

JOANNA JANIK  
(JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY)

**WISDOM BEHIND POWER**  
**GENERAL REMARKS ON ISOCRATES AS THE SELF-MADE**  
**ADVISOR OF THE KINGS**

**KEYWORDS:** Isocrates, political treatise, king's authority, Panhellenism, political commentator, counselor, intellectual

**SUMMARY:** The article begins with short introduction referring to the role of advisors, teachers and sages in the political life with emphasis on the changes connected with the emergence of Athenian democracy and education offered by the sophists. Athenian state offers excellent opportunities for political education, on the other hand the existence of a sage in the system based on the popular rule in the eyes of some intellectuals proves to be difficult, or impossible. Plato's reaction on the death of Socrates results in his resigning from public activity, Isocrates however finds his own way of life in accordance with his views. He seemingly retreats from political activity, because he does not present his speeches in the assembly, still he takes part in political life by writing treatises referring to the contemporary issues.

The treatises *To Nicocles* and *To Philip* prove that his interests were not limited to the Athens; he was eager to consider different political systems and believed that addressing the powerful leaders might be quite an efficient way to influence political reality.

In the treatise *To Nicocles* he offers the general set of principles that should be obeyed by a king in order to preserve his authority and take good care of the state, the treatise *To Philip* comprises an appeal to the king of Macedonia encouraging him to unite Greece in the crusade against Persia. In spite

of obvious differences in the historical context, both works present mixture of moral idealism and political pragmatism characteristic for Isocrates, who put an effort in establishing for himself the position of political commentator and advisor. His professional activity added a new quality to the political culture of Athens, where an individual either took active part in assemblies and administration, or chose the life of a private man. Isocrates escaped this alternative and introduced a new model of an intellectual in the public sphere.

In Greek tradition political power and social order are supported by wisdom embodied in the figure of a wise man, a sage, whose presence in the background safeguarded the decisions of a political leader. In the Homeric world this part was played both by the poets, rhapsodes, and by the priests able to interpret divine signs. Hesiod considered himself an advisor and without hesitation admonished his audience, especially the “kings”, with harsh words. With Solon the phenomenon acquired new dimension, because he represented both wisdom of an intellectual and power of a politician.

The beginning of the V century brought two important changes in the quality of leadership in Athens: the first one was introduction of democracy and the decisive role of the popular assembly. Since the reforms of Cleisthenes the ambitions of an individual depended from his power of persuasion. The second innovation, the art of rhetoric, came from Sicily. Teachers of rhetoric took the place once occupied by the poets reciting heroic stories. Rhapsodes provided entertainment and, at the same time, passed cultural heritage of previous generations; their stories offered ready models of behavior and presented ethical norms the knowledge of which decided about the place in the society. In this sense they worked as teachers. Like the heroes of their stories they belonged to the aristocratic culture. Poetry of course never lost its power of attraction, it was still regarded important factor in the education of a decent individual, the authors were still respected for their wisdom, but the verses and songs were no longer the main source of knowledge preparing to active life in the society. A poet, inspired by Muses, had to give way to a well educated and versatile teacher of “political art”, which was mainly based on rhetoric, eristic, dialectic and, in the best option, ethic.

Since most of these teachers were not Athenian citizens they could not take part in the political life of the city themselves, therefore, if any of them cherished any personal ambitions of influencing decisions of the Assembly or having an impact on the quality of political debate, the only way leading to this goal was through the education of the city elite.

In the second half of the 5th century BC Socrates, Athenian citizen by birth, brought together educational mission and fulfilling the duties for the country. Although far from any leading position, Socrates paid his due in battle and did not abstain from other obligations<sup>1</sup>.

The tragedy of his death had a negative influence on his most talented disciple: Plato tried to influence real political life, and, disappointed, gave up improving contemporary world<sup>2</sup>. Instead he engaged his mind in constructing ideal constitutions. The founder of the Academia came to the conclusion that the contemporary democratic community and state cannot accept a true wise man; there is no place for the philosopher in the society of individuals unable to understand his words and share his ideas; in the inevitable clash true wisdom enclosed in the fragile body of a single man is condemned to be destroyed by the more powerful opponent: an individual is not able to win with a state<sup>3</sup>. Such a pessimistic observation drove Plato to seek reclusion in to the world of intellectual deliberation. His dialogues may suggest that there is only one alternative: either a man decides to preserve his moral and intellectual integrity even and loses his chances of political career, or a man puts his political ambitions first.

