
EMPIRES & PERIPHERIES

THEMISTIUS AND HIS WORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURAL CONTINUITY

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Abstract. This article is devoted to the general heritage of Themistius, the orator, philosopher, and rhetorician who worked in Constantinople in the second half of the fourth century. All previous works have considered only his philosophical ideas. The author pays special attention to Themistius's orations, which are divided into political (19) and private (15). Themistius still has not been appreciated for his true value as an orator, philosopher, and especially as a rhetorician of Late Antiquity. His orations are an important historical source on political theory, the history of education, and rhetoric.

Keywords: Themistius, rhetoric, Late Antiquity, philosophy, Constantinople.

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ФЕМИСТИЙ И ЕГО СОЧИНЕНИЯ В КОНТЕКСТЕ КУЛЬТУРНОГО КОНТИНУИТЕТА

Аннотация. В работе предложен первый в отечественной науке очерк общего наследия оратора, философа и учителя 2-й половины IV в. Фемистия, работавшего в Константинополе. До этого разрабатывались

лишь его философские идеи. Особое внимание автор статьи уделяет речам Фемистия (всего их сохранилось 34), которые делятся на политические (19) и частные (15). Фемистий еще недостаточно оценен как оратор, мыслитель и особенно как преподаватель эпохи Поздней античности. Его речи – важный исторический источник по политической теории, истории образования, риторики.

Ключевые слова: Фемистий, риторика, Поздняя античность, философия, Константинополь.

Themistius (317–93 AD)¹ is a statesman, rhetorician, and philosopher of Late Antiquity.² Autobiographical notes in his works (orations) establish the facts of his birth and education. Most likely he was born in the same place as his father in Paphlagonia in 317 AD.³ Themistius's father, Eugenius, though a landowner of average income, had received a philosophical education, studied works by Plato and Aristotle, and tried to prove the unity of their doctrines (*Orat.* 20 “A Funeral Oration in Honor of His Father”). He provided a good home education to his son. In one of his orations, Themistius wrote that it was not obligatory to go to Athens or Constantinople to get a good education (*Orat.* 27 “On the Need to Give Thought, Not to Where [We Study] but to the Men [Who Will Teach us]”). However, Themistius himself got an education first in Neokaisáreia (at that time Basil of Neokaisáreia, the father of Basil Caesarea, taught there), and then in Constantinople where his family resettled in the mid-330s. Constantinople was not his native town.

In his youth Themistius taught philosophy and rhetoric in different towns in Asia Minor, including Nicomedia (342-43) and Ancyra (344-47). He became well-known and, at the age of thirty (other sources claim at the age of twenty-five), was invited to Constantinople to give the speech of welcome for Roman Emperor Constantius II. Themistius became famous after this speech and in time assumed the position of court orator.

From 347 to 355 Themistius opened a philosophical rhetoric school in Constantinople (Schemmel 1908), but later left teaching for the government service. Emperor Constantius II ensured his election to the Byzantine Senate in 355. At the end of the 350s, Themistius played an important role in the admission of new senators of Constantinople. During the visit of Roman Emperor in 357, he was elected representative of the empire's eastern provinces. This event probably took place in the same year as his appointment to proconsul in Constantinople. In addition, he served as the advisor to the emperor under Constantius II (337-61), Julian, Jovian, Valens, Gratian, and Theodosius I (379-95), and as tutor to future

¹ 383, 387 and 388 are also mentioned by different authors as the years of Themistius's death.

² For a dictionary entry see Solopova 2008.

³ See Themistius's biography in Vanderspoel 1996, 31–37.

emperor Arcadius. In 384 Themistius obtained the position of urban prefect in Constantinople.

During the thirty years following the 350s, Themistius was a very important political and cultural figure in Constantinople. The position of princeps became the summit of Themistius's career (Vanderspoel 1996, 71), but it did not give him real power. Themistius was also involved in Senate activities. Besides, he was a panegyrist and advisor to the emperors, and he taught the emperors' children. Theodosius's son, Arcadius, was left under the guardianship of Themistius for a short time when the boy's father was in Constantinople.

