

RIVALRY, COMPETITION AND CORRUPTION IN DIO CHRYSOSTOM'S BITHYNIAN ORATIONS*

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Abstract: This paper discusses some of the main 'vices' of Bithynian politics as they emerge from Dio Chrysostom's Bithynian orations. It focuses on the issue of local rivalries between Bithynian *poleis*, the problematic relations between *poleis* and Roman authorities and, eventually, the difficult position of Dio in Prusa.

Keywords: Bithynia, Dio Chrysostom, Rivalry, Competition, Corruption, *Homonoia*

Dio is an interesting, complex and in many respects ambiguous character. His life was marked by a series of significant events, such as his stay at the imperial court and the long exile from Bithynia and Italy following Domitian's order – a traumatic experience which compelled Dio to travel extensively in Greece and Asia Minor before his rehabilitation under Nerva.¹ Dio's works, philosophical activity and political life have been intensively discussed in past and recent scholarship, starting with the fundamental study by Hans von Arnim, then later in the wake of the influential works of Paolo Desideri, Christopher P. Jones, Simon Swain, and Giovanni Salmeri, until more recent studies.² Nonetheless, one aspect has so far received less attention as compared to other aspects of Dio's activity and career, namely the discourse of competition and corruption that

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¹ The main source on Dio's exile is Dio himself at 13.1; cf. also 1.50; 19.1: 36.1; 45.1. A reference is also in Luc. *De mort. Peregr.* 18; by contrast, Philostr. *VS* 1.7 (488) says Dio was on a self-imposed exile; see Schmitz 1996. On Dio's exile, see von Arnim 1898, 223–308; Desideri 1978, 187–260; Jones 1978, 45–55; Moles 2005 (cf. also 1983 and 1978); Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 119–122. For a different view of Dio's exile, see Ventrella 2009. On exile as a literary *topos* of the Second Sophistic, see Whitmarsh 2001.

² I limit myself to referring the reader to the most influential works on Dio: von Arnim 1898; Vielmetti 1941 (specifically on the Bithynian orations); Desideri 1978 and 2019; Jones 1978 and 2012; Moles 1978 and 1983; Salmeri 1980, 1982, 1999 and 2000; Sheppard 1984 (the Bithynian years); Harris 1991; Cuvigny 1994; Méthy 1994; Fuhrmann 2006 (on the Bithynian years); Bekker-Nielsen 2008 (also focusing on Bithynia); Amato 2014. Among miscellaneous works: *Dio Chrysostom* and *Der Philosoph und sein Bild*.

emerges from his so-called Bithynian orations,³ the speeches Dio addressed to the Bithynian *poleis* mostly after his return from exile.⁴ I argue in this article that this discourse emerges at several places in these orations, and it addresses two main aspects. The first aspect concerns the ‘twisted dynamics’ regulating the relations between Roman governors and Bithynian *poleis*. These dynamics were aggravated by the constant state of rivalry between *poleis*, as we can see mainly based on the speeches Dio delivered *outside* his native city, Prusa. The second aspect, by contrast, concerns the accusation of corruption addressed against Dio himself, an accusation that also partly involved Dio’s relationship with the Roman authorities. This second aspect can be reconstructed based on the speeches that Dio addressed to his audiences *in* Prusa itself.

A few introductory words are necessary. A crucial moment of Dio’s life and career coincides with his return to Prusa, probably at the beginning of Nerva’s principate.⁵ His return to Bithynia was greeted with enthusiasm by his fellow citizens,⁶ and probably by the other civic communities of Bithynia as well: as he himself boasts in the beginning of *Oration 38 To the Nicomedians on Concord with Nicaea*, he was awarded citizenship in several Bithynian cities – a clear token of the manifest admiration that he enjoyed among Bithynian communities. Dio declares himself proud that these naturalization grants were awarded to him on the grounds of his ability to give valuable advice – a reference to his activity as a counsellor, which he started during the years of exile.⁷ Acting as a political advisor in different civic communities was not an easy task in Bithynia, a land that in Dio’s own day was troubled by intense rivalry between *poleis*. Rivalry was certainly not a novelty among Greek cities: it was a typical phenomenon of the Greek world since the archaic period; however, in Bithynia it assumed the traits of a permanent state of competition, impacting not only the relations between cities, but also the image that these cities had in the eyes of Roman authorities, as we shall see.

³ Specifically, *Or.* 38–51. They are all pronounced in Prusa, except for *Or.* 38 (Nicomedia), 39 (Nicaea) and 41 (Apamea). The topic of corruption in Dio’s Bithynian speeches was also approached by Fuhrmann 2006. Recently on issues concerning Dio’s building project, see Russo 2021.

⁴ The standard reference for the chronology of Dio’s orations remains von Arnim 1898. For discussions of chronology concerning specific periods and orations, see Vielmetti 1941, 89–108 (period from 96 to 113); Moles 1983, 130–134 (speeches 33, 66, 80); Sheppard 1984 (above all the period after the exile, but see the overall chronology, pp. 172–173). Both Desideri 1978, 131–132, and Jones 1978, 134, maintain that all the Bithynian orations were composed after the exile, with the exception of *Or.* 46; Sheppard 1984, 163–173, also adds *Or.* 38 to this exception, which he dated to 81 CE.

⁵ Jones 1978, 51, notes that Dio might have needed several months, after his rehabilitation in 96 CE, to return from the remote regions where he was travelling, so he maintains 97 CE is the most probable date for his return to Bithynia. On Dio’s return, see also Desideri 1978, 262–282. See *ibid.*, 272, for the view that Dio returned to Bithynia in 101 CE.

⁶ See Dio 44.1, pronounced probably a few months after his return; Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 122.

