

Local Politics in an Imperial Context

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1. *Formal and informal politics*

The Roman Empire was an empire of cities. There were few truly large cities, but hundreds and thousands of smaller *poleis* and *civitates*, each of them a replica, on a small scale, of the great *urbs* itself. We are fortunate to have a vast array of sources for local government in the Empire generally and for Asia Minor in particular. Nearly all, however, derive from the sphere of formal politics: magistracies, public contracts, honorific decrees, legislation. These activities involve only a minority of the city population, the political class. This banal observation should be kept in mind because the focus of our research is so easily constrained by the focus of our sources. The latest work on the subject, for instance, the admirable volume by Henri-Louis Fernoux on local politics in Hellenistic and Roman Bithynia, is sub-titled *Essai d'histoire sociale*, yet explicitly limits itself to dealing with the elite, as Fernoux calls them, the *notables*.

Now a moment's reflection will make it clear that formal or "visible" politics, the aspects of local politics revealed by our sources, can only represent the tip of a much larger iceberg. For proof, one can study the parallel of the *urbs* itself, where the *Annals* of Tacitus provide a chronicle of informal wheeling and dealing, rumours and alliances, backbiting, envy, revenge and denunciation within the political class. We have no comparable political chronicle for any other city of the Empire, but there are a few places where political life at the informal or sub-formal level shows through and becomes visible. One is Pompeii in Campania, thanks to the large number of electoral graffiti that have been preserved;¹ another is Prusa ad Olympum in Bithynia, where we possess a collection of municipal speeches by a local politician, the orator Dion of Prusa. Despite its many ambiguities and textual problems, this body of texts, when combined with the epigraphic evidence, provides some fascinating glimpses of municipal politics at the lower levels. They can be grouped under four main headings:

- the power of money;
- the power of minor municipal officials;
- the power of Rome;
- the power of rumour and innuendo.

1.1 *The power of money*

The phenomenon of municipal cash crises in Greek cities is a familiar one. The exasperated tone of Pliny's letters from Bithynia might lead us to believe that the financial disarray of the cities under his tutelage was unique, but in fact financial disorder seems to have been the rule rather than the exception. The city of Prusa was a recent foundation when it experienced its first major cash crisis, evidenced by an inscription of the 180's or 170's BC (IK 40.1) in which the city council records the generosity of a former *epistatês* or city commander. The text is fragmentary, but clearly states how the city had borrowed a sum of money from the *epistatês* to cover current expenses. Now the *epistatês* has generously waived the interest that was due on the loan. This indicates that the sum was a substantial one and would take some time to repay.

Writing from Cilicia a century later in his capacity as provincial governor, Cicero relates how the city council of Salamis in Cyprus have contracted a debt which they are finding difficult to repay – not surprisingly, since their Roman creditor, Brutus, is charging an annual interest of 48% (*Letters to Atticus* 6.1).

Roman governors or specially appointed *curatores* would try to set city finances in order from time to time, and Pompey's decision to redistribute the lands of Pontos (Strabon 12.3.1), thus presumably also of Bithynia, among the city territories may have been intended to increase the revenue basis of individual cities.² But it was not only a question of insufficient resources, but also of underlying structural problems. The ancients had no banks and little knowledge of cash flow analysis, so unpredictable periods of cash shortage might be matched by periods with a surplus of cash.³ In a budgetary crisis, the average citizen would neither want to contribute more nor to go without the amenities of urban life; the rich, for their part, preferred to contribute on an *ad hoc* basis in the form of benefactions and grants that earned the gratitude and compliance of the city in return, rather than through taxes.

In politics, however, there is no such thing as a free drink; and the recurrence and unpredictability of cash crises combined with high civic ambitions left many cities at the mercy of their so-called benefactors, a phenomenon that has been highlighted in the classic study by Paul Veyne (1976) and within the Danish Black Sea Centre is being studied by Trine Madsen.

1.2 *The power of minor officials*

Apart from the prestigious magistracies, a city in Roman Asia Minor would also have some minor elected officials, as well as a number of subordinate functionaries. That some of the latter were of low status or slaves does not exclude them from the sphere of power. The magistrates of small provincial cities had other demands on their time than politics; living outside the city itself, as many Bithynian nobles did, they would often be absent. This in turn

offered greater scope for decision-making by subordinate officials, just as in modern university departments, the locus of real power is often the departmental secretariat, simply because the secretary is nearly always available for advice, whereas the professors are absent from the department for much of their time.

Two other factors would enhance the power of minor officials. One is that they could control access to the decision-makers. From Rome itself, we hear of imperial servants taking bribes in return for the chance to meet the emperor.⁴ In the provinces, a governor's servants might offer to use their influence with their master in return for a bribe.⁵ Do we have any reason to assume that local city officials and provincial court clerks were less corrupt?

