

# 1. Introduction

The ancient world as we know it would be unthinkable without the city. The world of classical Greece was a world of city-states; the Roman Empire was an empire of cities. From the fourth century BC onwards, most cities were no longer sovereign, self-governing *poleis*, but they were still *governing* on behalf of their Hellenistic or Roman rulers. The administrative functions of the city and the readiness of its elite to participate in its administration were crucial to the success of, and crucial to our understanding of, the Roman imperial project.

## Hybris and stasis

Aristotle famously defined man as a *politikon zôon*,<sup>1</sup> sometimes translated as “a political animal” and sometimes as “a creature that lives in cities”. The exact meaning lies somewhere between the two: man is not “political” in the modern sense of the English word, but neither is he merely a city-dweller. It would be clumsier, but perhaps more precise to translate *politikon zôon* as “a being that *participates* in a city”. To our eyes, ancient Greek cities were characterised by a high degree of citizen participation in the political process, not only because it was perceived as the duty of an adult male citizen, but also because it provided an opportunity for public display of positive personal qualities.

For the majority of the male citizens, a large part of the day was spent in public spaces: the street, the *agora*, the gymnasium, and a correspondingly smaller part within the confines of the nuclear family, the dwelling or the workplace. The public nature of the social environment favoured the creation of an agonistic urban society where the place of the individual within the group and within the citizen body was continually being defined and re-defined through ties of family, friendship, loyalty, patronage and clientage, and where visible personal qualities (honour, “face”, bearing, speech, education) were very important, tangible but impersonal status markers (wealth, possessions) less important. As the Book of Proverbs expresses it: “a good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold”.<sup>2</sup>

The social environment of a Greek city thus placed the male individual in a sink-or-swim situation: his status or “honour” had to be displayed on a regular basis, marking his place within the social hierarchy of the community and

enabling him to establish advantageous long-term relationships of patronage, clientage, friendship or marriage. On the other hand, the city was not a social jungle where one animal ate another: the *agôn* took place within a restraining framework of written and unwritten rules, ensuring that conflicts rarely got out of hand. Two central concepts in this connection are *hybris* and *stasis*.

The familiar meaning of *hybris* is “intolerable arrogance” but in a wider sense, *hybris* encompasses violent or anti-social behaviour in general. Sailing off to explore the land of the Cyclopes, Odysseus desires to know “what manner of men live there, whether they are arrogant men (*hybristai*) that do not have laws, or kind to strangers (*philoxenoi*) and god-fearing in their hearts”.<sup>3</sup> The form of life that he finds there is the exact antithesis of the civilized urban lifestyle: the Cyclops lives alone in his cave, follows no laws and does not fear the gods. As if to underline his disregard for Greek norms of social behaviour, which emphasize hospitality to strangers, the Cyclops not only treats his guests badly; he eats them.

Arrogant and self-gratifying behaviour transgressing established norms of social behaviour could not be tolerated within the *polis*, since it threatened the social cohesion and solidarity of the community, which was vital for survival in a conflict with other *poleis*. Another threat was *stasis*, disruptive conflict within the community, which could take the form of extreme factionalism or actual political violence. In the *Politics*, the clinching argument of Aristotle in favour of his “middle” constitution is that it is “free from *stasis*” (*astasiaskos*)<sup>4</sup> and according to the *Memorabilia* of Xenophon, Sokrates defined the “good” citizen as one who “puts an end to *stasis*”.<sup>5</sup>

The social structure of republican Rome had a good deal in common with contemporary Greek cities, and Romans shared the Greek horror of civic violence. At an early stage, the Republic adopted the Etruscan *fasces* as an emblem of public office, symbolic of the magistrate’s authority to impose order and punish transgressors with beating (the rods) or death (the axe). Such a concentration of power in the hands of the state’s leaders ensured stability – but it could be a terrible weapon in the wrong hands. So, firstly, power was always held jointly by two or more magistrates, except in emergencies; secondly, access to the magistracies was restricted to the right sort of people, originally members of certain (“patrician”) families, later those who met a property qualification, the *census*.<sup>6</sup> There might be a *census* threshold for entering the urban council of an Italian town (the *ordo decurionum*), there was a higher one for the equestrian order and a still higher one for the senate, the real locus of power in republican Rome. The *census* was not the only social dividing line, however, and within the Roman senate a distinction between members of established consular families and more recent arrivals (*homines novi*) lingered well into the early Empire.

