

Entrevista com Roger Rees: Retórica, política e o estudo dos panegíricos latinos*

*Interview with Roger Rees: Rhetoric, policy and the Latin
Panegyric's studies*

Roger Rees is a PhD scholar working in St Andrews University and has been there since 2006, when he was appointed Reader in Latin. Before that, he held lectureships in Classics at Newcastle (1997), St Andrews (1998), Trinity College Dublin (1998-9) and Edinburgh (1999-2006). He is interested in praise discourse in the Roman world. Among his works there is a collaborative commentary project on a collection of 12 Latin speeches of praise (the *XII Panegyrici Latini*), co-led with Professor Bruce Gibson of Liverpool University and involving scholars across Europe. His own focus is on a speech to the emperor Theodosius, delivered in 389 CE by Pacatus Drepanius. currently, he has been writing a biography of the emperor *Diocletianus*.

1. Thiago Brandão Zardini: The Panegyrici Latini Project was an academic initiative to study a collection of Roman speeches, organised in partnership with Professor Bruce Gibson. We would like to know more about it. What was the purpose of the Project and what conclusions have you drawn after looking all the data?

Roger Rees: The project has been running for five or so years now and although we have made significant progress, it shows no sign of stopping any time soon! We are currently five people on the project – Diederik Burgersdijk (Nijmegen, The Netherlands) Bruce Gibson (Liverpool, UK), Pilar Garcia Ruiz (Navarra, Spain) and Catherine Ware (Edinburgh, UK) plus myself. Our primary ambition is to produce fullscale, individual commentaries on each of the twelve speeches in the collection. The commentaries themselves are individually authored, but our work-in-progress is shared via Wordpress blogging software, making all of our draft work available to the entire research team, for

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comments, suggestions, etc, as we proceed. Some of the website is available for public access at (<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/classics/panegyric/>) although the work-in-progress is not.

We occasionally meet as a research team for 'old fashioned' face-to-face discussions, but modern it makes this rather less of a necessity than perhaps it would have been in the past. In the course of the project so far, we have also published a fair number of academic articles (see the website for details). Early on in the project we ran a conference at St Andrews on the theme of the reception of Pliny the Younger in Late Antiquity – this was not exclusively on the Panegyrici Latini, but included other genres, notably epic poetry, epistolography and biography. The findings came out in a special edition of *Arethusa* (46.2) in 2013. Future publications include the commentaries themselves of course, and further scholarly articles; that said, the project is sufficiently versatile to extend its intellectual range, for example into other classical panegyric literature, or to the renaissance and later reception of Panegyrici collection. There is certainly plenty of material to keep us – and any new team members - busy for many years.

2. In the last few years scholars on Ancient Rhetoric have proposed an interchange of ideas with other areas of knowledge, such as Sociology, and Linguistic, and Politics, and Anthropology and even Archaeology. How do you assess the benefits of this interchange?

R: I sometimes feel that interdisciplinary is fetishised by our profession, almost for its own sake and without rigorous interrogatio, so I prefer to try to judge the merits of academic 'interchange' on a case-by-case basis. That said, we rule nothing out! Within the Panegyrici project, several distinct areas of academic research and expertise come together – history, politics, textual and literary criticism, art historical and archaeological comparative data, etc.: in this sense, we are forging something new, since traditionally, scholarship has mined these speeches for their historical information - without in any way downplaying the importance of that, our project also treats the speeches as literary artefacts. They also showcase considerable cultural complexity, with for example, Gallic orators addressing Roman emperors of Balkan origin in Latin, so as well as establishing historical context, our research often tries to tease out the contours and effects of the

cultural interaction embedded in the texts – this approach has in fact been significantly promoted by recent and forthcoming conference themes headed by Diederik in the Netherlands and Pilar in Spain.

3. Concerning Late Antiquity, a traditional historiography about rhetorical studies used to emphasize the dichotomy between Christianity and Paganism. Nowadays, how this dichotomy is understood?

R: Alan Cameron's monumental *Last Pagans* book is of course a constant reference point for us, although the issue of Christianity is most remarkable for its absence in our material. The twelve *Panegyrici* were addressed to various emperors, including the pagan Trajan, the persecutors Diocletian and Maximian, the Christian Constantine (both before and after his Edict of Milan), the apostate Julian and the catholic Theodosius – that is, there is no consistent religious position that we can identify. This inconsistency is itself a subject of intense academic exchange. In my own case, working on the speech to Theodosius of 389, a fabulous monograph by Anne-Marie Turkan-Verkerk in 2003 established to most readers' entire satisfaction that Pacatus Drepanius was the author of a Christian poem (called the *De Cereis Paschalis*): the implications of this radical reattribution of the poem are yet to settle, but on the face of it, it seems that in his panegyric, we have a speech of praise delivered by a Christian subject to a Christian emperor, in which Christianity is side-lined! The model implied by 'dichotomy' would seem to oversimplify the cultural relations being played out here.

4. Now we would like to know about the transmission of the Panegyrici Latini as a specific corpus of ancient texts. To what extent how these ancient texts can be conceived as a group of similar texts?

R: The speeches were rediscovered in Mainz (Germany) in 1433, and although that manuscript is now lost, copies made of it at the time have allowed us to reconstruct that archetype fairly confidently. The collection was not put together in chronological sequence; its collectivity is enhanced by distinctive and elaborate patterns of intertextual relationships within the corpus (not to mention with other texts, such as Vergil and Cicero). The orthodox opinion is that the collection of twelve speeches was put together

in late antiquity, quite probably by Pacatus Drepanius, (or someone with his interests at heart). The speeches can be said to be similar, in that they all articulate praise to an emperor (or emperors), although one of them is at least a little anomalous; on the other hand, there are plenty of differences too, such as, for example, in something as fundamental as their length – the speech to Trajan by Pliny the Younger is about 80 sides of OCT text; the shortest panegyric is something like 12 sides long! One important point our project is making increasingly clear is that these twelve speeches are not ‘all the same’, any more, for example, than Ovid, Tibullus and Propertius are ‘all the same’, or Ennius, Vergil and Lucan etc. The mechanics and processes by which the collection came into being have been the subjects of informed scholarly hypotheses – the idea of a multi-authored anthology of oratory was hardly standard in classical or late antiquity, so scholars do not really have much in the way of comparative data to guide them. This makes it all the more fun.

5. Studying the Panegyrici Latini, scholars tend to highlight either the connections between this corpus and the Classical tradition or its originality, interpreting the Panegyrici as works related to their own time and context. What is your opinion about such approaches?

R: Both are important. Establishing and appreciating the historical context is axiomatically important for full understanding of political oratory, but the fact that these speeches, and therefore the collection in which they take their place, characterize themselves as heirs to – and part of – their classical past, is also vital. I guess that although scholarship’s traditional compartmentalization of its material (for example, early Latin, Classical Latin, Late antiquity) provides a convenient system for organizing our research and teaching practices, it becomes unhelpful if and when it limits our thinking and open-mindedness. Pacatus Drepanius was Gallic and Roman, poetic and prosaic, pagan and Christian, traditional and original: he deserves to be approached as such.

6. I think that we would not be wrong in considering the ceremonial of basileia as a kind of political "discourse". Do you think that, in Antiquity, the Panegyrici Latini contributed to strengthen the imperial political communication or to make it easier?

