



[Aelius Aristides, The Roman Oration \(extracts\)](#)

Praise of the Roman Empire

Name of the author: Aelius Aristides

Date: 143 CE to 155 CE

Place: Rome

Language: Greek

Category: Greek

Literary genre: Eulogy / Panegyric

Title of work: Roman Oration

Reference: Extracts

Commentary:

Publius Aelius Aristides Theodorus (117–181 CE) was a Greek orator, and one of the most important exponents of the Second Sophistic (a group of influential orators active from Nero's reign until around 230 CE). He was born at Hadriani in Northern Mysia, and studied at Smyrna under Alexander of Cotiaeum, who was a tutor of Marcus Aurelius, and then later went to Athens to study with Herodes Atticus. Aristides came from a wealthy landowning family who had been granted Roman citizenship several decades earlier. In 143 CE Aristides traveled to Alexandria in Egypt and to Rome. Due to recurrent illness, he was a devotee of the god Asclepius. He settled at Smyrna, although by 147 CE Aristides had resumed his career as a writer and occasional lecturer. From 154 CE onwards he visited Greece and Rome again, and continued to deliver orations. Among his pupils was the sophist Damianus. In 165 CE Aristides was one of the numerous victims of the Antonine plague, but he managed to survive. In 171 CE, he set about writing the *Sacred Tales* to record the numerous omens and insights he had received from Asclepius in his dreams over a period of almost thirty years. He wrote more than fifty orations, of which the present *Roman Oration* is one of the most important, and possibly one of the most significant literary celebrations of Roman imperial rule. The oration expounds on the civil and military achievements of Rome, the benefits to its subjects, notably Roman citizenship, and the Pax Romana. Aelius Aristides also analyses the reasons for Roman power and hegemony, such as the emperor, Rome's mixed constitution, the army, and Roman administration. The Pax Romana (Roman Peace) describes the period between Nerva's ascension in 96 CE and Marcus Aurelius's death in 180 CE. It was during this period that Rome experienced its greatest achievements in terms of military conquests, wealth, and expansion, and the *Roman Oration* celebrates these accomplishments in indulgent literary style.

According to James Oliver, the *Roman Oration* was delivered at the Athenaeum in Rome, during Aelius Aristides's first visit in 143 CE (*Ruling Power*, p. 887). However, various scholars date the oration to the time of his second visit in Rome, in 154/155 CE (see Charles Behr, *Aelius Aristides*, p. 373-374 n. 1). In the oration, Aelius Aristides gives an impressive image of the civil and military achievements of Rome, and of the benefits bestowed upon its subjects, such as Roman citizenship and the Pax Romana. Moreover, Aristides gives an interesting analysis of the reasons for Roman power and hegemony, such as the Roman emperor, Rome's mixed constitution, the army, and Roman administration. This positive image mirrors the condition of the Roman Empire at its peak, slightly before the outspread of the Antonine plague in 165 CE. The oration starts with an idealised description of the city of Rome, which can be seen in chapters 7-8 quoted above. Aristides emphasises the massive stretch of Rome's dominion, and marvels at the number of cities under her sway. That the city rules over so much of the world is acknowledged in her very name: "It is from this that she gets her name, and strength (????, *r?m?*) is the mark of all that is hers." This develops into a description of the Roman Empire depicted as a mirror of the cosmos, which like the Roman Empire has no borders or boundaries (chapters 9-10). Aristides then gives an impressive description of the wealth of the Roman Empire (chapters 11-13). Chapter 13, quoted above, emphasises the centrality of the city of Rome, with trade, agriculture, arts, and crafts all meeting there. Indeed, Aristides exaggerates that what one does not find in Rome, surely cannot exist.

A large part of the oration focuses on the *translatio imperii* ("transfer of rule"). This is a concept whereby history is understood as a succession of rule in which power is held by one supreme ruler. Aristides first compares the Roman Empire to the previous Persian and Macedonian kingdoms (chapters 14-27), and then to the hegemony of Athens, Sparta and Thebes (chapters 45-50). The concept of *translatio imperii* is used to exalt the Roman Empire, which he claims will not follow the fate of previous kingdoms which ultimately failed in their attempts at hegemony;



rather Aelius Aristides implicitly suggests that Rome is meant to be eternal. The main part of the oration is dedicated to the benefits which characterize Roman rule (chapters 28-39). The first benefit discussed is that of Roman citizenship. In discussing citizenship, Aristides was dealing with an issue that was becoming more and more important towards the middle of the second century CE, with the granting of Roman citizenship to the Greek and Eastern provincial elites. The grant of Roman citizenship implied the intermingling of two cultural and political identities, Greek and Roman. Unsurprisingly, Aelius Aristides, a Roman citizen himself, views the act of granting Roman citizenship positively, as a way of sharing privileges between the Roman conqueror and the provincial elites. The policy of granting Roman citizenship, however, makes the difference between Romans and non-Romans more and more palpable, a dividing line within the *oikoumenè* that can be compared to that which once existed between Greeks and Barbarians (59-64). Roman citizenship, however, is also marked out as something greatly unifying. In connection with this theme, Laura Nasrallah notes that Aristides celebrates Rome for its geography both in the sense that it is greater in size than other empires, but also because it is a unified harmony of peoples, the “chorus of the civilized world” (chapter 31, not quoted above). As exemplified by section 63, Rome transcends the traditional boundaries of language, geography, and ethnicity. This idea is already present in Pliny the Elder’s praise of Italy (although in Pliny’s text the issue of citizenship is totally absent; see [Pliny the Elder, Natural History III.38-39](#)). Aristides “shifts the ethnic and geographical map from Greek-barbarian to Roman-non-Roman,” thus making Rome “the meta-city to which the entire *oikoumenè* or inhabited world is a suburb.” The name of Rome now encompasses what previously were numerous identities (Nasrallah, *Christian Responses*, p. 93-96, quotations at p. 94).

