Mythology: a methodological approach for the Historian of Classic Antiquity

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ABSTRACT

The central theme of this article is the application of semiotic analysis as a methodology in the historical analysis of the myth present in Dio Chrysostom's *Discourses,* a Bythinian philosopher who lived in the Roman Empire between the years 40 and 115 AD.

Keywords: Myth, Roman Empire, Dio Chrysostom

In approaching myths of classical antiquity thematically a complex question is certain to be evoked which in turn limits the ways that can be taken. Before beginning a discussion about the myths of Antiquity, their constitution should be thought of firstly. Accepting the myth as an oration, or a narrative, infers that language is the myth's vehicle.

According to Everardo Rocha, " [if] the myth were a narrative or any form of oration it would be completely diluted. The myth is then a special kind of narrative, private, capable of being distinguished from other kinds of stories".

Comprehending myths, therefore, is a difficult task, subordinated to a wide range of different currents of human thought. The myth will be understood here in its pragmatic aspect, i.e. its function. In this manner, the interpretation of myth is in the direct effect it has in acting on society and for this reason the interpretation is variable. According to Mircea Eliade,[1] "The myth is an extremely complex cultural reality that can be approached and interpreted through multiple and complementary perspectives".

Werner Jaeger approached the myth as an exceptional form:

> We speak of the educational value of the examples created by myths ... The myth contains in itself this normative significance, even when it is not used expressly as a model or example … The myth always has its use from the normative instance to which the orator appeals. There in its core rests something that has universal authenticity. It does not

have a merely fictitious quality, though originally it was, without a doubt, the residue of historical happenings that reached immortality through a long tradition and exalting interpretation of posterity's fantasy creator.

Thus, by discussing myth as an expression of the thought of man, the ideas proposed by Jaeger will be taken into consideration more attentively. The myth will be understood as being the narrative of that, which, no matter what its intention, expresses the thoughts of a given society.

Roland Barthes proposes in the same way the model of the myth, according to which,

> … the myth is a system of communication, a message. Hence it could not be an object, a concept or an idea: it is a method of signification, a form… since myth is an oration, everything can consist of a myth, as long as it is susceptible to be judged by a discourse. The myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the manner in which it is uttered: the myth has structural not substantial limits.[2]

Barthes' proposition that myth is an oration matches Veyne's statement, in a certain jocular manner but realistic of which:

> the Greeks often appear not to have believed a lot in their own political myths, and were the first to laugh at them when they were presented ceremonially … with effect, the myth had become rhetoric truth … the content of the ceremonial speeches were not felt as true and even less as false, but as verbal. The responsibilities for this *langue de bois* do not fall on political powers but on an institution of its own of that era, the rhetoric.

In effect any approach to the myth should take into account the theoretical conditions proposed by Jaeger, Barthes and Veyne. Another fundamental aspect that acts effectively toward the myth's maintenance, which we could call the myth's survival, as reference to the society's behaviour, is memory. Memory, a fundamental aspect for the comprehension of the myth's composition and function, and the historical aspect underlying the construction also should be remembered. According to Barthes, preoccupied with the relations history-myth and history-mythology.

> [It is] history that transforms the real into discourse being it and only it that commands the life and death of the mythical language. From remote times or not, mythology only can have a historical foundation in view of the fact that myth is an oration chosen by history: it could not at all arise just from the "nature' of things.[3]

Accepting Barthes' analysis, the position is taken that the word, the myth's instrument of transmission, has its significance related to the idea of preserving or conserving some type of information, retaining within mental states much of what was produced by society. Thus the construction of the myth in memory has, at the same moment, a social-individual and social-collective trait, since it is the individual that makes his registration and accumulates it and it is the collective that redeems it.

Memory is preserved by way of the intelligible codes within societies, in which they are produced, constituting hence vestiges of the vivid past for this same society.

For Pierre Nora,

> … memory is life … and it is in permanent evolution, open to the dialectics of remembrance and of forgetfulness, unconscious of its successive disfigurements, vulnerable to all its uses and manipulations, susceptible to long latencies and sudden revitalizations.

This brief reflection about the myth and memory goes back to another fundamental question which is time. The time of memory does not have a continuous and measurable sequence but indeed an associative and emotional quality. The time of memory jumps to a desired point and establishes dates for associations. The consciousness of duration is made through the following terms:"it has been a long time", "the other day", or by associations of experiences society or individuals live through, like, for example, "in my grandfather's time".

