ASSESSING INSTITUTIONAL AND IDEOLOGICAL CHANGES: THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF *DĒMOKRATIA* IN THE LATE HELLENISTIC AND EARLY IMPERIAL PERIODS*

EVALUACIÓN DE CAMBIOS INSTITUCIONALES E IDEOLÓGICOS: LAS TRANSFORMACIONES DE LA DĒMOKRATIA EN LOS PERÍODOS HELENÍSTICO TARDÍO Y ROMANO-IMPERIAL TEMPRANO

Cédric Brélaz**
Université de Fribourg

ABSTRACT: Among the various changes which affected Greek cities during the late Hellenistic and early Imperial periods with regard to political practices and political culture, the disappearance of the concept of *dēmokratia* from the public discourse is certainly one of the most striking features. Although *dēmokratia* had been a core value during the whole Hellenistic period, as Greek cities asserted their ability to maintain their own institutions, the cessation of democratic references from the Augustan Age represents a turning point in Greek political culture. This paper surveys the meanings of *dēmokratia* in the few known instances during the Imperial period and explores the reasons why local elites in Greek cities decided to cull this term from their vocabulary to describe contemporary situations. It shows that, while

** **Correspondence to:** Cédric Brélaz, Université de Fribourg, Département d'histoire, Institut du monde antique et byzantin, Rue Pierre-Aeby 16, CH-1700 Fribourg, Suisse – cedric.brelaz@unifr.ch – http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8170-2140.

the absence of the concept of *dēmokratia* alone is insufficient to prove that any form of democratic practices was abolished, the use of more neutral expressions such as *politeia*, which had an Aristotelian flavour, is certainly indicative of the predominant role which was now played by conservative aristocrats in the government of Greek cities.

KEYWORDS: Greek cities, Roman Empire, democracy, popular participation, political culture, political institutions.

RESUMEN: Entre los diversos cambios que afectaron a las ciudades griegas durante los períodos helenístico tardío y romano-imperial temprano, en relación con las prácticas políticas y la cultura política, la desaparición del concepto de *dēmokratia* del discurso público constituye, sin duda, uno de los aspectos más llamativos. Aunque la *dēmokratia* había sido un valor central durante todo el período helenístico, cuando las ciudades griegas exponían su capacidad para mantener sus propias instituciones, el abandono de las referencias democráticas a partir de la era augustea marca un punto de inflexión en la cultura política griega. Este artículo analiza los significados de *dēmokratia* en los escasos casos documentados durante el período imperial y explora las razones por las cuales las élites locales de las ciudades griegas decidieron suprimir este término de su vocabulario para describir las situaciones contemporáneas. Se argumenta que, aunque la ausencia del concepto de *dēmokratia* por sí sola no basta para demostrar que se abolieran las prácticas democráticas en cualquiera de sus formas, el uso de expresiones más neutrales como *politeia*, con un matiz aristotélico, es ciertamente indicativo del papel predominante que los aristócratas conservadores comenzaron a desempeñar en el gobierno de las ciudades griegas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ciudades griegas, Imperio romano, democracia, participación popular, cultura política, instituciones políticas.

The period from ca. 200 BCE to 100 CE, with the creation of the first provinces in the Western Mediterranean, in Sicily and in Spain, and then the intervention into the Greek East, was crucial for Roman expansion outside Italy. This period was characterised by the deep and continuous involvement of the Roman state apparatus in many territories, which consisted of wars, violence, and economic exploitation, leading in the long run to transformations of the political structures and the civic practices of local communities. Epigraphic evidence proves to be of primary importance for assessing this phenomenon. Since the nineteenth century, epigraphic evidence has played a major role in our understanding of the institutional aspects of the integration of local communities into the Roman Empire from the mid-first century BCE, especially with the charter of the colony *Iulia Genetiva* at Urso in Baetica and the various fragments of the Flavian municipal law pertaining also to Spain.[1] The situation is more complicated as far as the Eastern Mediterranean is concerned, since, unlike many local communities in the Western provinces, Greek cities were never provided with a homogeneous constitutional charter and were not turned into Roman *municipia* —as a matter of fact, we only know of two of them in the Greek-speaking provinces: Stobi in Upper Macedonia and Coila in Thracian Chersonesus (Brélaz 2018, 286-287). Even if the so-called «provincial laws», such as the *lex Pompeia* in Pontus-Bithynia (which is only partly known thanks to references by Pliny the Younger) may have included provisions regarding the functioning of some aspects of local institutions (Kantor 2020), the political structures of Greek cities on the whole were not affected by Roman rule. The difference with the West is due to the fact that, for both cultural and practical reasons, Romans saw in the Greek *polis* the most efficient model to run a local community and, for that reason, they were ready to keep the traditional organisation of Greek cities, to grant them a good share of local autonomy, and even to rely on them for the administration of the provinces on a daily basis (Brélaz 2021b).

