Cameo Roles: Dio's Portrayals of Earlier Senatorial Authors

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Cassius Dio, as I think we've all figured out, had no problem talking about himself. He has lots of aspects of his life about which he's downright garrulous, including his political career and his literary endeavors. Nonetheless, as often happens with chatty people who have lived interesting lives, there are subjects one would really like to hear more about that it turns out to be very difficult to get him on to. One of these, I would suggest, is the intersection between his writing and his politics. While he does relate his writing to political events he lived through, it is often in opaque or unsatisfying ways. In particular, what continues to frustrate at least me is the question of how his various layers of criticism of the Severan regime relate to his political relationships with the various emperors, and to whatever larger world of clandestine dissent and opposition we suppose existed from the 190s civil wars right up to Alexander's reign. To what extent can Dio's history be read not as a retrospective memoir of a discontented individual, but as a document of the political culture in which it was written and circulated? In Severan Rome, what kind of political intervention did the writing of a history constitute?

There are lots of approaches to this question, and the article by Anthony Kaldellis on my bibliography represents a stimulating recent contribution: in spite of the title, he actually talks quite a bit about Dio and Herodian and the question of their apparent end-points. One other place I do think we can look for a sense of how Dio saw historiography in political culture, however, is in instances where senators are also authors of histories or memoirs find their way into Dio's narrative as characters. These are what I've termed the "cameo roles" of the title. They are quite numerous in surviving Dio, and stand out all the more in that Dio has virtually no source-citations as such. Historians are ostensibly only

mentioned when they perform noteworthy public actions, which in practice means that only senators get mentioned. There are no anecdotes of Livy or even equestrians such as the elder Pliny, as best we can tell. Most of them are brief mentions that do not mention the person's writing and might be considered just ordinary anecdotes about senators. I've given you in #1 a-e Cornelius Sisenna, Asinius Pollio, Cluvius Rufus, Arrian and Marius Maximus. There are also several major characters who wrote histories or *commentarii*. The works of major characters like Cato the Elder and Julius Caesar are similarly not typically mentioned even though the opportunity is evidently greater.

There are a few exceptions that I want to highlight today, these being most notably the cases of Sallust and Cremutius Cordus, with nods also to Rutilius Rufus and Cicero. What I want to argue from these, in brief, is that when Dio portrays his senatorial predecessors writing history, the main impression he leaves is that it's a dangerous and unpredictable business, partaking of the dangers and unpredictability of political life in general. He doesn't appear to stress either the pleasure or the utility of literary activity for the political man. I want at the end of the paper to consider what this means for Dio's portrayal of his own activities.

To consider first Sallust, however. It isn't clear at this point how much direct use Dio ever made of Sallust as a source, but the earlier historian does somehow manage to find his way three times into the narrative, all in basically negative contexts. In 2a he's being kicked out of the Senate by Pompey's supporters in 50, and note he's referred to as "the writer of history"; a couple of years in later in 2b he's losing control of the mutinous army that Caesar will eventually dress down at Placentia; and lastly and most importantly in 2c, he's being tried for provincial extortion. As you can see, Dio takes it for granted that he's guilty, and makes a meal of the discrepancy between Sallust's moralistic pose and his actual behavior. There are any number of specific passages in the *Catiline* or *Jugurtha* that he could have in mind, but it seems likely that Dio expects readers to associate Sallust with general railing against the corruption of his times.

What I want to highlight, though, is how Dio characterizes the relationship between the histories and the accusations. Anyone reading this passage who wasn't familiar with Sallust's works would, I think, assume that the historical works in question were already in circulation, and that the αἰσχύνην ἐσχάτην that he brought on himself mainfested itself at the time of the trial. This was not in fact the case. Sallust's own prefaces make it clear that the historical works are written after his withdrawal from public life, albeit their account of that withdrawal is unsurprisingly different from Dio's (3). The discrepancy seems to me deliberate on Dio's part. His language about this history coming first is ambiguous, there is a certain slippage between the judgement of contemporaries during Sallust's trial and that of posterity viewing him through his writings. Moreover, the idea writing in retirement isn't something Sallust just casually lets slip: passage #3 is a key part of a preface that Dio surely knew if he knew any Sallust at all, and the trope of history-in-retirement is a very common one that, as we'll see, Dio will go on to apply to himself.