Another aspect is that being involved in the daily business of the city on a long-term basis, the minor functionaries would know its recent history, its records, its rules of procedure and its financial obligations better than the annual magistrates. Finally, there is the question of literacy. We tend to assume that the urban lower classes of Roman Asia were literate after a fashion, but they might nonetheless need assistance when dealing with official paperwork, filing a petition or the like.

1.3 *The power of Rome*

The formal source material provides an incomplete and one-sided picture of Greek perceptions of the ruling power: hostile attitudes are very rarely found in inscriptions, not because they were not voiced in public, but because writing them down could be dangerous. Hostility directly expressed in writing is rare and would generally be found only in private correspondence between individuals, or between individuals and deities – one of the few examples preserved down to the present is a *defixio* of a citizen of Kourion in Cyprus who put a curse on the Roman governor in connection with a court case.⁶

In fact, the judiciary was precisely the sphere where a provincial would be most likely to come into direct contact with the ruling power. It was only the elite and the propertied middle classes, however, who had the means and connections to involve themselves in litigation.⁷ For civil cases, the less affluent would prefer the cheaper alternative of arbitration⁸ and if they ever found themselves in the governor's court, it would probably be in the unpleasant position of the defendant.

The relationship of the provincial cities to their governor was highly asymmetrical. In his oration 46, one of his earliest, Dion likens the relation of the governor to the cities to that of a schoolmaster to his pupils (*Or.* 46.14) In a later speech, he emphasizes how disunity among the cities plays into the hands of the governor (*Or.* 38.38) – but given Dion's eclectic style of argumentation and ambivalent attitude to Roman rule in general, we cannot conclude the converse, that a united front by the cities would have posed any serious opposition to the authority of the governor.

Nonetheless, it was possible to short-circuit the power of the governor by a variety of different ways. One was the *procurator* of imperial property; in a province with large imperial estates, his *de facto* power would rival that of the proconsul. Another was to exploit a direct personal lien between the emperor and a provincial citizen, e.g., an influential senator or an intellectual. Dion, as we shall see, claims to enjoy the “attention”, *spoudê*, of the reigning emperor, and to have used his influence for the benefit of his native city (*Or.* 45.3). Speaking about irregularities at a municipal election, Dion claims that if the proconsul should refuse to intervene, Dion could write directly to the emperor and make him take action (*Or.* 45.8); but we are dealing with a hypothetical situation and Dion’s ability to override the governor’s authority was not put to the test on this occasion.

The ultimate option was to file a suit *de repetundis* after the end of the governor’s term, but this was expensive and the outcome by no means certain.⁹

1.4 *The power of rumour and innuendo*

How well did the inhabitants of an ancient city know each other? Was the provincial city a “face-to-face society”? In a larger city of several thousand inhabitants, not everyone would know everyone else; but the leading citizens, those who participated in the social *agon* and the race for magistracies and places on the city council, would be known to most of their fellow citizens. Given that a great deal of social and political interaction took place in public spaces, their actions and relation to each other would be observed by, and known to, a wide circle. This provided a fertile environment for spreading rumours and telling defamatory stories about one another. Rumour is a democratic weapon: anyone can start a rumour and, after a while, the originator can no longer be traced. In modern municipal politics, slandering one’s opponents remains a reliable and often used tactic, the most popular topics being sexual orientation and drinking habits. To judge from the stories passed on by Suetonius, the same two topics were at the top of the list in antiquity. This would also explain the Pompeian graffiti announcing that thieves or late drinkers support so-and-so. There are a number of such electoral graffiti, and if they do not seem particularly funny to us, that is because we do not have the clue to their deeper meaning.¹⁰ They may refer to a particular candidate’s drinking habits or financial probity and may have been very funny, or very insulting, in their original context.

The use of rumour as a political weapon in Asia Minor is attested, *inter alia*, by Cicero’s correspondence with his brother Quintus during the latter’s term as governor of Asia. In a long letter (*To his brother Quintus*) Cicero gives his brother detailed advice on how to treat the local notables. He writes that Quintus’ administration generally earns praise, but that his *iracundia* has drawn negative comments in Rome; Quintus must learn to control his anger better (1.13.37). Written at a time when Quintus had already been in office

for more than two years, this is not likely to be brotherly advice of a general character, but rather a response to specific complaints and rumours about the conduct of Quintus; rumours that must have originated from his province and were no doubt circulated by his political and personal enemies.¹¹ That they have filtered through from far-off Pergamon to Rome is in itself a testimony to the power of rumour and innuendo in the ancient world.

