

## On the Rhetoric of Imperial Majesty

*Elements of the Ideological Interaction between Emperor and Imperial Society on the Basis of Civic Decrees, Imperial Pronouncements and Literary Testimonies in the Greek East*

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In his Second Discourse on Kingship Dion of Prusa presents a purported dialogue between Alexander and Philip II. The young crown-prince remarks there *i.a.* that rhetoric is a royal necessity (... καὶ ῥητορικῆς δέοι ἄν τῷ βασιλεῖ).<sup>1</sup> Dion's reference is obviously to the ruler's education and eloquence, in conscious Homeric tradition. However, the ability not only to express oneself efficiently as a monarch but also to think on and aptly express the elevated position of a monarchy, its policy/ideology and its needs is, of course, a more general pre-occupation of all those living in and trying to come to terms with such a political reality. It is the purpose of this short study to contribute some remarks on what I would call "the rhetoric of imperial majesty", that is the way(s) in which the position of the emperor was portrayed in some civic decrees but also in imperial pronouncements and in relevant literary works from the area of the Greek East. I hope that even this limited overview will already show how closely interconnected these three categories of texts and their repertoires of ideas are.

Of course, the content of these remarks touches upon the related problems of the imperial cult and its ideological foundations, a much wider and often treated subject. However, my present aim remains distinctly different and modest as I wish to focus on some noteworthy verbal means and formulas in which the cities of the empire describe the position of the emperor, and to set the eventual findings against (a) the emperor's/his secretaries' "self-expression" of rule in imperial orations and epistles, and (b) literary evidence on the style of these documents and on the emperor as viewed by his subjects.

Let us proceed first chronologically and begin by a civic decree of Mytilene from the age of Augustus.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after his assuming this new name and while

1 D.Chr., *Or.* 2.18. On eloquence as a quality of (or in the service of) the Roman emperor: Millar 1992<sup>2</sup>, 203f.

2 *IG XII.2*, 58 = Labarre 1996, Choix 21. The relevant passage here (b, 2–15): ... ἐπιλογίσασθαι δὲ τῆς/ οἰκείας μεγαλοφροσύνης ἄτ[ι]/ τοῖς οὐρανίου τετε[υ]χόσι δό/ξης και θεῶν ὑπεροχῆν και/ κράτος ἔχουσιν οὐδέποτε δύ/ναται συνεξισωθῆναι τὰ και/ τῆ τύχη ταπινότερα και τῆ φύ/σει. εἰ δέ τι

the Koinon of Asia had already begun erecting his new temple at Pergamon, the Mytilenaians did not wish to fall behind in his crucial favour and issued a long, fragmentarily preserved decree with various cultic honours for the emperor in their city, to be widely announced in the Roman world. In the final, and better preserved, part of this text the Mytilenaians almost disarmingly try to explain why these honours cannot properly fulfill their purpose. They state (in free translation) that “they reckon on his (Augustus’) magnanimity (μεγαλοφροσύνη) to see that those who have attained celestial glory and divine superiority and might can never stand on the same level with what is humbler by both fortune and nature. However, if something more honouring will be found out in the time to come, the city’s willingness and piety will omit nothing that could contribute more effectively to his deification (θεοποιεῖν)”. The city eloquently emphasizes Augustus’ unrivalled position. He exceeds human standards and therefore cannot be sufficiently honoured by human actions. The Mytilenaians find thus a passable excuse for what they can offer him now, and relegate the possibility of more honours to the future. By doing so they may even gloss over the fact that they had already decreed the deification of their grand local euergetes of the Pompeian era, Cn. Pompeius Theophanes, as I have noticed elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> The fact remains that the value of the emperor cannot be really met by any sort of counter-action, his majesty is simply beyond human measures in every respect.<sup>4</sup>

A very cognate set of ideas appears in the decree with which Kyzikos welcomes the sons of the Thracian king Kotys and their re-institution as kings by Caligula after his enthronement (37 AD).<sup>5</sup> The Kyzikenes express themselves no less eloquently: the “new sun” Caligula wished to be accompanied in his rise by his satellite kingdoms (τὰς δορυφόρους τῆς ἡγεμονίας βασιλῆας, l. 4), so that his immortal majesty would appear in an even more solemn form, “for kings cannot find, even if they try, expressions of gratitude to such a great god on the same level with his benefactions” (βασιλέων κἄν πάνυ ἐπινοῶσιν εἰς εὐχαριστίαν τηλικούτου θεοῦ εὐρεῖν ἴσας ἀμοιβὰς οἷς εὐηργέτηνται μὴ δυναμένων, ll. 5–6). The

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τούτων ἐπικυδέσ/τερον τοῖς μετέπειτα χρό/νοις εὐρεθήσεται, πρὸς μη[δὲ]/[ν] τῶν θεοποιεῖν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ [πλέ]/ον δυνησομένων ἐλλείψει[ν]/ τὴν τῆς πόλεως προθυμίαν/ καὶ εὐσέβειαν ...

3 Buraselis 2001.

4 Similar ideas re-appear also in [Arist.], 35 (Εἰς βασιλέα) 3–4 (Keil): ἐγὼ δ’ οὔτε χρόνου πλήθος ἱκανὸν οὔτε λόγον οὐδένα ὀρώ τοῦ βασιλέως ἄξιον, οὐδ’ ὅστις αὐτὸν ἱκανῶς ἐγκωμιάσαι δυνήσεται ὅμως δὲ οὐκ ἀποδειλιατέον, ἀλλ’ ὅση δύναμις πειρατέον εἰπεῖν. οὐδὲ γὰρ ἂν θύωμεν τοῖς θεοῖς, τὸ πρὸς ἄξιαν, οἶμαι, ὀρώντες τοῦτο ποιοῦμεν, ἀλλ’ ὅσον δυνατὸν ἡμῖν χάριν αὐτοῖς ταύτην ἐκτίνομεν διόπερ οὐδὲ τὸν βασιλέα δεῖ ὀκνεῖν μέλλοντας ἐπαινεῖν, ἀλλὰ θαρροῦντας ἰέναι ἐπὶ τὸν ἔπαινον αὐτοῦ. ἐκεῖνῳ μὲν γὰρ ἴσως ἐνδεῶς τὰ παρ’ ἡμῶν, ὑμῖν δὲ οὐκ ἐνδεῶς εἰρήσεται.

5 IGR IV, 145 (= Syll.<sup>3</sup> 798).