The Great Divergence between East and West

The Quest for Glory

So far we have used the most reliable sources to depict the history of Alexander’s life and deeds. Now we would like to broaden the discussion to its meaning. Obviously, if for centuries we have been speaking – and still speak – about Alexander, there must be a good reason. Our analysis will focus precisely on such a reason. With the exception of Diodorus, our sources were all produced between the first and second century after Christ. At that time, Alexander had become an example of the perfect tyrant and a deified emperor. In Rome the apotheosis, the ceremony through which the association of a person with the gods is asserted, is bestowed for the first time on Augustus, the founder of the empire. Some of his successors will avoid comparing themselves with him and will refrain from soliciting an honor equaling that of the founder of the empire. However, others aspire to such honors and seek recognition of the status of divus while still alive, thus generating criticism among the ruling class and in society at large. But something new occurs during the first century; something destined to bear extraordinary consequences for world history. In this chapter we will examine how the birth of Christianity affected proskýnesis.

Our main purpose is to define the meaning attributed to deification as well as its symbolic forms, on the part of the person deified and on the part of those who grant him the status of divus. An interpretation accredited by Plutarch sees in all of these phenomena the pursuit of glory. In fact, in the case of Alexander, more than one biographer brings attention to this aspect of the rituals and, more generally, to the symbolic forms of proskýnesis. According to Paul Veyne, “the imperial cult was reduced to a hyperbolic ritual” (Veyne 2010, p. 44). In the ancient world some authors, at their own risk, even have the audacity to mock the pretensions of emperors to be worshipped as gods. One of them is Dio Chrysostomos, or Dio of Prusa (AD 40–120). In his speeches on power (fourth speech) Dio brings together the philosopher Diogenes and Alexander. In truth, in Dio’s fiction Alexander is intrigued by Diogenes who, faithful to his role as philosopher, is indifferent and sarcastic towards the

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1 The cult of the divine emperor is a development of the funeral ritual of Roman nobility (Price 1987).
emperor. As soon as Alexander sees Diogenes he congratulates him. Diogenes, however, glares at him with a terrible look, “like that of a lion”, Dio says, and orders him to move because he is warming himself in the sun (Dio 2002, vol. 1, p. 175). A dialogue then begins amid great difficulties. Diogenes asks Alexander his identity and why he has come to him. Alexander replies:

“What, do you not know Alexander the king?” “I hear many speak his name, to be sure,” said he, “like so many jackdaws flitting about, but the man I know not, for I am not acquainted with his mind.” “But now,” came the answer, “you shall know his mind also, since I have come for the very purpose of letting you know me thoroughly and of seeing you.” “Well, it would be hard for you to see me,” rejoined the other, “just as it is for men with weak eyes to see the light. But tell me this: are you the Alexander whom they call a bastard?”

DIO 2002, vol. 1, p. 177

A this point a series of problems inevitably arises. Diogenes has said too much. Alexander must keep his restraint:

“What gave you the idea of calling me a bastard?” he replied. “What gave you it? Why, I hear that your own mother says this of you. Or is it not Olympias who said that Philip is not your father, as it happens, but a dragon or Ammon or some god or other or demigod or wild animal? And yet in that case you would certainly be a bastard.”

DIO 2002, vol. 1, p. 177

The dialogue continues, but Diogenes has made it clear that Alexander's claim of being the son of God also means acknowledging, at once, that he is a 'bastard'. Under Domitian's reign, Dio of Prusa is exiled to his native country, Bithynia. For us, his speeches on power can be a means of reflecting on tyranny. The ridicule that he casts onto Alexander is actually addressed to the emperors of his own time. There are two key issues that trouble the politics of this period. The first is whether the emperor should govern according to the law or if he himself is the law. The other is whether all men are equal or some are superior to others. To the first question we can answer, with Arrian's words, that regardless of the greatness of his actions, a ruler should have “self-restraint” (Arian IV, 7, 5) and should rule “not with the force but by the law” (Arian IV, 11, 6). In fact, it would not be “an opinion worthy of a wise man that a king should not come to hasty conclusions and act unjustly, and that whatever is done by a king must be deemed just” (Arrian IV, 9, 8). The grounds for this is that sovereigns are superior to other men. Plutarch believes this was Alexander's claim: