BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION – SOME RHODIAN REFLECTIONS FROM THE AGE OF THE HIGH ROMAN EMPIRE

By Peter Fibiger Bang

Summary: This introduction seeks to reflect on the contributions to this collection and the oeuvre of Vincent Gabrielsen through the prism of Dio Chrysostom's speech to the Rhodians. The themes move from the moral economy of honour in the city-state, to the formation of a Greek aristocratic identity under Rome, before finally analysing the relationship between empire, taxation and the ancient economy.

> For it is only those Hellenes who still live and are sensible of the difference between honour and dishonour of whom it is possible for any to be first.
> Dio Chrysostom[1]

What other text could serve much better to open this collection of studies? At the heart of The Speech to the Rhodians, by the Greek orator Dio Chrysostom, stands the question of honour. And it is to honour Vincent Gabrielsen on his retirement as professor of Ancient History in Copenhagen that we as friends and colleagues offer these articles. The speech, hailing from around the turn of the 1st century AD, is a virtual tour de force. Rhetorical figures are coming thick and fast, while nothing less than the character of Greek culture is subjected to thorough examination.[2] Rhodes and Athens, war and peace, naval power, economic wealth

1 Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31.159 (here as throughout this introduction, translation of passages from Dio Chrysostom's 31st Speech is based on the English version offered by Cohoon & Crosby in the Loeb Classical Library, occasionally revised and modified as I saw fit). Here I must also thank Wolfgang Filser for guidance on Rhodian sculpture and especially Bjarke Bach Christensen, once my research assistant, whose help was invaluable in preparing the manuscript of this set of papers for publication.

2 See Jones 1978 for a basic introduction to Dio Chrysostom and his work, chap. 4 on

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and the epigraphic habit, the postclassical Hellenistic world and the character of civic life in the polis, all these issues are taken under consideration.

Incidentally these topics also constitute a virtual list of the themes that have been central to Vincent's work over the last generation. Here is a brief, necessarily selective sketch. After two monographs on *Financing the Athenian Fleet* (1994) and *The Naval Aristocracy of Rhodes* (1997), he moved on to examine the ancient economy more generally together with John Davies and Zosia Archibald in their *Hellenistic Economies* project that resulted in three co-edited volumes between 2001 and 2011.[3] Here we also find a co-edited volume with John Lund exploring the economy of the Black Sea in antiquity (2007). The last decade has been occupied by conducting collective research projects. The Copenhagen Associations project has produced an inventory of private associations documented in the Eastern half of the Mediterranean world from 500 BC till AD 300 while a final and still ongoing project returns to Rhodes.[4] Throughout, the basis of all these efforts has been a steady engagement with Greek epigraphy.

Inscriptions on stone, civic life and Rhodes, these themes transport us right back into the speech of Dio Chrysostom; it reads as an indignant critique of a practice that had been developing among the Rhodians when bestowing public honours on a person during the first century AD:

> "The most inappropriate thing then takes place. For your chief magistrate merely points his finger at the first statue that meets his eye of those which have already been dedicated; and then, after the inscription which was previously on it has been erased and another name engraved, the business of honouring is complete and the man whom you have deemed worthy of a statue has already received it."[5]

the Rhodian speech; Swain 2000 for a set of essays exploring his work in all its many facets; Bekker-Nielsen 2008 for a broad discussion of Dio in the context of the Roman province of Bithynia-Pontus.

3 Archibald, Davies, Gabrielsen & Oliver 2001; Archibald, Davies & Gabrielsen 2005 and 2011.

4 https://ancientassociations.ku.dk/CAPI/index.php; Gabrielsen & Paganini 2021.

5 Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31.9.

The island city-state was famed for the numerous statues that graced its public spaces and sanctuaries in memory of past benefactors or heroic deeds. But now, the orator complained, the body-politic had begun to re-use and rededicate some of this rich monumental heritage to bestow honours on new recipients. The epigrapher will add that at the famed Rhodian sanctuary of Athena Lindios a set of regulations had even been introduced regulating the sale of the right to put up an inscription to a new honorand on bases of statues that carried no prior inscription on them.[6] However, all this was unworthy of the city and its standing. Under Roman rule Rhodes had retained its prestige as a centre of culture and learning. The sculptures of its workshops were priced even among the members of the imperial house and its schools of philosophy attracted many a prominent Roman. Most famously, of course, the future emperor Tiberius spent a period of exile on the island after having withdrawn from the politics of the capital and the dynastic struggles over the line of succession from Augustus.[7] But many more high-ranking Romans made a stop-over at Rhodes, often presumably on the way to or returning from a provincial assignment in the East. Such people were worth cultivating. Their patronage might prove important to safeguard the privileges and position of the Rhodians in the imperial order. Yet, Dio objected, this current practice was below the dignity of the Rhodians.

