



# Kent Academic Repository

**Burden-Strevens, C. W. (2023) *The Agrippa-Maecenas Debate*. In: Madsen, J. M. and Scott, A., eds. *The Brill Companion to Cassius Dio*. Brill, Leiden & Boston. ISBN 978-90-04-52417-0.**

## Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/80054/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

## The version of record is available from

<https://brill.com/display/title/63368?rskey=fkqWvD&result=1>

## This document version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

## DOI for this version

## Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

## Additional information

## Versions of research works

### Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

### Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal**, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

### Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact [ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

## Chapter 15: The Agrippa-Maecenas Debate

*Christopher Burden-Strevens*

### *The Turning-Point of Actium*

On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 31 BCE, the naval forces of Octavian clashed against the fleet of Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra at Actium, an ancient town guarding the narrow strait into the Ambracian Gulf. It is fashionable nowadays to write of the Battle of Actium as a tawdry, shabby affair, nowhere nearly as decisive and important as it is magnified to be.<sup>1</sup> Yet Cassius Dio, like all ancient historians who described the event, rightly recognised its importance in the long and bloody transition from free Republic to monarchical Empire. He devotes the entirety of Book 50 of his *Roman History* to it, and states at the very opening of the book that although Antonius and Octavian controlled the “Republic”, neither of them had yet turned it into a monarchy as such.<sup>2</sup> Ancient readers, just as the attentive reader today, would have recognised this deep breath before the plunge: a foreshadowing of the monarchy soon to come, of Octavian’s transformation into Augustus (“The Revered One”), and a clear signal of the decisive role played in that process by the struggle off the shores of an insignificant little town in Acarnania.

Yet to Dio, victory at Actium alone was not enough. Sulla had defeated fellow Romans in a spectacular victory at the Colline Gate, literally beneath the walls of Rome itself; but his new Republican constitution was wholly unpicked by populists within a decade. His reputation was soon in tatters.<sup>3</sup> Julius Caesar had vanquished Pompeius Magnus at Pharsalus; but the Republican aristocracy could never accept a king.<sup>4</sup> They took their revenge on the Ides of March—symbolically, it is said, beneath the statue of Pompeius Magnus himself. By the time of Actium and Book 50, Octavian’s path seems no different. Cassius Dio presents him as a scheming dynast, a vulture, capable of unspeakable acts of cruelty such as the alleged massacre of Roman equestrians

---

<sup>1</sup> So famously Syme 1939, 297; more recently Galinsky 2012, 33 and Beard 2015, 348. See Lange 2011, 2021b for an up-to-date re-evaluation of the strategy at Actium and the importance of the battle. Translations are taken from Carey’s Loeb edition with my own modifications.

<sup>2</sup> Cass. Dio 50.1.1.

<sup>3</sup> For recent discussion of Rome after Sulla, see especially Rosenblitt 2019. For his reputation in particular, see Barden Dowling 2000, 2006; Eckert 2016; Urso 2016; Burden-Strevens 2019. On his reforms and their impact, cf. also the famous debate between Badian 1970 and Keaveney 2005.

<sup>4</sup> These are certainly the terms in which Dio describes Caesar’s rule; see Cass. Dio 44.4–6. On Caesar’s rule as a Hellenistic monarchy the classic survey of Rawson 1975 is still important.

and senators at the siege of Perusia.<sup>5</sup> What made Octavian successful where Sulla, Caesar, and all the rest were not, dying peacefully in his bed as the emperor Augustus almost half a century after the Battle at Actium?

For the answer to that question, we need to look to the enormous bipartite debate (or *controversia*) between Agrippa and Maecenas in Book 52. Suetonius records that, after defeating Antonius, Octavian took pause and initially considered restoring genuine republican government at Rome.<sup>6</sup> In Book 52 of his *Roman History*, Dio took that idea and expanded it into the most important extended reflection on the nature of Imperial rule ever written during the period now known as the Principate. Octavian's closest friends, his general Agrippa and the wealthy patron and advisor Maecenas, are summoned in private to advise him on the decision he must make: to restore Republican government (Agrippa) or to formalise a monarchy as such (Maecenas).

The exchange is unique in Imperial historiography. Dio certainly had no "source" for the arguments it contains, and it entirely reflects his own causal interpretation of the historical process and his political philosophy.<sup>7</sup> As the longest surviving analysis in Greek of the constitution of the Roman Empire, the Agrippa–Maecenas debate is Dio's response to Polybius' excursus in Book 6 of his *History* on the constitution of the Roman Republic, and was possibly inspired by it as well as older debates of a similar nature earlier in the Greek tradition.<sup>8</sup> Marking the end of his massive account of the Republic, it is the cornerstone of his historiographical project and is rightly famous among Roman historians today.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of what follows is to give both an introduction to, and new reappraisal of, the Agrippa–Maecenas debate according to its main functions. In the past, scholars have sought to explain what central purpose the *controversia* sought to fulfil in Dio's *Roman History*: what one

---

<sup>5</sup> For the alleged massacre at Perusia, see recently Lange 2021a. The most detailed survey of the historian's attitude to Augustus remains Manuwald 1979, but it is important to note that Dio distinguished between Octavian the corrupt dynast and Augustus the good emperor: on this point see Reinhold 1988, 13; Rich 1989. See also chapter 10 in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 28.1.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent summary of Dio's rhetorical source material and accompanying bibliography, see Burden-Strevens 2020, chapter two. However, many of the more commonplace arguments on the virtues of the ideal ruler it contains were certainly inspired by earlier texts. See Fishwick 1990 for the analysis, with further discussion below.

<sup>8</sup> Especially so the famous constitutional debate on the government of the Persian Empire at Hdt. 3.80–82. It would be incredible to suggest that Dio had not studied Polybius' work in his decade of reading, but he does not seem to have used him directly as a source; see Foulon 2016.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Hammond 1932; Millar 1964; McKechnie 1981; Espinosa Ruiz 1981; Dorandi 1985; Kuhlmann 2010; Adler 2012; Markov 2013; Ando 2016; Vielberg 2016. Reinhold 1988, 165 calls it "the only theoretical analysis of Roman government and society from the third century".

thing it “does”.<sup>10</sup> This is a mistake, for its scope is as vast as the historian’s intentions in drafting it were varied. First, the speeches evidently serve as a response to the political instability, and occasional tyrannies, of the Severan Period (193–235 CE). To read the set-piece in this manner is the most traditional approach, but carries with it some critical baggage to be discussed below. Secondly, the debate articulates the historian’s own analysis of the fundamental weakness of Republican government, both on practical grounds and in relation to his political theory and philosophy. To place it at this point in the text, just after the Battle of Actium, makes historiographical sense: it concludes Dio’s history of the Republic with a summary of his interpretation for its collapse. This important aspect of the composition had been largely ignored until relatively recently.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, Agrippa and (especially) Maecenas set out the historian’s own explanation of the reasons for Augustus’ success and the stability of his regime: in other words, what course of action he must take in order to escape the bloody fate of Caesar and all the other would-be autocrats of the Late Republic. In short, the debate of Book 52 condenses Cassius Dio’s entire theoretical framework for the collapse of the Republic, the emergence of monarchical rule, and the means by which that rule may be made durable. Its scope is prodigious—and rightly so, for the largest and most ambitious history of Rome since Livy.<sup>12</sup>

### *Cassius Dio’s Contemporary World*

It has long been recognised that much of the content of Maecenas’ speech addresses the Severan period—reflecting on its challenges (fiscal, political, and military), positing solutions to those challenges, and appealing for continuity with the Imperial regime established in part by Augustus. This is a trend which began even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Paul Meyer’s 1891 dissertation. Meyer viewed the composition as a political pamphlet written in order to indirectly criticise the last Severan emperor, Alexander (222–235 CE), as a weak ruler who relied too much on the Senate: Dio thus emerges as an ‘anti-senatorial’ writer in favour of a largely symbolic role for that body. This interpretation is no longer fashionable and for the past half century has rarely been cited but

---

<sup>10</sup> So the many articles and chapters which view the composition as basically a polemic of Dio’s against the Roman emperors of his day, e.g.: Meyer 1891; Millar 1964, 107; and Makhlajuk and Markov 2008 among many others; and most recently Fomin 2015, 5, wrongly calling Book 52 “in essence a political pamphlet addressed against the ‘senatorial’ policy of Severus Alexander”.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Kemezis 2014; Burden-Strevens 2016. The study of Adler 2012 is also important, demonstrating the consistency of the views expressed by both Agrippa and Maecenas with the historian’s own overarching historical, political, and ethical opinions.

<sup>12</sup> Rightly emphasised as such by Kemezis 2014, 92.

to reject it.<sup>13</sup> However, Meyer's achievement lies in establishing the basic questions about the role of the text—as a political pamphlet addressed to a particular emperor, and an expression of the historian's suggestions for sound government—which have continued to inform modern readings, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> We may still ask:

Is this sort of discussion historical? What is its compositional role in the general structure of the *Roman History*? Which emperor of the Severan dynasty could be its addressee? Within those speeches, what is the relation between generalities, rhetorical and ideological clichés and Dio's own political views? How real or utopian are the suggestions formulated by him?<sup>15</sup>

Broadly, we can divide Maecenas' oration into five parts. First the *proemium* or introduction (52.14–18) explains the difference between enlightened kingship on the one hand and tyranny on the other, and summarises the reasons for Rome's civil wars and the imperative for Octavian to save the state. Secondly, Maecenas turns to the rights and responsibilities of the aristocracy, including senators, equestrians, and provincial governors (52.19–26): here he suggests how to ensure the loyalty of the provinces and their governors. Thirdly, financial matters are discussed, including the administration and payment of the army, reforms to systems of taxation and the Imperial estate, and the proper privileges of the cities within the Empire (52.27–30). Section four (52.31–34) gives guidance on how to show mercy (*clementia*) toward the aristocracy and how to maintain the illusion of respect proper from one citizen to another (*civilitas*). The fifth and final section deals with more moral concerns, including the emperor's conduct toward his subordinates and guidance on how to cloak the real fact of his monarchy behind a civilian guise by declining ostentatious honours, statues, deification and so forth (52.35–40).

Clearly such a comprehensive programme of reform was never intended as a purely “literary” or “rhetorical” schoolroom exercise, although such readings of the text have been

---

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Hammond 1932; Gabba 1955; Bleicken 1962; Millar 1964; Fechner 1986; Reinhold 1988; Adler 2012. However, Rich 1990 rightly acknowledges in the introduction to his edition on the debate that Dio was indeed attempting to reflect on the specific issues that Octavian was facing at this point.

<sup>14</sup> So Adler 2012, 478: “despite its age, in many ways Meyer's 1891 dissertation, *De Maecenatis oratione a Dione ficta*, continues to set the intellectual parameters for the modern study of this debate.”

