

EMPIRE, AUTONOMY AND THE POLIS

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Summary: This article is a contribution to the debate on the significance of autonomy for the ancient Greek city-state. It argues that one of the most important implications of Hansen's work on the *polis*, and his downplaying of autonomy as a constitutive feature, was finally to lay to rest any doubts about the continued vitality of the *polis* under Roman rule. Ma's new grand synthesis of the *polis* seems fully to have taken the consequence of this and expanded its chronological span to include the Roman Empire down to late antiquity. However, there is a paradox in need of resolution here. For at the same time, Ma has decided to re-instate autonomy as a pivotal feature of the *polis*. How can this be resolved?

In truth such marks of distinction, on which you plume yourselves, not only are objects of utter contempt in the eyes of all persons of discernment, but especially in Rome they excite laughter and, what is still more humiliating, are called 'Greek failings!' And failings they are indeed, men of Nicomedia, though not Greek, unless someone will claim that in this special particular they are Greek, namely that those Greeks of old, both Athenians and Spartans, once laid counterclaims to glory. However, I may have said already that their doings were not mere vain conceit but a struggle for real empire – though now you may fancy somehow that they were making a valiant struggle for the right to lead a procession ...¹

This remark was written by Dio Chrysostom at the turn of the 1st century AD. Hailing from the city of Prusa, he belonged to the landowning gentry in the Roman province of Bithynia-Pontus and established himself as a prominent voice in the movement of Greek cultural revival that we now refer to as the Second Sophistic.² All this is familiar enough. But, what will perhaps come as a surprise, the quote also leads us straight to the

1 Dio Chrysostomus *Or.* 38.38 (transl. H. Lamar Crosby in Loeb).

2 On this literary movement, see Swain 1996 and Whitmarsh 2001, followed by many more.

heart of a problem for which the work of Mogens Hansen and the Copenhagen Polis Centre radically changed the parameters of our understanding.

On the surface of things, we encounter a Roman era member of the Hellenic elite building a rhetorical contrast between a glorious past when Greeks fought for actual empire, Athens and Sparta in the classical age of the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, and then the lackluster, pathetic squabbles and rivalries over mere symbolism of the Greek cities under Roman rule. It is tempting to elevate this rhetorical ploy into a narrative of the freedom of the classical *polis* versus the imperial submission of the sad and empty relics of the *polis* under the Romans – and that used to be done.

Trouble is that the Greek *polis* thrived, indeed even expanded its geographical reach under Roman rule, as has repeatedly been pointed out over the last generation.³ A good example may be the small Pisidian city of Sagalassos, tucked away up on a hillside in the Taurus Mountains and admirably excavated over the last generation by an archaeological team hailing from Leuven and Bilkent. In the centuries after the establishment of a stable imperial monarchy under Augustus, the city went through a conspicuous development. Impressive fora or agoras adorned with triumphal arches and mesmerizing nymphaea, with splashing fountains and sporting sculpture of the highest quality, were built together with a colonnaded street, theatre, stadium, heroon, library and even a temple to the divine emperor, presiding over the entrance to the city.⁴ Another example would be Palmyra in a lush oasis in the Syrian desert: it too went through a spectacularly thriving development as a Greco-Roman city-state, with all the monumentalisation that this entailed. In the Greco-Aramaic epigraphy and grave material of the city we encounter a rich and successful elite, building its local community into a bastion of

3 Millar 1993 is foundational. See further, Madsen 2020 with a focus on Roman Pontus.

4 Beaujean et al. 2025 (sculpture and nymphaea, with copious references to earlier literature); Eich et al. 2018 (inscriptions). For further bibliography and information, see <https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/sagalassos/main>. I am grateful especially to Jane Fejfer and Jeroen Poblome for many illuminating conversations about Sagalassos.

power.⁵ Yet, these two examples of flourishing urban development and thriving civic communities, among many more, belong to the age of imperial subjection.

How could this be? It was hardly on the cards that it was to be Mogens Hansen that would lay the most important foundation to an explanation. As the historian of Athenian democracy in the classical age and then the surveyor of the spread of the Greek *polis* from the archaic to the classical period, the focus of his research seemed in fact to operate comfortably within the traditional boundaries. Yet, his work on the *polis* in general led to two important and in disciplinary terms almost transgressive developments. The first was a wide-ranging comparative exercise that reimagined the world of Greek *poleis* as only one, if prominent, example of a vast range of city-state cultures in world history.⁶ The second was the insight that the number of *poleis* beyond Athens and Sparta, our best-known cases, was so vast that most of these would have been of small or moderate size. By implication, many of these would have been faced with the prospect of subjection and imperial hierarchy from the word go. They were simply too small to avoid the domination of bigger powers. Empire was not incompatible with the Greek city-state culture. Freedom and autonomy may have been celebrated as values, but to quote Hansen himself: “*Autonomia* was not ever an irreducible characteristic for a *polis* to be a *polis*.”⁷ Many Hellenic city-states, already in the archaic and classical periods, existed under the hegemony of both neighbouring monarchical and city-state governments. There is, in short, little historical justification for cutting the history of the *polis* short at, say, the death of Alexander. To be consistent, and Mogens never wanted to be anything less than consistent, the history of the *polis* should be extended well into Roman rule or rather, at least, to the end of Roman antiquity.

