

Julian's Platonopolis?

Among the extant writings by Julian the Apostate, we have two exempla of public addresses meant for the general consumption of two major eastern cities: Alexandria and Antioch. Both of these cities were centers of Hellenic culture and education. Both of these cities would go on to become major centers of Christianity in the later phases of imperial history. But Julian's treatment of these cities, in some ways so similar could not have been more different. For Antioch, I argue, Julian planned a future greatness that might have been meant to eclipse Constantinople. While for Alexandria, Julian would not even so much as visit the city. When Alexandria would erupt in anti-Christian violence and openly subvert the rule of law, Julian responded with his Letter to the People of Alexandria, and punished no one. When the people of Antioch would fail to behave as Julian might have wanted, he appointed a new governor well-known for his harshness in order to punish the city, in addition to taking away its status of metropolis. Such uneven responses to two episodes in Julian's short reign demand explanation. In this paper, I will attempt to demonstrate that Julian's journey to Antioch amounts to his selection of the city as his imperial capital. This decision came not only from the practical political and military realities of his rule, but also from a desire to reform the culture and religion of the empire borne from his understanding of Greek Philosophy. His fraught interaction with the people of Antioch as demonstrated in the *Misopogon* was a consequence of the mismatch between Julian's expectations for how a city ought to be ruled, and the real results of putting political theory into practice.

We know for certain that this Philosophy was Neoplatonic in nature (Elm 2012, O'Meara, 2003, Smith, 1996), and that it was concerned with practical matters (Elm, 2012).

O'Meara argues that Platonic thinkers of late antiquity were very interested in political thought and public virtue. If O'Meara is correct, then it follows that Julian was also intimately concerned with the link between Philosophy and the practical matters of governance. Indeed, Plotinus attempted to convince the emperor Gallienus to build a city that would be ruled according to the philosophy espoused in Plato's *Laws*. This city was to be built in Campania from a previously abandoned settlement and called "Platonopolis". O'Meara's conception of Neoplatonic politics is one whereby "...political virtue can serve as a first, preparatory stage in the ascent of the soul to higher levels of divine life, and...since political virtue itself images divine life, the philosopher can descend so as to bring this divine life to expression on the political level." I would argue that Julian saw his involvement with the affairs of empire precisely in these terms, since it explains Julian's exhortation that a prince must be divine and a demigod in his behavior (θεῖον εἶναι χρὴ τῇ προαιρέσει καὶ δαίμονα Julian, *Epistle to Themistius*). That is to say that Julian thought that a "normal" man, i.e. a man not trained in philosophy, and therefore not seeking to become divine was not fit for rule.

Further evidence of this attitude can be found in Julian's *Oration 7*, which contains the "autobiographical myth" in which Julian describes a communion with Helios on top of a mountain. This myth bears a striking resemblance to Plato's allegory of the cave. It is my contention that Julian saw himself as a kind of real prisoner liberated from the cave through the study of Philosophy, whose divine responsibility was to return to the cave and thereby release the other prisoners trapped there. This interpretation explains Julian's attitude towards the citizens of Antioch who reacted so poorly when Julian attempted to "free" them via his imprecations to his own conceits of pagan civic piety, while at the same time treating the Alexandrians with a comparatively mild hand.

Bibliography

- Elm, S. 2012. *Sons of Hellenism, Father of the Church: Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus, and the Vision of Rome*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Julian. Vol II: *Orations 6-8, Letters to Themistius, To the Senate and People of Athens, To a Priest, The Caesars, and The Misopogon*. Ed. J. Henderson, trans. W.C. Wright. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Mass., 1913.
- O'Meara, D. 2003. *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Smith, R. 1996. *Julian's Gods: Religion and Philosophy in the Thought and Action of Julian the Apostate*. Routledge, London.