In the mid-350s Themistius wrote about the emperor, probably Constantius II: "He often follows my advice concerning the Council, invites me for dinners, and wants me to escort him on his trips. He accepts criticism willingly." Themistius persuaded Constantius II to increase grain measures in Constantinople. He distributed the emperors' donations to the town and asked emperors to recognize the privileges of Constantinople. Themistius was proud of the ten achievements he had managed on behalf of the Byzantine Senate.

Themistius was a skillful rhetorician and advocated for the development of narrative forms and against the rhetorical excessiveness and sophism characteristic of Late Antiquity. Themistius's orations (34 have survived) touch upon the problems of philosophy, state law, and the theory of rhetoric. They are notable for their simplicity, accurate logic, and lucidity.

Themistius was as well-known in Constantinople as Libanius in Antioch, but unlike Libanius, Themistius was seriously engaged in philosophy and wrote a number of popular renditions of Aristotle's works. In addition to literature and tutoring, he was occupied with public activities and was awarded a number of the highest decorations.

Themistius also taught philosophy (Meridier 1906). According to his own account (*Orat.* 5-6), philosophy itself does not contradict politics and the experience of some philosophers well-known for their social activities (Themistius reckoned himself among them) corroborates this fact. Theodosianus's codex for the year 361 describes Themistius as a philosopher. Themistius respected early Greek philosophers and their belief that man is a social and political creature. He admired the practical and political philosophy of Aristotle, and penned commentaries to works by Aristotle, including concise and rather successful renditions of such works as "Prior Analytics," "Posterior Analytics," "On the Soul," "Physics," and others.

The philosophical written heritage of Themistius consists of his tutorial comments to works by Aristotle.⁴ Three commentaries were kept in the original: "Physics," "On the Soul," and "Posterior Analytics." Two more, "On the Heavens" and "Metaphysics," were translated from Arabic into

⁴ See Wallies 1900; Schenkl 1900; Todd 2003; Landauer 1902; Heinze 1899; Todd 1996; Solopova 2005; Landauer 1903; Brague 1999. See also Schroeder and Todd 1990; Blumenthal 1990.

Hebrew. Commentaries on “Categories,” “Prior Analytics,” “On Generation and Corruption,” and “Nicomachean Ethics ” were not preserved, nor were some comments on Plato’s works mentioned by Photios (*Bibl. Cod.* 74, 52a19-20 Bekker). According to J. Vanderspoel, however, Photios took the information about forming the scientific library by Themistius in Constantinople under Constantius II for his commentaries on Plato’s works (Vanderspoel 1989). This library was likely founded on Themistius’s advice and his written order for Plato’s works, as well as for many other authors for this library, turned into “Themistius’s commentaries on Plato’s works” (*Orat.* 4). Themistius’s attitude toward Neoplatonism remains rather difficult to discern (Ballériaux 1994).

The majority of renditions of Aristotle’s works were written prior to Themistius’s election to the Senate in 355, when he began his public activity. He believed that if the emperor chose a philosopher to serve the state, he should not stand in opposition. Politicians should not put their personal interests before those of the country. Politician-philosophers should not refuse public activity for the sake of esoteric metaphysics.

Studying philosophy, Themistius tried to follow his father, whom he eulogized in his twentieth oration. His grandfather and father-in-law were also philosophers. Libanius considered Themistius to be one of the greatest philosophers. Gregory of Nazianzus appealed to him as a philosopher in 363 and in 369. Themistius always believed himself to be the only eminent philosopher. In his orations, he often juxtaposed himself, “the follower of Socrates,” to sophistic rhetoricians such as Himerius. Themistius often called them “windbags” and “know-it-alls,” and reproached them for improvised speeches, the benefit of which he denied.

