 40 (1905), 116–53, at 139 = *Kleine Schriften IV* (Berlin, 1962), 169–207, at 193: 'Das erste Gebot der Philologie ist, dass man nicht von der Vulgata ausgehe, sondern von der Überlieferung.'

²⁰ See n. 9 above.

²¹ G.H. Schäfer replaces, for no reason, *tam eorum* for *quod eorum*; neither is his reconstruction of the closing relative clause acceptable: *nec proficere pro desiderio athletarum potest, tam eorum, quae postea iselastica lege constitui quam, quum uincerent, esse desierunt*.

²² See n. 29 below.

evidence for special regulations from the High Empire for victorious athletes who came back from the ecumenical festivals. In Aelian's *Varia Historia*, which dates to the second half of the second century, one section is devoted to the solemn entry of a victorious athlete κατὰ τὸν νόμον τῶν ἀθλητῶν.²³ The first impression might lead to the assumption that νόμος here simply means 'custom' or 'habit', but we know to what extent emperors were obliged by the *synodos* to regulate the festivals and the agonistic calendar in detail.²⁴ Of special importance are Hadrian's letters found at Alexandria Troas in 2003 that show how the guild of professional artists had appealed to Hadrian in 134 to change the agonistic calendar in favour of the *synodos*.²⁵ In his responses, the emperor laid down detailed regulations, and these letters lead to the impression that Hadrian is not setting a precedent here, but, in contrast, follows an already established routine.

Commenting on Hadrian's letters from Alexandria Troas, Georg Petzl and Elmar Schwertheim pointed out that only Hadrian's regulations go back to an edict (διάταγμα), while those of other emperors known to us were published as imperial letters.²⁶ In a detailed analysis of *iselastic agōnes*, William Slater has convincingly shown that it might have been Trajan who was the first to introduce this kind of contests,²⁷ perhaps replacing the former '*hieroi*' *agōnes*.²⁸ The most plausible solution is that Trajan, in a *lex iselastica*, settled for the first time *iselastic* contests as he defined the privileges for victorious athletes and the duties of their home cities, but, as it becomes clear from the athletes' *relatio* to Pliny, left undecided, from which moment on the cities had to pay *obsonia*, viz. συντάξεις.²⁹

A passage of the first letter from Alexandria Troas shows that the problem discussed by Pliny and Trajan was still unsolved under Hadrian. Trajan had declared that the *iselasticum* (to use his expression in *Ep.* 119) should not start before the athlete's entrance into his πατρίς. This was, however, an inadequate solution for wandering

²³ Ael. *VH* 12.58.

²⁴ H.W. Pleket, 'Roman emperors and Greek athletes', *Nikephoros* 23 (2010), 175–203, especially 190–5 for a survey of 'what athletes wanted and apparently could expect from emperors' (190).

²⁵ G. Petzl and E. Schwertheim, *Hadrian und die dionysischen Künstler: Drei in Alexandria Troas neugefundene Briefe des Kaisers an die Künstlervereinigung* (Bonn, 2006) (*AE* 2006.1403a–c; *SEG* 56.1359). Among the numerous studies concerned with these letters, I refer only to C.P. Jones, 'Three new letters of the Emperor Hadrian', *ZPE* 161 (2007), 145–56; W. Slater, 'Hadrian's letters to the athletes and Dionysiac artists concerning arrangements for the "circuit" of games', *JRA* 21 (2008), 610–20; J.-Y. Strasser, "'Qu'on fouette les concurrentes..." À propos des lettres d'Hadrien retrouvées à Alexandrie de Troade', *REG* 123 (2010/2012), 585–622 and J.-Y. Strasser, 'Hadrien et le calendrier des concours (*SEG*, 56.1359, II)', *Hermes* 144 (2016), 352–73.

²⁶ Petzl and Schwertheim (n. 25), 25; in *Pap.Agon.* 3,4–7 a part of a Hadrianic διάταγμα has survived, granting privileges to members of the synod: cf. Jones (n. 25), 145 n. 3.

²⁷ Slater (n. 25), 615–16; Slater (n. 5), 147, 150; L. and J. Robert, *Claros I: Décrets hellénistiques* (Paris, 1989), 21 already stressed that *iselastic* contests are a phenomenon of the Imperial era.

