

THEMISTIUS THE ORATOR BETWEEN RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES AND IMPERIAL POLITICS IN THE EASTERN PART OF THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE

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Öz

Geç Roma İmparatorluğu'nun Doğusunda Dini Kimlikler ile İmparatorluk Politikaları Arasında Hatip Themistius

4. yüzyıl Roma tarihi genellikle I. Constantinus ve aile üyeleri ile Valentinianus-Valens gibi imparatorlara ya da dini bir tarih yazımını tercih edenler için Hıristiyan kilise babalarına odaklanan çalışmaların konusu olmuştur. Ancak hem halkın hem de senatonun temsilcisi rolüyle yönetenler ve yönetilenler arasındaki zincirin ana halkası konumundaki hatip, filozof ve devlet adamı Themistius, 4. yüzyıla damgasını vurmuş bir isimdir. Themistius'un gözünden imparatorluğun tasviri, askeri ya da siyasi anlatıların ötesinde çok canlı bir Roma dünyasına ışık tutmaya devam etmektedir. Söylevleri çoğunlukla siyasi nitelikte olsa da Geç Antik Çağ'da Roma İmparatorluğu'nun halkları ve şehirlerinin yanı sıra imparatorların dini politikaları hakkında da değerli bilgiler sunar. II. Constantius, Jovian, Valens gibi imparatorların dini politikaları ve dönemin entelektüel ortamı belki de en iyi Themistius'ta ayrıntılı olarak görülebilir. Themistius'un kendisi de bu güçler dengesinin ortasında kalmış bir figür olarak öne çıkmakta, kimi zaman Hıristiyan yanlısı imparatorluk politikalarını destekleyen kimi zaman da yerel rekabetlerde pagan kimliğiyle Hıristiyan dini gruplara karşı çıkmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Themistius'un geç dönem "Hıristiyan" Roma İmparatorluğu'ndaki konumu ve rolünün, onun perspektifinden imparatorluk şehirlerindeki dini ortamın ve imparatorların dini gruplar arasındaki dengede hoşgörü/hosgörüsüzlük politikalarının kesin bir analizini sunmaktadır. Sonuçlar, hem Themistius'un bir kaynak olarak önemini gösterecek hem de dördüncü yüzyıl Roma İmparatorluğu'na yeni bir bakış açısı sağlayacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Geç Roma İmparatorluğu, Themistius, İmparatorluk Politikaları, Dini Tolerans, Hıristiyanlık.

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Abstract

The fourth century Roman history has often been the subject of studies focusing on Constantine I and members of his family and emperors such as Valentinian-Valens or, for those who prefer a religious historiography, the Christian church fathers. However, the orator, philosopher and statesman Themistius, who acted as the main link in the chain between the rulers and the ruled in his role as the representative of both the people and the senate, is a name that marked the fourth century. The portrayal of the empire through the eyes of Themistius still sheds light on a very lively Roman world beyond military or political narratives. His orations, though mostly political in nature, provide valuable information on the peoples and cities of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity, as well as on the religious policies of the emperors. The religious policies of emperors such as Constantius II, Jovian and Valens, and the intellectual environment of the period can perhaps best be seen in detail in Themistius. Themistius himself stands out as a figure caught in the middle of this balance of forces, sometimes supporting pro-Christian imperial policies and sometimes opposing Christian religious groups with his pagan identities in local rivalries. This study offers a definitive analysis of Themistius' position and role in the late "Christian" Roman Empire, the religious environment in the imperial cities from his perspective, and the emperors' policies of tolerance/intolerance in balancing between religious groups. The conclusions will both show the importance of Themistius as a source for the Roman provinces in the East and provide a new perspective on the fourth-century Roman Empire.

Keywords: Late Roman Empire, Themistius, Imperial Policies, Religious Tolerance, Christianity.

Introduction

The third and fourth centuries were eras of fractures, changes, and transformations in various aspects of the Roman Empire. While the phenomenon of the third century was political instability and economic problems¹, in the fourth century it seems to have been replaced by religious conflicts and changing imperial policies. In addition to the very general question of whether there were dominant paradigms in the second half of the fourth century, the pagan-Christian opposition and the situation of the pagans in the period in question also attract the attention of researchers as important problematics². The most important information on these times comes mainly from the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. The subject of this paper is the religious milieu and the manifestation of imperial policy in late antique Anatolia, which during this period was one of the most important sources of educated people and income for the Roman Empire and even became one of its new pivotal provinces. This study focuses on the continuation of religious policies after the Constantinian dynasty in the fourth century, using Themistius as the main source. The question of whether Themistius' orations can be used as a historical reference for the provinces of the Later Roman Empire in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially for the history of religions, is the impetus for this paper.

1 See. Alföldy 1974, 98-103; Birley 1976, 253-281; Kuhoff 2001, 17-27; John 2008, *passim*.

2 On 30-31 May 2003, a colloquium entitled "Die Stadt in der Spätantike - Niedergang oder Wandel?" was held with the participation of prominent scholars to discuss the ideas of change and transformation in late antiquity. Although this was one of the most wide-ranging studies up to that time, even today there is no consensus on how to define developments in Late Antiquity.