Although a constitutional charter was not imposed upon Greek cities by Roman power, the rise of Roman sovereignty, especially from the beginning of the Principate, brought about many changes in how civic institutions operated. The Augustan period was instrumental in this process: the emergence at the top of the Roman state of an autocratic and authoritarian regime, and its claim that Rome should now have control over fields Greek cities had controlled for centuries, led to the overturning of many Hellenistic institutions. Some of these changes are expressed in the epigraphic evidence, or rather are made clear, if I may say, through the silence of inscriptions on some issues. Let us take the two main fields over which Rome, from the Augustan Principate, intended to exercise sovereignty: military defence and jurisdiction. Whereas there had been references in decrees to the use of local armies by Greek cities until the 40s BCE, with Greek cities taking part in Roman civil wars and relying on their own resources, mentions of this local military apparatus entirely vanished from inscriptions from the reign of Augustus onwards, with the only exception of some free cities, Rhodes in particular (Brélaz 2005; Brélaz 2015). This was the consequence of the elimination of local armies during that period, since imperial authorities were now considering that Rome was the only power entitled to have military forces and to take care of the external (and to some extent also internal) security of the provinces. Similar changes can be seen in the field of jurisdiction: whereas calling in foreign judges was very common to solve litigations between different cities during the Hellenistic period, this institution progressively disappeared from our evidence from the mid-first century BCE (Fournier 2010, 536-543). As in the case of local ar-

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[1] Crawford 1996, I, 393-454, no. 25 with the new fragment *AE* 2006, 645; *AE* 1986, 333. See González 2008.

mies, such a change shows the transition from a multipolar world towards to the rule of only one power. This should encourage us to dismiss the usual partition between the Hellenistic period and the Imperial period, and to have a closer look at the changes in epigraphic practice during the period 50 BCE – 50 CE. Other changes due to the rise of Roman rule in the late Hellenistic/early Imperial period which are revealed by epigraphic evidence include, for instance, Greek cities granting the title «patrōn» —which has an obvious Roman origin— to Roman officials from the mid-second century BCE (Canali De Rossi 2001; Eilers 2002); the gradual disappearance of the institution of proxeny which was superseded by the increasing globalisation of international relations (Mack 2015); and the creation of new local offices by Greek cities in mainland Greece and in Asia Minor during the first century CE, officers which were responsible for two areas crucial for Roman rule: public order (*paraphylakes, eirenarchai*) and taxation (*dekaprōtoi*) (Brélaz 2021c).

In what follows, I would like to focus on a specific term and to assess the political, institutional, and ideological implications of its disappearance from the epigraphic evidence during the late first century BCE/early first century CE: *dēmokratia*. As one can guess, this is a critical issue, not only for Greek cities at the time (in order to understand what happened to Greek democracy under Roman imperial rule), but also in scholarship today due to the many preconceptions about what democracy was, or was supposed to be, in the late Hellenistic period. Addressing the issue of the transformations of the concept of *dēmokratia* from the late Hellenistic period onwards is helpful to assess the changes brought about by Roman rule in Greek political institutions *and* Greek political culture, changes which are also mirrored in inscriptions, as we shall see.

Post-Classical democracies[2]

For a long time the common view has been, and for many scholars still is today, that Greek democracy collapsed during the second century BCE, due to a twofold phenomenon: on the one hand, the increasing influence of the richest citizens who became dominant in civic life during the Hellenistic period thanks to magnificent benefactions and through their monopolisation of public offices (Hamon 2007); and on the other hand, the constant support which was given by Roman authorities to local aristocrats in Greece and Asia Minor. In the past, this view has been expressed by some of the most influential scholars, for instance by A. H. M. Jones (Jones 1940, 170). The most radical comment in this respect certainly came from G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, the Marxist historian and famous author of *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, who, after having thoroughly compiled all the evidence pointing to the participation of the people in the public life of Greek cities under Roman rule in a very rich appendix, paradoxically and peremptorily declared that all this language and apparatus of democracy was just, «an empty shell» (De Ste. Croix 1981, 527). In this specific case, ideology led De Ste. Croix to deny any democratic reality to Greek cities of that period. Lastly, Paul Cartledge in a book intended to be a general history of democracy in Antiquity considered that the «death» of democracy should be pinpointed during the late Classical/early Hellenistic period (Cartledge 2016).

