Rivalry through Games

In modern society, there is no better way for a city to express its superiority over another than through games. This can be seen from all stretches of the globe, whether it is a city competing with another for the honor to hold the olympic games or the next superbowl. However, this is not something unique to our society alone, it has been prevalent for thousands of years. Two cities in particular that expressed their civic rivalry through games and festivals were the ancient cities of Anazarbus and Tarsus. These cities competed fiercely with one another over the koinon of Cilicia, this is evident by examining the numismatic evidence of both cities, and their usage of games and festivals on their coinage.

However before examining the numismatic evidence, it is necessary to explain just what the games were, why they were important to Greece and Rome. It is also necessary to give a background on the cities of Anazarbus and Tarsus in order to show why they were competing with one another. Then after viewing all these factors it will be possible through the numismatic evidence, to explain how the cities used the iconography on coinage to express who was the koinon of Cilicia, I will then look at whether the imperial cult played any role in identifying who was the koinon, and lastly by evaluating all the historical evidence and the coinage under the SNG, I will come up with my summary of when each city reigned supreme, and under which emperor.

First, as to what the games/ festivals were they could have been anywhere from sporting contests (i.e. racing, boxing, pankration...) to such things as a dramatic play or two orators debating each other.¹ The status level of the games were also a big factor in its importance. In the ancient world, there were two types of games. The first type were contests, these games were the least significant of the two. In that they were usually only of local importance, and featured

¹ Van Nijf, Onno. "Local heroes: athletics, festivals and elite self-fashioning in the Roman East, p.307
participants competing to earn a material value reward. The second type of games were the pan-
Hellenic festivals. These games unlike the contests could only be granted with approval by the
emperor, and unlike the contests the victors won only an honorary prize (such as a laurel wreath
or apple). However, in these games it was the glory that mattered above all else.²

As for the question of why the games were so important, this can be answered by looking
at what was most important to a Greek city. To a Greek city-state the most important factors
were its independence and autonomy.³ However, once Rome had conquered Greece, and Asia
Minor, these once proud city-states were forced to find new ways to express their independence
and autonomy. Thus, games and festivals were important to the city-state, in that it allowed the
city to express their self-image, while also allowing them to compete with their neighbors over
superiority.⁴ The games and festivals were also important in that they provided a way for a city
to earn economic benefits, this was a result of the vast amounts of people that would go to the
games, and spend money while they were there.⁵ As for why games and festivals were
important to Rome, they foremost provided a way for the cities to maintain some form of
autonomy and independence thus leaving Rome free from worrying about a revolt against them.
The games also served as a way of pleasing a city, which in return benefited Rome because many
cities often resided along transit routes which led to warring countries of Rome.⁶ For example,
during the Parthian wars the cities in the region of Cilicia resided along the transit route to
Parthia, thus in order to please the people and be able to use the roads without hassle, Rome
offered games to these cities (none more prevalent than in the cities of Anazarbus and Tarsus,

² Klose, Dietrich. Festivals and Games in the Cities of the East during the Roman Empire. p.126
³ Mitchell, Stephen. Festivals, Games, and Civic Life in Roman Asia Minor. p.189
⁴ Klose, Dietrich. Festivals and Games in the Cities of the East during the Roman Empire. p.125
⁵ Klose, Dietrich. Festivals and Games in the Cities of the East during the Roman Empire. p.125
⁶ Klose, Dietrich. Festivals and Games in the Cities of the East during the Roman Empire. p.131
both cities who resided on the transit routes to Parthia during the Parthian wars, it was also at this time that the rivalry between the two cities reached its peak).\(^7\)

As for some basic background on the cities of Anazarbus and Tarsus in order to explain their rivalry. It is important to note that both cities were located in the region of Cilicia in Asia Minor. Thus their rivalry consisted mainly over the ability to be called “koinon” of the region.\(^8\) It was then through the quest to be granted festivals and games as well as neokoroi (or the ability to worship the emperor as a god) that the rivalry for these two cities was fueled.

Now after examining what the games were and what made them important, as well as why there was a rivalry between the two cities of Anazarbus and Tarsus. It is now possible to show not only the iconography used by the cities to illustrate they had been awarded a game or festival but, also to show what types of civic self-presentation were used on the coins to show which city was claiming superiority over the other, and why. After viewing how iconography showed the rivalry between the two cities, it will then be possible to evaluate when each city was on top and who in the end can be seen as the ultimate victor by evaluating the relativity of the coinage, as to when one coin minted more than the other, and in the end how the granting of a game/festival compared to the imperial cult.