According to Jose Carlos Reis,

> even though they had been the creators of the *science of men in time,* the Greeks also possessed an extremely anti-historical thinking. They conceived only the knowledge of the eternal, of the permanent, of the immutable, of the supralunary. This supralunary being performs a circular movement. Aristotles defines the regular movement by three properties: eternity, unity and continuity. The only type of movement to possess these characteristics is the circular.

The Greek thought, according to Finley, divided the time of memory, or rather its past, into two times: the time of the *heroic era* during which the Greek oral tradition was created and maintained, having as a result the creation of a mythical past based on elements that differed in character and precision, whose origins in turn, went far back to periods of time quite remote. This "tradition" did not merely transmit the past, it created it. The principal objective of this period was the formation and the maintenance of a Greek identity constructed by the creation of a consciousness and of a Panhellenic pride, even locally situated or of regional character, in

which emerged the creation of the aristocratic government and especially the right of the aristocracy to govern manifesting and emphasizing its noteworthy qualifications and virtues. It is all about a process of mythical creation that does not terminate in the 8th Century BC, the end of the so-called "Homeric period" and when historically we have the formation of the *polis.* It continues evident within the mythification of individuals combining ancient elements with new forms, adapting to the religious and political changes.

The *pos-heroica era* is distinguished by the interest in the preservation of the remote and mythical past, so totally alive in the Greek consciousness and expressing itself by the conservation and repetition of the mythical map. The heroic past was the target of a passive attention that assured its maintenance in the social memory, in the accepted version and perpetuated into future generations by way of the preservation of this knowledge and of its permanent use. Firstly, the register of this past was made available with neither documents nor the files where they could be obtained, for this reason it was preserved by way of oral speech. Secondly, from oral speech to cultural practice, including the written register, the elaboration of the universal ritual in itself faithful to the origins of the tradition, ended up consolidating the speech-action relation that consecrated the principle that myth is the main vehicle of the memory of Greek society.

Another aspect can be raised: what did the Greeks think about the myth-memory-history relation? For Aristotle, history preoccupied itself with the private. "By the private I refer to what Alcibiades did and by what he went through" he affirmed in his *Poetica.* For the Greek philosopher contrasting history and poetry, poetry was much more philosophic and universal. The main question in Aristotle was to distinguish myth from history, as the atmosphere, in which the first historians wrote, the so-called fathers of history, was impregnated with myths.

> When Herodotus reached his youth, the distant past was quite alive in the consciousness of men, more alive that the recent centuries or generations: Oedipus, Agamemnon and Theseus were more real to the Athenians of the 5th century than any other historical figure before this century accept for Solon who was elevated to their category to be transformed into a mythical figure. [4]

The myth was a great master to the Greeks in all questions of the spirit and of social behaviour. With it, they learned morality and conduct, the virtues of nobility, and about race, culture and politics. This was one of the reasons why history, in the greater part of classic antiquity was regarded as based mainly in epic poetry, which can then be compared to the two forms of the narration of the past. There was the recognition that the epic tradition was based on concrete facts, nevertheless considered as distinct epochs, from the point of view of the historic-cultural experience, and it is necessary to establish the difference between Homer and Thucydides, which was certainly in the presentation of the style of their writings. Homer

adequately employed poetic licence while Thucydides made his report of the facts in an objective manner. However the origin of the writings is the same, the collective memory, expressed by oral speech.

For the Greeks, to be a citizen meant to be a member of the *polis* and participate in all its activities. The basis of this participation can be summed up in two essential aspects: the acceptance of the laws and having the right to possess land. Thus, one is only a citizen when one owns land, was born within the bounds of the territory of the *polis*, and is a free man or son of free parents. In the world of the *polis* there is a great contingent of non-citizens, consisting mainly of slaves and foreigners – *metoikoi* – , that do not have any political rights. And, consequently, the constitution of Greek citizenship is known by its organization and by the workings of its basic unit which is the *demos*.

There is in this constitution a political practice linked to the existential aspects and to the representations that in a certain form characterizes itself as a reference for domination. Rhetoric is regarded as one of these representations in the way in which it fundamentally reproduces the organized articulated way of the Greek philosophy. And it can be understood also that all the Greek education as an institutional element of domination is founded on philosophical scholarship. It is in educational action that the myth is utilized as a resource of rhetoric for the argumentation and transmission of dominant thought – while convincing and establishing historical, ethical and moral precepts.

