

Cassius Dio and the Principate

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Introduction

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In the imperial books of his *Roman History* Cassius Dio focuses on individual emperors and their families as well as on imperial institutions. He undertook this significant project not, as Fergus Millar once phrased it, for the simple purpose of carrying on his historical account as long as possible (1964), but rather to develop and promote a political framework for the ideal monarchy, and to theorise autocracy's typical problems and their solutions. As a much-cited article already demonstrated decades ago (Pelling 1997), it is clear that Dio's was not simply an annalistic history to be conducted year-on-year until its author ran out of steam. A distinctive aspect of the *Roman History* is that it is an historiographical account strongly intertwined with biographical elements, which structures the narrative around the lifespan of the *princeps*. The historian evidently began to experiment with that change of structure at a relatively early stage before the Imperial narrative, beginning with the extra-legal dynasts (*dynasteiai*) of the Late Republic which laid the foundations of the Principate. This introduces a tension into Dio's narrative structure, which creates a unique sense of the past and allows us to see Roman history through a specific lens: the viewpoint of a man who witnessed the Principate from the Antonines to the Severans. By the time of Dio's writing the Principate was a full-fledged historical fact: it had experienced more than two hundred years of history, good and

bad emperors, and three major civil wars (68-69, 194, and 197). It is, therefore, perhaps better to see the historian not as an “adherent” or “advocate” of monarchy – in Adam Kemezis’ own words, monarchy had long ceased to be something that one was for or against (Kemezis 2014) –, but rather as a *theorist* of its development and execution.

This collection of seven essays sets out to address these questions. It is the result of a seminar held in Nyborg in January 2018 organized by Jesper M. Madsen within the scope of the *Cassius Dio: Between History and Politics* network (2014-2018). This collaboration, under the aegis of the Danish Council for Independent Research, has published numerous collective studies of the results of its findings into the historian’s intellectual and political thought, the aims and methods of his work, and its socio-political context. As a result of these efforts, it is now more firmly established that one of Dio’s objectives throughout the *Roman History* was to demonstrate that only a monarchical form of government, in its right form and with the right kind of monarch, would ensure the stability to maintain Rome’s dominant position in the known world. This leads Dio towards a political analysis, according to which the civil wars following the death of Caesar – though traumatic, as fighting between fellow citizens always is – was ultimately necessary to change Rome’s political culture for the better. Also, Dio’s ideal emperor was a man of experience and proven military and political credentials; he was a member of the Senate and was to be chosen among the best qualified senators by the emperor in power without interference from his peers. Picking up these themes with specific reference to the Principate, this collection focuses in particular on political institutions and the government of the Principate, including its honour-system, the relationship between the emperor and the Senate, the army and the emperor, as well as the different ruling family dynasties. It explores how these facets make Dio reflect on periods of prosperity and decline, and aims to shed light on his political agenda. Through his own eyes – and often those of a contemporary eyewitness to the events described – Cassius Dio furnishes us with a distinctive interpretation of his time and the issues which most concerned (or plagued) it: the Imperial narrative is consequently a mirror to the historian’s own interpretative thought. This collection explores the underlying structural elements of imperial society, the individuality of emperors, and the relationship between institutions and individuals as seen by our historian.

Nevertheless, the issues of imperial Rome as they emerge in Dio’s work require a deeper analysis that includes also the Republican books of the *Roman History*. Recent work has emphasized the need to approach Dio’s text not as a series of discrete ‘sections’ but instead as a coherent work – a unified whole whose importance can only be appreciated by reading it in its textual and contextual entirety (e.g. Burden-Strevens, Lindholmer 2019). On this view, our understanding

of the *Roman History*, its message and its impact, can only be complete by looking across periods. To appreciate the Imperial narrative, we need the books which cover the Late Republic; for the Late Republic, we need to consider also the framework laid out in the books devoted to the birth and infancy of the Republic; and to gauge the programmatic function of the first books on Rome's earliest mythohistory, we must naturally know the story of the *Roman History* to its end. Accordingly, we here focus not only on the Imperial period but also selected aspects of Dio's treatment of the Republic. The two forms of government of the Roman state, Republic and Principate, are intertwined to such an extent that Dio's own historiographical design cannot be understood in full without considering them as a continuum rather than as separate entities. Of course this was exactly the wish of Augustus when he created the Principate after the end of the civil war. We know that facts make them different in substance, but formal continuity is an essential landmark.

