

Coinage and images of the imperial family: local identity and Roman rule

Marietta Horster

Introduction

In his speech “About harmony between the cities”, Publius Aelius Aristides, the famous orator of the mid-2nd c. A.D., admonishes the three most eminent cities of *Asia* — Pergamum, Ephesus and Smyrna — to put an end to their rivalries. He regards as useless their envy and struggle to be first among the cities in the province of *Asia*. He cautions against such rivalries, which could lead to an unwanted intervention by Roman authorities. He continues (*Or.* 23 [Keil = 42 Dindorf] 62):

Is there a child or an old man so much out of mind that he would ignore that this is our present situation and that this is thank heaven the ruling law: one city, the first and greatest, has the whole world under one authority and rule, and one family (*oikos*) gives the laws, and governors come to us year by year, and it is up to them to decide what is best in little and great things.¹

Aristides speaks of Rome (one city), and of several governors, but not of the emperor. Instead, he uses the word *oikos*, meaning house or family. This *oikos* is the centre of power, the lawgiver, the entity that sets the rules. This is rhetoric that visualises power as something concrete: city – house – man / Rome – *oikos* – governor. For someone living in one of the provinces, direct contact with the Roman authority was mostly with the governor and his staff, if not the army. The well-educated listener to or reader of Aristides’ speech was probably one of those who could get an appointment with the governor rather easily: the speech addressed the wealthy and influential élites of the three cities mentioned. Some of the members of the élite knew the governors in person; and it was the actual governor residing in the province who represented Roman power — not the distant emperor, not the far-off city of Rome. In Aristides’ speech, the choice of *oikos* over ‘emperor’ is mainly a rhetorical device: it does not provide a clue to how Aristides understood the potential, influence and power of members of this *oikos*, the imperial family.

The present paper discusses the rhetoric of images, a different form of rhetoric about the *oikos* as the imperial house or imperial family, namely, the presentation of members of the imperial families on local coins.² Some of the different ways in which such presentations were used will be surveyed and their possible meaning and significance discussed. As local coins are “the most deliberate of all symbols of public identity”, the “self-defined

1 For Aelius Aristides *Or.* 62, his understanding of the ruling power, and his exhortation of the cities’ competitions, see Merkelbach 1978 and Collas-Heddeland 2002. On differences between the views and concepts of Plutarch, Dion of Prusa and Aristides, see Veyne 1999, 565 f. The different attitudes of Greek orators to Roman rule are discussed by Bowersock 1969, Swain 1996, and Guerber 2002.

2 In contrast to local coinage, the medium of the imperial coinage and the selection and reception of the ‘messages’ of imperial coins have been the subject of many studies: e.g., Crawford 1983, 51-59; Metcalf 1993; Ando 2000, 215-28 (and 232 ff. on the “power of the imperial portraits”, not only on imperial coins); Noreña 2001; Hekster 2003; Duncan-Jones 2005, 460-61; Hedlund 2008, 27-42; Manders 2012, 33-40. For a focus on the imperial family on coins issued in the Late Republican and Imperial mints, see, e.g., Horster 2005, 2007a and 2011.