Veyne, however, raised a question: did the Greeks believe in their myths? Resting in this question is a kind of less than conventional controversy. First, Veyne suggests that the myth is contained in the tradition and written word:

> How is it possible to believe only by halves or believe in contradictory things? Children believe at the same moment that Santa Claus brings them toys through the chimney and these toys are put their by their parents; so, do they really believe in Santa Claus? Yes …

Therefore it can be said that there are questions to be raised about myth and truth, before continuing to think of myth as being at the same time source and a vehicle of information. Paul Veyne establishes a discussion about imagination and truth thinking of the myth as an instrument of communication.

On the other hand, the uses of myth launched selective views about the truth, and as time passed, with the oral or written transmission, its components were proved or not by cultural practice. Thus, the "mythical" occurrences ended up being overcome by the "historical" occurrences, whose evidences were shown to be rational in relation to the myth. We should think about the myth, therefore, as an information vehicle, a necessity of the truths in charge of the maintenance of the *status quo* of the Greek *poleis* and, by analogy, the citizenship category. The question is not therefore to "believe" in myths, but yes understand them with their examples

and their constitution. The function of myths in the formation of the Greek citizen was to instill credulity into the imagination of the *polis*, the participation and function of a small part of the population, a part constituted of *homoioi.*

Some deviations were made up to here about the role of the myth in the behaviour of dominant segments of the Greek city. And this was the foundation of the cultural construction of the myth in the ancient Mediterranean world, especially with the Hellenistic combination flowing into the Roman dominated world after the 3rd century BC. The myth, in its usages and representations could be worked on as a literary communication, a resource which was most common when trying to understand the thinking of determined segments of society.

According to Hartog,

> The task of the cultural historian, from hereon, can take to reading these texts, reconstructing – in Hermeneutic terms – the question to which they respond, redesigning the horizons of expectations in which since their first days up to ours ..., they will come and register, recalculating the bets that they designated and expressed, pointing to the *quid pro quos* that they successively provoked. This making of history does not signify modernizing them nor updating them, but on the whole makes its outdated reality obvious: their answers to questions that we no longer raise, we do not know how to raise or simply have "forgot".[5]

To understand better and analyze the aspects of literary language, the vehicles of Greek myths, a linguistic theory must be sought that offers theoretical and practical subsidies for analysis.

Working with literary discourse means navigating through linguistic theory, even with the consideration that the historian's task does not have linguistic analysis as its aim. Nevertheless, it is necessary to understand the mechanism of language, its functional structure and the various forms of analysis that offer observable elements to understand the moment and the form of how the discourse was produced, its scope in maintaining and affirming within the relation between public opinion and the *status quo.*

Thus, we propose to use semiotics as an instrument of a theoretical-methodological approach to myth. Semiotics is understood here as a general theory of signs[6] and with this understanding it opens up an even wider range of options. The application of the semiotic theory lays the foundation of a historical analysis, as the construction of history itself is also made of *signs* [7]

When we deal with the reading of a historian, the images produced by the signs become historical, since seeking to understand them contextually is more than just a habit, it is a commitment. When this moment arrives skepticism and ignorance are already overcome. The reader proceeds on a chosen *logos*, he already gave every chance to the text, "seen in its

multiple levels, its diverse melodic lines, also in its ruptures, retakes, impasses and as an expression of one or several narrative strategies".[8]

Contact with the identity-changeability relation permits finding in the read text, all of its consistency, its respiration, and see it stimulating itself and being put into movement, Similarities, vocabulary, cadence, memory, forgetfulness, life, death, passions, myths, anti-myths, heroes, antiheros are indispensable components of literary text, as it shows in the same manner, as usual, the journey made by the author. The mixture "of what really happened" with what "should have happened" or "would have happened" is evident in the author-text relation regarding the plot. In the case of texts produced in classical antiquity, it can be observed that this journey happens almost always from epic poem to history, involving heroic, mythical and legendary figures with human defects and virtues, albeit with semi-divine traits. There is, so to say, a narrative that sets itself before the reader and it is up to him to make this identification.

The metaphor and the allegory (the allegory being a set of metaphors) are used by the verbal language to make up for the absence of a sign that does not transmit, in its essence, the totality of a quality inherent to the analysed sign. To understand the metaphor it is necessary to have, as a reference, the word in a framework, meaning, in its context. One of the main vehicles of the metaphor is the myth, although literature and poetry are also its great medias. In myth, the main figure of language is the allegory, which is, nothing more and nothing less, than a chain of metaphors and symbolism. Myths are deeply impregnated with allegories and figures of language that represent the sociocultural moment of their elaboration.