⁷ Dio 38.1. On activity as a counsellor during the exile, see Dio 13.12. The chronology of Dio’s citizenship grants cannot be reconstructed, but it is plausible that citizenship was awarded by the *poleis* of Bithynia in the period after the exile.

Rivalry in Bithynia must be put in the context of the long history of intense urbanization in the region. After the defeat in 281 BCE of Lysimachos, who had renamed the *polis* of Antigoneia (founded by Antigonos Monophthalmos) to Nicaea (Nikaia) in 301 BCE, control over the region passed to a local dynasty.⁸ Two of the major *poleis* of the region were founded, respectively, by Nikomedes I, who founded Nicomedia in 264 BCE on the site of the Megarian colony of Astakos, and by Prusias I, who founded Prusa in 188 or 187 BCE, at the foot of Mount Olympus – later hometown to Dio.⁹ In 73 BCE the kingdom of Bithynia passed to Rome with the testament of Nikomedes IV, and, after the end of the Mithridatic wars, Pompey established the province of Pontus-Bithynia (63 BCE).¹⁰ The territory of Pompey's province, which originally also included a part of Paphlagonia in the south, was reduced in size around three decades later, taking the shape of a long strip of land extending eastwards on the southern coast of the Black Sea, including the *polis* of Amisos. Bithynia occupied the western part of the province. During Augustus' reorganization of the provinces, Pontus-Bithynia was classified as a senatorial province, that is, a province ruled by a governor of consular or pretorian rank with only few legions of the army, as these territories were usually considered not belligerent. Christian Marek has noted that the task of governing this province was generally (yet not always) assigned to young governors, and Bithynian administration became one of the first steps in the career of provincial governors.¹¹ At intervals, however, the emperor assumed control: this happened in 18–19 CE, and again for a short period during Trajan's reign, as well as under Hadrian, before Pontus-Bithynia became an imperial province under Antoninus Pius.¹² While it was not a belligerent territory, Bithynia was far from being unproblematic for Roman proconsuls, as is shown by the recurring lawsuits for corruption brought by the Bithynians against Roman governors, which are attested both in Tacitus' *Annals*¹³ and in Pliny's *Letters*.¹⁴ In what follows, we will discuss two of these trials, which are contemporary to Dio and, in one case, might have indirectly involved Dio himself.

⁸ On the foundation of Nicaea: Strab. 12.4.7; Steph. Byz., s.v. Νίκαια (474 Meineke). On the Bithynian dynasty inaugurated by Zipoites I, see Marek 2003, 21–23; Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 26–29; Paganoni 2019, 23–44.

⁹ On the foundation of Nicomedia, see Memn., *FGrHist*/BNJ² 434 FF 1,12.1 and 6; Arr., *FGrHist*/BNJ² 156 F 29; Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 21 with n. 3. On Prusa at the Olympus, Strab. 12.4.3; Arr., *FGrHist*/BNJ² 156 F 29; Plin. *Nat.* 5.148; Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 22–23 with n. 4.

¹⁰ The province's administrative structure was defined by the *Lex Pompeia*: early attestations are in Plin. *Ep.* 10.79 and 10.114. For a discussion about the *lex*, see Marshall 1968; Ameling 1984a; Fernoux 2004, 130–131; Madsen 2009, 29–34; Trampedach 2009.

¹¹ Marek 2003, 47.

¹² See the *legati* occurring in the list of the proconsular *fasti* collected by Rémy 1988 with discussion in Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 65–66.

¹³ Tac. *Ann.* 1.74; 12.22 (*accusantibus Bithynis*); 14.46 (*Bithynis interrogantibus*).

¹⁴ Plin. *Ep.* 4.9; 6.29; 10.56 (trials against Julius Bassus in 103 CE) and *Ep.* 5.20; 6.5; 6.13; 6.29; 7.6 and 10 (against Varenus Rufus in 107 CE).

1. Bithynian rivalries and the problematic relationship with Roman governors

In a study on the problematic relations between Greek communities and Roman officers, Christina Kokkinia pointed to a famous passage from Plutarch's *Præcepta* which is strikingly brutal about the reality of Greek political subordination to Rome:¹⁵

And when entering upon any office whatsoever, you [*scil.* the Greeks] must not only call to mind those considerations of which Pericles reminded himself when he assumed the cloak of a general: «Take care, Pericles; you are ruling free men, you are ruling Greeks, Athenian citizens», but you must also say to yourself: «You who rule are a subject, ruling a State controlled by proconsuls, the agents of peace; 'these are not the spearmen of the plain', nor is this ancient Sardis, nor the famed Lydian power» You should arrange your cloak more carefully and from the office of the generals keep your eyes upon the orators' platform, and not have great pride or confidence in your crown, since you see the boots of Roman soldiers just above your head. No, you should imitate the actors, who, while putting into the performance their own passion, character, and reputation, yet listen to the prompter and do not go beyond the degree of liberty in rhythms and metres permitted by those in authority over them.¹⁶

The image of the boots of the Romans on the neck of the Greeks is a strong metaphor of the limited degree of autonomy of Greek civic communities under Roman rule. The Greeks of Plutarch's day could hardly ignore such a reality, but Plutarch implies that, because they are heirs to a strong legacy of local autonomy, the Greeks seem to forget about it. He advises them to behave like actors and follow the script without taking liberty of action. Another passage of Plutarch's *Moralia* seems to further elucidate the same concept:

So the most powerful of the Greeks in my time, disagreeing first about rival dancers, then about harp-players, and afterwards by continually holding up to invidious comparison the swimming-baths and porticoes and banquet-halls at Aedepsus, and then manoeuvring for places and positions, and going on to cut off aqueducts and divert their waters, they became so savage and reckless that they were deprived of everything by the despot, and, becoming exiles and paupers and – I had almost said – something other than their former selves, they remained the same only in

¹⁵ Kokkinia 2006, 184.