In many respects, the way the issue has been addressed thus far in scholarship has been very normative, considering that the only possible way for a democracy to be implemented in Antiquity was

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[2] On the designation «post-Classical» see Salmeri 2007; van Nijf & Alston 2011.

to align with the fifth- and fourth-century BCE Athenian experience. Most of the time, post-Classical democracies are judged from what we know of fourth-century Athenian *dēmokratia* thanks to a huge number of epigraphic copies of decrees, to the testimony of the Attic orators, and to Aristotle's *Constitution of the Athenians*. All this enabled Mogens Hansen to write his masterful book on Athenian democracy in the age of Demosthenes (Hansen 1991). Against the tendency of scholarship to examine Greek democracies outside and after Athens through the lens of the Athenian model, we should move, I think, from the *Constitution of the Athenians*, in which Aristotle aimed to write a constitutional history of Athens, to the *Politics*, in which Aristotle and his school adopted a broader view and took into consideration the diversity of political experiences throughout the Greek world.[3] In the *Politics* Aristotle admits there were «different forms (or categories : *eidos/eidē*)» of democracy and talks of *dēmokratiai* in the plural form (Arist., *Pol.* 6, 1, 4 (1317a)). Furthermore, he was even ready to recognise a regime which required a certain level of property as a qualification for public office within one of these categories of *dēmokratia*, a definition openly conflicting with the fourth-century Athenian conception of *dēmokratia* (Arist., *Pol.* 4, 4, 3 (1291b)). According to this expandable definition, the regimes which were established at Athens by the Macedonians after the Lamian War in 322 BCE, or a few years later during the government of Demetrius of Phalerus, which both introduced a property qualification for the citizens to take part in the *ekklēsia*, could be described as *dēmokratiai* (Poddighe 2002; O'Sullivan 2009). In Athens itself, during most of the third century BCE, the use of the word *dēmokratia* was highly contentious and had many ideological implications because of the recurrent encroachments on Athenian sovereignty by the Antigonid kings and because political factions commonly accused each other of perverting *dēmokratia*, each one claiming to be the supporters of the original and true democracy (Luraghi 2018).

If we now turn back to the assumptions made by the scholars mentioned above about the disappearance (De Ste. Croix even spoke of the «destruction») of Greek democracy from the second century BCE onwards, having Aristotle's broader definition of *dēmokratia* in mind, we cannot simply consider the late Hellenistic period to be the abrupt end of the history of Greek democracy, and we must also examine what civic life looked like in later periods.[4] As for the Roman Imperial period, we can observe in fact that «the people» were ubiquitous in the public life and in the public discourse of Greek cities (Oppeneer 2018; Brélaz 2021a):

—first, apart from some exceptions, and unlike the Council, there was no general restriction based on socio-economic criteria which would have prevented citizens from taking part in the popular assembly, and the *ekklēsia*, which continued to meet on a regular basis, is constantly mentioned alongside the *boulē* in the epigraphic evidence as one of the two political bodies responsible for the decision-making process (Fernoux 2011);

—second, irrespective of the official role which was accorded to the *dēmos* within the functioning of the political institutions, the people also had power as a crowd (referred to as *plēthos* or *ochlos* in Greek): simply because they were more numerous than the notables, the people could put pressure on the elite within or outside regular assemblies, and there is plenty of evidence of popular unrests and riots in Greek cities during the Imperial period (Brélaz forthcoming);

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[3] For such a perspective on democracies, see Robinson's underestimated books: Robinson 1997; Robinson 2011.

[4] For a view rehabilitating Greek democracy during the Hellenistic period, see Gruen 1993. De Ste. Croix's observations about the domination of the elite in the Hellenistic cities, in particular in the case of euergetism, may still be valid: see Domingo Gygax 2019.

—third, civic ideology was deeply embedded in the public life of those cities: references to the *dēmos* were constantly used by the elite themselves, in particular when they were offering benefactions to their fellow-citizens, as well as in decrees praising them for their generosity and celebrating their civic-minded values at length (Zuiderhoek 2008); moreover, public ceremonies such as festivals and rituals deliberately put the people on display through the participation of all of the citizens like a kind of theatrical performance, a phenomenon which has rightly been identified already in the Hellenistic period (Chaniotis 1997; Chaniotis 2010).