To understand allegories better, it is necessary to go back a bit to the Benjaminian doctrine. For Walter Benjamin,[9] the rehabilitation of the allegory is temporality and historicity of the symbol in opposition to its eternity. For Benjamin, the rehabilitation of the allegory will be a rehabilitation of history, of temporality and death in the description of human language. Besides this, he condemns reducing the symbol and allegory to a mere reduction of the terms, to a relation between appearance and essence.

While the symbol points toward the eternity of beauty, the allegory emphasizes the impossibility of an eternal feeling and the necessity of persevering in temporality and historicity to construct transitory meanings. While the symbol tends to the unity of the being and of the word; the allegory insists in its essential non-identity because language always says something else (*allo-agorein*), that which has always been intended, therefore it was born and reborn only from this perpetual flight toward an ultimate meaning.

In a determined context, the allegory can refer to a precise meaning among others; while a sign refers itself to all possible meanings, therefore to none, there is no more fixed point, neither in the object nor in the subject of allegorical interpretation that guarantees the truth of knowledge. The written speech and the allegory are only described as "arbitrary" for a position

that maintains the affirmation of the possibility of a necessary, transparent and immediate knowledge. If the meaning of the totality is lost, this is owed as well, and furthermore, to the fact this meaning and history are intimately connected.

A proposal of an analysis of myth: Dio Chrysostom (40-115 AD)

Considering what already has been seen in relation to the conception of myth and a possible methodology applied for analysis, an allegorical analysis can be proposed from Dio Chrysostom's speeches, a Greek philosopher of the 2nd century AD.

Studying the work of Dio Chrysostom has shown to be a challenge, a task in recovering historical reality, considering mainly that it deals with literary work, adorned and replete with metaphorical and symbolic components that express under these appearances not just the creativity and the imagination of the author. It also means doing the reading that enables the recovering of a historical moment of the Pontus-Bythinia province during Emperor Trajan's government (98-117). The period in which the work was produced shows however an important documental nucleus represented by other literary works, more directed to the socially lived reality, and by archeological discoveries.

The urban structure in the Greek-eastern world, located in Asia Minor and Syria, maintained the same foundation from which they had been set up. The Roman presence did not modify the profile of the cities which revealed a millenary tradition of eastern cultures that did not alter with the arrival of the Roman municipal institutions. On the contrary, what can be seen is the strengthening of their conditions without any modification of the eastern monarchies.

The historical combination most evident in the definition of the way of life of the eastern provinces was the wide use of the Greek language and the preservation of the intellectual structures of the East. The Roman arrival did not provoke structural changes. On the contrary, adopting the practice of respecting the historical conditions of the provinces integrated into its immense body of conquests, Rome sought to preserve the provincial roots as a mechanism of domination. This is what happened to Pontus-Bithynia that had in this way the development of two cities under Roman domination conserving their Eastern Greek structures. To maintain regular relations, Rome applied a diplomatic policy that almost always availed itself of the so-called local "living forces", regarded as opinion formers and capable of securing the Roman presence, possibly without great traumas. The strategy most evident was the systematic and arranged use of methods of communication between Rome and the provinces. In this case, the Mediterranean Sea had an important role, becoming, since the 1st century BC., the *mare nostrum* of the Romans. Through it, they reached the most distant regions using complementary routes such as the Nile River in Egypt, the Aegean Sea between Greece and

Asia Minor, the Propontis at the entrance to the Black Sea, and the Black Sea itself. These routes, that were the routes of the economic life of the Roman Empire, also transported the western and eastern cultural aspects. The Mediterranean was, therefore, a great cultural space, that constituted itself as a privileged area of elaboration and circulation of ideas, not reducing itself neither geographically nor culturally to an aquatic mass and to a zone of terrestrial limits by the margins of an inland sea that confines itself within the borders of Europe, Africa and Asia Minor. It is a vast global space – maritime, continental and fed by many rivers; culturally defined from a geographic nucleus.

It is true that the Bythinian cities went through internal political problems, of which could be well understood in Book X that contained the *Cartas* exchanged between Pliny the Younger, and Trajan. The problems started occurring from the government of Vespasian (69-79 AD), where they can be observed in the works of Tacitus. The problems dragged on until Trajan, peaking during the epoch of Domitian (81-96 AD). Such problems consisted, mainly in conflicts among the cities that disputed the regional hegemony, and the adoption, among some Emperors, of the policy of persecutions that affected the intellectuals and philosophers, mainly those of Greek origin, as in the case of Dio Chrysostom.