We then have the slippery issue of Dio's terminology. This question is complex, and not only in those cases when we can see clearly the historian translating Latin words into Greek. The question of terminology is, in general terms, quite fundamental for anyone studying Roman history through its sources; but it becomes an inescapable challenge when Greek sources translate Latin words. As Nicolet put it forty years ago, "toute approche historique de la vie politique romaine achoppe sur des problèmes de lexicographie" (1980, 25). This assumption remains true even when aspects of Dio's vocabulary have already benefitted from some study, for example the work of Freyburger-Galland (1997) and the more recent contributions by Coudry (2016) and others. The problem is that Dio's terminology sometimes requires special and deeper analysis; this is sometimes lacking in Freyburger-Galland's lexical review. One example is the word δημοκρατία, a recurrent theme in this volume. Despite its profound importance for the development of Greek historiography in general, δημοκρατία remained a remarkably ambiguous term when applied to Roman history from the moment it was first used to describe the system by Polybius (6.11.2; cf. Nicolet 1980, 39-40; further in Nicolet 1973).

What does δημοκρατία *exactly* mean in Dio's work? The word is typically translated into English as "Republic". This is how modern scholars and students usually term the period that followed the 'founding' monarchy and preceded the Principate, if we follow the periodization commonly adopted in handbooks of Roman history. In the *Roman History*, however, δημοκρατία is regularly presented in direct opposition with μοναρχία, which in turn does not indicate the founding monarchy we find in the handbooks, but rather the Principate; Dio systematically calls the monarchy of the early kings a βασιλεία, not μοναρχία. In addition to this schema, experts in Dio will already be aware that between δημοκρατία and μοναρχία he inserts a third pe-

riod, a novelty in ancient historiography: that of the *δυναστεία*, the “age of potentates” or “age of dynasts” – a term used to characterise the extra-legal dominion wielded by the triumvirs which caused the final crisis of the *δημοκρατία* (famously, 52.1.1; see most importantly Kemezis 2014 on Dio’s “*dynasteia* mode”). Dio’s diachronic sequence is thus *βασίλεια*, *δημοκρατία*, *δυναστεία*, *μοναρχία* (cf. also Fromentin 2013 for this sequence, possibly laid out in the lost preface of the *Roman History*). This is an essential point of departure.

Bellissime (2016) has provided a recent in-depth analysis of Dio’s consistency in deploying these terms, focusing her study especially on *δημοκρατία* and *μοναρχία*; rightly, she interprets the evolution of Dio’s theory of the latter through the lens of the historian’s experience of his own time of writing, i.e. the first half of the 3rd century CE. Bellissime is certainly right in saying that in Dio “l’opposition entre *δημοκρατία* et *μοναρχία* se résout dans un même refus de la *δυναστεία*”; however, her conclusion that the terms *δημοκρατία* and *μοναρχία* “ne sous-entendent ni blâme ni éloge de sa part” must be at least nuanced on a more cautious ground. It is reasonably well established that for Dio *μοναρχία* is much better than *δημοκρατία*.¹ That much is clear from the Agrippa-Maecenas debate in Book 52. The vigorous advocacy and promotion of monarchy as such delivered by Maecenas – who argues that democracy (or republicanism) is unstable and doomed to fail because men cannot share power with their equals without envy and discord – accords entirely with the historian’s own political thought, as expressed in his *propria persona* statements in all portions of the work (Burden-Strevens 2020, 40-52, 121-6). The failings of *δημοκρατία* in Maecenas’ view (and unquestionably the historian’s own) were not only systemic, but inherent in the jealousy and ambition of human nature itself. Only a *princeps*, Dio argues through his Maecenas, could act as a counterpoise to those faults in human nature and so save Rome from itself after a century of *stasis* and civil war.

However, we need to be especially careful when we use the modern term ‘Republic’ as a translation for Dio’s *δημοκρατία*. The way in which we choose to translate his views into our modern languages necessarily alters our understanding of those views significantly, and prudent attention is required for the interpretation of his vocabulary. The modern term ‘Republic’, of course, derives from the Latin phrase *res publica*; yet *res publica* never denoted either ‘The Republic’ as a distinct period of Roman history, nor necessarily indicated the early modern and modern sense of a republic as a democratic or semi-dem-

1 For the analysis that Dio had also substantial reservations against monarchical rule and against Octavian-Augustus, who introduced the first version of the Principate, see Manuwald 1979, 8-15, 25-26.