<sup>15</sup> Makhilajuk and Markov 2008, 48.

attempted.<sup>16</sup> Rather, the most common approach to the speech, described as such by Fergus Millar in his classic 1964 *Study of Cassius Dio* and followed widely since, is to treat it as “a serious, coherent, and fairly comprehensive plan for coping with what Dio conceived to be the evils of his time”.<sup>17</sup> This is especially the case from chapter 19 onwards. Some of the content from this point onward is hortatory: it promotes to the contemporary reader—perhaps even to the current emperor himself—a vision of what the Empire *should* be (and, therefore, *was not yet* in the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE). Dio’s suggestions, placed into the mouth of Maecenas, are at their most original when they concern financial and administrative matters. This perhaps should not surprise in view of the historian’s career: if we accept the later and more generally followed dating for the composition of Book 52 (under Severus Alexander, ca. 223 CE),<sup>18</sup> then Dio had by this time quite wide personal experience of provincial government, including a spell as *curator* (governor fiscal) of Pergamum and Smyrna in under Elagabalus.<sup>19</sup>

He proposes, for example, that the emperor sell the property of the state, including *ager publicus* (public land), and use the capital raised to give investment loans. “In this way”, he writes, “the land will be put to productive use under the new owners who cultivate it; they will acquire property and become more prosperous; and the treasury will obtain a permanent source of sufficient revenue” (52.28.3–4: οὕτω γὰρ ἢ τε γῆ ἐνεργὸς ἔσται, δεσπότηαις αὐτουργοῖς δοθεῖσα, καὶ ἐκεῖνοι ἀφορμὴν λαβόντες εὐπορώτεροι γενήσονται, τό τε δημόσιον διαρκῆ καὶ ἀθάνατον πρόσοδον ἔξει). Here Dio departs radically from contemporary practice; if anything the Imperial estate grew rather than shrank in the years following Augustus’ accession to the throne, as Hammond (1932, 96) notes in his classic article on Maecenas’ speech. His vision for taxation is similarly innovative, even progressive: all property should be valued and taxed at an equal proportional rate across the empire, without exemptions. Payment should be made more manageable through smaller instalments rather than a lump sum (52.28.6–8). Dio was far ahead of his time in suggesting so equitable a reform of the taxation system: Augustus was greeted with

---

<sup>16</sup> Burgess 1902, 206 n. 2; Zawadzki 1983, 283. This view is rarely endorsed in modern work, but see Fomin 2015, 214, who treats the Agrippa–Maecenas debate as one of many examples of “the great extent of permeation of school rhetoric into Dio’s speeches”. Fomin does not, however, unfairly criticise the historian for this perceived aspect and the treatment he offers of Dio’s rhetorical art is a deal more nuanced than much earlier work. See also Fomin 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Millar 1964, 107.

<sup>18</sup> This later dating is followed by Bleicken 1962; Espinosa Ruiz 1981; Barnes 1984; Reinhold 1988 and most recent work. The much earlier dating to 214 CE proposed by Millar 1964, 104 is a lone voice.

<sup>19</sup> Millar 1964, 5–27 remains a solid summary of the historian’s life and career; the main details can be found at Cass. Dio 69.1.3, 74[73].12.2, 78[72].7.2, 80[79]5.1. See also the introduction to this volume.

howls when he suggested something similar (56.28.4), and the exemption of land in Italy from taxation was not lifted until Diocletian's time in the late third century.<sup>20</sup> Provincial matters also lead Maecenas to argue for the abolition of all systems of local weights, measurements, and coinage—still common in the Greek East—and to restrict the zealous competition between these cities for prestige by curtailing their games and magnificent building works (52.30.3–9). As the speeches of Dio of Prusa attest, such competition for status among the cities of the Greek East in particular could be genuinely divisive. Maecenas additionally recommends clearly separating the public treasury (*aerarium*) from the emperor's personal funds (*fiscus*) by appointing salaried officials for each, drawn from the equestrian order—a clear step back from contemporary practice.<sup>21</sup> Other important reforms, such as the division of the Empire and Italy itself, by race even (κατά τε γένη καὶ ἔθνη), into smaller territorial units with a more uniform system of administration, reflect developments not yet fully realised in Dio's time.<sup>22</sup> Evidently, the historian used his speech of Maecenas in Book 52 to set out concrete proposals for change in the administration of Severan Rome.

However, the greater part of Maecenas' programme cites reforms that Augustus or subsequent emperors did in fact implement in some form prior to the historian's lifetime. It is therefore very difficult to see it simply as a propaganda pamphlet polemicising against Severan policies. If that were Dio's intention, then necessarily his Maecenas would argue mainly for progress not already begun. He recommends, for example, that Augustus revise the membership of the Senate, inviting the "best men" from the provinces (52.19.1–3). As a Greek-speaking intellectual from a distinguished family in Nicaea (İznik, north-western Turkey) who, like his father, rose to the ranks of the Senate and the consulship,<sup>23</sup> Dio here not only *commends* the actual practices of his own day, but perhaps also alludes to the revisions of the Senate membership

---

<sup>20</sup> Hammond 1932, 97.

<sup>21</sup> Cass. Dio 52.25.1–5. See Mommsen 1875, II.2, 1012; also Hammond 1932, 94–65. Cf. 53.22.3–4, where Dio states explicitly that in his own time the distinction between the *aerarium* and the *fiscus* had become hopelessly blurred; Maecenas' recommendations on this point are evidently a response to that.

<sup>22</sup> Cass. Dio 52.22.1; cf. Mommsen 1875, II.2, 1081–1086.

<sup>23</sup> It has long been known that Dio's father Apronianus was a senator, governor of Dalmatia (69.1.3) as well as *legatus* in Cilicia (69.1.3, 73.7.2); it is probable that he also attained the consulship (*IGRR* 3.654). For a prosopography of father and son see *PIR* II, C 413 and *PIR* II, C 492. For fuller discussion of Dio's provincial origins and his family as a local aristocracy see chapter 1 in this volume.

(*lectiones*) conducted by Augustus himself.<sup>24</sup> In a similar vein his speaker argues that citizenship should be given to all free inhabitants of the empire (52.19.6). This is universally recognised as referring to the Edict of Antoninus (*constitutio Antoniniana*) issued by Caracalla in 212 CE. Dio in fact criticises Caracalla's motives for issuing this edict at a later point in his work—he attributed it to the emperor's desire for increased tax revenues to squander—,<sup>25</sup> but this is not a criticism of the measure *per se*, merely Caracalla.

So much for the provincials. As for those deputed to govern them, Maecenas' (read: Dio's) programme again clearly reflects many existing practices of the Imperial period. He proposes a minimum age-requirement of twenty-five for any man to become a senator and thirty for the praetorship; this mirrors Augustan practice and is remarkably similar to what was probably Dio's own career trajectory.<sup>26</sup> The candidates for these posts, Maecenas continues, should be selected by the emperor himself and the scope of free elections should be restricted (52.20.3); Dio's contemporary readers would have recognised this also. To guard against corruption, Maecenas suggests that public officials be awarded a salary, and serve in provincial government at least three years to gain experience. These changes had again become regular by the Severan period.<sup>27</sup> Though not fully a province in the sense of other territories of the Roman empire, Italy too in Maecenas' programme should have two praetorian prefects drawn from the equestrian class to share responsibility over the troops stationed there, both the Praetorian Guard and other forces; by the time this speech was written, this had been a regular practice for almost two hundred years.<sup>28</sup>

Numerous other aspects of Maecenas' oration on the government of the ideal monarchy depict the Principate as it had long been already. This is especially the case with his recommendations for the relationship between the emperor and the aristocracy. The emperor should extend his patronage to the aristocratic youth, the *iuventus*, funding public education in academic as well as martial pursuits.<sup>29</sup> Legislation should be enacted not through the popular

---

<sup>24</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 35; *Aug. RG* 8. For discussion and evidence see Hardy 1923, 54–60; Brunt 1984. At Cass. Dio 52.42, immediately after the close of Maecenas speech, Augustus takes precisely the course of action recommended by his advisor, and again at 54.13.1.

<sup>25</sup> Cass. Dio 78[77].9.3–7 [Xiph./Exc. Val.].

<sup>26</sup> Cass. Dio 52.20.1–2. Cassius Dio was made praetor for 194 CE by the emperor Pertinax, and the appointment was seemingly not reversed by his successor (74[73].12.2 [Xiph.]). He was probably around thirty at the time.

<sup>27</sup> Cass. Dio 52.23.2; cf. *RE* XII (1924), 1144 (“legatus”); Millar 2002, 271–291, 314–320.

<sup>28</sup> Cass. Dio 52.22.2; cf. Mommsen 1875, II.2, 866 n. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Cass. Dio 52.26.1–2; cf. Anderson 1993 on the publicly-funded professors of rhetoric at Rome and Athens in the Imperial period.



assemblies, but through Senate decrees at the emperor's instruction.<sup>30</sup> Appeals should go to the provincial governor, and embassies to the Senate.<sup>31</sup> When a member of that body is accused of misconduct or a crime, he should enjoy the right to be tried by his peers.<sup>32</sup> Finally—and perhaps most importantly of all, as we shall later see—Maecenas recommends that the emperor take scrupulous care over the outward manifestation of his power, especially before the aristocracy. He should decline all exceptional and magnificent honours, and refuse statues wrought in precious metals and temples erected in his name; these give only the illusion of power, and make the *princeps* appear more like a despot, envied and hated, than a mild and respectful citizen.<sup>33</sup> And a citizen indeed: in closing, Maecenas notes that if the emperor needs an official title, he may be styled *imperator* or *Caesar*—that is, civilian titles—and never “king” (52.40).

All of the above recommendations are recognisable aspects of the Principate. Some are detailed and technical, minute even, and provide a summary of reforms adopted by Augustus or his successors which were still in use in Dio's time.<sup>34</sup> Others encapsulate by-then established aristocratic attitudes toward imperial rule, emphasising the importance of *civilitas*: the belief that the emperor ought to behave humbly toward the Senate, affording them the respect they were due.<sup>35</sup> The speech of Maecenas therefore cannot be simply a propaganda piece, calling for change in the Severan period. A better way of looking at it, perhaps, is as an overview of the *development* of Imperial rule.<sup>36</sup> Situated at this transitional point between Republic and Empire in his *Roman History*, Dio took this opportunity to survey for the benefit of his reader those wide-reaching changes that would arise in the two hundred years between Augustus' accession to the throne and his own entry into public life as a senator in the early 180s CE. Many were instituted by Augustus

---

<sup>30</sup> Cass. Dio 52.32.1–2; cf. Hammond 1932, 98: “when he further suggests that all legislation be enacted through the senate, he propounds what had by the time of Hadrian become recognized legal doctrine”.

<sup>31</sup> Cass. Dio 52.30.9–10, 52.31.1. Dio and Tacitus give numerous examples of embassies from foreign states, such as client kings, to the Senate in Augustus' time (e.g., 52.43.1, 55.33.5, 56.25.7; *Ann.* 2.42.5, 2.67.3), and the practice continued thereafter. As for the local aristocracies, the practice of appeals to the provincial governor in the first instance is well known: see Millar 1977 and, importantly Plin. *Ep.* 10.23, 10.31, 10.43–44, 10.47, 10.56, 10.58–60, among many others.

<sup>32</sup> Cass. Dio 52.32.2–3; cf. Mommsen 1875, II.2, 960–962.

<sup>33</sup> Cass. Dio 52.35–36. Cf. the classic discussion of Wallace-Hadrill 1982 on the importance of this point to the ideology of the Principate; further in Fishwick 1990 and Winterling 2009.

<sup>34</sup> See 52.41.1–2 for the view that Octavian put some of these suggestions into effect immediately, but saved others for his successors.

<sup>35</sup> See again Wallace-Hadrill 1982.

<sup>36</sup> This is the principal suggestion of Hammond 1932, and still important.

himself and were observed to varying degrees throughout the Principate; other reforms would be left to his successors.

Dio does, however, use his Maecenas to labour one especially important point, already mentioned here: the personal conduct of the emperor, including his moral character and his respectful treatment of the senatorial aristocracy. We have already seen the importance of *civilitas* above: it was embedded in the ideology of the Principate. On this particular issue our historian certainly was reacting, urgently and sometimes polemically, against the developments of his day. When reading the so-called “contemporary history” or *Zeitgeschichte*—Books 73[72]–80[80]—it is impossible to escape the conclusion that the historian was deeply concerned about the character of Imperial rule under the Severans.<sup>37</sup> In a famous and often-cited passage, he notes that with the death of Marcus Aurelius, Rome degenerated from an age of gold to an empire of iron and rust (72[71].36.4 [Xiph.]). Maecenas’ part in the debate of Book 52 thus gave Dio an opportunity to reflect, right at the beginning of his Imperial narrative, on the qualities he considered desirable in the ideal emperor. There can be no doubt that he believed that the emperors of his lifetime—Commodus, Septimius Severus, Caracalla, the short-lived pretenders of 193 and 217 CE, Elagabalus, and Severus Alexander—failed to live up to these standards. This is certainly the strongest argument for supporting the speculation offered by Millar (1964, 104)—and speculation it is—that Dio may have personally declaimed the speech he wrote for Maecenas at the Imperial Court, perhaps before the emperor himself.