The *Discursos* of Dio Chrysostom are composed of several themes. But a dominant theme runs through all of them, a kind of tonic: the awakening of the citizens to the meaning of liberty and peace that the cities once enjoyed, being, however, impossible to return to the glorious past, incomparable to the present situation. Dio Chrysostom gave counsel so that public life did not suffer the effects of the social convulsions, hampering the proper functioning of the cities. It is not by accident that Dio Chrysostom, originating from an aristocratic family, could construct the buildings that he gave to the city of Prusa.

> There are a great number of the so-called cynics in the city … At the intersections, in the side streets and in the portals of the temples, they gather and trick the slaves, the sailors, and other others like them, uttering fallacies freely, their unending talk and their vulgar responses. No good comes of this, just very serious harm.[10]

The spreading of cynical ideas had the connotation of political propaganda that positioned itself right before the royalty, as the work of the gods, and tyranny. This opposition, of a philosophical nature, provoked the persecution of philosophers and the senators who were against Vespasian and Domitian.

Dio Chrysostom pronounced his *Discursos* in several cities of the East in the epoch of Trajan, especially in Alexandria and in Tarsus, besides the Bythinian speeches given to the citizens of Prusa, of Nicaea and of Nicomedia. As is attested by John Cohoon.

During all of this persecution, he reached Borysthenes, the flourishing colony of Miletus north of the Black Sea and not far from modern Odessa. He also ventured into Viminacium, the permanent Roman camp on the Danube, and lived among the savage Getae, whose history he wrote. [11]

After the death of Domitian in 96, Dio Chrysostom's exile terminated. Before returning to Rome, in the summer of 97, he made a speech during a Greek assembly in Olympia. Once in Rome, he was received by *vetus* Emperor Nerva (*Discurso* XVIII). The contact with the *princeps* made it possible for Dio Chrysostom to vindicate benefits for the habitants of Prusa,

but he was hampered in achieving full success due to Nerva's disease. He returned then to Prusa with the news that such favours had been guaranteed and then headed a mission sent out by the citizens to express their thanks to the Emperor. This mission however arrived only to find Nerva dead and Trajan the Emperor in his place[12].

Contact with the Emperor Trajan, in 98 or 99, gave Dio Chrysostom a new opportunity to narrow relations with the *princeps,* as in the case of Nerva. Before Trajan left for the Dacia campaign, Dio Chrysostom received the favours he had vindicated for Prusa from the new Emperor. After this, from Rome, Dio Chrysostom travelled to Alexandria and other places in the East, returning afterwards to his city of birth, already by the end of the year 99 or the beginning of the year 100.

In Prusa, Dio Chrysostom, at his own cost, took care of the urbanization of the city offering improvements that cost him money as well as personal annoyances. To be able to handle these improvements, some constructions in the city were demolished, for which he was sued. Pliny the Younger, that was *legatus pro praetore* of Pontus-Bythinia in the years 111-112, intervened together with the *princeps* Trajan, according to the report in Carta X 81: "Dio Cocceianus, it seems, wanted, in a meeting of the *boul,* that a public building, which was constructed at his cost, would be transferred officially to the city.

One of the Dio Chrysostom's reasons for this wish and possibly the strongest, according to Pliny the Younger, is that "there was in the same monument a statue and the buried bodies of [Dio Chrysostom's wife and his son.] … [13]"

Blessed by his birth, being a wealthy man and having a prominent political position, Dio Chrysostom had an excellent relationship with his compatriots in Prusa. As an aristocrat, he needed his community. The formal and informal honours offered by his fellow citizens – the applause, positions of magistracy, the statues, the sanctuaries, the funeral games – constituted the material and spiritual reward of the aristocrats, for which they retributed by way of presents in the form of civic liturgies and the exercise of political influence in favour of the homeland.

This symbiosis socio-politico is revealed by Dio Chrysostom when he boasted of the benefits obtained for the city of Prusa.