Thus it's all the more surprising when, on the most natural reading of Dio's text, the order remains "histories first, then trial." It has a curious effect on how Sallust comes off. Instead of being a bare-faced hypocrite who castigated the very sins everyone knew he had committed, Sallust becomes almost a victim of circumstance. How could he have known when he wrote his histories that he would face a trial in which they would become his indictment? Presumably Sallust's intent in writing was to acquire glory, and he's now fallen into a bitter ironic reversal, though one for which he's entirely to blame. Sting-in-the-tail endings of this kind are a common feature of Dio's sardonic persona, but here they can encompass the writings of perhaps the most widely read Latin historian of Dio's time.

A further curious aspect of this story emerges if we consider that it has something of a contrasting prequel. The fragments of Dio's narrative of the 90s BCE include a substantial reference (4) to the trial of Rutilius Rufus, which was something of a *cause*

célèbre of the time, related at some length by Cicero in the *Brutus*. Rufus was a consular who had served as a legate to the governor of Asia and had apparently favored the interests of the provincials over Roman tax-collectors. He thus made enemies who got him prosecuted and convicted for, of all things, extortion. Dio mentions his admirable but seemingly ineffective defense speech, and how he was vindicated by the revelation of his modest means, and by his living as an honored exile in the same province he had supposedly plundered. What Dio seems (at least from these excerpts) to have omitted is that Rufus himself described the whole business in an autobiography and likely also a Greek-language history. Admittedly he's not as famous a historian as Sallust, but both Appian and Athenaeus do mention his work. It seems like this might be the perfect counter-example to Sallust, someone who got the last laugh on his unjust accusers by writing an account that he then supported with the evidence of his own conduct. This isn't a road Dio takes, and it seems like he's less interested in the possibilities of historiography-as-self-vindication than in historiography-as-self-condemnation.

The second example, that of Cremutius Cordus, points in somewhat the same direction. Cordus was a senator who was forced to commit suicide under Tiberius when he was charged, seemingly with *maiestas*, over a history in which he praised Caesar's assassins. Subsequent tradition makes him into something of a hero: Seneca writes a consolatory essay to his daughter Marcia, and Tacitus turns his trial into a set-piece in which the historian-martyr receives a long and dignified speech. Tacitus stresses that the history was secretly preserved (5a) and reflects on the continued glory such writings bring their authors. He also places Cordus' story immediately after a long reflection on his own task as a historian of the principate, including a somewhat specious claim that writing about the Tiberian era is still dangerous for him seventy years after the fact.

Dio's version includes the same basic facts as Tacitus' but it's much shorter (perhaps unsurprisingly) and very different in emphasis. As you can see (5b), Dio is much more explicit than Tacitus that the history is simply a pretext: Cordus' real crime is

that he had annoyed Sejanus, a point confirmed by Seneca. Dio goes out of his way to stress the basic inoffensiveness of both Cordus and his works. As you can see, he points out Cordus' age and mild disposition, and how long ago the history was written. His summary of the content minimizes its critical nature: you can compare it with Quintilian's assessment (6c). And Dio makes sure to tell us that Augustus had in fact read Cordus' history when it was first written. Suetonius has a slightly different version of that same fact. Tacitus' version of Cordus gives a long list of instances where Caesar and Augustus tolerated uncongenial authors, but he somehow manages not to include himself on it, and leaves one to suppose his history was a recent composition. This lapse of forensic verisimilitude is pardonable: Tacitus' Cordus is admirable because he pursues free speech and accepts the inevitable consequences of principled action under a tyrant. Dio's Cordus did everything he could to cover himself, but the moral of the story seems to be that *any* public action can end up being lethal under the wrong circumstances. Even though Cordus' history actually seems to reflect Dio's own view of the Assassins and Triumivirs quite well, he doesn't give it any praise as a lasting monument. He portrays it more as an opening Cordus left his enemies. The final note about its survival is less a vindication than a bitter irony. The most interesting thing about Cordus' seemingly pedestrian work is that its author died over it, and it's not at all clear Dio thinks it was worth it.