Setting out his paradigm for the ideal ruler in this way enabled Dio to engage with, and contribute to, the rich tradition of “kingship literature”.<sup>38</sup> The roots of this tradition were ancient: in the Greek world we think of Greek texts such as Xenophon’s *The Education of Cyrus*, or the advice offered to King Croesus of Lydia by the Athenian sage, Solon, in Book 1 of Herodotus’ *Histories*. With the return of monarchical rule to Rome after a hiatus of half a millennium—and when that process of cultural absorption and adaptation of Greek ideas known as Hellenisation had reached its zenith—this genre acquired renewed vigour in the Roman tradition not only as a literary

---

<sup>37</sup> See most recently Madsen 2020 for discussion of Dio’s response to the emperors of his own time, and Kemezis 2014 for an excellent analysis of the historian’s desire to locate continuity between the “good emperors” of old and those of his own day. Bering-Staschewski 1981 provides a study of the *Zeitgeschichte* more generally; see also chapter 13 in this volume.

<sup>38</sup> For summaries of the Agrippa-Maecenas debate in the light of kingship literature and within the tradition of the *speculum principis*, see especially: Dorandi 1985; Fishwick 1990.

exercise, but also as a means of guiding the emperor and exhorting him toward the just or generous course of action. Flattery, too, was a welcome corollary of such an exercise.

Dio's oration of Maecenas in Book 52 is evidently his attempt to show his awareness of this tradition and it has long been known that many of its arguments draw from commonplaces in contemporary political thought. One function of Maecenas is thus a *speculum principis*, holding a "mirror" to the emperor's conduct. Whether it is Commodus, Caracalla, or Severus Alexander being addressed here is not the point. The speech surveys commonly-recognised criteria for the "good emperor" and invites the reader (or listener, if the speech was indeed declaimed) to evaluate his emperor in relation to those criteria. Some are mentioned not only here, but even recur quite explicitly later in the *Roman History*.

First, Maecenas recommends that Augustus should never permit statues of himself in gold and silver to be erected; these are wasteful and ephemeral (52.35.3–5). The basic idea can be found in Pliny's *Panegyric* for Trajan or Plutarch's *Moral Essays*, but in Dio's work the idea frequently returns, and he invites us in each case to reflect on the ideal emperor.<sup>39</sup> He lists the prodigious honours awarded to Commodus, including a gold statue weighing a thousand pounds (73[72].15 [Xiph.]). Fittingly, he was strangled in the bath by an athlete. Dio notes with ironic glee that, being unable to tear Commodus' corpse limb from limb, people at least did so with his statues (74[73].2.1 [Xiph.]). Those that remained were melted down and the materials sold by his short-lived successor Pertinax (74[73].5.4-5 [Xiph.]). When Pertinax—of whom Dio generally approved—was assassinated only a few months later, Didius Julianus bought the loyalty of the Praetorian Guard for a short time and rose to the throne in his place. Dio thought him a tyrant and a usurper who commanded little respect in the Senate, and he records almost poetically the fate of his statues, too (74[73].14.2<sup>a</sup> [Exc. Vat.]):

ψηφισαμένης δὲ τῆς βουλῆς χρυσοῦν ἀνδριάντα αὐτοῦ οὐ προσεδέξατο, εἰπὼν ὅτι  
'χαλκοῦν μοι δότε, ἵνα καὶ μείνῃ· καὶ γὰρ τῶν πρὸ ἐμοῦ αὐτοκρατόρων τοὺς μὲν  
χρυσοὺς καὶ ἀργυροὺς ὀρῶ καθαιρεθέντας, τοὺς δὲ χαλκοῦς μένοντας,' οὐκ ὀρθῶς  
τοῦτο εἰπὼν· ἀρετὴ γὰρ ἢ διαφυλάττουσα τὴν μνήμην τῶν κρατούντων· ὁ γὰρ δοθεὶς  
αὐτῷ χαλκοῦς ἀναιρεθέντος αὐτοῦ καθηρέθη.

---

<sup>39</sup> Plin. *Pan.* 52.3–5; Plut. *Mor.* 360c; 820f. See Fishwick 1990 for an excellent discussion of this point.

When the Senate voted to him a statue wrought in gold, he did not accept it, saying instead: “give me a bronze statue so that it may last; for it seems to me that all the gold and silver statues of previous emperors have been torn down, whereas the bronze ones remain”. In saying this he was wrong, for it is *virtue* that preserves the memory of rulers. Besides, the bronze statue we granted to him was toppled along with him.

This is Dio at his most catty, and the reader has seen this idea before. In Book 52, Maecenas advises Augustus that immortality is obtained not by a vote, but by virtue alone: if he rules just and honourably then that will be enough, “and the whole earth will be your sacred precinct, all cities your temples, *and all men your statues*, since you will forever be enshrined and glorified within their thoughts”.<sup>40</sup> He labours the point because he wishes us to remember Maecenas’ advice, and to apply it to the emperors of his own time. Statues and other vainglorious honours make the emperor no more competent or deserving; those distinctions are achieved by humility and virtue alone.

Statues of precious metal remain a shorthand or *topos* for incompetent and tyrannical figures, always ending in their destruction. Septimius Severus’ cousin and prefect of the Praetorian Guard, Plautianus, is said to have had more and larger statues than the royal family (76[75].14.6–7 [Xiph./Exc. Val.]); when Severus gave the order that many of the more excessive ones in the city be destroyed, many assumed that Plautianus had fallen from favour and began tearing them down elsewhere (76[75].16.2 [Xiph.]). Severus had him executed in 205 CE, and Dio notes again, with poetic irony, that the remainder of his statues were destroyed (76[75].16.4 [Xiph.]). As for the emperor’s son and heir Caracalla, he nurtured such a hatred for his brother Geta that after having him killed, he vented his anger by pelting stones even at the empty bases where his statues once stood (78[77].12.6 [Exc. Val.]); when Caracalla himself was assassinated in 217 CE, Dio records that the people melted down his gold and silver statues with fervent rejoicing (79[78].18.1). Maecenas’ guidance to Augustus on the impermanence of grand monuments is a central aspect of Dio’s political philosophy and key to his conception of the ideal emperor.

---

<sup>40</sup> Cass. Dio 52.35.5: πᾶσα μὲν γῆ τεμένισμα ἔσται, πᾶσαι δὲ πόλεις ναοί, πάντες δὲ ἄνθρωποι ἀγάλματα ἔν γὰρ ταῖς γνώμας αὐτῶν αἰεὶ μετ’ εὐδοξίας ἐνιδρυθήσῃ; cf. Thuc. 2.43.3; Tac. *Ann.* 4.3.

Secondly, the same principle applies to prodigious and extraordinary honours in general, which Maecenas advises Augustus to decline. The good emperor should allow no exceptional distinction to be given to him; for since he is already supremely powerful, nothing can be awarded him greater than what he possesses already, and in fact his position is *weakened* by such flatteries (52.35.1–2). The idea again tallies with similar arguments in Plutarch and Pliny, but it is a mistake to treat Maecenas’ words simply as “copying”.<sup>41</sup> The need for the monarch to demonstrate his *civilitas* was in Dio’s view of profound importance for the stability of Imperial rule. By Book 52, the reader has already seen the catastrophic results that may issue from a monarch who forgets these prescriptions and gets carried away by flattery. It is Dio’s basic explanation for the murder of Julius Caesar: the Senate voted him ever-more ostentatious honours, including a golden throne set with jewels and the right to wear purple, because they wished to make him envied and hated as a tyrant and so justify his murder (44.3–8). On the Ides of March they got their wish.

Later emperors who fail to follow Maecenas’ (that is, Dio’s) advice usually obtain a similar fate. Commodus assumed extraordinary titles: “conqueror of the earth”, “Roman Hercules”, and so forth (73[72].15.2–6 [Xiph.]). When fighting in the arena, he would command the senators looking on at the spectacle—Dio included—to call out praise, lauding him as master of the earth, most blessed and triumphant of all men (73[72].20 [Xiph./Exc. Val.]). Later, Caracalla demanded golden crowns from the cities of the Empire, and vainglorious building projects: fine houses and lodgings for him to rest even on short journeys, paid for entirely at the expense of the aristocracy (78[77].9.4 [Exc. Val.]). As for Macrinus, he assumed all the official powers and honorific titles of a Roman emperor “without waiting for any vote on our part, as would have been fitting” (79[78].16.2: οὐκ ἀναμένων τι, ὡς εἰκὸς ἦν, παρ’ ἡμῶν ψήφισμα). In this context, it is easy to see Maecenas’ appeal for the new emperor Augustus to be humble, rejecting ostentation and vain honours, as the historian’s genuine polemic against the trends of his day, and an appeal to pay the senatorial aristocracy the respect he deemed them due.

Third and finally, the theme of mercy is of obvious importance. As a Roman senator who lived in an age of civil wars and repeated usurpers and pretenders, Dio had a vested interest in the emperor’s treatment of those unfortunate enough to find themselves on the wrong side. As Carsten Lange has recently written, we must not underestimate the horror of civil war and its centrality to

---

<sup>41</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 543d, 820f, *Demetrius* 10.2, 30.6–8; Plin. *Pan.* 55.1.

Dio's history.<sup>42</sup> Dio tells us himself that he had reason to be concerned for his safety when Didius Julianus briefly usurped the throne (74[73].12.2–5 [Xiph.]). His *Roman History* expands widely on the theme of Imperial clemency, often through speeches: the longest is the dialogue between Augustus and his wife Livia in Book 55, where she advises him to show mercy to a conspirator against his life.<sup>43</sup> At a later point in the contemporary history Dio also inserts a short speech given by the aptly-named Cassius Clemens, encouraging the new emperor Septimius Severus to give his clemency (*clementia*) to members of the elite who had no choice but to side with his enemies (75[74].9 [Xiph.]). The former is almost certainly the historian's invention, but he may have been present to hear the latter.<sup>44</sup>

Understandably therefore, Dio reserves a substantial portion of his speech of Maecenas to the importance of mercy, calm, forgiveness, and kindness in an emperor (52.31.5–34.11). His advice on this point is wide-ranging. If one is accused of plotting against the regime, the emperor should refrain from prejudging the charge or giving judgment himself. The accused should make his defence in the Senate, and if found guilty the emperor should moderate the sentence as far as possible and safe.<sup>45</sup> When advising the monarch, senators should feel no reason to fear speaking their minds openly (52.33.6–7). The good emperor acts on genuine cases reported to him in the public interest, but ignores speculation or scurrilous rumours about the private lives of his subjects. In any case, there is no need to punish every wrong-doing: the emperor should apply the law judiciously, for it cannot conquer human nature (52.34.4–7). In short, “you can best induce men to shun their wicked ways by being kind, and to desire better ways by being generous” (52.34.9: οὕτω γὰρ ἂν μάλιστα ποιήσεις αὐτοὺς τῶν τε χειρόνων ἀπέχεσθαι, τῇ φιλανθρωπίᾳ, καὶ τῶν βελτιόνων ἐφίεσθαι, τῇ μεγαλοδωρίᾳ).

Dio was not naïve: the rationale Maecenas gives for the system outlined above is pragmatic rather than utopian. Yet in any case, it would be an understatement to say that the reigns of the Severan emperors described by him do not approach even this standard in Books 73[72]–80[80] of the *Roman History*. Septimius Severus decreed that no senator would be put to death under his reign, only to execute the very senator who assisted him in drawing up that decree, and many

---

<sup>42</sup> Lange 2021a; see also importantly Eckert 2014, who analyses the proscriptions of the Sullan Civil War and their aftermath from the innovative perspective of cultural trauma. See also chapter 18 in this volume.

<sup>43</sup> Cass. Dio 55.14–21; see also chapters 10 and 11 in this volume, as well as Giua 1981; Adler 2011; and Allen 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Perhaps inspired by a tradition of individuals appealing to Livia to intercede with Augustus for mercy on their behalf in Ovid *Pont.* 2.7.9 and Suet. *Aug.* 65.2, as Barden Dowling 2006 notes.