Themistius wrote that he chose philosophy that had political relevance. This position impressed Emperor Constantius II, who felt Themistius promoted philosophy for society. Themistius believed that seminars on philosophy should be attended by the masses, not by a select few. This stance caused Gregory of Nazianzus to urge people to follow Themistius’s philosophy, calling him as “the king of eloquence.” Themistius used the traditional philosophical technique of parrhesia or freedom of speech. Themistius’s ability to influence an audience allowed him to present his ideas in a convincing and engaging manner. Themistius’s authority as a philosopher and rhetorician was rather high among both contemporaries and the next generation a fact proven by the continued relevance of his ideas on public activity as well as the literary virtues of his orations.

All full original variants of Themistius’s orations have survived. Modern editions include thirty-four orations, of which the twenty-third, thirty-third, and twenty-eighth orations have been partially preserved. Themistius’s work “Virtue” has been survived only in Old Syriac and “State Governance,” addressed to Julian, only in Arabic. The latter resembles an oration rather than a treatise or a letter. In the nineteenth century the

oration "In Reply to Those Who Consider Him to Be Guilty" was found and became the addendum to the edition by W. Dindorf (Lips., 1832).

Themistius's orations have the following features: 1) public teachings presented to the court of public opinion; 2) stylistic skills to finish orations; and 3) the logic of interference in public life. The orations are usually divided into public (political)⁵ and private. It is not known if all of his political orations eulogized emperors. They supposedly included appeals to Jovian, Gratian, and Julian. Some of his orations were addressed to Emperor Constantius II, others to Valens, Valentinian I, and Theodosius I, and contained panegyrics and eulogies of emperors. The generally accepted designation for Themistius's orations is "emperor praise," which offers a more accurate description than "political praise."

Given that Themistius's literary activity occurred during the period of active formation of Christian literature and its self-determination regarding Greek scholarship, his study of religious views is especially interesting. As a pagan, Themistius nevertheless was not Julian's adherent and felt no animosity toward Christianity. He was a rather "flexible atheist" who managed to work closely with Christian emperors and defended religious tolerance. In the thirteenth century, Gregory Bar Hebraeus cited Themistius's oration eulogizing Julian in his reign, in which he tried to persuade the emperor to put an end to Christian persecution. Themistius upheld religious tolerance before the reign of Jovian and tried to prevent the persecution of Nicene Christians, appealing to Valens to show mercy after the suppression of rebellion under Procopius (364).

Themistius's oration to Emperor Jovian centered on religious tolerance and recognition of equality for all confessions. This oration is interesting in its closeness to the ethical position of the Roman Stoics and the deep belief that it is impossible to compel people to have morality against their will. Themistius underlined that since morality and emotions regarding religious devotion could not be obtained by compulsion, a policy of toleration was the most reasonable option. Those emperors who believed it possible to impose religion made people conceal their true faith for fear of punishment. Themistius considered Emperor Jovian's law on religious freedom as the original law given by God. Themistius believed that the existence of different confessions strengthened faith and diversified life. Lastly, as Themistius stated, the most important virtue of religious freedom was the end of violent internal conflict.

Initially, Themistius thought that Christianity detracted from philosophy, but later understood that what Homer and Christianity had in common could be expressed better through Christian notions, while preserving classical (pagan) values (Vanderspoel 1996, 18; Downey 1957). Unlike two other eminent ideologues of Hellenism, Libanius, the rhetorician, and Julian, the emperor, Themistius did not ignore Christianity and did not struggle against it, but rather tried to prove that

⁵ For analysis of Themistius's political orations see Val'denberg 2008, 74–98.

Hellenism exceeded Christianity in its cultural universalism and toleration. According to this view, Themistius tried to develop his own ideas while avoiding direct conflicts and attacks. Themistius was familiar with texts from both the Old and New Testaments. He cited the Bible three times for the confirmation of the traditional Hellenic idea about the emperor's power (*Orat.* 7, 89d2 Harduin; *Orat.* 11, 147cl; *Orat.* 19,229a4).