ocratic system in which the political elite compete to win power over the executive and the head of state. *Res publica* rather meant ‘the commonwealth’ or ‘the state’; this is the way in which Latin-speaking Romans termed the state irrespective of its form of government. Monarchy, Republic, Triumvirate, Principate, and even – to go beyond Dio’s own time – Dominate were *all*, one and the same, ‘the *res publica*’ to Latin-speaking Romans. This point is fundamental. In Dio’s work δημοκρατία is therefore used not as a Greek gloss of the Latin *res publica* but rather to denote a very specific political system: the senatorial and consular form of government that developed after the last king of Rome, Tarquinius Superbus, was banned from the city (allegedly c. 509 BCE) and lasted until the outbreak of civil war caused by the δυναστεΐαι. From the Latin-speaking Roman’s point of view, all these changes affected the one and same republic – the state, the *res publica*. The same was true for Dio, who certainly knew Latin, was himself the son of a Roman provincial governor and consul, and served in Rome’s Imperial government and Senate for four decades.

The question that necessarily follows should rightly be this: if Dio takes δημοκρατία to mean the consular and senatorial system of government – the ‘free Republic’, if you will – that existed from the expulsion of the Tarquins to Sulla’s civil war, how, then, does he translate into Greek the crucially important Latin term *res publica*, the one and indivisible commonwealth of the SPQR? Though an obvious question, the answer is unfortunately far from obvious. This was a problem already recognised in the Greek language centuries before his *Roman History*. Already at the time of the inscription of Augustus’ *Res Gestae*, the Greek copies of the *princeps*’ ‘achievements’ (*Res Gestae*) at Ankara and Apollonia clearly evidence a struggle of terminology, translating the phrase *res publica* in various ways. As shown by Cooley (2009, 26), the different Greek copies of the *Res Gestae* may translate the term literally as τὰ κοινὰ πράγματα (1.1) or τὰ δημόσια πράγματα (1.3, 4; 7.1), or more broadly as πατρὶς (2).² In one instance, perhaps significantly at the very beginning, the Latin word *res publica* is replaced with a generic Ῥώμη (*praef.*). In two instances, the Greek version simply omits the Latin expression altogether rather than translating it (25.1; 34.1). This is a most interesting peculiarity, especially in the light of what we normally know about official epigraphy, which standardized the terminology to be followed with often pedantic levels of precision. Indeed the Latin version is redundant, whereas the Greek is not. How does all this relate to Dio’s *res publica*?

² The latter being a “traduction développée ou libre” as Scheid 2007, xxxii defined it, a heightening of the emotional tone concerning Octavian’s struggle against Brutus and Cassius for Cooley 2009, 26.

Dio himself is ambivalent in translating *res publica* or its cognates – terms which denote the commonwealth or state at large – into Greek. He may sometimes use τὰ κοινά; at other times, πολιτεία or a related expression. Unlike the communities that erected their own Greek texts of the *Res Gestae*, Dio himself does not appear to have been hindered by the need to find a useful expression. It is not the aim of this volume to investigate this specific problem, already noted by Freyburger-Galland (although her study did not propose a solution to this problem; 1997, 43-7).

Nevertheless, this has something to do with Dio's terminology concerning the periodization of the history of Rome, and with his assessment of the different forms of government of the Roman state. The *Roman History* offers a multi-layered perspective of the evolution of the 'constitutional' history of Rome, and Dio's opinion about δημοκρατία seems to evolve in relation to his assessment of μοναρχία. When Dio approaches the Principate by staging the dialogue between Agrippa and Maecenas on the best form of government for the Roman state, he is – as we have already noted – generally negative towards δημοκρατία, and believes that μοναρχία is the only form of constitution that will prevent the immoderation, ambition, and rivalry of human nature causing renewed fragmentation and civil war. However, in his narrative of the Principate the divide between the two forms of government is not neat: indeed, this is intentionally the case, since Dio notes in the necrology of its founder Augustus that the first *princeps* instituted a regime which in fact *combined* the best of the Republic with the best of monarchy: “they were”, he writes, “subjects of royalty yet not slaves, and citizens of a democracy, yet without discord” (56.43.4 βασιλευομένους τε ἄνευ δουλείας καὶ δημοκρατουμένους ἄνευ διχοστασίας).

Although the Agrippa-Maecenas debate serves to articulate Dio's belief in the salutary powers of monarchy for Rome and his theory for its best expression, the historian does additionally highlight that δημοκρατία has certain benefits in its ideal form, such as encouraging competitive rivalry in service of the state among the aristocracy. And where δημοκρατία has its positives, μοναρχία has its faults: it is easy, both Agrippa *and* Maecenas conclude, for a monarch to become a tyrant if he is of poor character or his power left unguided (52.5, 52.15). The very best form of government, Dio concludes, is a tempered μοναρχία in which fundamental elements of δημοκρατία are present: the Senate, first and foremost, must remain as the political body that should use its collective experience and prestige to guide the emperor, and upon which that same emperor depends and draws legitimation.