For all its admirable qualities – and despite the admiration lavished on it by generations of classical scholars – the ancient urban community was a fragile social structure, as its members were well aware. Internal tensions within the

community were kept in check, after a fashion, by laws and unwritten codes to restrain individualistic behaviour going beyond the bounds of the *agôn* and threatening the cohesion, hence the survival, of the community. To modern eyes, some of these restrictions may seem peculiar and sometimes comical, for instance, the Athenian institution of ostracism, the Spartan prohibition on embellishing one's front door<sup>7</sup> or Trajan's refusal to permit a fire brigade in Nikomedia because the city was "plagued by political factionalism" (*factionibus vexata*).<sup>8</sup> But the fear of civil violence among the many or of oppression by the few was real enough, and well founded. Friendly competition and social rivalry within the *agôn* could easily get out of control and once public order had broken down, it was difficult to restore.

### *Urban rivalries*

The *agôn* of man and his neighbours in the *agora* and other public spaces was paralleled at the collective level, where cities battled to maintain and reinforce their position vis-à-vis their neighbouring communities. Though the stakes were essentially the same, the arena was different. The province was no face-to-face environment: behaviour and actions counted for less, titles and tangible status markers for more. To enjoy the special favour of the ruler, the Roman governor or the emperor himself was important. So was the status of a city within the formal administrative hierarchy of the province. Monuments and great public buildings, too, played their role, but perhaps less for their own value as for the means to an end: the maintenance of status in the eyes of the ruling power. In fact, it is striking how often the city's place within the *agôn* appears defined by its relation to the ruling power and its representatives. The rhetor Dion ridicules his fellow Prusans for wanting to preserve an old smithy whose dilapidated condition brings shame on the community on the occasion of the governor's visit, while his opponents claim that Dion has not done enough to win the emperor's favour for Prusa, which in that respect is far behind Smyrna.<sup>9</sup> Among the visible expressions of the city's high standing with the Roman authorities were honorific titles, above all that of *mêtropolis* and "first city within the province". The sometimes extreme nature of the urban *agôn* is illustrated by the persistent rivalry between Nikomedia and Nikaia, continually competing for titles and honours (below, p. 47-48).

The fields of religion and education provided complementary arenas for the urban *agôn*. In 29 BC, Nikaia won for herself the imperial cult of the "Romans" in the province, while Nikomedia became home to that of the peregrines, i.e. the *koinon*. In the mid-fourth century AD, Libanios was enticed away from Nikaia by the offer of a teaching post in Nikomedia. At the council of Chalkedon in 451, the bemused delegates spent a whole day listening to bishop Eunomios of Nikomedia and his colleague, Anastasios of Nikaia, disputing the ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the parish of Basilinopolis.<sup>10</sup>

To some degree, Roman domination acted as a stabilising factor. Jealousy

and enmity between cities could not be eliminated and indeed might be exploited in the interests of Rome, but at least they could be restrained. Further, the provincial law of Pompey the Great established a minimum age and a *census* threshold for the city councils, ensuring that urban politics would henceforth be dominated by adult property-owners, the “middle” class so dear to the theories of Aristotle. As we shall see, the *census* also had the useful side-effect of “compartmentalizing” the political arena and putting a brake on social mobility, and thus on conflict potential, *within* the city.

### *Formal and informal politics*

We know a good deal about formal political life in ancient cities: the names of their leading magistrates as preserved in honorific and funerary inscriptions; visits by or delegations to the emperor; famous sons and daughters who reached high imperial positions; important decisions of their councils that were inscribed on stone for posterity. But we know very little about the day-to-day, face-to-face relationships and conflicts, the undercurrent of urban life. A moment’s reflection will make it clear that the formal, visible aspect of urban politics is really the tip of a much larger iceberg, most of which remains invisible to our eyes.