<sup>45</sup> Cass. Dio 52.31.9.

others besides (75[74].2.1–2 [Xiph.]). The list of those executed by Commodus in the text, including ex-consuls and women, would be tedious to number over 73[72].4–5 [Xiph./Exc. Val.]: they included the two Quintilii brothers, distinguished members of the Senate whose fine villa still stands outside Rome today and was confiscated by the emperor. The version of Caracalla’s reign presented in the *Roman History* is similarly brutal; the list of those executed was apparently so long that the Byzantine scholar who copied Dio’s text for us apologises for leaving it out (78[77].6.1 [Exc. Val.]). Short-lived usurpers such as Didius Julianus similarly hunted down those who had opposed their rise to power or supported the previous regime (74[73].16.5 [Xiph.]), and our historian records that Septimius Severus did the same (75[74].1.1 [Xiph.]). Only the first of Commodus’ temporary successors, Pertinax, stands out as a merciful figure. Dio writes that the Praetorian Guard were on the verge of deposing him and electing the consul Quintus Pompeius Sosius Falco in his place, but Pertinax refused to have Falco executed. He even went so far as to proclaim “heaven forbid that any senator should be put to death while I am ruler, even for just cause” (74[73].8.5 [Xiph./Exc. Val.]: “μη γένοιτο... μηδένα βουλευτήν ἐμοῦ ἄρχοντος μηδὲ δικαίως θανατωθῆναι”). Just as Dio’s Maecenas predicts, Falco retired to the country, mollified by mercy, and caused no further trouble.

Maecenas’ speech in Book 52 thus presented the historian with an ideal opportunity to set out his vision of the ideal emperor, and it establishes the benchmark against which he will judge all monarchs from Augustus onward. To Dio, the successful emperor must shun ostentation and avoid conspicuous and near-divine honours. Comporting himself as if he were a member of the aristocracy, he must treat the Senate with all due respect. He must also realise both the moral and strategic value of mercy: this was the best way to heal the wounds of civil war and so protect the emperor, too. In short, he must be the *civilis princeps*, the citizen-king. In these respects, the historian evidently did intend to use his Maecenas as a means of responding to the ills of his time: it is almost a manifesto for the ideal emperor he felt Rome needed, a Marcus Aurelius or a Pertinax. It is less a programme of *reform* as such, since most of Maecenas’ detailed recommendations for the administration of the Empire were in fact implemented by Augustus or his successors; yet in view of the crises and instability of the Severan period, it certainly appeals for continuity with that regime. Scholars are therefore right to emphasise the importance of the Severan age as a “target” for the Agrippa-Maecenas dialogue; Dio certainly had a polemic against his own time in mind. However, that was not its *sole* function; and to understand this we must consider two further points.

The first is the role played by Agrippa in the debate; to this point we have discussed only Maecenas. Agrippa has little to say to Dio's contemporary reader: unlike his counterpart, he is necessarily silent on how the Empire (and therefore Dio's contemporary world) should be managed, and he restricts his comments to the virtues of republicanism as compared with the vices of tyranny. But this by no means suggests that Agrippa's speech served no purpose, and this raises our second question: Dio's rationale for including the debate at this specific point in his *Roman History*. It has been a common scholarly habit to read the Agrippa–Maecenas debate as a standalone composition, that is as a political pamphlet for the Severan age. Yet if this were truly the historian's intention, there would be no need to include Agrippa at all, nor to incorporate this material into his historical *narrative* of the decline of the Republic. Let us now fit these pieces together, and read the Agrippa–Maecenas debate as part of Dio's story-arc.

#### *Between Republic and Principate*

Agrippa's speech is noticeably shorter than that of Maecenas. As with Maecenas, it is possible to divide his oration into some relatively straightforward sections. He compares “democracy” with “tyranny” through a set of political criteria: the role of civic virtue in such systems (52.2–5); the use and procurement of state finances (52.6); how justice is administered (52.7); how competition operates among their respective aristocracies (52.8–9); the effects of real power upon the individual in both systems (52.10); the distribution of favours and honours (52.11–12); and finally, a list of examples from Republican Roman history of great statesmen who conceived a desire for monarchical rule and fell from grace as a result (52.13). Agrippa's *peroratio* (conclusion) has not survived as there is a missing folio in our manuscript. But by chapter 13, he is clearly winding up, and his arguments will not have proceeded much further.

At first glance its purpose is very simple: it seeks to persuade the young Octavian, recently victorious at the Battle of Actium, to lay down the wide-ranging powers he has hitherto enjoyed as a *triumvir*. Unlike Maecenas' response to follow, however, Agrippa's main argument is achieved not through detailed and specific suggestions, but rather through a generalising comparison of the virtues of “democracy” or δημοκρατία—the word used by Dio and other Greek



historians to describe the Roman Republic—with the vices of “tyranny” (τυραννίς), that is, monarchy in its degenerate or corrupted form.<sup>46</sup>

This immediately should give us pause: Agrippa is not comparing like with like. In ancient Greek political thought, there existed three basic forms of government: rule by the people, rule by the elite, and rule by a single monarch. As famously explored by Polybius in Book 6 of his *Histories* (as well as by Aristotle previously), for each form of government there was a positive and negative nuance.<sup>47</sup> Rule by the elite, for example, may in its best form be described as an “aristocracy”, or rule by the “best men” (ἄριστοι); but excessive corruption or abuse of power may degrade the system into an oligarchy. Similarly, democracy has a positive connotation, but its negative opposite—ochlocracy or “rule by the mob”—denotes a crazed mass whose worst instincts are pandered to by demagogues. Rule by a single individual, on the other hand, may be described as monarchy or even better “kingship” (βασιλεία) where the monarch exercises his power fairly; but rule by a cruel usurper is not kingship but rather tyranny (τυραννίς).<sup>48</sup> Dio’s educated readers would have noticed immediately the logical fallacy of Agrippa’s argument: he compares rule by the people in its positive form, democracy, with monarchy in its worst form, tyranny.

The reason for this fallacy is simple, and it is deliberate on Dio’s part. As a Republican statesman,<sup>49</sup> Agrippa cannot conceive of monarchy in anything *but* a negative form. Dio’s other staunch Republican politicians, such as Catulus in his speech of Book 36 and Cicero in Book 44, could never describe monarchy in positive terms: it is always a tyranny. In describing monarchy in a similarly categorical way, Agrippa displays Dio’s awareness of the political attitudes of the Republican aristocracy. In Latin, “monarchy” (*regnum*) and “king” (*rex*) were rarely positive terms, and usually had a pejorative application.<sup>50</sup> Monarchy was anathema to the proud Republican statesman. Dio has his Agrippa speak in an entirely appropriate manner for the speaker and the

---

<sup>46</sup> On Dio’s Greek vocabulary for Roman institutions, see Freyburger-Galland 1997 and Burden-Strevens 2016. Markov 2014 provides a recent study of the meaning of δημοκρατία in the *Roman History*; for Dio’s view of the Roman δημοκρατία in general (especially in the speeches), see Fechner 1986 and Burden-Strevens 2020. As Coudry 2016b has shown, his lexical choices are, moreover, often meaningful and deliberate.

<sup>47</sup> Polyb. 6.2–18.

<sup>48</sup> For good surveys of the place and definition of tyranny in ancient (especially Greek) political thought, see McGlew 1993 and Lewis 2006. Béranger 1935, though old, is also still useful.

<sup>49</sup> Or at least, in his dramatic *presentation* as a Republican statesman in this particular speech for Dio’s purposes. The historian later writes that Agrippa co-operated with the monarchical regime despite having advised against it (52.41.2), and did so as enthusiastically *as if* he had himself been in favour of Empire from the outset (54.29.3: ὥς καὶ δυναστείας ὄντως ἐπιθυμητῆς).

<sup>50</sup> Dunkle 1967.

context. Unlike Maecenas, he cannot imagine or describe sole rule in anything but tyrannical terms. Maecenas, too, is aware of this tension—hence his recommendation that Octavian rule not as “king” or “dictator”, but as “Caesar” and “imperator” (52.40).

Yet this also sets up an implicit hurdle for Octavian to surmount in the aftermath of Actium, and this hurdle is of genuine historical importance. A monarch at Rome, Agrippa shows us, could never be considered anything but a tyrant. Agrippa states this problem at the beginning of his speech: should Octavian choose monarchy, then people will think that he has been aiming at it all the while. The result, he predicts, will be a repetition of past events: disgrace (Sulla) or even death (Marius, Pompeius, Caesar).<sup>51</sup> Were the point not sufficiently clear, these *exempla* return at the end of his speech. “You remember”, Agrippa whispers paralitically, “how people proceeded against your father just because they became suspicious that he wished to make himself sole ruler” (52.13.4: μέμνησαι δὲ ὅπως τῷ πατρί σου προσηνέχθησαν, ὅτι τινὰ ὑποψίαν ἐς αὐτὸν μοναρχίας ἔσχον). Agrippa thus raises a fundamental historical question for Dio’s narrative. How could Octavian make himself a monarch without suffering the same fate as those before him? Was it possible to rule Rome justly and without a tyrannical reputation?

As well as explaining the risk to Octavian’s reputation, Dio additionally uses his Agrippa to summarise more practical and immediate dangers that may arise should he choose to make himself monarch. Most important is the threat posed to Octavian’s regime by ambitious provincial commanders eager to supplant him. Agrippa summarises the likely difficulties Octavian’s monarchy will face as follows (52.8.4):

νῦν δὲ πᾶσά σε ἀνάγκη συναγωνιστὰς πολλοὺς, ἅτε τοσαύτης οἰκουμένης ἄρχοντα, ἔχειν, καὶ προσήκει που πάντας αὐτοὺς καὶ ἀνδρείους καὶ φρονίμους εἶναι. οὐκοῦν ἂν μὲν τοιούτοις τισὶ τά τε στρατεύματα καὶ τὰς ἀρχὰς ἐγχειρίζης, κίνδυνος ἔσται καὶ σοὶ καὶ τῇ πολιτεία καταλυθῆναι.

It will be absolutely necessary for you to have many assistants in governing so vast an inhabited world, and I suspect that all of them will need to be of a brave and noble disposition. But if you entrust both legions and provinces to men such as these, you and your government will be in danger of being overthrown.

---

<sup>51</sup> Cass. Dio 52.2.4–7, 52.13.2, 52.15.3–4.

The reader of Dio's narrative to this point cannot doubt the reality of this risk. By Book 52, we have seen countless examples of generals and governors out on the periphery, challenging the central authority with military force. Octavian himself of course, whose power began more or less with a private army raised at his own expense; Marius, who catapulted himself to extraordinary power after his wars against the Cimbri; Sulla, who marched on Rome itself at the head of an army of loyal veterans; and naturally Caesar, who followed Sulla's example.

Thus, at this critical point of transition in Dio's narrative of the decline of the Republic and the emergence of the Principate, Agrippa serves to articulate some key historical problems that Octavian would—did—have to address in solidifying his nascent rule, including the risk to his reputation as a tyrant and the danger of other usurpers seeking to follow his example. It is important to note that this is the first point in the *Roman History* at which the historian raises these important questions, and it is a fictitious speech, not the narrative, which takes on the explanatory burden. In the recent words of Valérie Fromentin, speeches are often the key to Dio's interpretation of historical events,<sup>52</sup> and recent years have witnessed a growth in scholarly attention to Dio's use of speeches as a means of explaining his major interpretative premises and themes.<sup>53</sup>

However, the attentive reader will have noticed already another obvious logical flaw in Agrippa's argument, and this again is deliberate on the historian's part. His arguments against monarchy focus on the potential risk of ambitious provincial commanders challenging the central government, and on Octavian's reputation as a usurper or tyrant. These were real challenges to his position indeed; but they were not new. Agrippa describes these dangers as particular to monarchy, but the reader has seen these faults many times already in Dio's history of the *Republic*. There had, indeed, been many tyrants and usurpers already under the so-called Republic of the first century BCE.<sup>54</sup> Agrippa's peculiar praise of "democracy" thus draws the reader into a personal reflection on the nature of Republican government as we have seen it in the preceding narrative. We refute the case he makes in favour of the *res publica*, point-by-point in real time, and we construct that refutation ourselves on the basis of what we have read already. The purpose of this exercise—

---

<sup>52</sup> Fromentin 2019, 49–50.