When I first came to Copenhagen some 20 years ago, the question of Greek identity under Roman rule was rising to the top of the agenda and there it has remained. People were discussing whether the celebration of Hellenic culture was a sign of resistance to Roman power. Vincent and I joined this debate when, as the first thing I did in Copenhagen, we co-taught a course on Greek identity and the question of nationalism in antiquity. It was one of the most rewarding teaching experiences I have had. We came with different points of view and the students got to share with us a semester of constructive and playful debate. It speaks very highly of Vincent that he tolerated, perhaps even enjoyed, the opposition of the new assistant professor with nothing but good grace.

6 *I. Lindos* II, 419, ll. 30-43, discussed by Harter-Uibopuu 2013: 465-56.

7 Suet. *Tib.* 11-13. On the tradition of Rhodian sculpture, including its appeal during the early empire, see now best, Bairami 2017.

Graceful, however, was not a word that Dio would pin on the Rhodian adulation of visiting Roman nobles. Some might in his complaint read a sign of opposition and resistance against the Roman political masters. Paul Veyne, the great historian of honour and public benefaction in antiquity, has even in Dio's speech seen a manifesto of anti-Roman sentiment.[8] Dio certainly became one of the leading voices in the literary movement that is now known under the label of the second sophistic.[9] The speech exhibits most of the main characteristics. Its intellectual universe is demonstratively Greek and focused on pre-Roman or classical times. The primary points of reference are Athens, Sparta, or if need be, the Macedonians of Alexander, only secondarily Rome, whereas the present is often referred to in disparaging terms. The Hellenic world of the empire compares unfavourably, in the eyes of Dio, to its glorious past. Yet, neither Dio nor the second sophistic in general, really fit the part of the subaltern voice rejecting empire. It was not from among their ranks that rebellion was fomented. There we have to go to more marginalized groups within the Hellenistic networks of the Mediterranean such as the Jews. Conflicts about their position in the wider polytheistic order of the empire exploded into a series of hard-fought rebellions in Judea and the Eastern Mediterranean during the lifetime of Dio.[10] But it is not on their side that we find Dio. The order that the Jews both sought to gain a foothold within and rebelled against was an order articulated in classical Greek.

The imperial order in the Eastern Mediterranean was pre-eminently Hellenistic. In a wider perspective, there is nothing especially remarkable about this. The vast territorial empires of precolonial times always had to co-opt several elite identities and languages and therefore normally liked to proclaim themselves as universal. Under the Qing dynasty, the Manchu ruling class carefully cultivated its own separate language and ethnicity even as most of the imperial government was in the hands of Han Confucian literati. The Ottoman dynasty ruled under the banner of Islam, but nevertheless had to accommodate the leaders of its vast Christian populations. Even more so the Great Mughals who as rulers of

8 Veyne 1999.
9 Swain 1996; Whitmarsh 2001.
10 Goodman 2007.

Hindustan often competed with the Ottomans about who could send the most splendid gifts for the annual Islamic pilgrimage at Mecca. But while their magnificent mosques stand majestically across India, their rule was nevertheless based on a strong alliance with the Hindu warrior nobility of Rajasthan. Under their Muslim overlords, these rajputs rose to greater strength and prominence than ever.[11] One might also here with Paul Veyne adduce the experience of the multi-ethnic Austrian Habsburg monarchy, but with one significant caveat. Austro-Hungary had to negotiate the world of rising 19th century nationalism.[12] But Hellenicity under the Roman empire was a cosmopolitan identity, not a nationalism. Political allegiance remained tied either to the local city-state, occasionally a regional league or the empire. There was no Greek nation claiming independence and its own territory.