Themistius considered Paganism and Christianity as a form of popular belief far removed from true philosophy. In his oration to emperor Valens (*Orat.* 7), Themistius supported religious toleration and believed that it was folly to compel people to have common convictions against their own free will. Themistius's favorite word, which he used in his orations rather often, was *philanthropy*; this helps to clarify his religious toleration. Themistius did not adopt Christianity, but such a famous figure as Gregory of Nazianzus was favourably disposed toward him and rated Themistius highly. He even called Themistius as "the king of eloquence" (*Ep.* XXIV, 1) and with this epithet he went down in the history of Late Antiquity.

In contrast to Julian and Libanius, Themistius refrained from exchanging strongly-worded polemics with adherents of Christianity. Toleration was intrinsic to him and it was not without reason that he held notable public posts under all emperors irrespective of their religion. In oration 12, "To Valens On Religions," eulogizing the emperor, Themistius considered the policy of toleration as the most reasonable option. It is significant that in spite of Themistius's adherence to antique philosophy there are ideas alien to classical paganism in his works. For example, he considered the terrestrial life as a dungeon and the afterlife as "a happy field." In his orations he repeatedly expressed his love of philosophy, often appealing to Plato and Socrates.

Themistius's orations lack poetical theatrics and vivid characteristics, but he was a skilled wordsmith, a talent that played no small role in his fame.

Some of Themistius's 34 orations represent appeals and panegyrics to emperors Constantius II, Valens, Valentinian, Jovian, and Theodosius. Others deal with different issues of rhetorical skill. In his orations, Themistius presents himself as an ideologue of classical Greek tradition and a supporter of its value in consolidating the Christian empire. Along with works by Julian, Themistius's orations can be regarded as a rare example of political theory (mostly a traditional one) for Neoplatonism. The need for Themistius at the court of rather different emperors (Constantius, the Arian; Julian, the pagan; Theodosius, the orthodox believer) was unique. He continued to hold positions of influence, and in his orations counseled emperors in humanity (*philanthropy*), brotherly love, and mercy.

Themistius is an ideologue of enlightened monarchy. According to Themistius, an emperor's power and philosophy are two instruments of divine care for the people (Dagron 1968). According to Themistius, a monarch (*βασιλεύς, ἀυτοκράτωρ*) can be compared to God as he is chosen

by God and thus deserves to be called “born and nursed by Zeus.” The empire is the imitation (mimesis) of heaven. As opposed to the emperor himself, the institution of imperial power is divine. An emperor is the law incarnate. His humanity and good will are laudable, which makes him the opposite of a tyrant. He is born as emperor and his nature is regal. He is equal to the Sun and a guardian of souls. He brings harmony to different powers in the state. His regality is in virtue, and not in the outward symbols of power. His justice exceeds the limitations of written law. There are four regal virtues: wisdom, mercy, truth, and justice. The ruler ought to be a philosopher. He should be humane, one of the main characteristics of a statesman. In his Oration 6, 76cd, Themistius wrote, “One who loves his brother, loves his neighbor. One who loves his neighbor loves his homeland. One who loves his homeland loves the people,” that is Themistius adopted the basic principles of the Stoic theory of affinity.

Philanthropy as regal virtue and ideological substantiation of regal power is retraced in such orations as “Panegyrics” by Julian to Emperor Constantius, “On Regal Power” by Dio Chrysostom, and “On Regal Power” by Pseudo-Aristides. The general idea of this literature, which builds upon such works as “Busiris” by Isocrates, “Cyropaedia” and “Agesilaus” by Xenophon, and “The Republic” by Plato, is the affirmation of virtue as the true sanction of power.

In his oration “On Friendship” (*Orat.* 22), Themistius criticized the traditional Greek educational system, which was based on study of Homer’s poems glorifying anger and enmity; philosophy, which taught kindness, was neglected. According to Themistius, philosophy, not poetry, should be the true foundation of a child’s upbringing (Downey 1955).