<sup>53</sup> E.g., Kemezis 2014, 2016; Burden-Strevens 2016, 2020; Coudry 2016a; Rich 2019.

<sup>54</sup> On the place of tyranny in the Late Republic see: Hindard 1988; Kalyvas 2007. Burden-Strevens 2019 and 2020 argues that Dio viewed the dictatorships of Sulla and Caesar as basically tyrannical from the Republican Roman perspective, connected as they were to violent usurpation and murders.

which demonstrates the great extent of Dio's compositional art—is to guide the reader to the conclusion that the Republican constitution could not be rescued. It was untenable, and only a monarchy established according to the principles outlined by Maecenas could save Rome from itself.

This is in fact a common tactic in Dio's speech of Agrippa: his praise of the Republic is refuted *in advance* through the unfolding of Dio's Republican narrative. He claims, for example, that under a δημοκρατία all men are satisfied with the honours conferred upon them, and readily accept the punishments for their crimes. As so often in the *Roman History*, Dio's speaker bases this argument upon human nature: all men in a δημοκρατία consent to be ruled by others because they seek to rule themselves, and because they dislike being surpassed by the successes of others, so they do not seek to outdo their peers with their achievements (52.4.5). Here Agrippa describes democracy in risibly utopian terms (52.4.6–8):

κἄν οὕτω πολιτεύονται, κοινὰ μὲν τὰ ἀγαθὰ κοινὰ δὲ καὶ τὰ ἐναντία νομίζοντες εἶναι, οὔτε τι κακὸν οὐδενὶ τῶν πολιτῶν γίγνεσθαι βούλονται, καὶ πάντα τὰ κρείττω πᾶσιν αὐτοῖς συνεύχονται. καὶ ἅν τε τις αὐτὸς ἀρετὴν τινα ἔχη, καὶ προφαίνει αὐτὴν προχέριως καὶ ἀσκεῖ προθύμως καὶ ἐπιδείκνυσιν ἀσμενέστατα, ἅν τε καὶ ἐν ἑτέρῳ ἴδῃ, καὶ προάγει ἐτόιμως καὶ συναύξει σπουδαίως καὶ τιμᾷ λαμπρότατα. καὶ μέντοι κἄν κακύνηταί τις, πᾶς αὐτὸν μισεῖ, κἄν δυστυχή, πᾶς ἐλεεῖ, κοινήν τῆς πόλεως καὶ τὴν ζημίαν καὶ τὴν αἰσχύνην τὴν ἀπ' αὐτῶν εἶναι νομίζων.

If they live under this kind of government and consider good fortunes and their opposite as belonging to all alike, then they do not wish any harm to come to any of the citizens, but rather pray that everything good may come to all people. And if one of the citizens shows particular virtue, then he readily shows it, practices it enthusiastically, and exhibits it most joyfully; and if he sees that virtue in someone else, then he readily advertises it, eagerly tries to increase it, and confers brilliant honours upon it. On the other hand, if one of the citizens shows himself to be wicked, then everyone hates him, and if unfortunate, then everyone pities him. Each citizen considers the punishment and disgrace that issue from these faults as shared by the whole state.

Agrippa rounds off the thought by comparing this with tyrannies. Under tyrannies, he claims, the situation is precisely the opposite. The aristocracy vie jealously for status and prestige, and in their fierce competition they seek to overreach one another with the minimum personal risk. They are so selfish that they regard the successes of others as their own loss, and their failures as their own gain (52.5.1–2).

Any student familiar with Dio’s narrative will know that the democratic nirvana described by Agrippa has nothing to do with the Late Republic. Conversely, his description of the selfish wickedness of the aristocracy under a “tyranny” matches Dio’s presentation of Late Republican politics very closely. He claims that under a δημοκρατία, aristocrats do not seek to surpass their peers; what then do we make of Pompeius and Caesar, “the former wishing to be second to no man, and the latter to be first of all”?<sup>55</sup> A recurring feature of Dio’s Republican books is the inability of almost all politicians to be satisfied with their lot, and the historian explains their fall in consequence of their selfish desire ever to acquire more.<sup>56</sup> Thus it can hardly be said that all citizens in a δημοκρατία are modest and satisfied with the honours already conferred upon them! Furthermore, Agrippa presents democracy as a virtuous form of government in which the good are proudly promoted and the wicked have little influence. The historian’s actual presentation of the Late Republic is precisely the opposite. Consider, for example, the futility of Catulus’ and Cato’s efforts to defend the *res publica* from the ambitions of Gabinius, Clodius, Caesar, Pompeius, and all the rest.<sup>57</sup> The “tyranny” described by Agrippa is in fact the Late Republic.

There are many more examples of this technique. Throughout Agrippa’s praise of δημοκρατία, Dio consciously and deliberately made his speaker present the Republic in terms his reader would know to be untrue, and ironically describe as faults of monarchy those vices which are in fact pervasive in the Late Republican portions of the *Roman History*. He states that for Octavian to make himself a monarch would be an act of subjection, reducing the Roman people and their allies and subject nations to slavery (52.5.4). But enslavement is in fact the metaphor Dio uses to describe Roman imperialism in the Late Republic, and occasionally the powers of the great

---

<sup>55</sup> Cass. Dio 41.54.1: Πομπήιος μὲν οὐδενὸς ἀνθρώπων δεύτερος, Καῖσαρ δὲ καὶ πρῶτος πάντων εἶναι ἐπεθύμει.

<sup>56</sup> See Burden-Strevens 2020 for discussion and evidence.

<sup>57</sup> So Kemezis 2014, comparing the successes of ambitious dynasts with the repeated failures of genuine Republicans who speak in the public interest in Books 36 onward of the *Roman History*.

Republican dynasts (such as Octavian himself).<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Agrippa describes aristocratic competition in a δημοκρατία in terms that will, by now, appear absurd to Dio's reader. In a democracy—so he claims—the more wealthy, powerful, and brave men there are, the more eagerly they vie with one another to be foremost in serving the state (52.9.1). Nothing could be further from the reality of Dio's Republican narrative, where aristocratic competition repeatedly escalates into bribery and violence. Indeed, a recent analysis has even suggested that in Cassius Dio's interpretation, excessive aristocratic competition was perhaps the most important driver of instability in the Late Republic and the main cause of its collapse.<sup>59</sup> We might also consider Agrippa's comparison of finance and taxation in “democracies” and “tyrannies” in the same way. He notes—again unrealistically—that in a δημοκρατία many make generous contributions to the treasury of their own free will, all eagerly vying with one another to be the most patriotic; in monarchies, on the other hand, individuals are selfish and jealously guard their existing wealth (52.6). No reader of the *Roman History* to this point could believe such fantasy; Dio's history of the Late Republic is littered with examples of acquisitiveness and corruption, but of conspicuous generosity toward the state there are none.<sup>60</sup>

Agrippa thus serves two important purposes for the historian at this point in his narrative of the transition from Republic to Empire. First, he recapitulates the main lines of Dio's moral and ethical interpretation for the collapse of the Republic. By vaunting the many alleged virtues of δημοκρατία, Agrippa merely reminds the reader of all the vices of the Republic. Secondly, Agrippa's speech adds a tension which arises from a genuine and inescapable historical problem at this point in the unfurling of events. How, he asks, could Octavian's rule ever seem anything but a tyranny? Would-be autocrats had arisen before—Marius, Sulla, Pompeius, Caesar—and all were now dead. By what means could Octavian possibly survive where they did not?

The speech of Maecenas to follow provides the answer. By proposing a suite of reforms to combat these historical problems, Maecenas sets out Dio's interpretation of which remedial

---

<sup>58</sup> Cass. Dio 36.19.3; 39.22.3; 40.14.4; 40.42.1; 41.13.3; 43.20.2; 44.42.4; 50.1.2; 51.17.4. For a recent analysis of the historian's perspective on Roman imperialism in the first century BCE see the fine contribution of Bertrand 2016, with accompanying bibliography.

<sup>59</sup> Lindholmer 2017, 2019.

<sup>60</sup> E.g., Cass. Dio 36.18.2; 36.41.1; 38.10.1; 39.56.1; 40.12.1; 43.9.2; 45.14; 45.26, among innumerable others. For surveys of the historian's view of the moral degradation of the Late Roman Republic, with further discussion on his perspective as compared to our other historiographical sources, see Sion-Jenkis 2000; Kuhn-Chen 2002; Rees 2011; Burden-Stevens 2020, chapter four.

measures implemented by Augustus would be the most important and effective, and in short paves the way for Augustus' success. Agrippa's oration in defence of the Republic is not therefore a simple "prelude" or preliminary to Maecenas, as was once suggested by scholars,<sup>61</sup> but rather stands in dialectic with him, as Adler (2012) has suggested. It also, I would argue, establishes a dialectic with Dio's *reader*. As we have already seen, some of Maecenas' suggestions concern relatively detailed and minute administrative or financial reform, and some also survey developments in the government of the Empire which would emerge after Augustus' time. These suggestions obviously relate to the Imperial period as a whole, not to the specific historical situation in 31–27 BCE and Octavian's transformation into Augustus. However, it is entirely mistaken to view all of Maecenas' programme in this light. His most important recommendations for reform clearly reflect Dio's own analysis of the main reasons for the stability of Augustus' fledgling regime in the early 20s BCE.

A brief glance at only a few of these will demonstrate their obvious relevance to the specific political situation after the Battle of Actium. After his introduction Maecenas begins by surveying the pitfalls of Republican government. He exhorts Octavian to found not a tyranny but rather an enlightened monarchy, taking guidance from magistrates and advisers appointed on merit by Octavian himself. Maecenas argues that curtailing this fundamental aspect of the Republican system—elections—will hold in check the worst vices of aristocratic competition: craze for office (σπουδαρχία), envy (φθόνος), ambition (φιλοτιμία), and the civil strife (στάσις) that issues from these.<sup>62</sup> He goes on (52.15.5–6):

ταῦτα γὰρ πᾶσα μὲν δημοκρατία ἔχει· οἱ γὰρ δυνατώτεροι, τῶν τε πρωτείων ὀρεγόμενοι καὶ τοὺς ἀσθενεστέρους μισθούμενοι, πάντα ἄνω καὶ κάτω φύρουσι· πλεῖστα δὲ δὴ παρ' ἡμῖν γέγονε, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ὅπως ἄλλως παύσεται. τεκμήριον δέ, πάμπολυς ἐξ οὗ χρόνος καὶ πολεμοῦμεν καὶ στασιάζομεν. αἴτιον δὲ τό τε πλῆθος τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ τὸ μέγεθος τῶν πραγμάτων· ἐκεῖνοί τε γὰρ παντοδαποὶ καὶ τὰ γένη καὶ τὰς φύσεις ὄντες καὶ ποικίλας καὶ τὰς ὀργὰς καὶ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας ἔχουσι, καὶ ταῦτα ἐς τοσοῦτον προῆκται ὥστε καὶ πάνυ δυσχερῶς ἂν διοικηθῆναι.

---

<sup>61</sup> So McKechnie 1981, 150.

<sup>62</sup> Cass. Dio 52.15.1–4. For a recent study of the importance of σπουδαρχία and φθόνος in Dio's interpretation of the collapse of the Republic, see Burden-Strevens 2016.

Democracy has all of these vices just named...they have been most frequent in our time, and there is now no other way to stop them. The proof of this? We have been at war, and engaged in civil war, for a long time now. The cause of this? The multitude of our population and the enormity of our affairs. For our people are diverse, and being drawn from many races and cultures they possess a range of temperaments and desires. These considerations have brought us to such a point that we can now administer our empire only with the greatest difficulty.