¹⁶ Plut. *Præc.* 813e-f (transl. Fowler 1936): εἰσιόντα δ' εἰς ἅπασαν ἀρχὴν οὐ μόνον ἐκείνους δεῖ προχειρίζεσθαι τοὺς λογισμούς, οὓς ὁ Περικλῆς αὐτὸν ὑπεμίμνησκεν ἀναλαμβάνων τὴν χλαμύδα, «πρόσεχε, Περικλεῖς· ἐλευθέρων ἄρχεις, Ἑλλήνων ἄρχεις, πολιτῶν Ἀθηναίων»· ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐκεῖνο λέγειν πρὸς ἑαυτὸν, «ἀρχόμενος ἄρχεις, ὑποτεταγμένης πόλεως ἀνθυπάτοις, ἐπιτρόποις Καίσαρος· οὐ ταῦτα λόγῃ πεδιάς», οὐδ' αἱ παλαιαὶ Σάρδεις οὐδ' ἡ Λυδῶν ἐκείνη δύναμις»· εὐσταλεστέραν δὲ τὴν χλαμύδα ποιεῖν, καὶ βλεῖπειν ἀπὸ τοῦ στρατηγίου πρὸς τὸ βῆμα, καὶ τῷ στεφάνῳ μὴ πολὺ φρονεῖν μηδὲ πιστεῦειν, ὀρώντα τοὺς καλτίους ἐπάνω τῆς κεφαλῆς· ἀλλὰ μιμεῖσθαι τοὺς ὑποκριτάς, πάθος μὲν ἴδιον καὶ ἦθος καὶ ἀξίωμα τῷ ἀγῶνι προστιθέντας, τοῦ δ' ὑποβολέως ἀκούοντας καὶ μὴ παρεκβαίνοντας τοὺς ρυθμούς καὶ τὰ μέτρα τῆς διδομένης ἐξουσίας ὑπὸ τῶν κρατούντων.

their hatred for one another. It is therefore of no slight importance to resist the spirit of contentiousness and jealousy among brothers when it first creeps in over trivial matters, practising the art of making mutual concessions, of learning to take defeat, and of taking pleasure in indulging brothers rather than in winning victories over them. For the men of old gave the name of 'Cadmean victory' to no other than that of the brothers at Thebes, as being the most shameful and the worst of victories.¹⁷

The interesting aspect of this passage is the mention of a tyrant (ὕπὸ τοῦ τυράννου), which is Rome, described as a superior power that deprives the Greeks of their liberty, autonomy and even wealth. The 'tyrant' clearly takes advantage of the condition of constant conflict of Greek cities.¹⁸

This line of thought finds strong parallels in Dio Chrysostom's Bithynian speeches.¹⁹ In particular, in *Oration* 38, Dio relates problems of local rivalry to the mistreatments inflicted by the Roman authorities. The speech revolves around the question of the enmity between Nicomedia and Nicaea, and it is a precious source of information both on the relations between the two *poleis*, and on Rome's exploitation of their ongoing conflicts. Situated near the coast, Nicomedia was the *metropolis* of the region in Dio's day. The position of *metropolis*, according to Strabo,²⁰ had been previously held by Nicaea, a *polis* whose economic prosperity – also due to her location on an important trade route – was renown. Problematic relations and sharp rivalry between the two *poleis* were rooted in the early imperial period: in 29 BCE Augustus established the cult of Roma and Julius Caesar at Nicaea, while Nicomedia received the privilege of building a temple to the Emperor.²¹ Since the middle of the first century,

¹⁷ Plut. *De frat. amor.* 487f–488a (transl. Helmbold 1939): ὥσπερ Ἑλλήνων οἱ καθ' ἡμᾶς δυνατώτατοι περὶ σπουδᾶς ὀρχηστῶν εἴτα κιθαριδῶν διαστάντες, ἐκ τούτου τὰς ἐν Αἰδημῶ κολυμβήθρας καὶ παστάδας καὶ ἀνδρῶνας ἀντιπαραβάλλοντες αἰεὶ καὶ τοπομαχοῦντες καὶ ἀποκόπτοντες ὅχετους καὶ ἀποστρέφοντες οὕτως ἐξηγριώθησαν καὶ διεφθάρησαν, ὥστε πάντων ἀφαιρεθέντες ὑπὸ τοῦ τυράννου καὶ φυγάδες καὶ πένητες καὶ ὀλίγου δέω λέγειν ἕτεροι τῶν πρότερον γενόμενοι μόνω διέμειναν οἱ αὐτοὶ τῷ μισεῖν ἀλλήλους. ὅθεν οὐχ ἥκιστα δεῖ περὶ τὰ μικρὰ καὶ πρῶτα παραδυομένη τῇ πρὸς τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς φιλονικίᾳ καὶ ζηλοτυπίᾳ διαμάχεσθαι, μελετώντας ἀνθυπείκειν καὶ ἠπτάσθαι καὶ χαίρειν τῷ χαρίζεσθαι μᾶλλον αὐτοῖς ἢ τῷ νικᾶν. οὐ γὰρ ἕτεραν οἱ παλαιοὶ Καδμείαν νίκην ἀλλὰ τὴν περὶ Θήβας τῶν ἀδελφῶν ὡς αἰσχίστην καὶ κακίστην προσηγόρευσαν.

¹⁸ On the topic of Roman rule over the Greeks in Plutarch, see Stadter 2013, 24–25; on Plutarch's Hellenocentrism, Tröster 2023. On the impact of Roman rule in Pontus–Bithynia, Madsen 2009; cf. also Bekker-Nielsen 2006.