As for what iconography was used to illustrate the awarding of a game or festival. There is not just one but many. The iconography of a coin might illustrate the awarding of a game on the coinage not only through a picture but also a description. For example, on a coin in Tarsus the city is being shown as being awarded a game/festival under the reign of Septimius Severus. This is shown on the coin by looking at the obverse which features a portrait of the emperor, and at

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7 Klose, Dietrich. *Festivals and Games in the Cities of the East during the Roman Empire*. p.131
8 Harl, Kenneth. *Civic Coins and Civic Politics*. p.66
the reverse which has a picture of an agnostic crown with the inscription ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑ.\textsuperscript{9} Showing that this city was awarded an Olympic game (the Olympic games were one of the pan-Hellenic games, which were allowed only with the emperors approval). The most common representations of games/festivals on coinage although were the prizes (i.e. wreaths, apples, amphoras, vases, many times seen on a prize table).\textsuperscript{10} Some examples of this can be seen on the following coins; A. SNG France 1495 which features on the reverse an athlete, holding a palm (prize for victory), and placing an agnostic crown on his head, B. SNG Levante 1424, which shows three prize-crowns on three lion’s legged agnostic table.

\[ \text{A.} \quad \text{B.} \]

However, it was not the iconography describing the actual game that was the most important, instead it was the iconography of how each city displayed its own image. As to the specific imagery used by each city, there is little difference. For example, on a coin from Tarsus, Caracalla is shown on the obverse dressed in the garments of the demiourgos (or the official who presided over festival/game), while on the reverse, the two founders of the city, Perseus and Herakles are both holding a bust of Caracalla wearing the demiourgos garments (SNG Levante 1069).

\textsuperscript{9} All cities coinage cited available through SNG Cabinet Database. SNG France 1477.

\textsuperscript{10} Klose, Dietrich. \textit{Festivals and Games in the Cities of the East during the Roman Empire}. p.128-9
This coin not only illustrates that Caracalla is the official over the game/festival but is now a co-founder of the city. This coin seems to be showing that the Roman emperor is not only their emperor but favors them over all others because he is also the founder of the city. This is just one example of how a city could use its history in order to show superiority over a rival city, as well as showing their closeness with the emperor. Another example of this can be seen in a coin from Anazarbus, where the city god of the city is actually shown offering the prize crown to Elagabalus (SNG Levante Sup. 335). Although, they are not claiming the emperor a founder of the city, it has the same effect, by having their own goddess place a crown on the emperors head, they are showing not only their relationship with the emperor but at the same time suggesting he is even more important than their goddess. For she is placing the crown on him, and not the other way around.

However, the type of civic presentation on coinage that presents a cities status and dominance over another is most clearly seen through the labeling of their city as the first, best, and greatest
of the koinon. This is shown by the word AMK, which on coins means the “first, best, and greatest.” The first city to proclaim this title out of the two was Tarsus. It can be seen as appearing under coinage during the reign of Caracalla. Therefore, we can assume that during this time, Tarsus was the more prominent city of the two. However, under the reign of Elagabalus, the balance of power seems to shift from Tarsus to Anazarbus. It is under the coinage minted by Anazarbus under Elagabalus that we now find the epithet of AMK being shown on coinage of Anazarbus. An example of this can be seen on a coin featuring Elagabalus and his wife Paula on the obverse, while a nude athlete is crowned on the reverse, with the epithet AMK above it. (SNG Levante 1438)

However, this honor did not last long for upon the death of Elagabalus, the title of “best, and greatest” is stripped, and under the reign of Severus Alexander it is now seen on coinage from Tarsus. An example of this can be seen in (SNG FRANCE 1579), where Severus Alexander is on the obverse wearing the crown of the demiurge, and on the reverse the epithet AMK is seen. Thus, it is my belief from these coins that the title AMK was something that was recognized by Rome. For when the honor shifts from city to city, a game is celebrated. This can

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11 Burrell, Barbara. *Neokoroi: Greek cities and Roman emperors.*
12 For examples, See. SNG Levante 1059.1060, 1061
13 This is the first time, Anazarbus is awarded with this honor of being able to identify themselves as the best and greatest of the koinon of Cilicia. Burrell, Barbara. *Neokoroi: Greek cities and Roman emperors.* p.225
be seen on all three of the examples, for each one not only references the title AMK but, also 
alludes to a game. (ex. the crown under Elagabalus, or Severus Alexander as the demiurge, or 
chief official of games).