Whether the regime in Greek cities in the early Imperial period can be described as democratic is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I would like to examine what happened to the idea and concept of *dēmokratia* during the Imperial period: Was it still used? What was the interplay between this concept which had a long and complex tradition in Greek political culture, and civic life as it was experienced in Greek cities in the Imperial period? In what follows, I will point out several instances of the word *dēmokratia* in the epigraphic evidence, in the orators' speeches, and in Greek-speaking literature from the first century BCE onwards.[5]

THE USE OF *DĒMOKRATIA* IN AN OFFICIAL CONTEXT: THE FREE AND «DEMOCRATIC» CITIES

The first striking thing which needs to be pointed out is that the number of known instances of the word *dēmokratia* in the epigraphic evidence dramatically dropped during the first century BCE. During the Hellenistic period, democratic terminology had spread all over the Greek world, as most cities followed a similar pattern for their institutions, which implied at a minimum the participation of citizens in the *ekklēsia*, the involvement of the popular assembly in the decision-making process, drawing by lot or election of officials by the people, and the yearly renewal of the Council (Grieb 2008; Carlsson 2010; Hamon 2009 [2010]). All these features, even if not as radical as in fourth-century BCE Athenian democracy, still formed a sort of «democratic *koinē*», as it was called by Philippe Gauthier (Gauthier 1984). Yet, the last examples of the use of the term *dēmokratia* in this sense go back to the mid-first century BCE. We know instances from Pergamon (*OGIS* 449) or Cnidus (*I.Knidos* 51-55) in the context of the Roman civil wars in the 40s. After that, the term almost entirely vanished from the epigraphic evidence during the Imperial period.

The few known exceptions all describe free cities, that is cities which in theory were not subject to Roman provincial administration and were able to use their own laws. Interestingly, one of these few instances can be found in a letter of the emperor Nero to the city of Rhodes from 55 CE, a few years after the city had lost its privileged status as a free city, the word having certainly been previously used by the Rhodian ambassadors themselves who spoke out for their homeland before Nero (*Syll.*[3] 810). In this case, *dēmokratia* refers to the freedom that the city of Rhodes wanted Roman power to return to them. This use of *dēmokratia*, which is often associated with other words such as *eleutheria* («freedom») or *autonomia* («independence»), is perfectly consistent with the general meaning of *dēmokratia* during the Hellenistic period (Ferrary 1987-1989; Dmitriev 2011). Cities typically understood *dēmokratia* as their ability to govern themselves and their

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[5] This paper is not intended as an exhaustive survey of the concept of *dēmokratia* in the late Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods. The topic will be discussed at length in a forthcoming monograph on democracy, popular participation, and civic ideology in Greek cities under Roman rule.

independence from the power of the Hellenistic kings, and they were proud to assert that they enjoyed *dēmokratia*. In this context, rather than technically qualifying how the institutions operated, in contrast with an oligarchy, for instance, in the late Hellenistic period *dēmokratia* came to have a general meaning referring to any political community that relied on a body politic and enjoyed self-government. One of the most explicit examples of this conception of *dēmokratia* can be found in the bilingual dedication of a statue of Zeus/Jupiter offered by the Lycian confederacy on the Capitoline Hill in Rome to thank the Roman state for the recovery of its independence from Rhodian rule after 167 BCE: in this inscription *dēmokratia* is translated in the Latin version of the same text as *libertas* (*ILLRP* 174). Through the use of the word *dēmokratia* in the Imperial period, cities like Rhodes were proud to express that, contrary to the cities which were directly dependent on the Roman provincial administration, they were able to maintain their full autonomy —although no longer, during the Imperial period, a real independence.

We find another later instance of the word in Carian Stratonicea, which also was a free city. In this case, however, the expression seems to imply more than simply the freedom enjoyed by the city, and seems to characterize its constitution (*I.Stratonikeia* 14). In fact, the institutions of several free cities during the Imperial period —like Athens and Cyzicus, but also Rhodes as we have just seen, as well as Stratonicea itself (but interestingly, apparently not Aphrodisias)— maintained distinctively democratic features which were absent from most of the other cities which were subject to Roman rule, such as the drawing of offices by lot among all citizens and the turnover of members of the Council, or the ability of the *dēmos* to gather and serve as a court.[6] This awareness of the continuance of some of the democratic specificities of their institutions into the Imperial period might have encouraged the people of Stratonicea to depict themselves in the late second century CE «living in a city organised as a democracy». This difference between the cities which were in theory independent from Roman power and those which were not indirectly confirms the influence Rome had on the transformations of local institutions towards a limitation of the competencies of the *dēmos* in Greek cities from the late Hellenistic period onwards —although Rome never issued a law which expressly aimed to restrict the power of the people in local communities. In the case of Rhodes, the democratic characteristics of its institutions were explicitly emphasised by Dio Chrysostom and Aelius Aristides, who both used the word *dēmokratia* to refer to the Rhodian constitution at their time (D.Chrys., *Or.* 31, 58; Aristid., *Or.* 24, 22).[7] This is all the more remarkable given that neither did so for any of the other cities they visited, and that the concept of *dēmokratia*, when used by orators and writers in the second century CE, always refers to experiences of the past.