Two decades after both insights were concisely synthesized in *Polis: An Introduction to the Ancient Greek City-State*, their influence is clear. In two new monumental works by prominent colleagues in the field, the

5 So well brought out by Anna Minor in her new re-arrangement of the vast collection of Palmyrene elite portraits held by the New Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen. On Palmyra, see now Raja 2024 & 2022.

6 Hansen 2000.

7 Hansen 2005: 48.

problem of the Greco-Roman city is tackled anew. The world history perspective is predominant in Greg Woolf's *The Life and Death of Ancient Cities: A Natural History*, which relocates the Greco-Roman experience within a wider history of urbanism from its beginnings in the Fertile Crescent and ancient Mesopotamia, with looks to both India and China, till the end of antiquity.⁸ The second is self-styled far more traditional and Greco-centric; at its heart is the single-minded study of inscriptions. Even so, *Polis* by John Ma has adopted a long chronology, from the earliest archaic times till the later stages of Roman rule.⁹ The choice of title is of course itself a sign. Here is a new history of the *polis* to take over from Hansen. From one perspective, the self-consciously magisterial work seems to draw the obvious implication of Hansen's work and include Roman times. From another perspective, the book directly sets out to contradict Hansen's pivotal insight and attempt to re-instate autonomy as a central and defining feature of the Hellenic *polis*. This also means that even more than to Hansen, for Ma democracy is a central feature of the *polis*, even down into Roman rule. And certainly, the epigraphy of the Greek cities of Asia Minor and the Near East was never livelier than during Roman times. Civic culture was quite simply thriving, a fact to which the many volumes of *Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien* offer vivid testimony. However, it is a moot point who really carried and participated in this culture. Noting, for instance, that decisions were recorded on stone as having been made in the name of the council and assembly or the council and the people, does to be honest not necessarily persuade a Roman historian. After all, the formula of *Senatus Populusque Romanus* remained common state currency under the emperors for centuries. That the triumphal arch of Constantine in Rome was ostensibly put up by the senate and people would not lead any Roman historian to conclude that the assemblies of the people were still a real force of power.¹⁰

The rise of the common people, the peasantry and even on occasion the landless, to political influence in the ancient city-state was closely

8 Woolf 2020.

9 Ma 2024: 17 (against Hansen on autonomy and the *polis*); 323-28 (with a tension between Ma's view of omnipotent despotical empire and *polis* autonomy); 348-58 (democracy).

10 Van Dam 2007: 46-49 offers a brief analysis of the arch of Constantine in Rome.

tied to military service. The civic elite and aristocracy of the classical *polis* needed the *hoi polloi* in the army and fleet. That was the significant leverage which the commoners possessed, and the basis of their claims to political rights.¹¹ However, with the establishment of empire, that disappeared. Instead, the peasantry now regularly had to pay an imperial tribute to finance a professional imperial army.¹² In the long term, its rights were bound to be eroded and its position in the *polis* weakened. Do we have any corroboration of this expectation? Quite, as the late Paul Veyne pointed out, the *polis* turned increasingly aristocratic, developing a conspicuous culture of so-called euergetism. Celebrating itself, the aristocracy of the Greek *poleis* under imperial hegemony and peace channeled its resources into a culture of urban display.¹³ Lavish public rituals, ceremonies and festivals served to enliven a sumptuous façade of public architecture and art.

No self-respecting peasantry would ever have volunteered to finance the exuberant spending spree in which the elites of the Greek cities of the Roman empire indulged themselves. But that did not mean that the city-state culture was not alive and well. On the contrary, empire provided firm protection of its elites and they responded by developing an aristocratic culture, celebrating the honour and prestige of its carriers.¹⁴ Speeches such as those of Dio Chrysostom with which we started, reflect an attempt to assert dignity and to handle the negotiations with the imperial overlord. Empire might have meant subjection, but it also depended on, and even empowered the local elites of the realm to govern their own communities. As Garnsey & Saller pointed out long ago, this was government without bureaucracy.¹⁵ The result was a vibrant civic culture available now both to classical archaeologists and philologists for study. If “*autonomia* became a key concept in Greek affairs”, it was a re-

11 Well summarised for Rome by Rostenstein 2009: 32-33 and for the Greek city-state world by Mann 1986, chap. 7.

12 Bang 2022. I find this dimension strangely missing from current debate, even in a more cautious discussion of the oligarchic trend under Rome, such as Zuiderhoek's (2017: 80-87), with some 'democratic' dimensions enduring.

13 Veyne 1976.

14 Salmeri 2008; Lendon 1997.

15 Garnsey & Saller 2015 [1986]: chap. 3.

sult, not of their inherent independence, but precisely as Hansen concluded, because “more and more *poleis* were losing their independence.”¹⁶ *Autonomia* served as a metaphor under which to negotiate the terms of local self-government under imperial supremacy.

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16 Hansen 2005: 48.

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