¹⁹ Both Dio and Plutarch were in contact with the Corinthian sophists, a fact that might have contributed to a shaping of common ideas: see Winter 1997, 126–144. On the topic of Roman domination in Dio's orations, see Méthy 1994. The question of Greek identity under Roman rule is too vast and complex to be addressed here; I limit myself to refer the reader to some brief treatments of the subject, such as Veyne 1999 and, with focus on Bithynia and Pontus, Madsen 2009.

²⁰ Strab. 12.4.7 refers to Nicaea as the *metropolis* of Bithynia. For the possibility that the capital was transferred from Nicaea to Nicomedia by Germanicus during his passage in Bithynia in 18–19 CE, see Bosch 1935, 224; Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 65–66.

²¹ For the cult of Rome and Julius Caesar in Nicaea: Cass. Dio 51.20.6; Suet. *Aug.* 52; Madsen 2016. On the temple of the Emperor in Nicomedia: Cass. Dio 51.20.7. In general, on Bithynia in Cassius Dio,

Nicaean coinage attests the title of πρώτη for the city, but, from Domitian's reign, Nicomedia also appears to use πρώτη on its coins.²² Louis Robert notably spoke of a 'war of titles', indicating the enumeration of honorific titles on Nicaean and Nicomedian coins as an expression of the rivalry between the two cities.²³ In fact, Nicaea never accepted the loss of the status of *metropolis*: Nicaean coinage dating to Domitian's reign attest the use of *metropolis* in reference to Rome – indeed, with the purpose of polemizing with Nicomedia.²⁴ By contrast, the implications of the title of πρώτη are unclear, specifically as to whether or not it was purely honorific. In *Oration* 38, Dio briefly refers to the fact that this title conferred to Nicaea the right of claiming tribute, but the passage does not provide any further information on this scenario.²⁵ It comes as no surprise that such a title, whatever its practical implications, represented a strong element that fuelled discontent and rivalry with the neighbouring *polis* of Nicomedia, which regarded her position of *metropolis* as contested.

Dio's *Oration* 38 has the declared purpose of promoting concord (*homonoia*) between the two cities – an aim that was doomed to fail, as the hostility between them persisted, and later in the second century CE it focused on the crucial question of the *neokoria*, the celebration and administration of the imperial cult.²⁶ But what interests us now is the main argument that Dio offers on the necessity of avoiding strife:

[...] Or is it possible you are not aware of the tyrannical power your own strife offers those who govern you? [...] Yet by their public acts they have branded you as a pack of fools, yes, they treat you just like children, for we often offer children the most trivial things in place of things of greatest worth; moreover, those children, in their ignorance of what is truly valuable and in their pleasure over what is of least account, delight in what is a mere nothing. So also in your case, in place of justice, in place of the freedom of the cities from spoliation or from the seizure of the private possessions of their inhabitants, in place of their refraining from insulting you, in place of their refraining from drunken violence, your governors hand you titles, and

see Ameling 1984b. On *neokoria* and competition for the imperial cult in Nicomedia and Nicaea, see Burrell 2004, 147–165.

²² Robert 1977, 4. The first occurrence of the title πρώτη on Nicaean coins is *RGMG* 1.3 Nikaia 30 = *RPC* I, 2042, dated to 47/48 CE. For Nicomedia's use of the title of πρώτη on coins since Domitian's reign, see *RGMG* 1.3 Nikomedia 30–39 = *RPC* II, 655–664. Robert 1977, 6, maintains that Nicomedia's claim to πρώτη can be dated back to Vespasian's reign. For rivalry between the two *poleis*, see also Drolet 2004; Calomino 2023. More general, on rivalry between *poleis* in Bithynia in the Late Hellenistic and imperial period, see Heller 2006.

²³ Robert 1977, 6, including the expression «guerre des titres». Cf. Calomino 2023 for Nicaea's and Nicomedia's use of titles on coins.

²⁴ *RGMG* 1.3 Nikaia 61 = *RPC* II, 640.

²⁵ Dio 38.26. Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 48, maintains the title πρώτη was purely honorific, but he does not seem to consider this passage by Dio.

²⁶ Four Bithynian orations (Dio 38, 39, 40, 41) revolve around the topic of concord. On *homonoia* in Dio 38, see Baldi 2001. On *homonoia* as an important civic value, as well as a religious cult in the *poleis* of the imperial period, see Thériault 1996. On rivalry about the issue of the *neokoria*, see *supra*, n. 21.

call you 'first' either by word of mouth or in writing; that done, they may henceforth with impunity treat you as being the very last! 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 among the Romans these disputes evoke laughter and, what is still more humiliating, are called 'Greek failings'.²⁷

Dio's main concern, beyond the strife itself, is the visibility that such disputes assumed in the eyes of the Roman authorities. This passage sheds light on what Dio sees as a recurring strategy of the Romans, namely that of awarding titles (in his view, meaningless) to cities, in order to distract them from Rome's detrimental actions against them. What Dio describes here is a perverted mechanism of power relations, in which Roman governors exploit and exacerbate the hostility between Greek *poleis* by flattering one party. In the case in question, the title awarded to Nicaea is a subtle instrument to legitimize Rome's use of violence against the *polis*. With the metaphor of the children, Dio describes this dynamic very clearly: children cherish the reward of little things, and in so doing they do not realize the major goods they are being deprived of. Dio was confident that such a picture of Rome's deceptive power would strike a chord in his audience.²⁸

2. Dio's difficult position in Prusa

Overall, the Greeks of Bithynia had some good reasons for regarding the Roman governors with suspicion and mistrust. As noted above, the history of Roman administration in Bithynia is marred with a significant number of trials for corruption. Two of these trials occurred in the years of Dio's return to his homeland, and they are attested in Pliny's *Letters*: these are the trial against the proconsul Julius Bassus, and against Varenus Rufus.²⁹ Regarding the latter, Pliny recalls his defence of Bassus in a letter to Cornelius Ursus:³⁰