Isocrates, contemporary to Plato, chose different path: he decided not to take active part in the political life, although in his case this decision did not mean total absence from the public debate<sup>4</sup>. As an Athenian citizen Isocrates felt obliged to participate in the political life of the city, on the other hand, his conservative sympathies made this participation

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<sup>1</sup> Socrates took part in the battle of Potidaea (*Symp.* 219 e) and was one of the *prytanes* during the process of the generals at 406 BC (*Gorg.* 474 a).

<sup>2</sup> About Plato's plan see: *Ep.* VII 324 b-c; Ober 2002: 162-165.

<sup>3</sup> This could be the interpretation of *Gorgias* (especially the conclusion: 521 d-522 a), for further commentary see e.g.: Ober 2002: 192-214; Kahn 1999: 144-145.

<sup>4</sup> *Phil.* 81-82; the excuse given by Isocrates does not have to be taken literally, as was argued by Too 1995: 84-87.

difficult. His texts prove his genuine interest in the Athenian politics, he really cared about his country, but there are some hints, that he could not find his own place on the contemporary political stage, at least not in the sense he was expected to find. He decided to comment on political decisions and programs and did so with written treatises. One may suspect that the form Isocrates chose for his works was supposed to bring them closer to real political life: all his treatises were composed as speeches. Thus the author might create an impression of taking part in the actual debate, since a speech was the most obvious way to present one's views<sup>5</sup>.

These speeches became Isocrates' way to share his ideas referring to the most vital issues of Athenian state. There is very little doubt that Isocrates wanted to influence reality; apart from written works he had one more tool at his disposal: his school designed to provide proper education for eminent citizens and leaders-to-be<sup>6</sup>. He trained his carefully selected students in rhetoric, but this was only part of the program: Isocrates' ambition was to equip his pupils with high moral standards, which would guide them through the whole public career.

His school, although never established as a formal institution, was a success and many generations regarded Isocrates mainly as a teacher. If we are to believe his own words, Isocrates would not be completely satisfied with such a classification; we may easily infer from his texts that in his opinion intellectuals obliged to participate in the life of their polis, but this participation does not necessarily mean active political career<sup>7</sup>. His ambition was to influence people with written word, which, instead of discussing some sophisticated and abstract dilemmas, would refer to contemporary political issues. He felt perfectly at ease in writing to kings and tyrants and in giving advice to his own fellow countrymen. The difference in political system did not discourage his enthusiasm, even if his connections to Cyprian rulers could instigate rumors about his alleged monarchical sympathies. Isocrates replied that he

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<sup>5</sup> Nails 1995: 159; Too 1995: 85-86; Woolf 1996: 84-98.

<sup>6</sup> The most complex explanation of his ideas and aims was given by Isocrates in the *Antidosis*, see also Usener 1994: 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Isocrates described his own writings as πολιτικοὶ λόγοι and argued that discussing important matters of the state is the most suitable task for an individual, e.g. *Antid.* 47-49, 67, 80.

simply wanted to make the Cyprian monarchy better and the life of the Cyprians easier, and that such an intension does not collide with his loyalty to the democratic homeland (*Antid.* 40, 67-70). This statement implies some general principle which seem to lay behind Isocrates' attitude towards political leadership and one-man rule in particular: his interests were never limited to the political entanglement of his own country, although he was truly devoted to Athens, he was able to see its role at much broader context, he also seemed to accept the diversity of political forms in contemporary Greece and he made effort to make them better within the limits of reason. This together with his pedagogical passion were the source of his writings to Nicocles of Cyprus and Philip of Macedon. The mere existence of these works provokes reflection. The treatises of Isocrates were not addressed to the abstract figure of a ruler, neither were they theoretical works composed mainly for the author's pleasure, with no chance of attracting the attention of the addressee. At least in the case of the Cyprian speeches there was high probability that the treatises would be accepted by Isocrates' former student.

In the beginning of the treatise *To Nicocles* Isocrates made his intention clear; on reflection he decided that offering advice is the best gift for a king (*Ad Nicocl.* 2). It should be noted that Isocrates could not expect any particular profit from the ruler of Cyprus, at least not in the political sense. Neither had he any special plans connected with Nicocles, he did not see him as the leader of any great crusade. We may safely assume that he wrote his treatises to Nicocles unselfishly, just because he considered it right thing to do. He was convinced that the best gift for a new ruler is wise advice send by someone independent enough to tell the truth. Of course Isocrates did not intend to offend his former pupil, but he certainly wanted him to understand that a king seeking advice can hardly count on his court. In this essay I am not going in to details of the speech, since it has already been discussed, point by point, by several scholars<sup>8</sup>. I would however like to refer to some of his ideas and the general tone of the treatise *To Nicocles*.