A FOSSILISED CONCEPT: THE CLASSICAL ATHENIAN *DĒMOKRATIA*

One of the most common uses of *dēmokratia* in the Greek-speaking literature of the Imperial period is to refer to the regime of Classical Athens. This is very frequent in Plutarch's biographies, for instance, especially of Athenian statesmen.[8] Dio Chrysostom as well, in some of his speeches delivered in front of the *ekklēsia* in various cities throughout Asia Minor, uses the technical word *dēmokratia* when he alludes to historical examples taken from Classical Athens (see e.g. D.Chrys.,

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[6] For the various cases under discussion here see Geagan 1967, 62-91; Caldesi Valeri 1999; Hamon 2005, 140-143; Fournier 2010, 185-204.

[7] See Franco 2008; Fernoux, Gangloff & Guerber 2021.

[8] See e.g. Plu., *Them.* 19, 6 ; *Per.* 16, 1 ; *Alc.* 25, 6 ; *Cim.* 10, 8 ; *Phoc.* 32, 1.

Or. 50, 2). In the context of the Classicising perception of Greek history which was typical for the authors of the Second Sophistic, *dēmokratia* is described as a kind of fossilised concept necessarily associated with the political experience of fifth- and fourth-century BCE Athens. This evocation of Athens as the paradigm for *dēmokratia* is especially clear in Pausanias's depiction of Athens's early history where Theseus is, according to a local tradition, presented as the inventor of democracy, even before Solon's reforms (Paus. 1, 3, 3).

Greek interpretations of the Roman constitution

Next to the many references to the regime of Classical Athens, the same word *dēmokratia* is extensively used by Plutarch to describe the Roman state during the Republican period (see e.g. Plu., *Publ.* 10, 6). Admittedly, Greek-speaking authors of the Imperial period, Cassius Dio for instance, were willing to acknowledge, after Polybius (Plb. 6, 11, 11-12; 6, 14),[9] that the mixed constitution of the Roman state during the Republican period included some democratic features because the citizens gathered into political assemblies (*comitia*) and the people were allowed to take part in the election of the magistrates. However, when describing the Roman state as a whole as being a *dēmokratia*, Plutarch does not argue that its constitution was predominantly democratic in the Athenian sense. In this case, *dēmokratia* is rather a translation, or more accurately a transposition, into Greek of the Latin expression *res publica*: the Roman state was said to be a *res publica* because it relied on the *populus Romanus* which, together with the Senate, was the holder of the sovereignty of the political community formed by the Roman citizens. Since *dēmos* was the most appropriate Greek word to translate the notion of *populus/publicus*, *dēmokratia* was used to refer to the Roman state itself, irrespective of the actual role played by the people in the institutions.

The use of the word *dēmokratia* to characterise the Roman *res publica*, however, was not self-evident. Tellingly, Polybius himself never characterised the Roman constitution as being a *dēmokratia* (Polverini 2005). To the best of my knowledge, the first author to have done so seems to have been the historian Nicolaus of Damascus, a contemporary of Augustus (Nic.Dam., *Vit. Caes.* (*FGH* 90 F 130), 61). Clearly, his use of the word *dēmokratia* to describe the *res publica* was made possible by the emergence of the Augustan monarchy he experienced himself: the past *res publica* was described as a *dēmokratia* not because it was felt to be a democracy in the Greek sense, but only because in comparison with, and in contrast to, the new regime, the *res publica* was retrospectively seen as a period of freedom —*libertas* would be the word in Latin, which was the concept used by Livy to refer to the Roman people after they had been freed from the rule of the kings (Liv. 2, 1, 1), and *dēmokratia* should, in this context, be understood in terms of the meaning it most commonly had in the late Hellenistic period.