This stress on danger and unpredictability is curiously at odds with the last example that I want to briefly throw in the mix, which is that of Cicero's hypothetical history. Dio's relationship to Cicero is a complex one that's beyond our scope here, but what I want to single out is a brief passage of from the long consolatory speech that Dio's Cicero receives in his exile from a probably fictional philosopher named Philiscus. Philiscus, whose advice often has an Epicurean flavor, is adamant that Cicero should not attempt a return to political life, but rather he should treat his exile as a tranquil retirement. As you can see in (#6a), he suggests among other things that history-writing might be a way for Cicero to remain useful to his community. In spite of the pointedly

Greek examples that Philiscus brings up, the trope is recognizably Roman, and one is tempted to see references not only to the Sallust passage I've already quoted, but to Cicero's own musings on this question, especially from the *De Legibus* (#6b) and then even back to Cato the Elder (#6c).

We can't know that Dio read any of these works, but given that here he's putting the idea of Cicero the historian on the table, it doesn't seem unreasonable to suppose that he might have been aware that the real Cicero had made similar reflections. These reflections, though, both Cicero's own and Dio's, belong firmly in the world of alternate reality and roads not taken. And that goes not simply for the historical writings themselves, but for the whole cultural scenario of which they are a part. Cicero is imagining a stable republic made up of predictable life-patterns and safe traditional roles such as that of the elder-statesman *cum* historian *cum* all-around-sage. Dio and, I think, his imagined readers, know that this isn't a role Cicero will ever get to play or, ultimately, the world he lives in. The writings of his old age will be ostensibly non-political philosophical and rhetorical treatises, up until the *Philippics,* which will turn out to be just as fatal for their author as Cordus' histories. And as with Cordus, Dio's view of Cicero's *parrhēsia* is less than wholly admiring.

The overall picture, I'd argue, remains a pessimistic one in which history-writing is dangerous, unpredictable and perhaps futile. The natural question, then, for my last couple of minutes today, is how these examples relate to Dio's presentation of himself and his own work. As we know, this is a subject on which Dio has a great deal to say, notably in (#7a) on your handout, where he describes the genesis of his historical writings. There are lots of things evidently to say about this passage, and especially how it disavows the usual tropes of independence and impartiality. Dio is remarkably willing to associate his earlier writing projects with Septimius Severus, who indeed then returns to him in a later dream. Dio casts his younger self as a political maneuverer, for whom

historiography is a tool for political and cultural advancement. He sees the results of his first work and assumes they can be replicated on a larger scale.

We all know that this isn't exactly how it works out for Dio in the end, and this passage has been the basis of many biographical readings of Dio as "disillusioned" with the Severan dynasty. Such readings are to my mind correct, but don't always acknowledge how deliberately Dio creates this impression. Rather than inconsistency, I think we're meant to see a certain wry irony in this passage. Certainly the history we are reading will not turn out to be the one anticipated by Dio or Severus back in the 190s. Its end-point will change as emperors die, and its viewpoint will be revised based on the ups and downs of their successors. It's less clear what if any effect it had on Dio's career: there is little trace of any favor it might have helped him gain from Severus, though also no apparent sense that it has gotten him in trouble or will do so. What we do see is an peculiar emphasis on *tychē*, I think here in the sense of random unpredictability. When Dio speaks of that goddess as guiding his work, he's reflecting in part on all the vicissitudes of his own career and the place his literary work has within it. *Tychē* may offer fine hopes, but by her nature she does not deal in predictable certainties.

Dio reflects once in passing that he owns a villa in Capua that he designated as his place to write history (7b). This is perhaps the closest he comes to the idyll suggested by Philiscus and in some measure by Cicero himself. As ever, we know that it won't work out that way, at least completely. When we get to the end of Dio's history (7c), we learn that the words we read are not composed in his chosen retreat. After the debacle of his second consulship in 229, he leaves Italy altogether for his ancestral home in Nicaea. This is sometimes seen as a peaceful retirement, as perhaps the lines from Homer suggest. But one wonders: after all, context from the *Iliad* tells us that the safety Hector has found is neither congenial nor permanent. If Dio's stories of previous historians are any guide, the one predictable lesson he draws about historiography is that the past is no less unpredictable than the future.