On the other hand, Dio Chrysostom registers the rivalry between the Bythinian cities; between Nicaea and Nicomedia, and between Prusa and Apamea. These rivalries made Prusa receive special treatment from Dio Chrysostom by way of the construction of a generous quantity of images in the city, to the point where it was raised to the level of leader among the cities, and head of a federation, even though affirming that:

> You can be sure that though Prusa is not the largest of our cities and has not been tranquil for a long time, it is more illustrious than many equally revered on the other side of the world, and that it has motivated its citizens for much time to put it at the top, not at the bottom, or in third or in second place, in competition with all the other Greek cities.[14]

Dio comments further that Prusa has been a city full of hovels and huts and this situation had been a strong incentive for his energetic attitudes. Dio Chrysostom apparently died around the year 120.

The theogonic conception of Dio Chrysostom: the Olympic Discourse

The Olympic Discourse was read by Dio Chrysostom in Olympia in the year 97 AD in front of a large audience that had gone to the city to assist the games, and in front of the famous statue of Zeus that was sculpted by Phidias, the great Greek sculptor, more than five centuries before.

In his introductory commentaries, Dio Chrysostom tells us that he was returning from the Danube, where the Roman army under the command of Trajan was beginning a Second Dacian War, and asked the question: Should I speak to my listeners about the land of the Dacia and the obstacles of the war, or approach the theme suggested by God in whose presence they are? Then he describes some experiences he went through together with the Roman army:

> I, that had nothing to do with all those things, [legions, armaments], drew near to those men who were not so dumb and brute, or did not have time to hear the speeches, but were very sensitive and tense as a racehorse on the starting line, anxious for the start-off and in their excitement and eagerness trampled the ground with their hooves. In this location we could see swords all over the place, breastplates all over the place, spears all over the place, and everywhere the area was full of warhorses and men in arms.[15]

Dio Chrysostom did not vacillate in mentioning the present, in clear terms, in his speeches directed toward his Greek listeners. The historical anecdote from the past was not for

Dio Chrysostom a moment to escape from the present, but at the most a place of recognition that permits the establishment of an interaction between the present lived, to which Dio Chrysostom observed lucidly, and the prestigious past as a backdrop of the real life. He respects and protects the remembrances of a past that he knows so well, but refuses to escape to them, even in thought, as many Greeks of his time did, and in this brilliance of long ago or that his culture made him live through, refuses, as many did, to forge his prestigious remembrances as arms against Rome. He condemns the false philosophers and the dangerous sophists that preached revolt against Rome for the exaltation of a glorious past.[16]

Dio Chrysostom sought a general reconciliation and looked for past examples of agreements, models of civic virtues that suggested an ideal for his contemporaries. Guaranteed by the ancient authority, these qualities seemed necessarily to be eternal and consubstantiated for Greek culture. It was for this reason that he proposed the theme of the Dacian War. Although the Greeks found themselves, at that very moment, before a place permeated with Hellenistic and religious feelings, the world around them was taken over with the description of a very close battleground. Dio Chrysostom reminded his listeners that there was a military camp not very far and it played a part in the world they live in.

> Completely alone I showed myself in the middle of this powerful host, perfectly tranquil and the most serene observer of war, weak in body, and advanced in age, not carrying 'a golden sceptre' or sacred adornments of gold … wishing to see strong men fighting for the Empire and power, and their opponents for liberty and the homeland. So, not because I became a coward in the face of peril … but because I remembered an old oath, I changed my direction to be together with you, always considering that divine things have great and more advantageous clamour than human things, no matter how important they may be. [17]

It is worthy to note that Dio Chrysostom, in reference to the Dacian War did not refer to the name of the Emperor, speaking only in "strong men fighting for the Empire and power". This is a characteristic apparent in all the references that he made of Nerva or Trajan. The appointments of the contemporary Emperors were always made through analogies.

The characters that sparked the stories told by Dio Chrysostom were few and always the same: they were the philosophers Socrates, Diogenes, Pythagoras; the heroes of popular mythology as in Hercules, a controversial character, Cyrus, Croesus, the seven wise men, Solon and finally the greatest hero of Greek history at that moment, whose Empire had foreshadowed the Roman conquest, Alexander the Great. These characters often cut into Dio Chrysostom's speeches. To bring to the stage a sovereign (Alexander) and a philosopher (Diogenes), or even an old king (Philip) and a young prince (Alexander) would have been a critical procedure. Through the use of existing and ever present figures in Greek imagery, Dio Chrysostom made direct reference to them, staying close to the reality of the period lived by him, mainly in relation to the Nerva's and Trajan's governments. We can see in these references the evocation

of the figures of the Roman Emperors of his period that are in the present, but had a justification for their political role in the memorable past of the Greeks through the Hellenistic figures that represented the unification of the universal world.