Thus, after evaluating the evidence of when a city was granted the title of AMK, it seems 
possible to conclude which city was dominant over the other and when. However, the indication 
of AMK on the coinage is not the only factor that allows one to deduce, which city was the koinon of Cilicia. Some scholars believe that another way of figuring out which city was the koinon of Cilicia can be seen by looking at not only the coinage of the games/festivals but also the cities relation to the imperial cult.\(^{15}\) However, I do not feel there is any connection with the two. While, I believe a game or festival may have been granted for the city being rewarded a neokoroi. I do not believe it had any direct relation for the title of koinon of Cilicia. My reasoning behind this is that Tarsus who had none of their three neokoroi awarded on the Severans still showed their neokoroi under Severan coinage, but had no relation to the games or honor of being koinon of Cilicia. The greatest proof of this can be seen under the coinage of Anazarbus. For Anazarbus gained their first two neokoroi under the Severan empire, the first being under Septimius Severus, and the second under Geta and Caracalla.\(^{16}\) However, neither of these go along with the title of AMK or the koinon of Cilicia, for it is under Caracalla that Tarsus achieves the honor of AMK. Thus, leading to the question if the imperial cult played into determining the koinon of Cilicia, why would they grant a neokoros to Anazarbus while Tarsus has the honor of being the koinon. Barbara Burrell offers her opinion, suggesting that the reason Anazarbus was granted a neokoroi under Caracalla and Geta, had to do with geography, and the

\(^{15}\) This is Ziegler's belief. Ziegler. 1993b. 126-128. However, it is important to note that Barbara Burrell, whose main focus is neokoroi (the granting to be worshipped as a god) disagrees with Ziegler, and believes that there is not necessarily a connection between the imperial cult, and the games. Burrell. Neokoroi. p.218

\(^{16}\) Burrell, Barbara. Neokoroi: Greek cities and Roman emperors.
Parthian wars that the Roman empire was engaged in during this time, rather than favoring one city over the other.

Thus, in order to form my conclusion on when each city benefited the most from Rome, and when each seemed to have the upper hand (or the honor of being koinon of Cilicia). I based my evidence most heavily on the honor of having the epithet AMK on coinage, while comparing a city's particular devotion to one emperor over another to see if it aligned with the honor of being koinon of Cilicia. After examining the three hundred and thirty-two coins in the SNG for Tarsus, and the one hundred and forty-four under Anazarbus, I came to the conclusion that Tarsus benefitted most from Rome under the reign of Caracalla, it is under him that they seem to be at their height. Out of the three hundred and thirty-two coins I analyzed, one hundred and seventy-eight of them featured Caracalla on the coin, with thirty-five of them alone, showing the emperor as the chief official of games (demiurge). As for the city of Anazarbus, they seemed to have been at their height under the emperor Elagabalus, this is also the time the city boasted the honor of AMK, giving them the title of koinon of Cilicia. The most controversial of the two however, is shown under the reign of the emperor Severus Alexander. For upon the death of Elagabalus, the title AMK was stripped from Anazarbus and returned to Tarsus. However, in comparing the amount of coinage of each city, Tarsus has Severus Alexander in only twenty-nine of three hundred and thirty-two coins compared to Anazarbus who has Severus Alexander in forty-six out of one hundred and forty-four coins. This twenty-four percent difference, I believe to be due to Anazarbus appealing to the emperor to maintain their title AMK, as the koinon of Cilicia. However, I believe that Severus Alexander ignored the extensive appeals from Anazarbus and in order to punish Anazarbus for the support of Elagabalus gave the title to their

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17 of the one hundred and forty-four coins, Elagabalus is shown on only forty of them
18 It is important to note that the reign of Elagabalus was shorter than the reign of Caracalla. I believe that if he was alive longer, more coins would have been produced.
rival Tarsus. Therefore, when it came to the rivalry between these two cities, I give the edge to Tarsus. Based upon the fact that they were crowned AMK, first, best, and greatest of the koinon of Cilicia not once but twice. However, in lieu of who was the winner or not, the numismatic evidence overwhelmingly shows just how important games and festivals were. By the numerous amounts of references to the games on coinage we can see just how important they were. For coins during this time period were the ancient world’s key form of communication with each other. Thus, the emphasis each city seems to have placed on games, shows how highly they regarded the honor, as well as providing a way of boasting to neighboring cities that they were better than them. As shown in the cities of Anazarbus and Tarsus, these coins allowed them to express themselves in the only way they saw possible. For in the period where they had very little ways to express their independence and autonomy due to the power of the Roman empire and the control they enforced; games allowed a release and a competitive fire among cities which without the form of games would not have been possible. Therefore, it can be shown that by Rome granting these cities games, they in sense allowed each city to maintain its own individuality as well as their own sense of being Greek.

Bibliography of literary sources


My belief is based on the assumption that Severus Alexander did not want any city that was loyal to Elagabalus to have too much power; due to the danger that my cause, seeing as Elagabalus was assassinated.

Mitchell, Stephen. 1990. *Festivals, Games, and Civic Life in Roman Asia Minor*. JSTOR


All coins cited can be found using the Severan Provincial Coinage Database.