Accordingly, for Dio the best possible emperor seems to be a ruler who is δημοτικός: this adjective does not mean “democratic”, which as we have discussed must be a mistranslation, but rather serves as Dio's direct and consist translation for the Latin term *ciuilis*. In spite of having been long underestimated by scholars – or at least until

recent decades –, *ciuilis* with its kin abstract noun *ciuilitas* was an essential aspect of the senatorial ideology under the Principate, of which Dio is only one exponent. His personal experience of the Antonine and Severan emperors will no doubt have cemented his view, surely already present from the historian's childhood as the son of a Roman senator and provincial governor and shared also by his peers, that the emperor must derive legitimacy from the Senate. Its status and prestige – no longer as an arm of government as such, but rather as the symbolic repository of Rome's dignity and authority – must be respected, and the life, property, and pride of its members protected. Observing these tenets was essential for the *ciuilis princeps*; they provided for Dio a set of political and philosophical principles that formed the framework of his *Roman History*. Nevertheless, the historian's 'senatorialism' is not self-indulgent, nor seeks to arrogate to the Senate practical political powers that had been lost centuries before. Dio never fails to blame 'bad' emperors for humiliating or otherwise mistreating the Senate, but it is equally clear that the inclusion of senators' points of view when decisions were being made was the responsibility of the *princeps* alone. In Dio's outline of the ideal monarchical constitution, there was no mechanism for the Senate to check the emperor's decision – nor could they enact laws on their own initiative. That power rested with the *princeps* alone. The senators were therefore in no position to change the emperor's decision other than by offering their points of view. But such a system required that the emperor listen to their concerns and that he attend Senate meetings, which Dio leads his readers to understand was far from always being the case. Unlike Tacitus' scepticism against those senators who refused to share power with Tiberius, Dio never criticises the Senate for failing to assume political power, not even when Tiberius offered it. Direct rule was no longer a matter for the senators but had to be placed under the firm control of the monarch in power.

A final aspect when dealing with Dio's approach to and assessment of the Principate – and inextricably related to his belief in the importance of having a *ciuilis princeps* – is philosophy. Since no literary genre, including historiography, can be regarded as exempt from the influence of philosophy, the relationship between Dio's *Roman History* and this branch of intellectual thought must also be addressed. In Dio's time, the impact of Stoicism was fueled by the principate of Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic emperor. Did this affect Dio's interpretation of the role of a Roman emperor in the *res publica*? What about the role of the Senate in Dio's Rome, after many years of history of the Principate, with many senatorial victims of tyrannical emperors from Caligula to Commodus, from Didius Julianus to Elagabalus? Did Dio see a possible solution to the pressing issue of a state governed by a single man, whose powers nevertheless depended upon the Senate's decisions? It is our hope that this volume con-

tributes to carve out definitions of these problems perhaps in more thoughtful and more precise terms than has been done so far, which in itself posits a challenge.

The collection begins with Gianpaolo Urso (“‘Ritorno alla monarchia’, tra Cesare e Augusto: le origini del principato in Cassio Dione”), who elaborates on how for Dio there was no continuity between δημοκρατία and μοναρχία. The “Republic” ended between 43 (when the triumvirate between Antony, Octavian and Lepidus was established) and 42 BCE (the Battle of Philippi); the “Monarchy” was established between 29 (when Octavian received the title of *imperator*) and January 27 BCE (when Octavian delivered his famous speech to the Senate and received the title of Augustus). In Dio’s view, however, the founder of the “Monarchy” was not Augustus, but Julius Caesar: his dictatorship was already a means to exert the same monarchic power of his adoptive son. In its inner complexity, such a representation of the transition from δημοκρατία to μοναρχία is consistent with the way in which Dio reconstructs the origins of δημοκρατία in the first books of the *Roman History*, now traceable only through fragments.

Martina Bono (“Teoria politica e scrittura storiografica nei ‘libri imperiali’ della Storia Romana di Cassio Dione”) examines to what extent the political persona of the *princeps* shapes Dio’s imperial narrative. The best fitting passages for investigating this topic are the anecdotal-biographical sections, which cannot be entirely dismissed as elements of imperial biography: it would be better, Bono maintains, to consider those sections as devoted to the assessment of the emperor’s praxis of government on a very concrete (rather than moral) ground. These narrative elements reveal the existence of a well-structured framework lying beneath the Dio’s historiographical building in terms of political thought. In fact, Dio develops a consistent perspective about the relationship he expected between the *princeps* and the Senate, fashioned by the *ciuilis princeps* model. According to Bono, this paradigm is sustained by a very classical political theory, though remoulded: the theory of the ‘mixed constitution’ first propounded in Thucydides and Aristotle, applied to Rome by Polybius, and later adopted in the Roman tradition by Cicero.