Themistius’s educational program was based on two key principles: 1) the value of Greek philosophy, especially its theory of morality, allowing everyone to lead a life that promoted self-education (Downey 1957), and 2) a true state system was possible only if both the ruler and his subjects had a classical education and virtue.

Themistius’s private orations deal with polemics about Christianity, cultural pragmatics (rhetorical and philosophical), autobiographical material, and philosophical discourses. He also reasoned about the nature of power, the ideal ruler, war, the benefit of philosophy, and the drawbacks of the Greek educational system (Downey 1955).

Some orations were devoted to the problems of oratorical skill, in which he wanted an orator to prepare carefully, offer serious ideas, and be able to characterize a person so that the audience could identify him even if his name was not spoken. Only oration 30, a routine educational document, is out of tune with the rest of his works.

Themistius is a unique example of a humanist of the Late Antiquity who combined in himself classical education, a value system, and service to Christian emperors without regard to world views. He was a rarity in the period of the final struggle between Christianity and paganism in the late fourth century. Thus, in some instances, Themistius anticipated the later

“last pagans” of Byzantium in the fifth and sixth centuries (Pamprepius, Illus and Zosimus), who preserved their paganism in their private life. Themistius’s significance is that he was not only a court orator, but a gifted and whole-hearted humanist of the transitional period, one of the creators of cultural continuity between Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Orations by Themistius:⁶

Political (I-XIX)

- Oration 1. On the Love of Mankind; or Constantius.
- Oration 2. Thanksgiving to Constantius – Also a Perfect Philosopher and Emperor.
- Oration 3. Embassy Speech for Constantinople Delivered in Rome.
- Oration 4. To the Emperor Constantius.
- Oration 5. On the Consulship, to the Emperor Jovian.
- Oration 6. On Brotherly Love, or On Philanthropia.
- Oration 7. On Those Who Were Defeated under Valens.
- Oration 8. Five Years.
- Oration 9. The Hortative Oration to the Young Emperor Valentinian.
- Oration 10. On Concluding of Peace (to the Emperor Valens).
- Oration 11. A Decade, or, On the Emperor’s Duty.
- Oration 12. To Valens On Religions (Latin).
- Oration 13. Enamored, or, On Beauty of One Who Reigns.
- Oration 14. Embassy to the Emperor Theodosius.
- Oration 15. To Theodosius or The Most Royal of the Virtues
- Oration 16. Speech of Thanksgiving to the Emperor for the Peace and the Consulship of the General Saturninus.
- Oration 17. On the Election to the Urban Prefecture.
- Oration 18. On Emperor’s Love to Listen.
- Oration 19. On the Autocrat Theodosius’s Philanthropy.

Private (20-34)⁷

- Oration 20. A Funeral Oration in Honor of His Father.
- Oration 21. The Examiner, or, The philosopher.
- Oration 22. On Friendship.
- Oration 23. The Sophist.
- Oration 24. An Exhortation to the Nicomedians.
- Oration 25. In Reply to One Who Asked for an Extempore Oration.
- Oration 26. On Speaking, or, How the Philosopher Should Speak.
- Oration 27. On the Need to Give Thought, Not to Where [We Study] but to the Men [Who Will Teach us].
- Oration 28. The Disquisition on speaking.

⁶ Published in Schenkl and Downey 1965-1974; Euphrada 2011. Indices to orations can be found in Garzya 1989. Incomplete translation of Themistius’s orations into English is available in Heather and Moncur 2001.

⁷ Translation of Themistius’s private orations can be found in Penella 2000.

Oration 29. In Reply to Those Who Interpret [His Oration] “Sophist” Incorrectly.

Oration 30. Should One Engage in Farming?

Oration 31. Concerning My Presidency [of the Senate], addressed to the Senate of Constantinople.

Oration 32. On Moderation of One’s Emotions, or, On Love to One’s Children.

Oration 33. [Title lost].

Oration 34. In Reply to Those who Found Fault with Him for Accepting Public Office.

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