R: It's a difficult question! I'm sure you are right to see the performance of panegyric as part of imperial ceremonial, but beyond that I would be hesitant to commit to too broad an answer, I'm afraid. The evidence of the panegyric collection indicates that provincial orators, albeit educated and presumably of considerable status in their own communities, could be granted access to the imperial court, at least in these perhaps rather circumscribed situations. That is not to say that they were able to exercise complete freedom of speech though – the pressures of courtly protocol were no doubt intense. On the other hand, I do not suppose that these men were simply ventriloquizing speeches dictated to them from the court, as, as it were, mouthpieces for state propaganda. Close reading of the speeches has shown that sometimes they seem to promote a local or even personal agenda (such as a bid for tax breaks in the former case, or for some familial patronage in the latter); and on other occasions they publicise and respond imperial 'news'. This two-way traffic in political discourse has been termed 'communication ascendante et descendante', rendering clumsy their characterization as either 'free speech' or 'propaganda'. What is less clear is, of course, what we don't have: as a formal display of rhetorical negotiation between aristocratic interest groups, panegyric was a medium of communication, with rules, traditions and boundaries. What we know much less about is what went on behind the scenes, between orators and government officials, before and after the delivery. Panegyrics are simply what they all wanted us to see and hear and experience, but their political relationships must have consisted of much more as well.

7. According to you could the study of the Panegyrici Latini cast some light on both the rituals of the Roman power and the political demands of the provincials?

R: Certainly. The very fact that in late antique Gaul, orators addressed dignified and polished speeches in praise of Roman emperors tells us at least as much about relations between capitals and provinces and the cultural changes they precipitated as the marvelous archaeology of Trier, Nimes, Bordeaux, etc. Speech-making as a cultural practice had been successfully exported into Gallic schools, who were understandably keen to display their cultural credentials as part of their political agenda.

8. *Currently, you have devoted yourself to study the Tetrarchy, especially the government and the political image of Diocletianus again. Is it possible to explain why this subject is so appealing to you? Could you tell us something about your current research findings?*

R: I have worked on Diocletian before, and find myself doing so again, as you say. Writing a biography of a Roman emperor is in some senses a hopeless or arrogant ambition – we simply do not have the sources of appropriate type or in suitable quantity to attempt realistic psychological or emotional profiling, for example. But amongst other things, the landscape of sources for Diocletian has been endlessly appealing to me: speeches of extravagant praise, excoriating abuse from later Christian sources, inscrutable portraiture, ambitious legal and administrative reforms, and finally, most intriguingly, retirement. I find him elusive and compelling, and I am trying to capture some of that quality in my current work.

9. *From the Tetrarchy onwards the Roman political language was entirely altered. Besides that, there were substantial political reforms and the creation of new social relations. Do you believe that the laudatory speeches of Late Antiquity can help us to understand these changes?*

R: Probably rather less than narrative histories such as Ammianus, or documentary sources such as the Theodosian Code or the Verona List, all of which, despite the idiosyncratic challenges of their interpretation, grant wider perspectives than speeches, taken individually or collectively. I am being cautious here because I think it would be wrong to present oratorical praise-giving as peculiarly characteristic of late antiquity – even by the time Pliny addressed Trajan in 100, the genre of the political laudation had considerable Latin ancestry, not to mention the form in the Greek world – our problem is, that in the case of the Latin tradition in particular, we know rather less about it than we would like. That is not to say the Panegyrici can offer us no help, but to insist that any temptation to associate literary praise-giving with late antiquity risks colluding in Gibbon's characterization of the later empire as a period of decline – politically, artistically, morally, etc.

10. *Nowadays we have seen the increase of academic interest in Late Antiquity all over the world, including in South America. Have you been aware of such process? What do you think about it?*

R: It is tremendously exciting, and a huge contrast even to my own time as an undergraduate – nowadays, authors like Ammianus, Libanius, Claudian and Sidonius, or emperors like Constantine, Julian and Theodosius are so much more mainstream than they used to be, the subjects of conferences, monographs teaching syllabuses and research collaborations. I think the internationalism you mention is at least as strong in late Antique studies as in other areas of classical scholarship, a feature which I hope will develop even more in the coming decades. And in respect of South America, I am delighted that Classics at St Andrews is about to welcome a new colleague from Brazil onto the staff, Carlos Machado, who has a late antique string to his bow, so to speak.