

# Honoring One's Pledge? Benefactors and Their Building Donations in Roman Asia Minor

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Asia Minor provides a vast amount of evidence for building donations from Hellenistic and Roman periods, both from written sources, particularly inscriptions, but also from the extant monuments themselves. This is particularly important not only for architectural history, but also for our understanding of the legal process that benefactors had to undertake in order to realize their building projects.<sup>1</sup>

Frequently, in discussions on more or less “unfinished” buildings, the set phrase that “they ran out of money” provides a convenient and easy explanation for complex phenomena. However, a closer look at the available evidence does not permit us to draw such easy conclusions.

It is true that expectations and ambitions to erect spectacular monuments were high, especially during the Roman Imperial period. Potential donors might therefore exceed their financial or organizational limit, and the polis might have been left with unfinished and ruinous construction sites in its very center. This has led to rules for the permission of building donations and even laws concerning these official pledges, for which the benefactors were held liable. At the same time, benefactors wanted to make sure they were absolved from their legal obligations once they turned over their buildings to the city.

A good example concerning these complex matters is the Library of Celsus in Ephesos (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> The building was conceived as a tomb for Ti. Iulius Celsus Polemaeanus, *consul suffectus* of 92 AD and in 105/106 AD, governor for his native province of Asia Minor. To justify this intra-mural burial in the very center of the city, the tomb was combined with a public library in order to satisfy Celsus' personal goals as well as the common good of the polis.

The inscriptions on the library facade do not only allow us to date the completion of the project to the late years of Trajan's reign.<sup>3</sup> They also give us insight into the juridical and financial transactions for the construction of the library and the coverage for its running costs. In legal terms, the library represents a combination of a donation – the finished building is presented to the city – with an endowment, i.e. revenues from money handed over to the city should cover its running costs for upkeep and maintenance of the library, payment for its attendants, and purchases of new books, as the inscriptions states.

Both Ti. Iulius Celsus Polemaeanus and his son Ti. Iulius Aquila Polemaeanus passed away before the completion of the project. Therefore, 2000 sesterces were taken from the endowment and used for the completion of the library. In their inscription, Celsus'



Fig. 1: Library of Celsus in Ephesos. The inscription on the endowment is located on the back wall in the left intercolumniation above the niche

heirs particularly stressed the fact that they had fulfilled their legal obligations and that no further requests or expenditures could be asked from them.

This emphasis on the completion of the project is in accordance with the architecture. The extant remains of the library, and particularly the preserved architectural members of the facade are finished, confirming the statement of Celsus' heirs that they had honored his pledge.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Wesch-Klein 1989; Rumscheid 1999; Harter-Uibopuu 2015; all with further references.

<sup>2</sup> Still fundamental: Wilberg et al. 1953; see also Strocka 2009, with further references.

<sup>3</sup> IvE 5101. 5113.

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Fig. 1: by the author.

### References

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#### **IvE**

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#### **Rumscheid 1999**

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