Orators and philosophers criticized or condemned Alexander; but, if he had been maltreated as a rhetoric hero, Alexander also was, since the reign of Augustus and as the creator of the Empire, the subject of a serious ideological debate. Would Alexander be capable of beating Rome if he had confronted its power? The idea of a possible victory of this great conqueror had without a doubt comforted the Greeks who found it difficult to accept the law of the winner.

Although Dio Chrysostom's worry was only at the beginning of the Olympic Discourse, the mere mention of the doubt about the theme was pure rhetoric in reminding the Greeks that the Roman world still was present, though the worries about Greek influence, represented in the divine conception and its imagery, was what determines the ethos.

Dio Chrysostom finally chose the second option and, after explaining that the conception of the nature of the gods, and especially of the most important ones, was innate in all of humanity, and that this innate conception and belief was strengthened by the experiences of men and in the observation of his world, he offered a classification in a way in which the conception and the belief in his existence were implanted in the minds of men. In paragraph 39 he made a classification about the innate idea and the acquired idea. Then in section 44 and what follows, he subdivided the acquired idea into voluntary and of exhortation given by poets, compulsory and established given by the legislators, that which was given by painters and sculptors, and the notions and concepts as shown and exposed by philosophers. Dio Chrysostom was cautious, however, in pointing out that the poets, legislators, sculptors and others do not have any influence if it were not for the idea of primary and innate.

> Man's belief in divinities and the supposition that there is a god that protects us and whose origin … was the idea that he was innate in all humanity and came as a result of real and true facts, an idea that was not developed in a random or accidental manner, but has been powerful and lasting since the beginning of time and has arisen among all nations, being a common and general gift to rational beings. As a second source of information we designate the idea that has been acquired and in fact implanted into the soul of men by way of tales, myths and customs, and in some cases not attributed to any author or just anonymous, but in other cases written and having as its authors men of great fame. In this acquired idea of divine beings, let us suppose that one part is voluntary and susceptible to exhortation, another part compulsory and established … But which of these two influences mentioned should be called to the primitive times, among us Greeks, nominally, poetically or legislatively, I am afraid of not being able to argue this in detail on this present occasion; but maybe it would be convenient that the type for which they depend, not as penalties, but as persuasion should be more ancient than the type that applies compulsion and prescription. After this point … the feeling of the human race about its first and immortal ancestor, that who we

have in the inheritance of Hellas called Ancestral Zeus, walks step by step together with those men that have followed their mortal and human ancestors.

In this quotation we can analyse some points that take us to a relation with the introductory part of the speech as in "the idea of the innate and the idea of the acquired and implanted in the soul of men." This comparison is clear in relation to the formation of religious feeling and to all the theogonic conception between the Greeks and the "barbarians", as they are referred to by Dio Chrysostom in several passages. The relation between naturalness of the cult to Ancestral Zeus developed by the Greeks, and the imposition of the Emperor's cult imposed by the Romans. The character of the hereditary ancestry in the development of a population that identified itself as the descendent of the founding god of all mankind and in whose temple they found themselves in.

> Indeed, benevolence and the wish to serve, which descendants feel regarding their ancestors, is, in the first instance, present in them, innate, like a gift from nature and like a result of the acts of goodness received, provided that this has been generated immediately from birth to love and esteem in retribution … that began it, and fed it and loved it …

> Considering the second and the third type, that are derived from our poets and legislators, the creator exhorts us not to restrain our gratefulness for that which is more ancient and of the same blood, besides being the author of life and existence, the more ancient using compulsion and the treatment of punishment to those that refute obedience …

After these ideas, the orator proceeded to what was more important in the speech in which he offered a magnitude of ideas apparently original, about which were the field and the function of art and what were its limitations. He put his thoughts into the mouth of Phidias that analysed the specific case of his statue of Zeus, and eager to show that he had used all the resources of art and sculpture in the production of this illustrious statue of the most important of the gods. Phidias, in the course of his exposition, spoke about other things that he had used in his conception of Homer's Zeus, and also made a detailed comparison between the respective capacity of poetry and sculpture in portraying and representing and deciding about the advantage of poetry.