The political power of rumour and of public opinion generally is to some extent proportional with the degree of public participation in decision-making. How much did the urban populace have to say in the cities of Bithynia? The provincial law of Pompey had introduced a scheme of urban government where the council (*boulê*) was dominated by ex-magistrates holding their seats for life. The intention was clearly to reduce the democratic element in urban politics. It seems, however, that the popular assembly – *ekklêsia* – continued to play a significant role. The assembly conferred honorific titles, as we know from inscriptions; it elected or at least ratified the choice of magistrates; but it also seems to have taken a hand in other matters. That Dion defends his building programs in the assembly indicates that questions of building and finance, which we would expect to fall within the competence of the council, would sometimes be debated in the assembly to ensure popular backing for the council's decisions. It may even be hypothesised that the reforms of Pompeius, intended to reduce the degree of democratic participation in city politics, actually strengthened the assembly because its decisions had a legitimacy that the council was no longer able to confer.

2. Two case studies

2.1 Reading the Riot Act in Ephesos

This well-known story is told in the *Acts of the Apostles* and takes place not in Bithynia, but at Ephesos in the neighbouring province of Asia. A silversmith called Demetrios is concerned that the preaching of the apostle Paul and consequent conversions to Christianity will harm his business and that of his colleagues. A spontaneous meeting takes place in the city's theatre but is dispersed by a person who is not named but identified as *grammateus*. His address to the throng is rendered as follows:

Citizens of Ephesus, who is there that does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper of the great Artemis and of the statue that fell from heaven? Since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. You have brought these men here who are neither temple robbers nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the artisans with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls; let them bring charges there against one another. If there is anything further you want to know, it

must be settled in the regular assembly. For we are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion (*Acts* 19.35-40, New Revised Standard Version).

As with most of the speeches inserted into ancient historical narrative, the authenticity of this text is dubious. It is safer to take it as a normative account of how, in the narrator's view, a situation like this should be resolved. But to carry weight with his readers, the choice of characters and the line of argument had to be convincing. There are several remarkable points in the narrative.

First, the protagonist of the scene is the *grammateus*, in the Vulgate translation rendered as *scriba*. The precise standing of the Ephesian *grammateus* is not clear, but he is certainly of lower status than the Asiarchs who have previously taken a hand in the matter, without success (*Acts* 19.31). Despite the absence of high formal status, the *grammateus* is clearly perceived as an important person who not only quiets the assembly and succeeds in dispersing it but takes it upon himself to prejudge the case: "these men are neither temple robbers nor blasphemers".

Secondly, one notes that the *grammateus* invokes the power of Rome in two strikingly different ways. First as an invitation to the silversmiths to take their grievance to the proconsul's court; then as a thinly veiled threat of punishment by the Roman authorities in case their riot was denounced as treasonous. The distinction between appearing in court as a litigant and as a defendant is implicitly stressed. Our clerk adds that if the conflict is not a matter that comes within the jurisdiction of the court, it can be settled by the *ekklêsia*, that is by the assembly of the people, in a regular meeting. Like its counterpart in Prusa, the competence of the Ephesian *ekklêsia* is apparently not tightly defined; the assembly can deal with matters that are not specifically within the jurisdiction of other institutions, such as the court. We might suspect that the *ekklêsia* of the Ephesians functioned as a "safety valve" for minor grievances.

2.2 Friends in high places

Our second case story takes place in Prusa. Dion is involved in one of his many conflicts with other influential Bithynians. It is a typically Dionian conflict involving money and building projects. An edifice that has been built under Dion's supervision is to be taken over by the city, and Dion will receive a sum in return. It is not quite clear whether Dion was acting on behalf of the city throughout or whether the building is his own private project that he now asks the city to take over; probably the latter. In any case, Dion has named a sum, and the city fathers, wanting to know how he has arrived at this figure, have asked to see the building accounts. Dion refuses to provide

the documentation required, thus strengthening the latent suspicion that he is demanding too much.

While this matter is dragging on, his opponents present another seemingly minor, but potentially lethal charge: Dion has placed a portrait of the emperor Trajan next to the place where his wife and son are buried. Given ancient attitudes to burial places, this could be interpreted as a desecration of the emperor's image, or at the very least as a mark of disrespect, and provide the foundation for a charge of *maiestas*.

Pliny writes to the emperor for advice. In conclusion, he explains that he has

inspected the buildings in question, where I find your statue is placed in a library; and as to the edifice in which the bodies of Dion's wife and son are said to be deposited, it stands in the middle of a court, which is enclosed with a colonnade (*Ep.* 10.81, translated by Betty Radice).

Trajan's reply (10.82) is short and to the point: Dion must produce his books while no action is to be taken on the *maiestas* charge, which Trajan dismisses as irrelevant. His tone is one of mild reproach that Pliny should have bothered him with such a trivial matter.

Some modern commentators have followed the emperor's lead and dismissed Pliny's letter as one example among many of this proconsul's indecisiveness. Certainly it conforms to a perception of the younger Pliny as a pedantic, cautious and unimaginative bureaucrat. But while this general character sketch of its author may well be valid, an alternative interpretation of this particular letter is possible.