In a city of several thousand inhabitants, not everyone would know everyone else; but the most prominent citizens, those leading in the social *agôn* and the race for magistracies and places on the city council, would be known to most of their fellow citizens. Since a great part of their social and political interaction took place in public spaces such as streets and squares, their actions and relations to each other would also be known to a wide circle. The street provided a stage for displaying “correct” behaviour. On the other hand, it was also a fertile environment for rumours and stories that could rapidly erode the individual’s position. Because the ancient world assumed that personal qualities were inbred rather than acquired, the personality of a candidate was considered as important as his formal qualifications, and attacks on an opponent’s character was an effective “informal” tactic. The early imperial historians provide many examples of how rumour and denunciation were deployed in the fight for social and political status, and the *Apocolocyntosis* of Seneca an impression of the innuendo and half-truths circulating in the imperial capital.

Taking Suetonius, Tacitus and Seneca as our sources for early imperial slander, the most common topics seem to be sex and drinking habits. As in other societies, a double standard applied in sexual matters; behaviour that would generally be tolerated or ignored might on occasion be denounced and punished. Stories about the heavy drinking of Roman magistrates and emperors were recorded by later writers.<sup>11</sup> No doubt similar stories were circulating in the smaller cities, viz. the Pompeiian graffiti stating that “the late drinkers support candidate so-and-so”.<sup>12</sup>

Another way to undermine a person's credibility is to suggest that he is overbearing, quick to anger and has little patience with others, implying at once arrogance and lack of self-control – in one word, *hybris*. We get a glimpse of this type of innuendo in a letter from Cicero to his younger brother Quintus, who held the governorship of Asia from 61 to 59 BC. At the commencement of Quintus' third term as governor, Marcus sends him a long letter of advice, warning Quintus that rumours about his conduct as governor are circulating in Rome. According to Marcus, the detractors of Quintus have focused on his *iracundia*, which Marcus acknowledges as a particularly deplorable weakness in one who exercises *summum imperium*, the almost unlimited authority of a governor. He goes on to give examples of Quintus' behaviour which are presumably drawn from rumours circulating in the capital.<sup>13</sup>

From sources such as these, we know how informal political tactics, as well as personal vanity, petty rivalries, graft and corruption played a role in the political process at Rome. We have no reason to suppose that the hundreds and thousands of provincial *urbes* were so very different; the difference is that for most of these, we have no evidence to work from.

There are a few places, however, where the political process at the personal level can be glimpsed. One is Oxyrhynchus (el-Bahnasa) in Egypt, where verbatim records of council debates of the third to fifth century have been preserved.<sup>14</sup> Another is Pompeii, where the eruption of AD 79 has preserved electoral *dipinti*, political graffiti and other ephemera.<sup>15</sup> A third is Bithynia, where we are fortunate to possess a unique collection of municipal speeches by the philosopher-politician Dion Chrysostomos and a contemporary collection of letters to and from the provincial governor, Pliny the younger. These sources provide unique insights into the workings of local politics and administration at the personal and informal level.

Dion often needed to defend himself against the stories put about by his opponents. As a young man in Prusa, he faced charges of grain hoarding and lack of public spirit. In the early post-exilic period, the rumours centred on his relationship with the emperor: Dion was not the close friend that he claimed, he had mishandled an embassy to Rome, he had failed to win Prusa the concessions that Trajan granted Smyrna, etc. – an ingenious angle of attack, since it concerned events in far-off Rome that could not be verified or disproved, leaving Dion defenseless. Later, he was accused of tyrannical or demagogical behaviour, and negative rumours were spread about his administration of public projects. He was also taken to task for his too close relationship with the Roman governor and seems to have been suspected of atheism.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps because of the pedestrian nature of their subject matter, the municipal speeches of Dion Chrysostomos have not attracted a great deal of scholarly attention; most students of Dion – with the exception of C.P. Jones (1978) and M. Cuvigny (1994) – have directed their attention to other parts of his *oeuvre*. In this book, however, we will focus on Dion the local politician and on the political, intellectual and social urban environment of Roman Bithynia.