A concept irrelevant for Greek cities in the Imperial period

Whereas orators and thinkers like Dio Chrysostom and Plutarch frequently used the word *dēmokratia* to describe past political experiences, they would refrain from using it to qualify the institutions and the public life of Greek cities in their own time. Dio, however, was well aware of the

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[9] See Nicolet 1983.

competencies the people still had in the decision-making process since he himself delivered many speeches on political issues in front of the *ekklēsia* in various cities, as already mentioned, not only in his native city of Prusa in Bithynia but also in Tarsus in Cilicia, for instance (Cuvigny 1994; Ma forthcoming). The most vivid depiction of what a meeting of a popular assembly might have looked like in the Imperial period is given by the same Dio in his *Euboicus* speech in which the orator staged different speakers addressing the people, participants in the *ekklēsia* applauding or booing them, the main officials being unable to restore calm in the assembly, and the local elite being put under pressure by the people (D.Chrys., *Or.* 7, 24-26).[10] Yet, when he refers to political life in the Greek cities of his time, Dio avoids any characterisation of their regime and only uses the more generic word *dēmos* to emphasise the role played by the citizenry (see e.g. D.Chrys., *Or.* 41, 2).

The contrast is even more striking in the case of Plutarch. In his *Precepts of Statecraft* (*Politika Paraggelmata*), which was conceived as a kind of handbook of political behaviour compiling advice for the *politikoi andres*, the «politicians» (namely the elite), of the cities of his time, Plutarch does not even mention the word *dēmokratia* (there are actually two instances, but both refer to the Classical Athenian experience: Plu., *Mor.* 802B; 816F). In this handbook, Plutarch speaks at large of the relationship between the elite and the people, he expounds what he thinks is the best way for the elite to keep the cities quiet and to maintain the social and political order, but he does not address the issue of the very nature of the regime. Plutarch's omission of democracy in his handbook —while the same author constantly refers to Classical Athens or to the Roman Republic as *dēmokratia* in his other works— suggests that he considered democracy to no longer be an option for the Greek cities of his time. For Plutarch, the governance of Greek cities under Roman rule is no longer a matter of political agency. It is now simply a matter of controlling the crowd and of reducing the tension between the elite and the people. Tellingly, the word which is most frequently used by Plutarch in his *Precepts of Statecraft* to refer to the people is not *dēmos*, but *hoi polloi* («the numerous»)[11], as if forming a large number of people was now —in their relationship with, and by contrast to, «the first» (*hoi prōtoi*)— the main characteristic of the ordinary citizens, who by this terminology become depoliticised.

Theoretical, fictional, metaphorical *dēmokratiai*

Other references to *dēmokratia* in political literature during the Imperial period all convey the same image of a regime which was regarded as entirely fictional for their contemporaries. In a short, unfinished treatise which was erroneously attributed to Plutarch and which aimed to determine which kind of regime should be considered the best, the author discusses the potential advantages of the three typical categories of political regimes: *monarchia*, *oligarchia*, and *dēmokratia* ([Plu.], *Mor.* 826C-827C). This, however, was pure theory, a philosophical discussion fitting the Platonic tradition disconnected from the political, social, and institutional realities of Greek cities under Roman rule. In the end, as it should be, the author would of course give his preference for monarchy, like Plato. This example shows that *dēmokratia* could be taken into consideration from a theoretical point of view, but was not considered a regime which could have an actual application for the government of contemporary cities.

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[10] See Ma 2000.

[11] See e.g. Plu., *Mor.* 800F ; 801E ; 802D ; 811E ; 813B ; 814C ; 817D ; 822A.

In his long treatise on monarchy (*Peri basileias*), in which the author intends to teach Trajan to be a good ruler, Dio Chrysostom, for his part, makes a small concession towards *dēmokratia* (D.Chrys., *Or.* 3, 47). He admits that *dēmokratia* could in theory be a fair regime, but was impossible to implement because of the excess of the people, who by nature were unpredictable and irrational; therefore democratic regimes could not have the required stability and would fall apart in the end. This is consistent with the recurrent idea in political philosophy, relying on an elite preconception about the people, that *dēmokratia* necessarily devolves into a perverted form and tends to become an *ochlokratia*, a regime ruled by the crowd (*ochlos*).[12]