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<sup>8</sup> E.g. Jaeger 2001: 1005 ff.; Eucken 1983: 216-247; Poulakos 1997: 26-40; Tuszyńska-Maciejewska 2004: 138-153; Janik 2012: 81-106.

It is difficult not to see that the way Isocrates addresses the king resembles the tone of a teacher addressing a student: he considers his advice the most suitable present to give and to accept by the king (*Ad Nicocl.* 2). It is a matter of debate whether his attitude free from any amount of servitude is the result of his former relations to Nicocles. On the other hand, the other letters Isocrates addressed to the leaders of the Greek states prove that the author never felt particularly inferior to the people representing political and military power. He must have felt secure in his Athenian home, far from the reach of the men he chose to admonish. Moreover, he believed that being a king was the most important and at the same time the most demanding human task (*Ad Nicocl.* 6), but the popular image of the life of a monarch and the usual temptations associated with such existence make fulfilling this task even more difficult.

His advice to Nicocles refers to two main issues: the task of a king in general and the performance of it. Education of a ruler-to-be seems to belong to the first subject and its importance corresponds to the greatness of the task. The position of a leader surpassing all the others in power and rank demands extraordinary personal qualifications: king's exceptional position should be justified by his exceptional virtue, and the way leading to fulfilling this demand leads through education and diligence (*Ad Nicocl.* 12). Isocrates explains at length the significance of personal training the result of which is self-assured, reliable and mature ruler. The most important however is the aim and the main reason of such a demanding process: a king has to develop several skills and appropriate moral niveau to be able to undertake his main task, taking care of the city and his subjects. It is hard not to notice that such an attitude belongs to the traditional Greek way of describing royal authority, which, since Homer, had been seen as a set of tasks and obligations rather than privileges<sup>9</sup>. Isocrates adds certain argument of more practical nature: the most secure and stable rule is built on the love and trust of the subjects, there is no better way to keep one's authority than to being good and loved leader (*Ad Nicocl.* 21). Another element crucial for the security of the throne is the entourage

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<sup>9</sup> *Il.* 2, 204-206; 9, 96-99; *Od.* 11, 568-570; see also: Raaflaub 1997: 633; Janik 2003: 50-51.

of a king: there is nothing surprising in Isocrates' exploring old Greek belief, according to which a man may be evaluated by the quality of his friends and companions (*Ad Nicocl.* 27). What is rather obvious in the life of a private individual seems to be especially difficult to achieve in the case of a king. People at court are especially prone to flattery and interested in getting as much profit for themselves as possible. The self-conduct of a monarch often adds to the problem, as he is not accustomed to the sincere opinions of inferior companions (*Ad Nicocl.* 28). Isocrates admonishes Nicocles to be particularly prudent in choosing his advisors and companions, the better the surrounding, the more respectable ruler. The importance of the companionship for the personal development of an individual has already been underlined, especially by Theognis, but contrary to this aristocratic moralizer Isocrates never described noble birth as the crucial criterion of a man's ethical credentials. This difference however was not considered fundamental by the author of Cyprian speeches, since he recommended the poet of Megara, together with Hesiod and Phocylides, as the most suitable help in educating human soul (*Ad Nicocl.* 43).

Worthy friends, wisdom and loyalty of the people should be regarded as the most solid foundations of the throne and the most trustworthy guarantee of royal power (*Ad Nicocl.* 21). This remark reveals one of the most characteristic features of Isocrates' concepts: distinct practical attitude towards life, ethics and professional activity suitable for a respectable individual. Isocrates expresses his enthusiasm for philosophy and intellectual training with one serious reservation: these disciplines should provide necessary knowledge, ethical background and appropriate exercise for one's mind in order to prepare a man for life in a state, where his talents would be used in discussing vital matters of contemporary politics. Indulging in subtle arguments far from reality for the whole life perhaps allows to feel superior to the rest of the people, but in reality offers nothing valuable to the community (*Ad Nicocl.* 39, 50) His own counsels represent a mixture of standard ethical principles and common sense; almost every piece of advice refers to practical results of a ruler's conduct. Any reader could easily come to the conclusion that being a good king demands a lot from a man, but this effort proves very profitable, both for the ruler and for his subjects. Respect and loyalty instead of fear, good laws and economy introduce

harmony and peace in the state (*Ad Nicocl.* 17-20, 23). A king should not avoid changes, if they are necessary, nor should he hesitate imitating foreign examples, if the local political tradition does not provide the efficient solution of a problem. One principle deserves particular attention: in the world of extensive conquests, Isocrates reminds his royal friend that the greatness of a state does not depend on the territorial extension (*Ad Nicocl.* 26).