It is through the world history context of the extensive pre-colonial, universal empire that the second sophistic should be approached. The Hellenic elites of the Eastern Mediterranean were forcefully on the rise and increasing numbers made it to the top ranks of the Roman ruling class. Some of the most prominent nobles of the second century empire hailed from the Hellenic elites. They were joined by the emperors in the celebration of their culture and history. Under Hadrian, a panhellenic league, centred on the Aegean, was even formed.[13] But the world of Hellenising elites was wider and reached across the eastern part of the empire. Some of these were even "eager to become Roman," as Jesper Majbom has argued. But far from all, there was no need to. One could loyally serve the imperial order without necessarily acquiring a Roman citizenship which was now more a legal status than an ethnic marker.[14]

This is where Dio's speech and its preoccupation with honour fits in. The aim, as with the entire literary movement, is repeatedly to advocate

11 Bang & Kolodziejczyk 2012 (with many more cases); Kolodziejczyk 2021; Kinra 2021.

12 Veyne 1999: 562-63. Gellner 1998 on the Habsburg dilemma between imperial and national loyalties.

13 For two classic epigraphically based contributions to this literature, see Spawforth & Walker 1985-1986; Oliver 1970 (not least for Herodes Atticus, one of the riches aristocrats in the empire, friend of Marcus Aurelius, massive benefactor and occasional opponent of Athens).

14 Majbom 2009; Woolf 1994.

for stricter and more demanding standards of Hellenicity, in terms of literary aesthetics, norms of comportment or public ritual. In fact, the procedure of honouring Roman dignitaries by rededicating past statues to the representatives of imperial power was far from particular to Rhodes, but is better attested in the epigraphical record from other cities, not least the Athenian Acropolis. Visually and symbolically, the strategy served to integrate, perhaps even define the Roman conqueror within a Greek cultural universe. Roman power was, so to speak, both honoured and mastered by Hellenic elite society through the symbolical language of an increasingly glorified past.[15] But all that is high-handedly and probably disingenuously ignored by Dio.[16] The point was not to offer a "true" representation of contemporary Greek culture, but to assert his position as arbiter of taste and launch the Greeks into an intensified competition for status and thereby strengthen their prestige even further. Thus, the Rhodians are accused of cheapening their honours and admonished instead to take greater care to safeguard and, if possible, heighten their dignity. "For do not think that the Romans are so stupid and ignorant that they would choose that none of their subjects should be of a free and noble character, but rather prefer to rule over slaves."[17] This is aristocratic language laying out a position of dignified service.

For someone with Herodotus fresh in memory, Dio's claim may read like a tall order and represent quite an ironic reversal of meaning. After all, the history of the Persian Wars had sought to demonstrate the exact opposite, that imperial rule was incompatible with the politics of free men.[18] This observation might then serve as a basis for an attempt to "de-

15 Shear 2007; Krumeich 2022; Ma 2013 makes the important point that in the honouring process an individual is not merely being honoured, the community also masters that individual by inserting him or her within its system of public values and virtues. See Leypold, Mohr & Russenberger 2014 for a recent collection of studies dedicated to the reuse and rededication of statues in classical antiquity, Blancken 1969 for the basic collection of the evidence.

16 Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31.105-6 (only Rhodes does it).

17 Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31.111. For guidance, see Salmeri 2000, the best discussion of the position advocated by Dio Chrysostom, and further Salmeri 2011 on the loyal pride taken in Sicilian provincial identity under imperial rulers.

18 Herodotus e.g. 7.101-4 and 8.142-44.

stabilize" the reading of Dio. Can we really be sure that this self-proclaimed admirer of the Greek past, meant his statement? But such an approach would miss the point of the speech. It is not a piece of confessional literature. Any search for authenticity is futile. It is a piece of highly charged rhetoric, constantly changing its angles, driving home its point again and again with whatever argumentative means Dio can muster. At the end, the listener is left dazzled and overwhelmed, if not numbed and bored. The aim is not sincerity, but performative, the fashioning of an honourable aristocratic identity – keeping up appearances.

Which takes us to the question that the speech presses on the ancient economic historian, an issue crucially at the centre of modern debate: did imperial subjection leave the polis better off? The answer, as Davis and Archibald intimate in their contribution, is complicated by the varying fates of different cities and regions. Ober has made a case for classical Athens as an almost ideal version of premodern economies while Alcock sees postclassical mainland Greece as sluggish until late antiquity.[19] Many other Greek communities, however, seem to have benefitted mightily from the imperial peace. The material and inscriptional record of Asia Minor, Anatolia and Syria reflect a world of flourishing communities.