Next to theory and fiction, *dēmokratia* could also be used as a metaphor. In his *Roman Oration*, Aelius Aristides praises Rome for bringing together the Greeks who had been fighting each other for centuries and for allowing them to live in peace under the benevolent protection of the Roman emperor. In this view, the Roman Empire, due to the integration of the entire world (the *oikoumenē*), is depicted as if it were a single *polis*, universal and cosmopolitan, with local communities scattered in the provinces being the single demes or «communes». Aristides goes even further and pretends that the local elite, due to their active involvement in the self-administration of local communities and due to the fact that they were chosen by governors to form jury courts for provincial jurisdiction, had a share in the government of the Empire. This system where power was allegedly exercised in the people's interest was described by Aristides as the epitome of democracy (Aristid., *Or.* 26, 36-38; 59-60). In this example, the concept of *dēmokratia* is instrumentalised and distorted to, ironically enough, be applied to Roman imperial rule. Obviously, the Roman Empire was not a federal state and the share of power which was given to local communities, in reality, was unilaterally granted by Rome and could be removed at any time —and this also applies to the privileged status of free city (Millar 1999). The fact that Aristides could put forward such a radical reinterpretation of *dēmokratia* confirms that the concept was no longer considered relevant for describing the political realities of Greek cities at that time.

From *DĒMOKRATIA* to *POLITEIA*

At the end of this short survey of some of the uses, and non-uses, of the word *dēmokratia* in the political discourse during the Imperial period, it is time to examine the reasons which could account for this reluctance to use this term to refer to contemporary realities. In this analysis, the answer cannot just be that Greek cities were no longer democracies. It would be too simplistic to produce graphs of epigraphic data showing the massive drop in the use of the term *dēmokratia* and to use them as evidence to prove that any form of democracy had disappeared in Greek cities from the beginning of the Imperial period and that the concept is not relevant to a historical examination of political life in those communities.

Admittedly, the regimes of most Greek cities under Roman imperial rule certainly fail to comply with most of the criteria listed by Aristotle himself for democracies, even for democracies outside Athens, especially because of the limitations on accessing public offices for ordinary citizens and the predominant role played by the Council, which was now a closed group of lifetime members instead of an assembly of citizens drawn by lots and serving only for one year. From a technical point of view, however, these regimes were not oligarchies either, since the power was not re-

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[12] See Plb. 6, 57, 5-9.

served for just a few dozen people as in Classical oligarchic regimes (Simonton 2017), since there were no property qualifications to attend the popular assembly, and since the people were constantly involved in the decision-making process. An oxymoron such as «oligarchic republics» could perhaps be appropriate for describing the regime of Greek cities during the Imperial period.

If we look at the distribution of the instances of *dēmokratia* over time, however, it cannot be a coincidence that the term vanished suddenly from the epigraphic evidence at the end of the first century BCE, and the Augustan age must have been a turning point in this, although censorship from imperial power must certainly be ruled out. When more than two centuries later Cassius Dio came to depict the establishment of the new regime of the Principate and staged Augustus's two most important advisers, Maecenas and Agrippa, having a debate about which would be the best form of government to implement, *monarchia* or *dēmokratia*, using the vocabulary of the Greek philosophical tradition for this purpose (Horst 2010; Adler 2012), the suppression of popular assemblies in local communities was among the advice given to Augustus by Maecenas (D.C. 52, 30, 2). But, like the entire speech of Maecenas, this was all apocryphal. None of the proposals which are listed by Maecenas in his speech aiming to restrain the autonomy of local communities were ever implemented by Augustus, or probably even conceived by Maecenas. Through Maecenas's speech, Cassius Dio, as a senator, presented his own project for the reform of imperial governance at the beginning of the third century CE towards increased centralisation (Millar 1964, 102-118), and this can by no means be seen as proof that, in spite of the autocratic and authoritarian nature of the regime of the Principate, it had been Augustus's intention to suppress popular assemblies in Greek cities.