Aristides next goes on to emphasize the positive role of the Roman army, not as an instrument of repression or conquest, but as an institution which defends and protects the Empire and its peace (chapters 65-68 and 72-89). By the middle of the second century CE, the period of conquests was closed. Hence, Aristides cannot depict the Roman army purely as an instrument of conquest, even if the oration began with praise for its wide expansion. The army was stationed on the borders, and so its presence was felt, but not always seen. Aristides describes the happiness of the Greek cities under Roman rule, which was a result of their loyalty to Rome (chapters 69-71), as one of the most visible facets of the Pax Romana. At the end of the oration, Aelius Aristides also mentions Roman administration (chapter 107), the tangible evidence of Roman hegemony. The main source of Rome’s successful hegemony is seen by Aristides to lie both in the just rule of the emperor, with the various peoples of the empire “harmonized by the leader in command” (chapter 29), as well as in Rome’s mixed constitution, which includes elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy (chapter 90). In connection with the theme of the unity of the empire, comparisons can be made between the *Roman Oration* and the work of the second-century Christian apologist Athenagoras of Athens. In his *Supplication for the Christians*, addressed to the emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and his son Lucius Aurelius Commodus, Athenagoras lists the accusations levelled against Christians; atheism, immorality, and cannibalism (I-II), before refuting each of these charges. [Chapter XXXII](#) sees Athenagoras lavish praise upon his imperial addressees in a final attempt to win them over to his way of thinking. He argues that the Christians ought to be left alone, as they continually pray for the wellbeing of the empire, and enjoy its benefits; chief among these is the Pax Romana. William Schoedel has argued that Athenagoras is “as striking in [his] idealization of Roman power” as Aelius Aristides (“Christian ‘Atheism’,” p. 317). Schoedel rightly notes, however, that while Aelius Aristides can be effulgent in his praise for the empire, Athenagoras has to consider the mistreatment of Christians in his writing, and so solves this problem in his apology by presenting harassment of Christians as an anomaly in Roman religious policy.

Interestingly, in connection with the statement of Athenagoras that assures of Christian prayer for the emperor and the empire is the claim by Aristides that “for the eternal duration of this empire the whole civilized world prays all together, emitting, like an aulos after a thorough cleaning, one note with more perfect precision than a chorus; so beautifully is it harmonized by the leader in command” (*Roman Oration* 29). Athenagoras’s insistence that Christians pray for the Roman government and the expansion of the empire chimes with Aelius Aristides’s statement that the whole *oikoumenè* joins together in prayer for the empire’s continuation. Indeed, Athenagoras assures his imperial audience that Christians, being every bit a part of the empire as any of its other subjects, naturally wish to enjoy the Roman peace and other benefits of empire in the same way as anyone else. While the Christians are not a distinct ethnic race (in fact they were specifically non exclusive in this regard, advertising Christ’s relevance for all peoples), they are conceived of by Athenagoras and numerous other Christian authors throughout history as being a discernible and unified group of people who make up a section of the Roman empire, and were very much a part of it, enjoying its peace and prosperity, and wishing for it continued success just as its other inhabitants did. This sense of unity within the empire is something which the *Roman Oration* and Athenagoras make clear, praising the Roman ability to extend its sway far and wide, drawing in all peoples.

The taxonomy of the emperor’s qualities mirrors the portrait given by Pliny the Younger in the *Panegyric of Trajan*.



The depiction of the Roman constitution as mixed, clearly a reference to Polybius, does not really correspond to the reality of Aristides's own time. By the middle of the first century CE, the democratic part of the Roman constitution, the *comitia* or assemblies, were no longer called in. However, it is true that the emperor possessed the *tribunicia potestas*, as he was responsible for the welfare of the Roman plebs. Aristides concludes the oration with a comparison between the age that preceded the emergence of the Roman Empire (that of Chronos), which was characterized by violence, and the present age under Rome, which is compared with the age of Zeus, characterised by order and happiness (chapters 103-106). Moreover, the Roman Empire is said to be blessed by all the gods of the Greek pantheon (chapter 105).

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [eternity of the Roman empire](#)
- [freedom](#)
- [Greeks](#)
- [harmony](#)
- [liberty](#)
- [oikoumenè](#)
- [Pax Romana](#)
- [peace](#)
- [prosperity](#)
- [provincial elites](#)
- [Roman army](#)
- [Roman benevolence](#)
- [Roman citizenship](#)
- [Roman constitution](#)
- [Roman expansion](#)
- [Roman hegemony](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [Roman rule](#)
- [universalism](#)

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