Mads O. Lindholmer (“Cassius Dio’s Ideal Government and the Imperial Senate”) sets out to focus on the exact role of the Senate in Dio’s ideal government and its preferable relationship with good emperors. There is a fundamental difference between viewing the Senate as a passive pool of administrative experts, a forum of debate or advice, and an actual governmental partner meant to share responsibilities or even power with the emperor. Attaining a more precise understanding of Dio’s view of the Senate, Lindholmer assumes, would illuminate Dio’s ideal government further as well as the effects of the Severan period on the elite’s perception of this institution. Lindholmer provocatively argues that, in actuality, Dio idealises a minimalist role

for the Senate: in his view, its members function as a pool from which magistrates and advisors should be drawn, but the emperor should hold absolute power and the Senate should not constitute an important forum of genuine deliberation. Instead, in Dio's ideal government, the *consilium* was the key forum of debate informing imperial policy.

Jesper M. Madsen ("Reconstructing the Principate: Dio and the Flavians") explores how in Dio's account of imperial Rome, the Flavian Dynasty represents all aspects of monarchical rule in the age of the empire: they serve as a literary microcosm of the strengths and weakness, the pros and cons, of monarchical rule. The strength is represented with Vespasian, his display of modesty and understanding for the need to cooperate and share power with the senatorial elite. The weakness is described through the nepotism, betrayal, and uncontrolled ambition for glory and prestige that helped Domitian to power and forced the return of tyrannical rule upon the Romans. In this chapter, Madsen discusses how the Flavian narrative serves as a microcosm in the *Roman History* to demonstrate why dynastic succession was incapable of providing the stability needed for monarchical rule to reach its full constitutional and political potential.

Antonio Pistellato ("Δημοκρατεῖσθαι or μοναρχεῖσθαι, That Is the Question: Cassius Dio and the Senatorial Principate") sets out to explore how Dio's account of Caligula's principate pivots on the divide between Caligula's *ciuilis* debut and his later decline into despotism. As Dio reports, the murder of the emperor in 41 CE polarized the Senate on the question of whether to abolish the Principate or to confirm it. Dio's interest in such a crucial passage seems to depend on his own experience of the end of Commodus and the accession of Pertinax in 192/193 CE. Pistellato suggests that the underpinning of Dio's political thought is Stoic, and interestingly coincides with elements of Cicero's *De republica*. When the relationship between the *princeps* and the Senate collapses, the solution is not so much utopian 'republicanism' as a 'civil' - in Dio's own words - spirit, to be intended as a fruitful cooperation between the two or, in the best of all possible worlds, as a senatorial emperor on the throne of Rome.

Christopher V. Noe ("The 'Age of Iron and Rust' in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*: Influences from Stoic Philosophy") discusses the impact of Stoic philosophy on Dio's imperial books. Noe sets out to demonstrate how fundamental Stoic ideas influenced Dio's constitutional discussions and the role of the emperor as in the Agrippa-Maecenas debate in Book 52, and how Dio evaluated political environments as well as political developments in the Empire with inspirations from Stoic logic. Moreover, the chapter argues that the "age of iron and rust" in his contemporary narrative from the emperor Commodus to Caracalla was also fundamentally an 'iron age' on the basis of Stoic values.

Finally, Andrew G. Scott ("Misunderstanding History: Past and Present Cassius Dio's Contemporary Books") demonstrates that what

lies at the heart of Dio's *Roman History* is the charting of changes in government from the early kings to the monarchy established by Augustus, with particular emphasis on the decline of δημοκρατία and the transition to μοναρχία. Throughout Dio's analysis, we observe certain individuals who serve as examples to be emulated or avoided. In Dio's own age, emperors generally misunderstood or misinterpreted, willingly or unwillingly, these examples from the past. These failures, Scott maintains, allow us to consider Dio's understanding of the function of historiography and his ideas about the utility of his own work. While this may lead us to the negative conclusion that Dio believed all forms of government eventually degenerate, it also leaves open the possibility that Dio considered the writing of history, and thus the guarantee of a proper understanding of the past, to have positive, transformative consequences for Rome's μοναρχία.

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