Fig. 1. Map of Roman Bithynia (Inger Bjerg Poulsen)

To set Dion and his city within their proper historical and geographical context, the narrative will commence with the foundation of the three cities that formed the background to Dion's career.

### *A tale of three cities*

Nikomedia, Nikaia and Prusa were important cities in northwestern Asia Minor, located within a hundred Roman miles of Byzantion – later to become the imperial capital of Constantinople – and of each other. Together, they commanded the major highways from Europe into Asia Minor and the Levant. As Hellenistic foundations, they share many common characteristics, and from the Hellenistic period onwards, their histories were intertwined in changing relationships of hegemony and subordination, friendly competition, fierce rivalry or obsessive enmity. Each of them vied for the leading position in their region, and in turn, each of them attained it. Nikaia was the oldest city and the first *métropolis* of Roman Bithynia. Later it was eclipsed by Nikomedia, which rose to be an imperial residence under the Tetrarchy.

A thousand years later, Prusa, too, became an imperial capital and the residence of the Ottoman sultan.

During the twentieth century, Prusa and Nikomedia have shared in the industrial growth that has characterized the Marmara region. Whereas a large part of the 34,000 inhabitants of modern Nikaia (Izmit) still nestle within its late Roman walls, Prusa (Bursa) has grown to over a million inhabitants, Nikomedia (Izmit/Kocaeli) to some 300,000.

In the scholarly literature and tourist itineraries, on the other hand, little Nikaia looms far larger than her two sister cities. The last decade has seen two monographs on the history of Nikaia (Foss 1996, P. Guinea Diaz 1997) and it is to Nikaia that visitors go for a visual impression of a Roman city, whereas the remains of ancient Nikomedia and Prusa are covered by modern construction. Though some archaeological evidence has come to light accidentally and in the course of rescue excavations, we have no detailed overall picture of these two cities, their topography and their monuments as we do in the case of Nikaia. This does not preclude writing a history of their urban life and development, it merely means that other types of sources and different approaches are required.

## Notes

- 1 *Pol.* 1253a1.
- 2 *Proverbs* 22.1.
- 3 *Odyssey* 9.174-176.
- 4 *Pol.* 1296a7.
- 5 *Mem.* 4.6.14.
- 6 Even Sallust (*Bell. Jug.* 86), no admirer of the Roman nobility, echoes a familiar Roman prejudice when writing that Marius recruited proletarians into the army due to *inopia bonorum*, literally “a shortage of good ones” (i.e., of property-owners).
- 7 Plutarch, *Lyk.* 13.5; Link 2000, 77-80.
- 8 Pliny, *Ep.* 10.34.
- 9 *Or.* 40.9; 40.13.
- 10 Foss 1996, 12-13.
- 11 Seneca, *Ep. ad Lucilium*, 83.12-14; Suetonius, *Tib.* 42; *Titus* 7.
- 12 Mouritsen 1988, 67.
- 13 Cicero, *Ad Q.F.* 1.1.37-38; cf. Braund 1998, 17-18. In a more positive vein, Pliny (*Ep.* 9.5) claims to have heard how well his friend Calestrius Tiro is doing as governor of Baetica; but this may merely be a literary formula to open the letter.
- 14 Coles 1966; Bowman 1971. Some of the later records (from the third century onwards) appear to be verbatim renderings of speeches in the council, probably taken down by a shorthand writer as they were delivered.
- 15 Mouritsen 1988.
- 16 Dion, *Or.* 43.11, but cf. Vielmetti 1941, 98. In Vielmetti’s view, the charge of atheism has no substance but is introduced by Dion to underscore the parallelization of himself with Sokrates in 43.10 and 43.12. Dion evidently intended to answer the charge in 43.13ff, but this part of his oration is not preserved.

