THE HIGH PRIESTS OF THE TEMPLE OF ARTEMIS AT EPHESUS

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The cult of Artemis at Ephesus was a unique syncretism of Greek and Oriental elements. Several types of cult officials are unique to this sanctuary. The relevant ancient evidence reveals much about some of these officials. But the high priests of this cult, the so-called "Megabyzoi," are mostly an enigma. What modern scholars "know" about them consists entirely of assumptions supported by ambiguous ancient information. Indeed, an analysis of the ancient references shows that the very existence of a class of priests who were called "Megabyzoi" by the Ephesians and the "fact" that they were eunuchs are based on ambiguous and often contradictory ancient information.

Sources

The ancient evidence for the "Megabyzoi" is, at first glance, abundant. Several writers, some as early as the fourth century B.C., mentioned them. Though most of these authors wrote during the Roman period, and some of the earlier sources are playwrights, there are still several clear references to the "Megabyzoi" at Ephesus. Archaeological evidence also seems to support the existence of this "class" of priests, but this evidence has recently been questioned.

Description of the references to Ephesian "Megabyzoi" in ancient literary and other sources

Several ancient authors clearly refer to men named Megabyzos who were priests of Artemis at Ephesus.¹ A brief description of these authors' references to the "Megabyzoi" follows.

¹ The citations of authors and works in this paper will be in accordance with the Oxford Classical Dictionary.
In the early fourth century, Xenophon recorded (An. 5.3.4.2–5.3.8.3) that during his trip back to Greece from Persia, he stopped at Ephesus and left some of his booty with Megabyzos, a “neokoros of Artemis,” for safekeeping. Megabyzos later travelled to Greece and returned the money. Diogenes Laertius gave essentially the same account, clearly drawing on Xenophon (2.51.8–12, 2.52.7–10).

Strabo (14.1.23) gave the most complete account, saying that the Ephesians had eunuch priests, whom they called “Megabyzoi.” These priests were brought in from other places.

Pliny referred to the “Megabyzoi” twice. Once (HN 35.36.93) he referred to a painting at Ephesus of the procession of (a) “Megabyzus,” the priest of Diana at Ephesus, by Apelles, and once (HN 35.40.131–2) to a painting (also at Ephesus) by Nicias on the tomb of a “Megabyzus,” the priest of Diana at Ephesus.

Pseudo-Heraclitus (Ep.9) berated the Ephesians for castrating the “Megabyzos” since they could not tolerate a real man as the priest of their virgin goddess.

Appian (BC 5.9) mentioned a “priest of Artemis at Ephesus, whom they called Megabyzos,” whom Marc Antony met during his campaigns in the East in 39 B.C.

Plautus mentioned (Bacch. II.307–8) Megabulus, the father of Theotimus, a priest of Artemis at Ephesus. Several elements of this account seem inconsistent with the above-mentioned descriptions of the “Megabyzoi” at Ephesus. The name is slightly different. Megabulus _himself_ is not called a priest of Artemis at Ephesus. He also had a son, which would take some explaining for a eunuch priest. But the connection of a name so similar to Megabyzus with the priesthood of Artemis at Ephesus makes it likely that Plautus here is indeed speaking of a “Megabyzus” from Ephesus. If so, this would be the earliest such reference independent of Xenophon.

Other ancient authors mention a “Megabyzus” who may have been a priest of Artemis of Ephesus but who is not specifically said to be, and who cannot be identified as another historically attested “Megabyzos.” These authors include Plutarch, Lucian, and Quintilian.

Plutarch (Alex. 42.1.5–42.2.1) mentioned a “Megabyzos” in connection with an unnamed sanctuary in Asia Minor. This man is never specifically associated with Ephesus, much less the priests of Artemis there. Also, this reference is in the context of letters from Alexander to officials such as Seleucus and Craterus, so it is likely that this “Megabyzos” is an official associated with Alexander instead of a