Pomponius Rufus, a ready and impetuous speaker, opened against him and was followed by Theophanes, one of the deputations from the province, who was the very life and soul of the prosecution, and indeed the originator of it. I replied on

²⁷ Dio 38.36–38 (transl. Crosby 1946): [...] ἡ γὰρ οὐκ ἐπαισθάνεσθε τῆς τυραννίδος, ἣν ἡ στάσις ἡ ὑμετέρα δίδωσι τοῖς ἄρχουσιν ὑμῶν; [...] κατεγνώκασι δὲ ὑμῶν ἄνοιαν δημοσίᾳ, καὶ χρῶνται καθάπερ τοῖς παιδίοις ὑμῖν, οἷς πολλάκις ἀντὶ τῶν μεγίστων προτείνεται τὰ μικρότατα· κάκεῖνα διὰ τὴν ἄγνοιαν τῶν ὡς ἀληθῶς μεγάλων καὶ διὰ τὴν πρὸς τὰ ἐλάχιστα ἡδονὴν χαίρει τῷ μηδενί· καὶ ὑμῖν οὕτως ἀντὶ δικαιοσύνης, ἀντὶ τοῦ μὴ συλᾶσθαι τὰς πόλεις μὴδὲ ἀφαιρεῖσθαι τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τῶν ἰδίων, ἀντὶ τοῦ μὴ ὑβρίζειν αὐτοὺς εἰς ὑμᾶς, ἀντὶ τοῦ μὴ παροινεῖν, προτείνουσιν ὀνόματα καὶ ἡ εἶπον ὑμᾶς πρῶτους ἢ ἔγραψαν· εἰτὰ εἰσιν ἀκίνδυνοι τὸ λοιπὸν ὑμῖν ὡς ἐσχάτοις χρώμενοι. τὰ γὰρ τοιαῦτα, ἐφ' οἷς μέγα φρονεῖτε, παρὰ πᾶσι μὲν τοῖς ὀρθῶς ἐννοουμένοις διαπτύεται, μάλιστα δὲ παρὰ τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις γέλωτα κινεῖ καὶ καλεῖται τὸ ἐπὶ ὑβριστικώτερον Ἑλληνικὰ ἀμαρτήματα.

²⁸ On speaker and audience in the Second Sophistic, see Korenjak 2000.

²⁹ See *supra*, n. 14.

³⁰ Plin. *Ep.* 4.9. For a commentary on Pliny's letters, see Sherwin-White 1966. For similarities in the political ideas of Pliny and Dio, see Trisoglio 1972. On Bassus, see *ibid.*, 60, and Sheppard 1984, 164–173.

Bassus' behalf, for he had instructed me to lay the foundations of his whole defence, to give an account of his distinctions, which were very considerable – as he was a man of good family, and had faced many hazards – to dilate upon the conspiracy of the informers and the gains they counted upon, and to explain how it was that Bassus had roused the resentment of all the restless spirits of the province, and notably of Theophanes himself. He had expressed a wish that I too should controvert the charge which was damaging him most. For as to the others, though they sounded to be even more serious, he deserved not only acquittal but approbation, and the only thing that troubled him was that, in an unguarded moment and in perfect innocence, he [*scil.* Bassus] had received certain presents from the provincials as a token of friendship, for he had served in the same province previously as quaestor. His accusers called these gifts as thefts and plunder: he called them presents, but the law forbids even presents to be accepted by a governor (*Haec accusatores furta ac rapinas, ipse munera vocabat. Sed lex munera quoque accipi vetat*).

Pliny explains that Bassus was accused of accepting 'gifts' by the Bithynians during his time in office as a proconsul, gifts that he 'naively' understood as tokens of friendship for his earlier service as a quaestor in the province. In Pliny's words, Bassus is *homo simplex et incautus*. From a letter to Trajan, we learn that the decrees that Bassus had issued when he was proconsul were rescinded, a clue that he had been convicted.³¹ Pliny indicates that a short time after impeaching Julius Bassus the Bithynians brought another action against a proconsul, this time Varenus Rufus, who was among those who held a defence of the Bithynians against Bassus, a fact that shows there were close connections between him and the Bithynian elites.³² A trial was held against Varenus Rufus: the Bithynians asked for a special commission of enquiry, while Varenus Rufus intended to bring his own witnesses from Bithynia – another hint of his good network in the province. The Bithynians protested, but the Senate granted permission to Varenus Rufus. From Pliny we also learn of the accusation of bribery³³ and the unexpected conclusion of this story after the Bithynians withdrew their accusation «on the ground that they entered upon it without adequate proofs».³⁴

There are several clues in Dio's speeches that he had friendly relations with Varenus Rufus. Upon entering his time in office as a proconsul in Bithynia,³⁵ Varenus Rufus paid an institutional visit to Prusa. Shortly before his visit, he

³¹ Plin. *Ep.* 10.56.

³² Plin. *Ep.* 5.20.

³³ Plin. *Ep.* 6.5.

³⁴ Plin. *Ep.* 7.6 and 7.10. Jones 1978, 102, argued that it was the provincial *koinon* in Bithynia that undermined the prosecution, and that Dio was involved in engineering the withdrawal of the accusation; similarly, on the involvement of Dio, see also Desideri 1978, 272; for objections, see Bekker-Nielsen 2008, 144 n. 92; cf. Fernoux 2004, 357–358. On the Bithynian *koinon*, Campanile 1995; on imperial *koina*, see Edelmann-Singer 2015.