This is certainly the historian's own analysis of the historical situation: in his famous digression on the nature of democracies at the opening of Book 44, Dio writes that Rome's outdated Republican system could no longer accommodate itself to the vast size of its empire (44.2.4). The basic point returns later in Maecenas' speech, and surprisingly is used as justification by Dio's Caesar in the harangue of his mutinying troops at Vesontio in Book 38 (38.41.1–7). Evidently the historian viewed the traditional system for allocating magistracies and provincial commands—through election—as the midwife of competition and civil war, and Rome's empire too large to be governed securely under a Republic.

Chapters 19 to 23 of Maecenas' oration set out, in detail, the historian's interpretation of how Augustus should neutralise those risks. He should revise the Senate roll, excluding members who were unfit and adding new worthy members. "In this way", Maecenas continues, "you will have many assistants and will keep an eye on the leading men from all the provinces; and the provinces will not rebel, because they will no longer have leaders of distinction".<sup>63</sup> The *princeps* should make all appointments himself, except for the offices of praetor and consul; these may remain filled by election in order to give the appearance of Republican government. This is because entrusting elections to the people will lead to discord and rioting, and entrusting them to the senators will aggrandise their ambitions (52.20.3). Even the offices of consul and praetor should be shorn of the full extent of their traditional power in order to limit their capacity to rebel—in other words, "to stop the same things happening all over again" (52.20.3: ἵνα μὴ τὰ αὐτὰ αὐθις γένηται). Magistrates ought not to command legions during their term of office nor immediately

---

<sup>63</sup> Cass. Dio 52.19.3: οὕτω γὰρ σύ τε πολλοῖς συνεργοῖς χρήσῃ, καὶ τοὺς κορυφαίους ἐξ ἀπάντων τῶν ἐθνῶν ἐν ἀσφαλεῖ ποιήσῃ, καὶ οὔτε ἐκεῖνα νεοχμῶσει τι μηδένα ἐλλόγιμον προστάτην ἔχοντα.



afterward, but only after a sufficient hiatus. “In this way”, Maecenas observes astutely, “they will never be put in command of soldiers while still enjoying the prestige of their titles and thus be led to incite rebellions; and they will be less ambitious after they have spent a time as private citizens”.<sup>64</sup> The *cursus honorum* should again be regularised: would-be provincial governors should themselves serve as *legati* for other governors before assuming the praetorship, and should only hold the consulship after that (52.21.8). They should serve in office for no longer than five years, “because longer terms of many years in power tend very often to make officials conceited and encourage them to rebel”.<sup>65</sup> Finally, it should also be forbidden for provincial governors and commanders to hold several important posts in succession: they will be milder if they spend time in the city as private citizens before moving on to their next appointment.<sup>66</sup>

We have already seen that Augustus or his successors would indeed go on to implement many of these reforms to the provincial administration in the ensuing decades, but that is not quite the point here. What matters most is the historian’s decision to place this list of suggestions at this juncture in the narrative. These points constitute a plan—*Dio’s* plan—for ending the cycle of extraordinary commands, prodigious honours, rebellious governors, and ambitious generals that in his view caused the final crisis and collapse of the Roman Republic. With the Battle of Actium confirming Octavian’s unchallenged position as the leading power in Rome, Dio took this opportunity to pause, to explain how affairs arrived at this point in the first place, and how Octavian in the early 20s BCE could refashion the empire to prevent a repeat performance. Maecenas’ suggestions underline the imperative for the new *princeps* to keep the traditional aristocracy—Senate, magistrates, provincial commanders and governors—weak, and unable to challenge his power. If the new regime is to survive, it must be a military dictatorship, and no one individual should acquire too much power.

Maecenas also poses a solution to the second stumbling-block interposed by Agrippa for Augustus’ nascent rule: the risk to his reputation. How could the young Octavian install himself as monarch without seeming the very image of a tyrant? It must indeed be a military dictatorship,

---

<sup>64</sup> Cass. Dio 52.20.4: οὕτω γὰρ οὔτε τινὲς νεοχμῶσουσι, στρατοπέδων κύριοι ἐν τῷ τῶν ὀνομάτων φρονήματι γενόμενοι, καὶ χρόνον τινὰ ιδιωτεύσαντες πεπανθήσονται.

<sup>65</sup> Cass. Dio 52.23.2: ὅτι αἱ μακρότερα καὶ πολυχρονιώτερα ἐπαίρουσί πως πολλοὺς καὶ ἐς νεωτεροποιίαν ἐξάγουσι.

<sup>66</sup> Cass. Dio 52.23.4. Cf. the speech of Catulus at 36.31 for a similar idea: he argues that it is perilous to entrust continuous commands, one after another, to a single individual—the practice breeds ambition. This is Dio’s analysis of the problematic distribution of military power in the final decades of the Republic, and of course he was correct. See Eckstein 2004 for an excellent analysis of this point, with further comments in Burden-Strevens 2016.

but cloaked beneath a civilian guise. At the very opening of his speech he responds directly to Agrippa's objection: Octavian should by no means set up a "tyranny" (τυραννίς, 52.15.1). Rather, he should be moderate. The ideal *civilis princeps* must be easy of access, and welcoming of frank and unrestrained advice.<sup>67</sup> He should seek the loyalty of his subjects through kindness and generosity rather than compelling them to obey through fear (52.34.6–11). As we have already seen, he must also scrupulously decline excessive and prodigious honours—that arrogance which was one of the main causes of Caesar's assassination (52.35–36). Maecenas proposes the means by which Octavian may avoid such a course. He must act, dress, and speak in the manner of an ordinary citizen. Even his title must be a civilian one.

These are precisely the steps that Octavian will go on to take in the following book.<sup>68</sup> After the Agrippa-Maecenas debate, the historian devotes most of Book 53 to narrating the process by which Octavian's powers were confirmed by the Senate and the most important of the reforms he immediately implemented. Coming before the Senate, Octavian delivers a weighty address, promising to relinquish his powers and demanding that the order permit him to retire to a quiet life as a private citizen. It is all spin, of course: Dio writes that he proclaimed this refusal of power or *recusatio imperii* not because he genuinely wished to restore the Republic, but rather to appear "forced" to accept monarchical powers by a Senate which could not countenance his resignation.<sup>69</sup> But the mere act of refusal is in itself an example of Octavian following Maecenas' (that is, again, Dio's) advice for solidifying his rule, putting on a show of refusing power and honours and behaving in the manner of an ordinary citizen. Many more examples of this tactic will also follow later, with Augustus self-consciously emphasising his *civilitas*, his modesty, and his respect for the aristocracy.<sup>70</sup> The Senate, of course, were not fooled as to his intentions: but having no power to stop him or little inclination to, they begged him to assume the leadership of the state.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Cass. Dio 52.33.6–7. For the historian's view of the importance of freedom of speech or *παρρησία* in the ideal monarchy, and its excessive misuse by the squabbling politicians of the Late Republic, see recently Mallan 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Some related comment on this point can be found in Reinhold 1988.

<sup>69</sup> Cass. Dio 53.2.6. It is important to note that in having Octavian "decline" power in this way, our historian is absolutely mimicking Octavian's historical strategy of *recusatio* and *dissimulatio* vis-à-vis the Senate: see Rich 2010 and Vervaeke 2010.

<sup>70</sup> The *recusatio imperii* of Book 53 in fact mirrors Augustus' justification for his regime in the *Res Gestae* very closely, including his many alleged refusals of power; see Burden-Strevens 2020, chapter two for a more developed argument.

<sup>71</sup> Compare Cass. Dio 53.11 with Tac. *Ann.* 1.11 on the senators' cynicism toward the "resignations" of Octavian and Tiberius respectively.

At this point the *Roman History* summarises Augustus' reforms to the provincial administration. Wishing to appear "Republican" or perhaps "civilian" (δημοτικός), he declared that he would not govern all of the provinces himself. Rather, he made some "senatorial", their governors chosen at random and by lot from among the qualifying membership of the order, and others "imperial", that is, under his personal jurisdiction or that of his own hand-picked governors.<sup>72</sup> At a stroke he removed the potential for any one individual to use a particularly juicy or well-situated province, such as Gaul, as a springboard for their personal ambitions. But there is more, and here Dio's analysis is astute and incisive. Augustus justified this reform on the pretext that it would enable the Senate to enjoy the best of the empire without fear—the peaceful provinces—while he himself would take on all the hardship and strain of more heavily militarised provinces. Such generosity! But in fact the actual and intended result of this, Dio writes, was to entrust the Senate only with the weaker provinces (53.12.2–3). True to Maecenas' advice, Augustus' reforms to the provincial administration took care to enfeeble the traditional establishment while keeping the emperor personally strong. This is the most important example of Augustus directly following Maecenas' recommendations, but there are many others that we need not detail here: accepting frank and honest advice and freedom of speech;<sup>73</sup> treating conspirators and wrongdoers mercifully;<sup>74</sup> declining grand or ostentatious honours, especially statues;<sup>75</sup> and ensuring harmonious relationships with his assistants and the aristocracy, curtailing their ambitions wherever possible.<sup>76</sup> In the ensuing narrative Dio's Augustus follows scrupulously all those suggestions of Maecenas we have outlined in the previous section.

The Agrippa-Maecenas debate thus fulfils an important purpose not only in advocating Dio's political programme for the Severan period and the proper government of the Empire in general, but also—crucially—in his interpretation of the decline of the Republic and the success of Augustus' regime. It can hardly be read straightforwardly as a Severan political pamphlet, less still a generic philosophical treatise on kingship with Agrippa as a mere prelude to justify Maecenas' intervention. Cassius Dio made a meaningful and deliberate decision to insert the *controversia* at this point in the historical narrative. Agrippa praises a Republic that no longer

---

<sup>72</sup> 53.12.1–2, 52.13.1–5. On the so-called "senatorial" and "imperial" provinces, see especially Millar 2002.

<sup>73</sup> 53.21.3; 54.3.3, 54.17.5, 54.30.4; 55.4.2–3, 55.7.2–3.

<sup>74</sup> 53.24.4–6, 54.15.4–8, 54.23.1–4; 55.7.2–3, 55.22.1–2.

<sup>75</sup> 53.27.3; 54.1–2, 54.25.3, 54.27.2, 54.35.2.

<sup>76</sup> 53.23.3–4, 53.27.3–4, 53.32.3–4; 54.22.4.

exists, and perhaps never existed. In so doing, he merely serves to remind us of the cesspit the *res publica* has become, and how far it has fallen from the philosophical ideal of a functioning δημοκρατία. Ironically, his speech in defence of the Republic merely summarises the justification for abandoning it. Yet Agrippa looks forward as well as back, positing key challenges the new regime will have to face. In Maecenas, Dio sets out the solution to those challenges, offering his own interpretation—as an historian—of the measures Augustus would have to follow in order to survive where Caesar did not. The Agrippa-Maecenas debate is a remarkably sophisticated historical analysis of Octavian’s position in the aftermath of the Battle of Actium. The narrative of Books 50 to 53 of the *Roman History*, charting the final stage in the bloody transition from Republic to Empire, would be wholly incomplete without it.

### *Conclusion*

Almost half a century after the Battle of Actium, its victor Octavian—now Augustus—lay dying. By 14 CE, Rome had enjoyed decades of relative internal cohesion and stability. Dio was not fooled by the idealistic claims of the new regime, immortalised in the emperor’s own autobiographical writings and the output of the Augustan poets.<sup>77</sup> There were pretenders and challenges to the emperor’s power: Dio records the ambitions of provincial governors such as Marcus Primus and Cornelius Gallus,<sup>78</sup> or populists at home like the aedile Egnatius Rufus.<sup>79</sup> There was competition and discord: when Augustus attempted to fill the consular posts of 22 and 19 BCE by free election, the people fell to rioting and violence (54.6, 54.10). And there were inevitably plots against his rule: the most elaborate example in the *Roman History* is an alleged conspiracy of L. Cornelius Cinna Magnus, lavishly dramatised in the private dialogue between Livia and Augustus on the need to be merciful to wrong-doers in Book 55.<sup>80</sup> But none of these threats weakened the Imperial centre to perdition. Ambitious governors were tried and replaced; the elections ceased and were replaced by personal appointments; plots failed in their objects, partly

---

<sup>77</sup> At 53.19 the historian shows his awareness of the regime’s penchant toward secrecy and the necessity of dissimulation and cover-ups to keep it secure. Ando 2016 has recently given a fine analysis of the Agrippa-Maecenas debate from this perspective, using it to show Dio’s awareness of the profound (and eventually deligitimising) disconnect between the reality of the emperor’s power and the falsity of its presentation.

