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Preferred panel: Image, Text and Reality

Phidias' and Homer's Images of Zeus in Dio's *Olympian Oration*

At the conclusion of Dio's *Olympian Oration* there is a famous comparison of two images of Zeus—a sculptural image created by Phidias and a poetic one produced by Homer. Dio compares their specific traits, contrasting the peaceful and kind Zeus of Phidias with his ever-changing image in Homer that seems at times benevolent yet at other times belligerent and terrible. This difference between the artist and the poet is explained by differences in the possibilities offered by the material they use: poetic language is diverse and capable of expressing various, often contrary, views within the same work of art, whereas the material used in sculpture is firm and solid and the work of carving a sculptural piece in stone takes much time so that an artist has to keep in his mind a constant, unchanging image of what he is going to create. In my paper, I aim to analyze the function and meaning of this comparison in the thematic structure of the *Olympian Oration*, which I interpret as a piece of propaganda of Roman imperial policy.

1. I am tracing the content of the comparison back to two *topoi* of Hellenistic rhetoric that asked the question of how Phidias could produce his work when he did not have a model before his eyes. The one answer was that he had taken as his model a passage from *Iliad*, namely 1.528 (Plut. *Aemil. Paul.* 28.4, Dio *Olympian Or.* 25-6); this *topos* was a source of the very idea of comparison between Phidias and Homer. The other answer was that an ideal model originated in the mind of the sculptor (Cic. *Or.* 9, Philostr. *Apoll.* 6.19); this answer, Platonic in its origin, forms the basis for Dio's idea of the superiority of the sculptural image over the poetic one, reproducing not the ideal and true reality but an ever-changing appearance.

2. By analyzing the whole of Dio's speech in comparison with his orations *On Kingdom*, as well as with the Hellenistic treatises *On Kingdom*, I aim to demonstrate that it is the Roman power, in particular, the power of Emperor Trajan, which is epitomized by Dio's Zeus, and that the message of the *Olympian Oration* was to affirm the peaceful character of his rule notwithstanding his wars against the Daci.

3. The comparison between Phidias' and Homer's images of Zeus appears to be a specific Platonic way of affirmation of benevolence of the Roman rule. Homer, who endows Zeus with various and contrary traits and whose Zeus is sometimes violent and belligerent, is wrong in that he reproduces the world of appearance, while Phidias' art, following the highest ideal reality, produces the true

image of Zeus, peaceful and benevolent, which conforms to what he wants to present as the true character of the Roman power.