²⁸ However, the denomination of *agōnes* as *hieroi* did not disappear completely; cf. Markos Aurélios Dēmostratos Damas who, in his Sardis list (dated to 211–17), names his numerous victories in ἱεροῦς εἰσελαστικούς ἀγῶνας; see Strasser (n. 8), 259–60, 268 (*SEG* 53.1355; Moretti, *I.agonistiche* 84; *I.Sardis* 79; P. Mauritsch, W. Petermandl, H.W. Pleket and I. Weiler, *Quellen zum antiken Sport: Griechisch/lateinisch und deutsch* [Darmstadt, 2012], 349–50, Q243), lines 10–11 νεικήσας ἀγῶνας ... | ὧν ἱεροῦς εἰσελαστικούς.

²⁹ Cf. S. Scharff, 'Zu den Siegespreisen der Wettkampfstätten und den Prämien der Heimatstädte', in G. Petzl and E. Schwertheim, *Hadrian und die dionysischen Künstler: Drei in Alexandria Troas neugefundene Briefe des Kaisers an die Künstlervereinigung* (Bonn, 2006), 95–9, especially 96 n. 300; Pleket (n. 24), 193–4; K. Sānger-Böhm, 'Die συντάξεις und τέλη τὰ ἐπὶ ταῖς ταφραῖς in der Hadriansinschrift aus Alexandria Troas: Eine papyrologische Bestandsaufnahme', *ZPE* 175 (2010), 167–70; Fauconnier (n. 2), 223–30.

artists and athletes who seldomly visited their home city and thus would have had to wait too long to enjoy their rewards.³⁰ According to the petition to Pliny, the *synodos* of the *athletae* claimed the right to get their *obsonia* from the day of their victory (*Ep.* 118.1 *ex eo die, quo sunt coronati*). Taking up the athletes' argument, Hadrian eventually decreed that, for wandering artists, it should be possible to inform their home city's council of their victories by a letter. From the day this letter was handed out to their home city, the *πατρις* was obliged to pay the grants,³¹ though this was met with resistance by the insolvent cities.³²

Throughout Imperial times, the rights and privileges of victorious athletes caused problems that imperial legislation had to solve. Though Hadrian's image was—and still is—that of a peace-loving *musagetēs* who was seriously engaged in Greek agonistic contests and fostered cultic activities throughout the Greek world, his sober and martial 'father' had already been involved heavily in this.³³ As we have seen, there are both philological and historical reasons to assume that Trajan not only ordered the status of agonistic festivals in Bithynia and Pontus but may have also decreed the first law concerning *iselastic* contests. An ancient collection of inscriptions from Pergamon, including an imperial *mandatum* (ἐντολή), shows that Trajan granted the Pergamenes the privilege of a new holy and pentaeteric festival which included an εἰσελαστικὸς ἄγων.³⁴ As the decisive letter may be dated to the period between approximately May 114 and February 116,³⁵ these documents support the idea of a *lex iselastica* and may, furthermore, indicate that this law was enacted for the whole Empire.³⁶

Essentially, the *iselasticum* allowed victorious athletes more than the solemn entry into their home town, as the name might suggest. Trajan's decree established the

³⁰ Slater (n. 5), 148.

³¹ Petzl and Schwertheim (n. 25), 12, lines 49–51 (with a commentary at 59): αἱ συντάξεις ἐπὶ ταῖς νεῖκαις οὐκ ἄφ' ἧς ἂν εἰσελάσῃ τις ἡμέρας ὀφείλονται, ἀλλὰ ἀφ' ἧς ἂν τὰ περὶ τῆς νείκης γράμματα ἀποδοθῇ ταῖς πατρίσιν αὐτῶν. For this procedure, see Slater (n. 25), 616 n. 9 (with references to such notifications of a victory to home cities) and W. Slater, 'Victory and bureaucracy: the process of agonistic rewards', *Phoenix* 69 (2015), 147–69.

³² For the cities' financial problems and Trajan's measures, for example the appointment of *correctores* and *curatores*, see D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* (Princeton, 1950), 1.596–9 and W. Ameling, *Die Inschriften von Prusias ad Hypium* (Bonn, 1985), 22.

³³ Correctly observed by Graf (n. 2), 23 who, however, does not discuss this point in detail. For the relationship of the Dionysiac *synodos* with Trajan, cf. *I.Gerasa* 192 (105/14). The surviving evidence of Trajan's legislation was collected by J.H. Oliver, *Greek Constitutions of Early Roman Emperors from Inscriptions and Papyri* (Philadelphia, 1989), 132–47, nos. 44–55 and 150, no. 57, with additions by V.I. Anastasiadis and G.A. Souris, *An Index to Roman Imperial Constitutions from Greek Inscriptions and Papyri, 27 B.C. to 284 A.D.* (Berlin, 2000), 220–1.