First, it is worth noting that this letter combines two matters related only in so far as they concern the same person, Dion. Even in the first nine books of *Letters*, where the individual letters are longer and more literary in style, most of Pliny's letters are devoted to a single subject. In the letters from Bithynia this trend is even more pronounced: each missive is brief and deals with a specific problem that has recently presented itself, rather like a modern e-mail.

Second, Pliny was well aware that Trajan would never press *maiestas* charges on such flimsy grounds. How do we know? Because earlier, Pliny had said so himself: in his *Panegyric* composed shortly after Trajan's accession, Pliny praises the civilised attitude of the new emperor and contrasts it with bad rulers (i.e. Domitian) who would persecute their subjects on charges of *maiestas* (*Panegyricus* 42.1). In the contemporary work of Suetonius, persecuting for *maiestas* on trivial grounds (such as bringing a coin with the emperor's portrait into a public lavatory) is used as an example to illustrate the wanton cruelty of Tiberius (Suetonius, *Tiberius* 58).

But then, why consult the emperor at all? Let us examine Pliny's situation in its context. He is far away from home and no longer *à courant* with the situ-

ation at the imperial court. He is presented with a complaint – at this stage, it is only a complaint, not a criminal charge – against Dion.

Dion, as we know from his speeches, is an energetic name-dropper, continually reminding his townsmen of his close relations to the famous and powerful: governors, philosophers, even the emperor himself. According to Dion, Nerva was an “old friend” who felt affection, *agapê*, for Dion (*Or.* 45.2), and we are also told about the *philantropia kai spoudia* shown him by Trajan (45.3). Naturally, his enemies circulate nasty counter-rumours that Dion is not nearly as close to the emperor as he claims; that when he led an embassy to Rome it was less successful than the embassy from Smyrna (40.13-14); that the orations Dion composed for the emperor’s ear were never held in the imperial presence. We see the power of rumour in operation and the wide scope for extravagant claims and counter-claims that no one in Prusa can verify, least of all the proconsul, who has recently arrived and knows little of Dion’s past history except that he was exiled under Domitian and has been rehabilitated by Nerva.

The situation is a delicate one, and Pliny follows his usual routine in a difficult situation: he consults the emperor – but he cannot send Trajan a missive along the lines “Sire, is this person, as he claims, a friend of yours and therefore above the law, or should the same rules apply to him as to everyone else?” Here the *maiestas* charge provides a handy pretext. *Maiestas* by definition involves the emperor, so referring the matter to Trajan is the correct procedure. Pliny combines two questions in one letter and gets two answers. About the *maiestas* charge he was probably never in doubt. To the other question he gets the guidance he wants: Dion is not one of Trajan’s intimates and must open his books for inspection.

In his *Hellenism and Empire* from 1996, Simon Swain discusses this correspondence and concludes that “Pliny’s major worry is not the public accounts, but the potentially treasonable act of having placed the emperor’s statue near a grave”.¹² Clearly the interpretation given above disagrees with Swain, though not to insist that the public accounts were the prime concern of Pliny. His real concern was that he might cross the plans of an *amicus principis* who was more influential than himself.

One cannot help wondering if Pliny, like Dion, has exaggerated his personal familiarity with Trajan? But that is another question for another occasion.

Notes

- 1 Mouritsen 1988.
- 2 Fernoux 2004, 133.
- 3 Pliny, *Ep.* 10.54 for a description of the difficulty Pliny finds in placing the cash surplus of the Bithynian cities.
- 4 Tacitus, *Annales* 16.1 (Cesellius Bassus bribes himself into the presence of Nero); cf. also Suetonius, *Vespasian* 23.
- 5 Ailius Aristeides recounts how, in a dream, a governor’s clerk offered to have a verdict reversed in return for a bribe of 500 drachmas (*Sacred tales* 4.81).

- 6 Mitford, *Inscriptions of Kourion*, 130.
- 7 For an idea of the expense of contesting a court case, and the income that the periodical assizes generated in the urban community, see Dion *Or.* 35.15.
- 8 Cf. the (mock?) complaint of Pliny (*Ep.* 7.30) about the many demands for his services as *iudex* or *arbiter*.
- 9 Cf. Pliny, *Ep.* 5.20.
- 10 Mouritsen 1988, 67 rightly rejects the notion that rogations by *serebibi* or *latrun-ulari* are “real recommendations by an organized group of people” but goes on to argue that “it seems unlikely that in the few cases in which the intention was to embarrass opponents, so subtle a form should have been used as to make the meaning obscure”. The message is subtle and obscure to our eyes because we do not know the code; it may have been blunt and clear to a contemporary reader.
- 11 On Cicero’s attitude to rumour in general, and his awareness of ways in which it could be exploited, see Dufallo 2001.
- 12 Swain 1996, 237.