<sup>78</sup> 53.23.5–7; 54.3. On Gallus’ monumental stela and his ambitions in Egypt, see Minas-Nerpel and Pfeiffer 2010.

<sup>79</sup> 53.24.4–6; see Philipps 1997.

<sup>80</sup> On the oft-forgotten plots against Augustus’ rule, see Vio 2000.

thanks to the oft-forgotten repressiveness of Augustus' military dictatorship. Octavian had succeeded.

In any case, it was in Dio' view too dangerous for Augustus to turn back after Actium. "Who", Maecenas asks, "will spare you if you give your powers back to the people or entrust them to another, when you have injured so many people and practically all of these will aim for supreme power for themselves?".<sup>81</sup> The wise advisor is unequivocal and gives as examples the major dynasts of the last century. Pompeius gave up his extraordinary powers after returning from the East with his loyal army in 62 BCE; and we know what happened to him. Marius and Sulla would certainly have suffered the same fate, had they not died first. As for Caesar, when he had defeated his enemies there was no option but to press on. He could not march back over the Rubicon; it was done (52.17.3–4). Maecenas voices Dio's firm historical view that Octavian, too, could not make a second crossing. It was essential for him to seize this opportunity to solidify his position after Actium; he could not back down now.

In Dio's view Octavian ultimately succeeded because he, unlike his successors, was moderate, respectful, and listened to sensible advice. In the process of showing us that advice in action, the Agrippa-Maecenas dialogue sets out the historian's main causation for the decline of the Republic and Augustus' success. Agrippa's valiant but doomed final defence of the Republic maintains a delicate balance: by praising an idealised δημοκρατία which no longer exists, Agrippa's speech must summarise Dio's view of how dramatically the *res publica* has degenerated from a positive form while at the same time appearing to give a genuine defence of the *status quo*. The result is unconvincing, but that of course was precisely the historian's intention. Maecenas, on the other hand, explains that a different Rome was possible. It was neither necessary nor inevitable that Augustus' monarchy be a tyranny. At this dramatic point of transition in the history of Rome, Octavian could either turn back and follow the fate of his predecessors, or press on and forge the most stable possible monarchy: a strong central government sustained by military force, legitimised by popular and aristocratic approval, tempered by clemency and virtue, and cloaked in a humble and civilian guise.

This perhaps also explains the reason for which Agrippa and Maecenas serve as a shorthand for Augustus' excellence whenever they are mentioned in the narrative after the *recusatio imperii*

---

<sup>81</sup> 52.17.2: τίς γάρ σου φείσεται, ἄν τε ἐς τὸν δῆμον τὰ πράγματα' ἀνώσης, ἄν τε καὶ ἑτέρῳ τινὶ ἐπιτρέψῃς, παμπόλλων μὲν ὄντων τῶν ὑπὸ σοῦ λελυπημένων, πάντων δ' ὡς εἰπεῖν τῆς μοναρχίας ἀντιποιησομένων.

of Book 53. Their interactions with the emperor give Dio an opportunity to show the *civilis princeps* following their advice, and succeeding in his objects by that means. Whenever they enter the scene, Augustus is presented as following carefully Maecenas' programme for the "good emperor". In a list of Agrippa's many building works and public benefactions, Dio notes that he not only enjoyed a life free from envy despite his great position, but was even praised and honoured by the emperor: "the reason for this was that he consulted and cooperated with Augustus in the most humane, celebrated, and beneficial endeavours, and yet did not arrogate to himself any glory for them".<sup>82</sup> When Agrippa died, the historian opines that he had shown himself the most noble of men, and was honoured unstintingly by the emperor for his excellence. As for the inheritance he left to the emperor, the latter generously distributed it to the people in Agrippa's name (54.29.4). It is ironic and deliberate that Agrippa, whose speech argues that it is impossible to find a patriotic statesman under a monarchy, becomes the ideal citizen under Augustus' rule.

On the other hand, Maecenas continues to fill the function he served in Book 52: that of the wise and honest counsellor, unafraid to speak to truth to a temperate and forgiving monarch. When the emperor was on the verge of sentencing men to death, Dio records that Maecenas publicly interposed himself and convinced him otherwise. Augustus, far from being displeased, was glad: "because whenever he was given over to unfitting passion as a result of his own nature or the stress of his affairs, he was set right by the honesty of his friends".<sup>83</sup> Satisfyingly, the interactions between Augustus, Agrippa, and Maecenas demonstrate *in action* those virtues which Maecenas' speech charged the new emperor to possess and which Agrippa predicted he could not as a monarch: clemency, tolerance, humility, trust, and magnanimity.

The elaborate *controversia* of Book 52 is therefore a very special piece of eloquence, unique in the Greek historiography of the Roman Empire. We have seen here that one important function of the debate is to reflect on the ills of the Severan period. Living in an age of instability, dynastic struggles, and occasional tyrannies, Dio took this opportunity to reflect upon the character of the ideal emperor for Rome in two set-piece speeches, drawing several arguments from the Greek tradition of kingship literature. To that reflection he appended concrete and often sophisticated suggestions for reform in the early third century CE. Dio's administrative and financial proposals—

---

<sup>82</sup> 53.23.4: αἴτιον δὲ ὅτι τὰ φιλανθρωπότατα καὶ τὰ εὐκλεέστατα τὰ τε συμφορώτατα καὶ συμβουλευῶν οἱ καὶ συμπράττων οὐδ' ἐπὶ βραχὺ τῆς δόξης αὐτῶν ἀντεποιεῖτο.

<sup>83</sup> 55.7.3: ὅσα αὐτὸς ὑπὸ τε τῆς ἑαυτοῦ φύσεως καὶ ὑπὸ τῆς τῶν πραγμάτων ἀνάγκης καὶ παρὰ τὸ προσήκον ἐθυμοῦτο, ταῦτα τῆ τῶν φίλων παρρησίᾳ διορθοῦτο.

some of which would not be fully realised until long after his time—demonstrate his statecraft and his clear wish to make a contemporary political point with the debate. However, most aspects of the programme for Imperial government set out by Maecenas in fact list changes once put in place by Augustus or his successors. It cannot, therefore, be a straightforward a ‘call to arms’ for a Severan audience. Rather, it surveys the development of Imperial rule over the *longue durée*, and invites the contemporary reader to reflect upon what had until relatively recently been the building-blocks of Rome’s imperial stability.

Yet none of this suggests that the Agrippa-Maecenas debate was a mere political pamphlet, dropped into the text the moment the appropriate dramatic situation occurred. The speeches of Book 52 belong inextricably to Dio’s historical explanation of the transition from Republic to Principate. Indeed, they are so essential to his method that the overarching interpretation of Books 50–56—encompassing Octavian’s rise, his war against Antonius, the means by which he confirmed his monarchy, and made it successful thereafter—would make little sense without them. They offer an important analysis of Octavian’s historical position in the wake of the Battle of Actium, each summarising the risks to his position should he assume a monarchy (Agrippa) or reject it (Maecenas). The risks were great indeed. Agrippa and Maecenas offer a tantalising counterfactual possibility: a history in which Octavian came to be seen as a tyrant and suffered the same fate as his adoptive father, was dethroned by a provincial governor at the head of a loyal army, fell at the hands of plotters against his rule, or perhaps laid down his powers after all and was assassinated. None of these eventualities came to pass. Maecenas articulates, point by point, the historian’s own interpretation of the measures necessary for Augustus to anticipate and neutralise these hazards, all of which the *princeps* will indeed go on to implement in the narrative to follow. Dio’s speaker gives a detailed overview of the virtuous means by which Augustus was to secure acceptance and even celebration of his rule; to make himself a god not in the manner of a Hellenistic tyrant, but in the hearts and minds of his people. It is a gross mistake to be too sentimental about Augustus, and Cassius Dio certainly was not. He simply knew a capable monarch when he saw one—and Agrippa and Maecenas pave the forward road for Octavian to become one. In any case, after the reigns of Commodus and Caracalla, one could hardly censure Dio for a little nostalgia.

## Bibliography

- Adler, E. (2011). "Cassius Dio's Livia and the Conspiracy of Cinna Magnus", *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 51, 133–154.
- Adler, E. (2012). "Cassius Dio's Agrippa-Maecenas Debate: An Operational Code Analysis", *American Journal of Philology* 133/3, 477–520.
- Allen, J. (2020). "Gossip of Violence and Violence of Gossip: Livia's Lament and Its Remedy in Cassius Dio's Severan Context", in C.H. Lange and A.G. Scott (eds.), *Cassius Dio: The Impact of Violence, War, and Civil War* (Leiden and Boston): 46–62.
- Anderson, G. (1993). *The Second Sophistic: A Cultural Phenomenon in the Roman Empire*. London.
- Ando, C. (2016). "Cassius Dio on Imperial Legitimacy, from the Antonines to the Severans", in V. Fromentin et al. (eds.), *Cassius Dion: Nouvelles lectures* (Bordeaux): 567–580.
- Badian, E. (1970). *Lucius Sulla: The Deadly Reformer*, Sydney.
- Barden Dowling, M. (2000). "The Clemency of Sulla", *Historia* 49/3, 303–340.
- Barden Dowling, M. (2006). *Clemency and Cruelty in the Roman World*. Ann Arbor.
- Barnes, T. D. (1984). "The Composition of Cassius Dio's *Roman History*", *Phoenix* 38, 240–255.
- Beard, M. (2015), *SPQR. A History of Ancient Rome*. London.
- Béranger, J. (1935). "Tyranus: Notes sur la notion de la tyrannie chez le Romains particulièrement à l'époque de César et de Cicéron", *Révue des Études Latines* 13, 85–94.
- Bering Staschewski, R. (1981). *Römische Zeitgeschichte bei Cassius Dio*. Bochum.
- Bertrand, E. (2016). "Point de vue de Cassius Dion sur l'impérialisme romain", in V. Fromentin et al. (eds.), *Cassius Dion: Nouvelles lectures* (Bordeaux): 679–700.
- Bleicken, J. (1962). "Der Politische Standpunkt Dios Gegenüber der Monarchie: Die Rede des Maecenas Buch 52.14-40", *Hermes* 90/4, 444–467.
- Brunt, P. A. (1984). "The Role of the Senate in the Augustan Regime". *Classical Quarterly* 34/2, 423–444.
- Burden-Strevens, C. (2015). "Ein völlig romanisierter Mann? Identity, Identification, and Integration in the *Roman History* of Cassius Dio and in Arrian", in S. Roselaar (ed.), *Processes of Cultural Change and Integration in the Roman World* (Leiden and Boston): 287–306.



Burden-Stevens, C. (2016). "Fictitious Speeches, Envy, and the Habituation to Authority: Writing the Collapse of the Roman Republic", in C. H. Lange and J. M. Madsen (eds.), *Cassius Dio: Greek Intellectual and Roman Politician* (Leiden and Boston): 193–216.

Burden-Stevens, C. (2019). "The Republican Dictatorship: an Imperial Perspective", in J. Osgood and C. Baron (eds.), *Cassius Dio and the Late Republic* (Leiden and Boston): 131–157.

Burden-Stevens, C. (2020). *Cassius Dio's Speeches and the Collapse of the Roman Republic*, Leiden and Boston.

Burgess, T. C. (1902). *Epideictic Literature*. Chicago.

Cary, E. (1914–1927). *Cassius Dio: Roman History*. 9 Vols. Cambridge, MA.

Carson, R. A. G. (1957). "Caesar and the Monarchy", *Greece and Rome* 4/1, 46–53.

Coudry, M. (2016a). "Cassius Dio on Pompey's Extraordinary Commands", in C. H. Lange and J. M. Madsen (eds.), *Cassius Dio: Greek Intellectual and Roman Politician* (Leiden and Boston): 33–50.