³⁴ *I.Pergamon* II 269 (*CIL* III Suppl. 7086; *IGR* IV 336; Oliver [n. 33], 141–3, no. 49 [lines 23–32 only]), lines 9–13: [certamen illud], quod in honorem templi Iouis amicalis et | [Imp. Caes. diui Neruae f. Ner]uae Traiani Augusti Germanici Dacici | [pontificis maximi est const]itutum εἰσελαστικὸν in ciuitate | [Pergamenorum...]. Restored in lines 17–19 certamen in ciuitate | [Pergamenorum ab Iulio Quadrato amico clarissimo uiro quinquennale, | [quod dicitur εἰσελαστικόν, c]onstitutum sit ... Cf. also lines 21–2 iselas[tici uictoribus id quod in altero] certamine custoditur dari oportebit | [praemium].

³⁵ Trajan is styled consul for the sixth time (ὑπατος τὸ 6', i.e. after 112), and his titles include ἄριστος (*optimus*, line 23), which he accepted before 3/4 May 114 (for the date, see D. Kienast, W. Eck, M. Heil, *Römische Kaisertabelle: Grundzüge einer römischen Kaiserchronologie* [Darmstadt, 2019⁶], 117), but not yet *Parthicus* (which he accepted on 20/21 February 116, cf. Kienast, Eck, Heil [this note], 117); for the date, see also B. Burrell, *Neokoroi: Greek Cities and Roman Emperors* (Leiden, 2004), 23 ('between 114 and February 116').

³⁶ Remijsen (n. 6), 108 n. 48 likewise regards the Pergamene *Traianeia Deiphileia* as the first known *iselastic* contest.

iselasticum as the entirety of all the prizes and privileges the winner of an *iselastic* contest could get, including the honorary entry, but also the bridging money between the day of his victory and his return home.³⁷

As Trajan's regulations were not precise enough, his decree caused troubles between the athletes and their home cities which letters 118 and 119 reflect. Later, in a fragmentary letter found near Perinthos, Antoninus Pius or his governor also settled some problems related to a festival (πανήγυρις, lines 10 and 14), though this document is too damaged to reveal its actual purpose.³⁸ The decree of Marcus Aurelius from Miletus discussed above dealt with the status of the festival and, in some way, also with the privileges of the victorious athletes and the costs for the home cities.³⁹ The latest surviving law *de athletis* dates to the time of Diocletian and Maximianus (that is, 285/6–305). It confirms that athletes who had won at least three *hieroi agōnes* (*certamina sacra*) 'in Rome or ancient Greece' (*semel Romae seu antiquae Graeciae*) were exempted from civil obligations (*ciuilium munerura ... uacatio*).⁴⁰

These ongoing discussions about prizes and privileges for victorious athletes show, on a general level, the ever-increasing importance of festivals in the second and third centuries, in which contests played a significant role in the public life of the cities in the eastern Mediterranean.

Summing up, we have considered both the philological and the historical perspectives of Pliny's letter and Trajan's response. First, we proposed a new reading of a corrupt passage in the emperor's letter which respects the textual transmission and is in keeping with the historical background the governor and the emperor were discussing. Against this background, it is far from 'absurd' that the text is referring to a Trajanic *lex iselastica*.⁴¹ On the contrary, this passage gives a strong indication of a Trajanic decree *de statu certaminum* which was in force at least in Pontus and Bithynia before c.113. By this law, the status of *iselastic agōnes* was, probably for the first time, settled and thus this new category of contests became a firm part of the agonistic world in the High Empire.

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³⁷ Cf. H.W. Pleket, 'Einige Betrachtungen zum Thema "Geld und Sport"', *Nikephoros* 17 (2004), 77–89, at 84; for the pensions, see Slater (n. 31), 150–4.

³⁸ *I.Perinthos* 35.

³⁹ For the financial burdens connected with festivals, see F. Camia, 'Spending on the *agones*: the financing of festivals in the cities of Roman Greece', *Tyche* 26 (2011), 41–76, especially 48–9.

⁴⁰ *Cod. Iust.* 10.54, *Impp. Diocletianus et Maximianus AA. et CC. Hermogeni. Athletis ita demum, si per omnem aetatem certasse, coronis quoque non minus tribus certaminis sacri, in quibus uel semel Romae seu antiquae Graeciae, merito coronati non aemulis corruptis ac redemptis probentur, ciuilium munerura tribui solet uacatio*. For the context of this law and the addressee, Hermogenes, see my article 'Aktia and isaktioi agones: Greek contests and Roman power', *HSPH* 113 (2024), 231–60, at 248.

⁴¹ This term was rendered by Sherwin-White 731; see n. 18 above.