It is worth remembering that Isocrates does not aspire to surprise the reader with novelties and freshly invented arguments; on the contrary: he is perfectly aware that the treatise to Nicocles repeats several opinions scattered in the literary tradition. As if challenging some intellectual celebrities of his time, he argues that sometimes it is better to follow commonly accepted opinion (*Ad Nicocl.* 40-41). He persuades his audience that in giving advice he is not seeking popularity or fame of an exceptionally original author, but he simply tells what he considers the most prudent and sensible. If we consider friendly relations between the new king of Cyprus and his former tutor, we may assume that Isocrates' words would be accepted, perhaps with certain degree of attention.

The historical context of the treatise *To Philip* was quite different, but the practical inclination of the author and his ambition to influence politics outside Athens remain the same. Isocrates was very worried about the conflict between his country and the king of Macedon over the possession of Amphipolis. He was working on the treatise arguing that the war was equally disadvantageous for both parties. To his joy, before he completed this work Athens and Philip signed peace treaty. Isocrates decided to strengthen this political tendency and convince the king that Macedon and Athens have mutual interests. Besides, the authority of Philip and his talents gave new impulse to Isocrates' old dream about Panhellenic peace and crusade against the barbarians<sup>10</sup>. Since the time of *Panegyricus* Isocrates had abandoned the hope, that the common peace and cooperation between Hellenes would be accomplished under the guidance of his own city, this disappointment however did not ruin his vision of Hellas united in the common aim<sup>11</sup>. He

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<sup>10</sup> On the idea of Panhellenism see: Flower 2000: 93-95.

<sup>11</sup> I referred to this issue lately, see: Janik 2012: 129-140, also Michelini 1998: 115-133.

grasped the opportunity to promote this idea, when Athens and Philip were on good terms<sup>12</sup>. Perhaps, as the political realist he sensed what was coming and tried to prepare common ground for both the king and the Greek cities<sup>13</sup>. It could be expected that the treatise addressed to one of the most powerful men in the world would be carefully phrased, and that the tone of the author would differ from the style of the Cyprian speeches. Isocrates, however, did not abandon his professor-like attitude: he praised the king and the Athenians for signing the treaty and immediately proceeded to his own ideas referring to the creating permanent peace. In other words, he began to explain what could have been done to make the situation better. He is so much convinced about his being right, that does not hesitate to advise the leaders in the most vital matters. This time he was not writing to a new king giving him general precepts about the conduct of a ruler, he was writing to a leader whose decisions had the direct impact on the whole Greece, and he was fully aware of this fact. Isocrates openly expresses his belief that in order to achieve some impact on the reality and act for common good, one should address the men of power able to put in to practice wise ideas (*Phil.* 12-14). He regards this course of action much more effective and practical than addressing the assembly; the suggestion that Isocrates' writings might turn out more profitable for the Athenian politics than public speeches of hectic orators, seems to be distinct. It is hard not to notice that Isocrates tries to prove that speaking in front of the people was not the only way to be active in politics. Isocrates chose to address Philip because in his opinion the king of Macedon was the only leader able to act freely and plan on a grand scale (*Phil.* 14-16). Isocrates vividly describes, how he overcame the reservations of his friends dissuading him from sending his advice to the most successful king,

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<sup>12</sup> On the other hand Markle argues that Isocrates really addressed this treatise to the Athenian audience and wrote it in such a way, as to please the Greeks; since Philip was already inclined to invade Persia there was no serious need to convince him to this plan, and Isocrates sent him his work just to gain the favour of the monarch, see Markle 1976: 80. I could agree with the first statement, since the arguments are chosen deliberately to satisfy self-dignity of the Greeks and enable them to accept Philip as their leader, but the final conclusion seems disputable: Isocrates was old and respectable, he did not need particular protection, and his views must have already been known.