³⁵ The date of the beginning of Varenus Rufus' office in Bithynia is debated: von Arnim 1898, 378, maintained it was 102/103 CE, Sherwin-White 1966, 61, proposed 105/106 CE, and Desideri 1978, 264 and 278 n. 28, proposed 103/104 CE.

had restored the assembly's right to convene, after it had been suspended due to frequent riots.³⁶ In Dio's *Oration* 48, delivered to the assembly of Prusa just before the governor's visit, Dio expended a good amount of his rhetorical energy recommending to the people that they refrain from riots in the assembly and from expressing their discontent with the problems of Prusa to the proconsul.³⁷ He was concerned with giving to the governor the impression of a city in which *homonoia* ruled:

On the present occasion, therefore, it is your duty not to prove false to his conception of you, but rather to show yourselves temperate and well-behaved in assembly, and first and foremost, I believe, to adorn yourselves with mutual friendship and concord, and if he comes in answer to our invitation, to defer the other matters about which you were so vociferous; for he will inquire into the public problems himself, even if you wish to prevent him. But for the present express your appreciation of his goodness, greet him with applause, and welcome him with auspicious words and honour, to the end that he may visit you, not as a physician visits the sick, with apprehension and worry over their treatment, but rather as one visits the well, with joy and eagerness.³⁸

Oration 43 mentions Dio's connection with a Roman governor whose name is not disclosed.³⁹ In what resembles the introduction to a lost apology, Dio sums up the several kinds of accusations levelled against him in Prusa:

But my bill of indictment was longer and, one might say, nobler, a sort of occult bill apparently: «Dio is guilty, first, of not honouring the gods either with sacrifices or with hymns, by abolishing the festivals of our fathers; secondly, of so misleading a wicked proconsul (ἡγέμονα πονηρὸν) as to cause him to torture the people and to banish as many as possible, and even to put some to death, making it necessary for them to die a voluntary death because, old as they were, they could not go into exile or endure to abandon their native land; thirdly, of cooperating in everything even now with the man who took the role of tyrant over our nation, and of arranging, so far as it is in his power to arrange, that that tyrant shall be successful in his struggle and shall take by force the cities and their popular governments; fourthly, of spoiling even democracy itself, setting himself up as its accuser, and with his own words and tongue committing crimes against his fellow citizens, yes, the members of his own community, and doing many other things which I am ashamed to specify; fifthly, of

³⁶ Dio 48.1.

³⁷ Dio 48.3.

³⁸ Dio 48.2: νῦν οὖν ὑμέτερον ἔργον ἐστὶ μὴ ψεύσασθαι αὐτοῦ τὴν διάνοιαν, ἀλλ' ἐπιδεῖξαι σωφρόνως καὶ καλῶς αὐτοὺς ἐκκλησιάζοντας, καὶ πρῶτον, ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ, καλλωπίσασθαι τῇ φιλίᾳ τῇ πρὸς ἀλλήλους καὶ ὁμονοίᾳ, κὰν δεῦρο ἀφίκηται παρακληθεῖς, περὶ μὲν τῶν ἄλλων ὧν ἐβοᾶτε ὑπερθέσθαι· ζητήσῃ γὰρ αὐτὸς τὰ δημόσια, κὰν ὑμεῖς κωλύειν θέλητε. τὸ δὲ νῦν εὐχαριστήσατε καὶ δεξιώσασθε καὶ μετ' εὐφημίας καὶ τιμῆς ὑποδέξασθε, ἵνα μὴ ὥσπερ ἰατρός πρὸς νοσοῦντας ὑπόπτως καὶ ἀηδῶς θεραπείας ἐνεκεν, ἀλλ' ὡς πρὸς ὑγιαίνοντας ἡδέως καὶ προθύμως παρῇ.

³⁹ Dio 43.11.

making himself a bad example of laziness and high-living and faithlessness for both young and old; and sixthly, of bribing the masses (δεκάζων δὲ τὸ πλῆθος), so that no one may reproach him with what was done in those days, but that people may instead acquire a sort of forgetfulness of his hatred and treachery».⁴⁰

The first charge is a stereotypical one, that is, ‘not honouring the gods’, which reminds us of the trial against Socrates, to whom, in fact, Dio implicitly compares himself in the beginning of the speech.⁴¹ The fourth charge, that of destroying democracy, is also probably a generic reference to the conflicts Dio had with other elite members, as it seems unlikely that Dio and his supporters ever plotted to overthrow the current political constitution. The fifth charge, i.e. that of being an example of misconduct, is equally, if not even more, generic. The last charge refers to attempts at ‘bribing’ the people – a typical way of framing attacks against demagogues in classical rhetoric. Despite being generic, however, this charge might be related to Dio’s public position when riots broke out over the increase in the price of grain at Prusa before he was exiled. These events are described in *Oration* 46, in which Dio, in the assembly, addresses the fellow citizens who attempted to set his house on fire. On this occasion, he reminded the audience of the several benefactions and liturgies he performed for the *polis*, following a consolidated habit in the self-representation of the elites to the public. It was perhaps this rhetoric habit of Dio – which was not limited to the riot-related events – that was described as an attempt to ‘bribe’ the mass (δεκάζων δὲ τὸ πλῆθος) by Dio’s opponents.⁴²

What we are more interested in are the second and third accusations, which concern Dio’s alleged support for a «wicked governor» (ἡγέμονα πονηρὸν) in actions such as torture, killing and exiling people, and Dio’s cooperation with «the man who took the role of the tyrant over our people» and his support for him in a struggle. The two possibilities that have been discussed to identify the wicked governor are Julius Bassus and Varenus Rufus, both of whom were involved in

