

Masts in the Mists: Borysthenes as Ghost Town in Dio's *Oration* 36

To an audience of his native Prusans, Dio relayed an encounter he supposedly had with the people of Borysthenes while he attempted to cross into the lands of the Getae. He describes the environs of Borysthenes in ways which, when taken collectively, may seem eerie: a shoal hidden by still water, a river which strains to meet the sea, and a copse of trees in a marsh which appears (to the untrained eye) to be the masts of ships sitting at harbor (*Oration* 36.2-3). We learn of the town from Dio that it had a previous life and reputation that its current appearance does not match (36.4), rather the remaining city is a dilapidated patchwork of new living spaces crammed into old defenses (36.6). Only after this prelude does Dio introduce a citizen named Kallistratos riding into the oration as if a character plucked from the works of Herodotus or Homer, well outside contemporary times.

Dio's work and his *Borysthenitic Oration* particularly have been getting a good deal of attention lately (very recently, Salles 2024, Powers 2025, Hutton 2025, Kirkland 2025), especially regarding both the philosophical underpinnings of the Stoic ἐκπόρωσις which ends the dialogue and the geographic underpinnings of his version of the northern shore of the Black Sea and the rivers which join it. I seek to unite some of these discussions to consider Dio's presentation of the failed renewal of the city of Borysthenes by reconsidering it as a "ghost town." Ghost town here takes a double-meaning; Borysthenes is both largely depopulated and somewhat spectral.

Concerning the depopulation, Dio tells us that the once burgeoning city was destroyed some 150 years previous to his own time (36.4) and was re-founded not by the Milesians, their previous mother city, but the Scythians in need of a Greek-speaking *emporion* (36.5). Even this

tentative mission is under threat for the city, as the populace now no longer speaks Greek correctly (36.9: οὐκέτι σαφῶς ἑλληνίζοντες). With defensive walls that stand at a great distance to the dwelt-in portion of the city, the question of the double-foundation story, and the raiding that still diminishes the population even immediately preceding Dio's visit (36.15), one might ask: what sort of population makes up the remains of Borysthenes?

The spectral characteristics of Borysthenes within this oration in part answer that question. Beyond the mirage of the masts in the marsh, the descriptions of the internal interlocutors, Kallistratos especially, seem to suggest that these men are at least outside of the modern milieu. In literary tastes, they prefer Homer to the exclusion of all others (36.10), making metaphorical ghosts of authors the populace would be expected to know. These include explicitly in the oration Phocylides of Miletus, but implicitly (I believe) also the omission of Sphaerus of Borysthenes, the Stoic philosopher. The physical description of Kallistratos and the close proximity of the island of Leuke also bring to mind another work of the Second Sophistic, Philostratus' *Heroikos*. In that dialogue post-mortal Protesilaos and Achilles supposedly occupied the visible world, the latter recalled within the oration by Kallistratos as the city's primary deity (36.14).

While I am certainly not the only to suggest that the Borysthenes Dio conjures sits at a breaking point (Bäbler 2007) nor the only to reinsert Sphaerus into the discussion (Braund 2024), I believe there is more to be had of this conversation.

Works Cited

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