The impact of the emergence of the Principate on political culture and discourse in Greek cities, however, should not go underestimated. Although Augustus was celebrated for having restored the *res publica* and although he praised himself in his *Res Gestae* for having taken care of the Roman *plebs* by giving money to the people, securing the food supply, and staging magnificent shows for the *Urbs*, the regime was very suspicious of any form of popular movement. The avoidance of the discourse of democracy in Augustan ideology (but not of the *civic* discourse, which is something different) was perfectly consistent with the agenda of the elite of Greek cities themselves who were trying to restrain the influence of democratic factions at the local level. In this struggle, imperial power, like the Roman Senate in the second century BCE at the beginning of Rome's interference in the East (Kallet-Marx 1995; Ferrary 2014), actively backed up local aristocrats who were ready to cope with Roman rule in order to contain or even to crush openly democratic factions. We have many examples of imperial intervention during the first decades of the first century CE, including in free cities which were deprived of their liberty in the aftermath of popular unrest such as Cyzicus and Rhodes (Fournier 2014; Fernoux, Gangloff & Guerber 2021). In this context, the concept of *dēmokratia* began to be seen as subversive, and Greek local elites deliberately culled the term *dēmokratia* from their own vocabulary. Instead, they started using less controversial, more consensual terms to depict the regime of their cities, such as *politeia*, which was very generic and could simply mean «government» or «constitution» regardless of the nature of the regime, or *patrioi nomoi*, «the ancestral/traditional laws» which had a conservative flavour. These words deliberately eluded any question of the nature of the regime. One of the most obvious illustrations of this phenomenon comes from the famous dedication which the elite of the Lycian confederacy in Patara offered to the emperor Claudius on the occasion of the intervention of Roman power in support of local aristocrats against an attempted democratic revolution in the context of civil strife and the transformation of Lycia into a Roman province in 43 CE (*AE* 2007, 1512a):

«To the Emperor Claudius (…), the Lycians, who are the friends of the Romans and of Caesar, faithful allies, because they were freed by his divine providence from civil war, from anarchy and from brigandage and because they recovered concord, equality in administration of justice and their ancestral laws (*patrioi nomoi*), whereas the government (*politeia*) was transferred from the thoughtless multitude (*plēthos*) to the councillors who were selected from among the best (*aristoi*) (…)».

In this dedication, the democratic factions are censured, being described as a mob of troublemakers threatening the laws and the constitution and denied the character of a *dēmos*. The use of *dēmokratia* to describe the restoration of the constitution would have been, from the point of view of the Lycian elite, impossible in this context: first, because the Lycian confederacy had now been turned into a Roman province and deprived of its *libertas/dēmokratia*, as it was still called in the dedication set up on the Capitoline Hill two hundred years earlier (see above); second, because it was specifically the «best», who received support from Rome to rule Lycia, who fought against factions which were favourable to the *dēmos* (Thornton 2001; Thornton 2004). In this case, the anti-democratic rhetoric of Lycian aristocrats precisely fitted the interests of imperial authorities.

The neutral term *politeia* was frequently used in the Imperial period, referring to the constitution of contemporary Greek cities as the «regime of the citizens», and euphemistically omitting any mention of the predominance of the elite. It is interesting to note that this was precisely the term which Aristotle used to describe what he thought would be the best constitution, namely a kind of «mix of oligarchy and of democracy» according to his own definition (Arist., *Pol.* 4, 8, 2-4 (1293b30-42)).[13] This would be achieved by handing over the major offices of the city to the best of the citizens. For Aristotle, those were primarily defined by reference to their education and ethics, but also partly to their wealth since he was ready to admit the introduction of a low property qualification to exercise power, a definition which fits the realities of the Greek cities in the Imperial period fairly well. I am not arguing here that local aristocrats consciously implemented Aristotle's project, even if recent studies have emphasised the Aristotelian background of the political ethics of Greek aristocrats in the late Hellenistic period (Gray 2018). But one could say that local aristocrats during the Imperial period were empirically Aristotelian, or, to put it the other way round, that Aristotle anticipated in his *Politics* the evolution of Greek democracies in the post-Classical period and that his project of *politeia* was somehow eventually realised under Roman rule.

Let us now return, as a conclusion, to the preliminary questions which were raised at the beginning of this paper. Through the example of *dēmokratia*, we have seen what can hide behind the disappearance of a single term in the epigraphic evidence in the late Hellenistic/early Imperial period and what implications this may have had for political institutions and political culture. This example, I think, should invite us to pay more attention to the changes in epigraphic practices, and encourage us to also explain the silence of the inscriptions (regardless of the problems associated with the random nature of the transmission of inscriptions). From a methodological point of view, the disappearance of a term in the epigraphic evidence cannot simply be seen as a proof of the disappearance of the institution itself. The political realities are only partly mirrored in inscriptions, and we have to be aware of the limits of the ability of epigraphic evidence to reconstruct political practice and political culture. However, most of the changes which can be documented in epigraphic practices between the late Hellenistic and early Imperial periods are not just a matter of fashion or epigraphic habit, but are symptomatic of the deep changes experienced by civic communities due to the rise of Roman rule.

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[13] See Lintott 2000; Giorgini 2019.

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