⁴⁰ Dio 43.11–12 (transl. Crosby 1946. The reader should note that the Greek text does not explicitly number the accusations, whereas numbering is introduced by Henry L. Crosby in his translation): ἡ δ’ ἐμὴ γραφή μείζων καὶ γενναιότερα σχεδὸν ἦν, κρυφαῖα τις, ὥς ἔοικεν· ἀδικεῖ Δίῳ, τοὺς μὲν θεοὺς μὴ τιμῶν μῆτ’ ἐν θυσίαις μῆτ’ ἐν ὕμνοις, καταλύων τὰς πατρίους ἑορτάς, ἀναπείσας δὲ ἡγέμονα πονηρὸν ὥστε τὸν μὲν δῆμον βασανίσαι καὶ ἐξελάσαι ὅσους ἂν δύνηται πλείστους, ἐνίους δὲ καὶ ἀποκτείνειν, παρασχῶν ἀνάγκην αὐτοῖς ἐκουσίως ἀποθανεῖν διὰ τὸ μὴ δύνασθαι πρεσβύτας ὄντας φυγεῖν μηδὲ ὑπομένειν καταλιπεῖν τὴν πατρίδα· συμπράττων δὲ καὶ νῦν ἅπαντα τῷ τυραννήσαντι τοῦ ἔθνους, καὶ ὅπως ἐκείνος καλῶς ἀγωνιέται καὶ κατὰ κράτος παραλήψεται τὰς πόλεις καὶ τοὺς δῆμους κατασκευάζων, ὅσον ἐστὶν ἐπ’ αὐτῷ κατασκευάζειν· διαφθείρων δὲ καὶ τὸν δῆμον αὐτὸν ἐφιστάμενος κατήγορος καὶ τοῖς αὐτοῦ ῥήμασι καὶ τῇ γλώττῃ παρανομῶν εἰς τοὺς πολίτας, εἰς τοὺς δημότας, καὶ πολλὰ ἔτερα ποιῶν ἃ αἰσχύνομαι καθ’ ἕκαστον λέγειν· πονηρὸν δὲ παράδειγμα παρέχων ἑαυτὸν καὶ νεωτέροις καὶ πρεσβυτέροις ἀπονίας καὶ τρυφῆς καὶ ἀπιστίας· δεκάζων δὲ τὸ πλῆθος, ἵνα μηδεὶς αὐτῷ προφῆρῃ τὰ τότε πραχθέντα, ἀλλὰ τοῦ μίσους καὶ τῆς ἐπιβουλῆς λήθην τινὰ ποιῶσινται.

⁴¹ Dio 43.8–9.

⁴² See especially Dio 46.5. For the chronology of Dio’s speeches, see *supra*, n. 4. On the Greek civic assemblies in the imperial period, see Fernoux 2011.

trials for corruption, as we have seen.⁴³ Identification with Varenus Rufus is the most likely possibility based on the references to Bithynian supporters and to a successful struggle in his trial. In fact, these clues rule out Julius Bassus, who was convicted to the payment of a fine and for whom there are no mentions of Bithynian supporters.⁴⁴

Alleged cooperation with a wicked Roman governor was, however, only one of the things which Prusan opponents considered Dio guilty of. Two more reasons for hostility against Dio date to an earlier period, namely, the period immediately following Dio's embassy to Trajan in 101 CE. The first concerned the election of new *bouletai* in Prusa, as Dio had obtained permission from Trajan to enlarge the local *boule*. From *Oration* 45, we might infer that some Prusan citizens spread the suspicion that Dio had organized the outcome of elections, ensuring that his friends would be elected as councillors.⁴⁵ Dio rejected this rumour, underlining that he had left Prusa the day of the election⁴⁶ – clearly a weak argument, as bribery could be orchestrated well in advance of the election day.

The second aspect that fuelled internal hostility against Dio revolved around his proposal of a monumental building project to embellish Prusa, a project that was central to his position in the following years. In Dio's ambitious view, the beautification project was necessary for Prusa to compete with cities like Ephesus in the race for obtaining special privileges from the Emperor.⁴⁷ The chronology of the project is not known. In *Oration* 45, pronounced before the assembly of Prusa, Dio refers to the (recent?) past approbation of the project in the assembly, in the presence of an (unnamed) proconsul.⁴⁸ However, as it appears from *Oration* 47, which also addressed the Prusan assembly, the project was not well received by part of the Prusan citizenry, and it exacerbated political unrest. Dio's opponents defined Dio as a tyrant, with reference to his involvement in proposing and sponsoring the building program.⁴⁹ They claimed that no formal discussion and vote for authorizing the project had taken place in the assembly. The proconsul personally summoned the assembly, and he showed up to read a letter in support of the project.⁵⁰ Dio, by contrast, claimed the assembly did vote in favour of the proposal,⁵¹ and, in *Oration* 40, he refers to opposition on specific issues

⁴³ In favour of identifying the wicked governor with Julius Bassus: von Arnim 1898, 367–368, 374–383, followed also by Kokkinia 2004, 496 n. 28; with Varenus Rufus: Sherwin-White 1966, 275; Jones 1978, 102. Cf. discussion in Desideri 1978, 271–272.

⁴⁴ *Pace* Kokkinia 2004: the fact that the proconsul is defined as ἡγέμονα πονηρὸν in Dio 43.11 cannot be taken as proof that Dio is not referring to Rufus on the grounds of their friendly relationship, because Dio here reports the point of view of his accusers.

⁴⁵ Dio 45.7–10.

⁴⁶ Dio 45.10.

⁴⁷ Dio 40.10–11. For discussion of *Or.* 40, see Russo 2021, 53–54.

⁴⁸ Dio 45.15–16, cf. 40.6. For discussion of *Or.* 45, see Russo 2021, 55.

⁴⁹ Dio 47.18–24; cf. 50.10.

⁵⁰ See *supra*, n. 48.