Coudry, M. (2016b). "Institutions et procédures politiques de la République romaine: les choix lexicaux de Cassius Dion" in V. Fromentin et al. (eds.), *Cassius Dion: Nouvelles lectures* (Bordeaux): 485–518.

Dorandi, T. (1985). "Der 'gute König' bei Philodem und die Rede des Maecenas vor Octavian (Cassius Dio lii, 14–20)", *Klio* 67, 56–60.

Eckert, A. (2014). "Remembering Cultural Trauma: Sulla's Proscriptions, Roman Responses and Christian Perspectives", in E.-M. Becker, J. Dochhorn, and E. K. Holt (eds.), *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions. Insights from Biblical Studies and Beyond* (Göttingen): 262–274.

Eckert, A. (2016). *Lucius Cornelius Sulla in der antiken Erinnerung: Jener Mörder, der sich Felix nannte*, Berlin.

Eckstein, A. (2004). "From the Historical Caesar to the Spectre of Caesarism: The Imperial Administrator as Internal Threat", in P. Baehr and M. Richter (eds.), *Dictatorship in History and Theory* (Cambridge): 279–298.

Espinosa Ruiz, U. (1981). *Debate Agrippa-Mecenas en Dion Cassio. Respuesta Senatorial a la Crisis del Imperio Romano en Época Severiana*. Madrid.

Fechner, D. (1986). *Untersuchungen zu Cassius Dios Sicht der Römischen Republik*. Hildesheim.

Fishwick, D. (1990). “Dio and Maecenas: The Emperor and the Ruler Cult”, *Phoenix* 44/3, 267–275.

Fomin, A. (2015). *How Dio Wrote History*. Diss. Rutgers University.

Fomin, A. (2016). “Speeches in Dio Cassius”, in C. H. Lange and J. M. Madsen (eds.), *Cassius Dio: Greek Intellectual and Roman Politician* (Leiden and Boston): 217–237.

Foulon, E. (2016). “Polybe source de Cassius Dion? Bilan d’une aporie”, in V. Fromentin et al. (eds.), *Cassius Dion: Nouvelles lectures* (Bordeaux): 159–178.

Freyburger-Galland, M.-L. (1997). *Aspects du vocabulaire politique et institutionnel de Dion Cassius*, Paris.

Fromentin, V. (2019). “La fiabilité de Zonaras dans les deux premières décades de l’Histoire romaine de Cassius Dion: le cas des discours”, in C. Burden-Strevens and M. O. Lindholmer (eds.), *Cassius Dio’s Forgotten History of Early Rome* (Leiden and Boston): 27–52.

Gabba, E. (1955). “Sulla storia romana di Cassio Dione”, *Rivista Storica Italiana* 67, 289–333.

Galinsky, K. (2012). *Augustus. Introduction to the Life of an Emperor*. Cambridge.

Giua, M. A. (1981). “Clemenza del sovrano e monarchia illuminata in Cassio Dione 55.14–22”, *Athenaeum* 59, 317–337.

Hammond, M. (1932). “The Significance of the speech of Maecenas in Dio Cassius, Book LII”, *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 63, 82–102.

Hardy, E. G. (1923). *The Monumentum Ancyranum*. Oxford.

Hinard, F. (1988). “De la dictature à la tyrannie. Réflexions sur la dictature de Sylla”, in F. Hinard, (ed.), *Dictatures. Actes de la Table Ronde de Paris, 27–28 Février 1984* (Paris): 87–96.

Horst, C. (2010). “Zur politischen Funktion des Demokratiebegriffes In der Kaiserzeit: Eine Interpretation der Reden Des Agrippa Und Maecenas”, in V. V. Dement'eva and T. Schmitt (eds.), *Volk und Demokratie im Altertum* (Göttingen): 189–208.

Kalyvas, A. (2007). “The Tyranny of Dictatorship: When the Greek Tyrant Met the Roman Dictator”, *Political Theory* 35/4, 412–442.

Keaveney, A. (2005). *Sulla: the Last Republican*. Second Edition, London and New York.

Kemezis, A. (2014). *Greek Narratives of the Roman Empire Under the Severans*. Cambridge.

Kuhlmann, P. (2010). “Die Maecenas-Rede bei Cassius Dio: Anachronismen und intertextuelle Bezüge”, in D. Pausch (ed.), *Stimmen der Geschichte: Funktionen von Reden in der antiken Historiographie* (Berlin): 109–124.

Kuhn-Chen, B. (2002). *Geschichtskonzeption griechischer Historiker in 2. und 3. Jahrhundert n. Chr.: Untersuchungen zu den Werken von Appian, Cassius Dio und Herodian*, Frankfurt.

Lange, C. H. (2011). “The Battle of Actium: A Reconsideration”, *Classical Quarterly* 61/2, 608–623.

Lange, C. H. (2021a). “Cassius Dio on Perugia: A Study in Human Nature During Civil War”, in J. M. Madsen and C. H. Lange (eds.), *Cassius Dio the Historian: Methods and Approaches* (Leiden and Boston).

Lange, C. H. (forthcoming 2021b). “Augustus: C-in-C, Strategist, and Field Commander” in R. Frolov and C. W. Burden-Strevens (eds.), *Leadership and Political Initiative in Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome* (Leiden and Boston).

Letta, C. (1979). “La composizione dell’opera di Cassio Dione. Cronologia e sfondo storico-politico”, in E. Gabba (ed.), *Ricerche di storiografia greca di età romana* (Pisa): 117–189.

Levi, M. A. (1937). “Dopo Azio: Appunti sulle fonte augustee: Dione Cassio”, *Athenaeum* 15, 415–434.

Lewis, S. (2006). *Ancient Tyranny*. Edinburgh.

Lindholmer, M. O. (2017). “Cassius Dio, Competition and the Decline of the Roman Republic”, M.Phil. Diss., Glasgow.

Lindholmer, M. O. (2019). “Breaking the Idealistic Paradigm: Competition in Dio’s Earlier Republic”, in C. Burden-Strevens and M. O. Lindholmer (eds.), *Cassius Dio’s Forgotten History of Early Rome* (Leiden and Boston): 190–214.

Madsen, J. M. (2020). *Cassius Dio*, London.

Makhlajuk, A. V. and Markov, K. V. (2008). “Historian and Challenges of His Times: Cassius Dio’s *Roman History* as a Document of the Third-Century Historical and Political Thought”, *Herald of Ancient History [VDI]* 2, 38–56.

Mallan, C. (2016). “Parrhesia in Cassius Dio”, in C. H. Lange and J. M. Madsen (eds.), *Cassius Dio: Greek Intellectual and Roman Politician* (Leiden and Boston): 258–275.

Manuwald, B. (1979). *Cassius Dio und Augustus: Philologische Untersuchungen zu den Büchern 45–56 des dionischen Geschichtswerkes*, Wiesbaden.

Markov, K. (2013). “The Concepts of ‘Democracy’ and ‘Tyranny’ in the Speech of Agrippa in Cassius Dio 52.1–13: Conventional Rhetoric or Political Theory?” in A. Mehl, A. V. Makhlajuk, and O. Gabelko (eds.), *Ruthenia classica aetatis novae: A Collection of Works by Russian Scholars in Greek and Roman History* (Stuttgart): 215–231.

- McGlew, J. F. (1993). *Tyranny and Political Culture in Ancient Greece*. Ithaca.
- McKechnie, P. (1981). "Cassius Dio's Speech of Agrippa: A Realistic Alternative to Imperial Government?", *Greece and Rome* 28/2, 150–155.
- Meyer, P. (1891). *De Maecenatis oratione a Dione ficta*, Stuttgart.
- Millar, F. (1964). *A Study of Cassius Dio*, Oxford.
- Millar, F. (1977). *The Emperor in the Roman World*, London.
- Millar, F. (2002). *Rome the Greek World, and the East: Volume 1: The Roman Republic and the Augustan Revolution*, Chapel Hill.
- Minas-Nerpel, M. and Pfeiffer, S. (2010). "Establishing Roman Rule in Egypt: The Trilingual Stela of C. Cornelius Gallus From Philae", in K. Lembke, M. Minas-Nerpel and S. Pfeiffer (eds.), *Tradition and Transformation. Egypt under Roman Rule* (Leiden and Boston): 265–298.
- Mommsen, T. (1875). *Römisches Staatsrecht*. Vol. 2.1. (repr. 2010), Cambridge.
- Phillipps, D. A. (1997). "The Conspiracy of Egnatius Rufus and the Election of Suffect Consuls under Augustus", *Historia* 46/1, 103–112.
- Rawson, E. (1975). "Caesar's Heritage: Hellenistic Kings and their Roman Equals", *Journal of Roman Studies* 65, 148–159.
- Rees, W. (2011). *Cassius Dio, Human Nature, and the late Roman Republic*. Diss. Oxford.
- Reinhold, M. (1988). *From Republic to Principate: An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History, Books 49–52 (36–29 BC)*, Atlanta.
- Reinhold, M. and Swan, P. M. (1990). "Cassius Dio's Assessment of Augustus", in K. A. Raaflaub, M. Toher, and G. W. Bowersock (eds.), *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate* (Berkeley): 155–173.
- Rich, J. W. (1989). "Dio on Augustus", in A. Cameron (ed.), *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History* (London): 86–110.
- Rich, J. W. (1990). *Cassius Dio. The Augustan Settlement ('Roman History' 53–55.9)*, Warminster.
- Rich, J. W. (2010). "Deception, lies and economy with the truth: Augustus and the establishment of the Principate", in A. J. Turner, J. H. K. O. Chong-Gossard, and F. J. Vervaeke (eds.), *Private and Public Lies. The Discourses of Despotism and Deceit in the Graeco-Roman World* (Leiden and Boston): 167–191.

Rich, J. W. (2019). "Speech in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, Books 1–35", in C. Burden-Strevens and M. O. Lindholmer (eds.), *Cassius Dio's Forgotten History of Early Rome* (Leiden and Boston): 217–284.

Rosenblitt, A. (2019). *Rome After Sulla*. London.

Schwartz, E. (1899). "Cassius (40)". *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* 3.2, 1684–1722.

Sion-Jenkis, K. (2000). *Von der Republik zum Prinzipat: Ursachen für den Verfassungswandel in Rom im historischen Denken der Antike*, Stuttgart.

Swan, P. M. (2004). *The Augustan Succession: An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History Books 55–56 (9 BC-AD 14)*, Oxford.

Syme, R. (1939). *The Roman Revolution*, Oxford.

Urso, G. (2016). "Cassius Dio's Sulla: *Exemplum* of Cruelty and Republican Dictator", in C.H. Lange and J. M. Madsen (eds.), *Cassius Dio: Greek Intellectual and Roman Politician* (Leiden and Boston): 11–32.

Vervaeke, F. J. (2010). "Abrogating despotic power through deceit: the Pompeian model for Augustan *dissimulatio*", in A. J. Turner, J. H. K. O. Chong-Gossard and F. J. Vervaeke (eds.), *Private and Public Lies. The Discourses of Despotism and Deceit in the Graeco-Roman World* (Leiden and Boston): 133–166.

Vielberg, M. (2016). "Ciceros Staatsschrift und die philosophische Tradition der Verfassungsdebatte bei Cassius Dio und Philostrat." *Wiener Studien* 129, 233–256.

Vio, F. R. (2000). *Le voci del dissenso: Ottaviano Augusto e i suoi oppositori*, Padua.

Wallace-Hadrill, A. (1982). "Civilis Princeps: Between Citizen and King", *Journal of Roman Studies* 72, 32–48.

Welch, K. (2019). "Dio and the Virtues", in J. Osgood and C. Baron (eds.), *Cassius Dio and the Late Republic* (Leiden and Boston): 97–128.

Winterling, A. (2009). *Politics and Society in Imperial Rome*, Chichester.

Zawadzki, R. (1983). "Die Konzeption der römischen Staatsverfassung in der politischen Doktrin des Cassius Dio", *Analecta Cracoviensia* 15, 271–318.