Rhodes rose in the interstices of empire. Ally first of the Ptolemies, then of Rome, the island acquired a territorial foothold on the South Coast of Asia Minor, a source of tributes and profits, as Dio reminded the reader.[20] In his article, Alain Bresson shows how Rhodes was even able for a while to step into the shoes of the Ptolemies and take over some of their possessions and imperial organization in Asia Minor when their power began to crumble at the turn of the second century BC. With its active fleet, Rhodes positioned itself as a central hub in the interregional trade of the Eastern Mediterranean. Its amphorae became widespread and Isager's article reminds us how its citizens crop up everywhere in the epigraphical record. On the other hand, the wavering of Rhodes in the 3rd Macedonian war, left its wings clipped. Not in the sense that the economy went bust. As Vincent has pointed out, the trade of Rhodes carried on. But the punitive creation of Delos as a free port by the Romans,

19 Ober 2015; Alcock 1997.

20 Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31.101.

may have cut back Rhodian activity from a brief exceptional maximum. Delos became a centre of the slave trade and Italian businessmen until after the Mithridatic war when they penetrated the communities of Asia Minor.[21] Even so, the position of Rhodes remained a privileged one. For long periods, Rhodes enjoyed the status of a free community within the empire. The freedom of Rhodes, "often annulled or reaffirmed" in the pithy phrasing of Tacitus, was perhaps not as secure as that of Aphrodisias that managed to have its privileges confirmed repeatedly over several centuries.[22] But it certainly did succeed for long periods.

It is noteworthy that Dio nowhere mentions the payment of an imperial tribute by the island polis. Given its long history as an ally, it may be that the consolidation of empire under the Caesars had not yet resulted in the imposition of a tax on Rhodes. On the other hand, a grant of "freedom" did not automatically come with exemption from the imperial land tax. That was normally conferred only when the so-called *ius Italicum* was bestowed on a community - a much rarer occurrence.[23] Be that as it may, Dio points us to a dimension of the fiscal bargain that would have benefitted Rhodes, as well as most other Greek communities in varying degrees.

> "But now, the heaviest expenses of previous times do not exist. For, their [the Rhodians] military expenditures, since they were almost continually at war and rarely, if ever, had a break, cannot, in my opinion, be compared to those which are now made in times of peace. For it is not the same thing at all to send out a fleet of a hundred ships or even more...it is not possible to compare all that with what may now be seen in our time, when you [the Rhodians] appear with merely one or two undecked ships every year at Corinth."[24]

21 Rauh 1993; Eberle & Le Quéré 2017 on the acquisition of landed estates in the world of the eastern Mediterranean by Roman businessmen in the 2nd and 1st centuries BC; Gabrielsen 1997: 64-71.

22 Tac. *Ann.* 12.58, contrast the record of Aphrodisias, of freedom confirmed repeatedly for centuries, preserved on its record wall in the theatre, published by Reynolds 1982: docs. 8-25.

23 Jones 1940: 132-34.

24 Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31.102-3.

Subjection to Rome and unification of the Mediterranean under a single empire had significantly reduced warfare inside the realm. Local communities were still mostly in charge of day-to-day policing or fending off the odd pirate. But warfare on a grand scale, by far the costliest item in the budget of any ancient state, had become the preserve of the Roman imperial authorities. A very militarily active city-state such as Rhodes during the Hellenistic era would have seen its direct war expenditures slashed significantly by the imposition of the imperial peace.[25] Against this gain must then be set the loss of some of the economic benefits of military investment. Opportunities for foreign plunder would have ceased while the pressure to mobilise the people and the resources of the island would have become less intense. Thomsen's contribution, on the late 3rd century Athenian trierarchy examines the early stages of the process that eventually saw the independent war-making capacity of the Hellenic polis reduced. Instead of a mobilized citizenry and elite, the contours of a smaller permanent professional force become visible.