<sup>13</sup> Convincing analysis of Isocrates attitude towards Philip was provided by Perlman 1983: 211-217.

surrounded by many clever companions (*Phil.* 20-23). Isocrates would not like Philip make the same mistake and urge him to read the whole treatise with open mind, no matter how unrealistic some of its proposals might appear at the first sight (*Phil.* 25). Isocrates realizes the fact that the written word is less valued and is stripped of the advantages of the direct personal performance, yet he counts on the reason of his addressee; he reminds the king that he should consider the facts and remain superior to the popular opinion (*Phil.* 28-30). Recounting Philip's victories may be regarded as the indirect compliment, on the other hand Isocrates does not hesitate to tell the king what is the appropriate conduct of a man of his rank (*Phil.* 28). Further paragraphs comprise more expressions suitable for a master explaining a student why a particular actions should be taken and what conduct is becoming in particular circumstances (*Phil.* 30-32). Reconciliation of traditionally hostile Greek cities would be the extremely difficult task, impossible to accomplish in the past, yet Isocrates is tempting Philip by emphasizing the greatness of this enterprise, a real challenge for an exceptional man (*Phil.* 41). This clever remark is the closest to compliment in the first part of the treatise.

Discussing the deeds of his predecessors in the position of the leader of Greece Isocrates points at their deficiencies and explains why Philip's chances for success are grater (*Phil.* 42-67). He encourages the king to action and assures him that no matter what the result of the campaign against Persia would be, king Philip would succeed: he would equal the great ancestors in the glory of a conqueror, or he would win the friendship of all the Hellenes (*Phil.* 68). At the same time Isocrates appeals to the ambition and common sense of the king: he cannot loose, and the profits would be enormous. Striking the right note Isocrates depicts the vision of Philip as the wise and respected leader and arbiter of the whole Hellenic world (*Phil.* 69-70). He also warns Philip not to disregard negative opinions propagated by his enemies in the Greek cities, the opinion of the multitude should be important for every leader (*Phil.* 79-80).

It is worth emphasizing that Isocrates chose this treatise to explain, why he had given up the career of a public speaker and why he, nevertheless, considers his writing important (*Phil.* 81-80). According to his own words, physical and psychical deficiencies prevented his

public performances, still he has no reason to feel inferior, since he had not wasted his talents and found another way of expression. Wisdom obliges a man and encourages him to express his views boldly even in front of the most powerful audience.

The second part of the treatise is designed to stimulate Philip's ambition by describing the deeds of his heroic ancestor: in the crusade against Asia the king would follow the steps of Heracles. Isocrates does not limit his counsels to general idea of the Panhellenic enterprise and the leadership of Philip; as in the case of Nicocles, he underlines the importance of the leader's conduct towards his allies and subjects. In the last paragraphs (*Phil.* 120 ff.) the author recalls the topos of a good and gentle ruler; in the conclusion he summons Philip to behave like a king, not like a tyrant (*Phil.* 154).

Isocrates' interest in the ambitious and talented king of Macedon corresponds to his conservative vision of the world, where eminent individuals should play exceptional role and work successfully for the sake of the whole community. The position and actions of such men in the democratic state was often jeopardized by the mistrust of the fellow-citizens; in comparison, a king's lot seems to be much easier, since he is able to proceed with his plans and is seemingly independent in his decisions. These circumstances really offer excellent opportunities provided that the throne belongs to the right person, and that this person is fully aware of the difficulties of the task. Isocrates believes that good advice is crucial in performing such serious duties. As he argued in the treatise to Nicocles, ability to listen to wise men should be one of the most basic virtues of a man in power. On the other hand, it may be inferred that giving advice should be considered a duty of a wise man. Isocrates does not hesitate to fulfill it with all his strength. The written word provide the excellent way to approach even the most distant addressee; the author is no longer limited by the space or time; he can go beyond the politics of his own city and easily indulge in the international affairs. Isocrates' efforts to take part in contemporary politics represent new element in Greek public life and provide a new model of professional career: a political commentator and counselor, interested in political reality, yet not acting as a public speaker, nor employed by a government, private man, expressing freely his own views referring not only to the past, but to the present and offering ideas

to men of action. We might even risk the conclusion that Isocrates must have accepted the fact of particular specialization: exceptional wisdom and political power are not always united in the same individual; it is natural that some men are born to be leaders, they are given enough energy and talents to put their ambitions into practice, but whether they achieve greatness depends upon their ability to choose right counselors.

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