⁵¹ Dio 45.16.

concerning the project, such as the construction of a *stoa* that would bring about the demolition of workshops.⁵² One of the more problematic aspects concerned the financial management itself: in fact, the project was funded by donations (or liturgies) of the Prusan elites, which also included Dio. His opponents, however, accused the Prusan elites of delay and lack of transparency in handling the funds, including the illegitimate holding of public funds.⁵³

From Pliny's letters to Trajan,⁵⁴ we learn the name of two of Dio's accusers, i.e. the philosopher Flavius Archippus and a certain Claudius Eumolpos, who levelled two charges against Dio, respectively, the charge of not handing in the financial account for an *opus magnum* that he had undertaken, and the charge of having buried his son and wife in the new building (probably, a *stoa*) in proximity to the statue of Trajan. For both charges they appealed to the Roman governor: Pliny, as he usually did on such matters, sought the opinion of the Emperor. The event in question dates to some ten years later than the beginning of the building project in Prusa, so it either concerns that project's continuation or a new project, sponsored, it seems, mainly by Dio.⁵⁵ Be it the continuation of the old project or a later addition, such accusations show that serious polemics revolving around Dio's involvement in local building policy lasted for years.

From Pliny's letters to Trajan, we also learn that troubles concerning financial administration in Prusa were well-known, and they continued to mar Prusa well into the first decade of the second century, during Pliny's time of office. In Book 10 of his epistolary, he writes to Trajan:

[...] I am now engaged in examining into the expenditure, revenue, and debts of the people of Prusa, and the more I look into them the more necessary I find it. For a number of sums of money are being detained on various pretexts by private individuals, and certain of the items paid out of the public funds are far from being legitimate. I am writing this, Sir, immediately upon my entry.⁵⁶

And again:

⁵² Dio 40.8.

⁵³ Dio 48.9 and 11. Russo 2021, 56, rightly notes: «Le accuse non sono ulteriormente circostanziate, ma, con ogni verosimiglianza, deve trattarsi di fondi destinati a costruzioni di edifici pubblici non impiegati e trattenuti illegalmente da privati cittadini, cui erano stati affidati». By contrast, Desideri 1978, 406, regards the financing of the project as a public subscription («sottoscrizione popolare»), probably implying it was an *epidosis*. This possibility, however, is unlikely: Dio's words (48.11, *passim*) seem to refer to liturgies or a joint action of euergetism by the elites, as he clearly hints at polemics addressed at the rich for evading their promises.

⁵⁴ Plin. *Ep.* 10.81–82; see Billault 2015.

⁵⁵ Russo 2021, 56 n. 24, assumes the *opus magnum* mentioned by Pliny is a different building project than the project proposed by Dio in 101 CE. Cf. Desideri 1978, 401–404. For information on Flavius Archippus, based on Pliny's letters, see Kokkinia 2004.

⁵⁶ Plin. *Ep.* 10.17a (transl. Firth 1900, modified). See Russo 2021, 56–57. For problematic building projects in other *poleis* of Pontus Bithynia, see Plin. *Ep.* 10.37–40.

I entered the province, Sir, on September 17th, and I found the people as obediently and loyally disposed towards you as you deserve that the whole human race should be. You might consider, Sir, whether you think it necessary to send a public surveyor, for I think that considerable sums of money might be recovered from the contractors for the public works, if an honest survey were made. I am convinced of that from the public accounts of the people of Prusa, which I am examining with the greatest care.⁵⁷

In his survey of the Prusan accounts, Pliny identified two main problems: private citizens detaining public money, and illegal spending of public funds. Archipus's and Eumolpos's accusations against Dio should be read in relation to this general context of financial mismanagement in Prusa.

3. Conclusion

Dio's Bithynian orations, together with information contained in Pliny's *Letters*, provide some glimpses of Bithynian politics, particularly regarding three main aspects: the problem of rivalry between neighbouring *poleis*, the relationship between the *poleis* and local governors, and the troubles afflicting the domestic politics of Prusa. In Dio's view, the case of the exploitation of the rivalry between Nicaea and Nicomedia by Roman authorities is emblematic of a twisted dynamic of power between local governors and the Bithynian cities, which eventually damages the cities themselves. The trials for corruption against the Roman proconsuls described by Pliny must have made public opinion in Bithynia very alert to the obscure side of Roman provincial administration. In Dio's orations we have no specific information about these trials, and we should highlight that the main protagonist of stories concerning corruption in Dio's speeches is Dio himself. The rhetor was certainly less virtuous of a man than what he claimed. He advised local assemblies to pursue concord (*homonoia*) between neighbouring cities, praising it as the chief political virtue, but his attitude was intrinsically contradictory, as he was engaged in launching Prusa in the race for architectonic splendour, a policy that would certainly fuel rivalry rather than promoting concord. In Prusa, his position was ambiguous: the ghost of corruption haunts him both in his relationship with the Roman authorities and in Prusa's domestic politics surrounding building activity. From the accusations of Dio's opponents, we derive an image of Dio as an individual constantly engaged in the attempt to gain prestige and recognition, both in Prusa and in the eyes of the Roman officers. His opponents did not hesitate to build a discourse of corruption revolving around him, his projects, and his collaborations with the proconsuls. There is no conclusive evidence proving whether this discourse was rooted in an actual background of corruption, or if it was rather a fabrication aimed at discrediting an influential local politician, as Dio certainly was. The

⁵⁷ Plin. *Ep.* 10.17b (transl. Firth 1900, modified). See Russo 2021, 57–63, for the broader context of building problems in Pontus-Bithynia in relation with contemporary building legislation in Rome.

political activity of the Bithynian rhetor is perhaps doomed to remain burdened with these shadows. After all, Dio is a character who constantly reminds his audiences – and us, his readers – that the vices of political power often lie with those who preach political virtue.

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