In spite of the very vocal nostalgia for the time when the city-states were independent players, on balance, the benefits of an imperial peace might have been worth paying a modest tribute for, especially since the imperial government also firmed up the position of landowning aristocracies, the class that saw itself as the natural leaders of local communities. The Roman authorities had little sympathy for the volatile politics so characteristic of the Greek city states in the preceding period. The fraternities and civic associations, discussed for classical Athens by Ilias Arnaoutoglou in his paper, not only made up the rich fabric of civic life in the Greek polis, they might also easily become a source of social unrest, as Trajan famously cautioned one of his governors.[26] Calls for cancellation of debts and redistribution of land had sounded frequently enough to be considered an integral part of Greek political culture and its strong democratic aspect.[27] But that would mean revolution, a no go in the eyes of empire. Disruption of the local political process threatened

25 See Zuiderhook 2017: 141-42 for a warning against, in general, to underestimate the contributions to the financing of war that ancient Greek city-states, in spite of their much celebrated freedom from permanent land-taxes, had to make.

26 Pliny *Ep.* 10.34 and 93.

27 Finley 1983: 108-13.

the stable collection of taxes that went to finance the imperial army. Order, stability and rule by the "best" men was a programme around which both empire and local aristocracies could unite. Lucian, another of the leading lights of the second sophistic, knew quite well how to craft a character assassination. In his mocking portrait of Peregrinus, the cynic philosopher is presented as both fraternizing with Christians and calling up the people to revolt against Rome. That was not what a proper dignified representative of Hellenic culture was supposed to do.[28] This class would know nothing of such "rabble rousers." On the contrary, the Greek elites sized the opportunities offered by empire and made the most of their cultural capital to join the Roman rulers in an aristocratic celebration of distinction, excellence, and the nobly born.

The protective bargain of imperial subjection, in short, served this class more than well. Under Roman rule, Hellenism consolidated and expanded its predominance in the eastern part of the empire. Greek served as the primary language of power and growing numbers of local elites oriented themselves towards Hellenistic aesthetics and forms of display in an effort to heighten their status.[29] Perhaps, the most remarkable testimony to this development, is the monumentalisation of Palmyra. In this fabled oasis-city of the Syrian desert, the Aramaic speaking community began, in the best Hellenic fashion, to honour its elites with statues and inscriptions, carved in both Greek and the Palmyrene dialect.[30] But what is so impressively on display in the Syrian desert was part of a general trend that archaeologists have documented across much of the Eastern imperial landscape. Benefitting from the Roman peace, the elites strengthened their position and hold on local communities while putting their success on display in an exuberant public culture.

However, before we get too carried away in singing the praise of the imperial peace, Cartledge's contribution reminds us that even as some

28 Veyne 1999: 526 misses the character assassination performed by Lucian in his discussion of *De Morte Peregrini* as a simple account of a Greek call to arms. To Lucian, however, the task presented itself as one to burden Peregrinus with every malignant charge which could be mustered, to exclude him of Hellenic upper-class society.

29 Andrade 2013; Millar 1993.

30 Yon 2012 now assembles most of the public epigraphy of Palmyra. See Raja 2022 for a recent history of Palmyra.

groups may have benefitted from empire, others were made to pay. In that respect, classical Sparta prefigures the Roman empire. Dominion exercised over conquered peasant populations on the Peloponnesus, did that amount to slavery? Or are the Helots best understood as a kind of harshly tied peasantry ruthlessly exploited by a military class of masters? In the eyes of a Roman historian, the terms of this debate may seem a little too dominated by a Greco-Roman elite discourse that, like Dio here, tended deceptively to portray all forms of dependency as potential slavery.[31] Reality was always more complex. In the Roman case, empire certainly brought an increase in real chattel slavery, but probably even more depended on tightening the screws on a much larger subject peasant population. Backed up by the imperial army, landlords and rulers saw their power increase. By contrast, peasantries experienced a reduction in freedom as they found themselves subjected to an increasing burden of various forms of claims and obligations. Roman rule meant that they had to work harder to meet the demands of landlords and ruling classes. In short, just how to balance the opportunities brought by empire formation against a growth in exploitation – did it lead to significant growth in per capita incomes? – that is something that we still have to work out, and something that I look forward to debating in the coming years with Vincent, retirement or not. Here, the enquiry now proceeds with a section of four papers examining offices and associations in the classical and Hellenistic polis and then continues with a second section dedicated to circulation, empire and the economy more generally.

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31 Lavan 2013.

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