According to J.W. Cohoon[18], no ancient writer up to the time of Dio Chrysostom, whose work has survived, has given us such a treatment about the theme. The others, such as Plutarch, made only passing references to the arts. Certainly none of them made a comparison so detailed between sculpture and poetry. In Flavio Josefo, also according to Cohoon, we can find a treatment about this theme. Paul Hagen,[19] however, in his *Quaestiones Dioneae*, tries to show a

comparison between certain passages of Cicero, Pliny the Elder, and Quintilian that Dio Chrysostom was not original in his theories on art, but adopted a conception of the Pergamon where the most famous school of sculpture had been which had flourished in its time. The most exemplary work known from this school is the Dying Gaul, which can be found in the Capitolino Museum in Rome.

Dio Chrysostom certainly had easy access to the Pergamon. If he was not original in his ideas about art, he was at least very interested in it. The question of originality of ideas is not the most important thing for the historian. The social representation that is contained in his discourse overcomes any attempt of discussing his originality or the influence of Dio Chrysostom over the thinkers of his time. According to Cohoon, Dio Chrysostom approached this theme in more than one occasion and traced in different ways an approach to art in different places for different audiences until we can see the version that today we have in this discourse.

The book organized by Simon Swain,[20] a collection of texts produced by scholars about Dio Chrysostom has shown open doors for new research about this Bythinian author. There are few historians that analyse the documentation of Dio Chrysostom. The major interest has been in the area of philosophy and literature. In 2001 the author defended within the Program of Post-graduation, Doctorate level, at the University of the State of Sao Paulo "Júlio de Mesquita Filho", the Assis campus, the thesis entitled "*Princeps* and *Basileus* in the *Discursos* of Dio Chrysostom (96 to 117 AD)", under the assistance of Dr. Ivan Esperança Rocha. This was a work of initiation to the study of the documentation of Dio Chrysostom regarding Brazilian academic production, perhaps even the Portuguese language. The researchers Christopher P. Jones,[21] Tim Whitmarsh, Simon Swain,[22] Aldo Brancacci,[23] Paolo Desideri[24] e John Moles[25] did not tire in manifesting that the documentation is provocative and inspiring, but nevertheless by its rhetorical and allegoric characteristic, it was very difficult to be analyzed. This article proposes and intends to only debate some methodological possibilities of approaching the documentation in question that stands out mainly, by its documental constitution that challenges the historian, and that still finds several possibilities in present day interdisciplinary discussions in the current historiography.

Footnotes

1 ELIADE, Mircea. **Mito e Realidade.** Trad. Pola Civelli. São Paulo: Ed. Perspectiva, 1989. p.11.

2 BARTHES, Roland. **Mitologias.** Trad. Rita Buongermino e Pedro de Souza. 10. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 1999. p.131.

3 BARTHES, Roland. Op. cit., p.132.

4 HARTOG, François. **O Espelho de Heródoto.** Trad. Jacyntho Lins Brandão. Belo Horizonte: Ed. UFMG, 1999. p.34.

5 HARTOG, François. Op. cit., p.15-16.

6 Understood as signs all and anything that substitutes or represents another thing and is organized under the language form, verbal or non-verbal.

7 Let us understand sign also as signal, vestiges, and proof. The historian works with all elements that can represent determined social moments, in a determined time or space.

8 HARTOG, François. Op. cit., p.17.

9 GAGNEBIN, Jeanne Marie. **História e Narração em Walter Benjamin. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1994.** p.86.

10 CHRYSOSTOM, Dion. **Orations.** Trad. J.H. Cohoon. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press/William Heinemann, 1971. v.I, p.XXXII.9.

11 Idem, p.IX.

12 Idem, p.X-XI.

13 Idem, p.X.81.2.

14 Idem, p.XLIV.9.

15 Idem, p.XII, 19.

16 Idem, p.XXXII, 62.

17 Idem, p.XII, 19-20.

18 Idem.

19 HAGEN, Paul. **Quaestiones Dioneae.** H. Fiencke, Ex officina, 1887.

20 SWAIN, S. (ed.). **Dio Chrysostom: politics, letters, and philosophy**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

21 JONES, C. P. **The Roman world of Dio Chrysostom**. Cambridge MA, 1978.

22 SWAIN, S. Op. cit.

23 BRANCACCI, A. **Rhetorike philosophousa: Dione Crisostomo nella cultura antica e bizantina.** Naples, 1986.

24 DESIDERI, P. **Dione di Prusa: un intelletuale greco nell' impero Romano**. Messina, 1978.

25 MOLES, J. L. **'The career and conversion of Dio Chrysostom',** JHS, 98, 1978, 79-100.