

In the fourth of his *Hieroi Logoi* Aelius Aristides recounts his efforts to claim immunity (*ateleia*) from local magistracies in the Roman province of Asia – a legal struggle that lasted from 147 to 153 CE (*Or.* 50.71-109, ed. Keil). Nominated over several years to the offices of high priest of Asia, priest of Asclepius at Smyrna, tax collector, *eirenarch* of his birthplace Hadriani, and *prytanis*, Aristides contested these appointments, apparently seeking exemption on the basis of his professional status as a *rhetor*. Aristides' bid for immunity has attracted interest because it offers a glimpse of the structures of imperial government, the dynamics of provincial politics and the prerogatives of elite privilege in this period (Bowersock 1969; Nutton 1971). However, the account he gives in the *Hieroi Logoi* also bears the stamp of Aristides' unique preoccupations and rhetorical aims. Scholars have routinely noted Aristides' odd decision to present the account of his quest for immunities in reverse-chronological order, but no one has offered an interpretation of the reason for this narrative strategy. In this paper I will argue that Aristides tells the story in reverse partly to underscore a claim to imperial sponsorship that, in his view, frees him from lower-level obligations.

Investigating the complex allegiances of the Roman Empire's Greek-speaking elite, Simon Swain has suggested that the *ateleia* narrative in the fourth *Logos* is remarkable for the fact that Aristides focuses squarely, here, on local and regional politics: the cast of characters is largely provincial, rather than imperial (Swain 1996, 269-70). As Pernot's recent discussion makes clear, however, the Emperor remains a significant presence (Pernot 2008). In fact, I will argue, it is the Emperor Aristides presents as his crucial sponsor near the beginning of the account. Barred from ordinary avenues of recourse when he is nominated by the governor himself to the position of *eirenarch*, Aristides appeals to a higher authority for help: he calls upon Asclepius. In the event, though, aid – miraculous, because unsought – comes from the imperial court, in the form of letters of support from Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius (*Or.* 50.75). Strictly speaking, this is an imperial endorsement Aristides had solicited earlier, for a previous case. But, he strategically obscures this fact by telling the story in reverse. It is only by presenting his account (as he puts it) “upwards,” that he can make himself appear the beneficiary of spontaneous imperial favor. Engineering the narrative so as to break the pattern of petition and response that normally obtained between imperial subjects and the center of power, Aristides suggests that the Emperor is as active and provident in his care as is his most important patron: the god Asclepius. When he describes the strategy of his reverse-order narrative account – “as if we were mounting ever higher on a ladder” (*Or.* 50.100) – the image alludes to a hierarchical model in which imperial and divine patronage alike offer Aristides a way to rise above the entanglements of provincial politics.