The second half of the fourth century was a period when Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean provinces of the Roman Empire experienced a cascade of problems centered on natural disasters³. As Liebeschuetz points out, the Late Antiquity of Anatolia in particular represents a period in which many questions remain unanswered, such as the decline of urbanization and the evolution of economic structures⁴. In the fourth century, natural events, the changing policies of the emperors and religious divisions initiated many transformations in Anatolian and Eastern Mediterranean cities, moving away from the classical *poleis* and pre-Christian culture.

For this period, both pagan and Christian writers provide a variety of information on the history of Roman Anatolia and Eastern Mediterranean. One of them was Themistius, who emerged in the 4th century as one of the remarkable figures of the new capital Constantinople. Themistius, who is briefly mentioned in the Souda as the *praefectus urbi* of Constantinople during the reign of Emperor Julian (361-363) and as a philosopher who also wrote many works, is a statesman as well as an intellectual and provides important and little-known information about Roman politics and historical developments in the fourth century⁵. In addition, Themistius provides first-hand information on Constantinople and Eastern Roman Provinces, both because he was a Constantinopolitan of Paphlagonian origin⁶, and because the centre of the empire shifted from Rome to Constantinople and the eastern Mediterranean. The first nineteen orations of Themistius are of a political nature, and 20-34 of his orations are of a public nature⁷. Studies on Themistius, whose various philosophical works and letters are also known, increased in the mid-20th century. Vanderspoel, Penella, Heather and Moncur, Downey, Errington, and Dagrón prepared the most comprehensive studies on Themistius and his works.

A significant part of the information Themistius provides directly or indirectly in his orations can provide new information and perspectives for future research on the Late Antiquity. The fact that Themistius delivered various orations to important figures such as Constantius II, Jovian, Valentinian, Valens and Theodosius I during his life distinguishes him from many orators who were associated with one or several emperors⁸. The fourth century in which Themistius lived is also noteworthy for pagan intellectuals such as Libanius, Eunapius, Ammianus Marcellinus in the increasingly Christianised Roman Empire.

The orations of Themistius continue to be a useful corpus for the history of Late Antiquity. This article focuses on a partially neglected aspect of Themistius' orations. It discusses the relationship between developments in the fourth centu-

3 This period was also characterized by a series of natural disasters such as earthquakes, hail, floods, fires and famines, which occurred in different regions from Bithynia to Egypt. See Lenski 2002, 385-391.

4 Liebeschuetz 2006, 469-470.

5 Souda, s.v. Θεμιστιος.

6 See below.

7 While Themistius' public orations generally bear traces of possible meetings with officials and emperors and in this sense have a content addressed to the governed, it is possible to accept that the political ones have content addressed to emperors. See. Swain 2013, 5-9. On the role of orators in the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, see. Omissi 2020, 41-45.

8 Errington 2000, 863.

ry and the transformation of the religious milieu in Roman cities in the context of Themistius' accounts, and offers ideas on where concepts such as decline and transformation can be placed for the Eastern Mediterranean cities of Rome.

A Pagan Orator in Politics: The life and career of Themistius

Themistius was born in 317 to a family originally from Paphlagonia, at a time when the Roman Emperors were increasing their support for Christianity, and as a pagan, he climbed the career ladder rapidly⁹. According to Vanderspoel, Themistius was born in Gangra or Cimiata near Mount Olgassys; Kupreeva argues he was born near Abonouteichus, another town in Paphlagonia¹⁰. Themistius received his basic philosophical education from his father Eugenius, a modest philosopher, and from an unknown sophist in a small town near the Phasis River¹¹ on the eastern shore of Pontus and later possibly in Neocaesarea. He describes there as follows: "I myself reaped the fruits of rhetorical study in a place far more obscure than this one, not a refined Greek place, but one on the outskirts of Pontus near [the river] Phasis...¹²" Themistius, although born in Paphlagonia, spent only a small part of his life there and came with his family to Constantinople, the new imperial residence of Constantine I (324-337), where he continued to study and live after 337¹³. However, it seems that the move to the Constantinople did not make Themistius a permanent resident of the city.

Themistius came to Nicomedia in the early 340s and started teaching students, and he left there in 347/348 and began teaching rhetoric in Constantinople¹⁴. Apparently, the oration he delivered (i.e., *Or. 1, On the love of Mankind or Constantius*) in Ancyra in 350 in the presence of Constantius II (337-361) on how the ideal emperor should be both made him stand out in his profession and made him a prominent person whose opinions were important to the emperors¹⁵. Themistius, who established a link between the traditional and the contemporary, was also appointed as the head of the philosophy chair of Constantinople and senator with *adlectio* to the newly established Constantinopolitan Senate in 355, and in 357 he travelled to Rome as the senate's delegate, both to celebrate the *Vicennalia* of Emperor Constantius II and to convey the congratulations of the Constantinopolitan senate for the elimination of figures such as Vetrano and Magnentius, which were be problematic for the empire¹⁶. According to Heather and Moncur, the Constantinopolitan Senate used the elimination of the usurpers Vetrano and Magnentius by the emperor as an excuse for the gift of *Aurum cor-*

9 PLRE I, Themistius I, col.889-890; Dagron 1968, 5-14; Vanderspoel 1995, 31. In the orations 5 and 6, the influence of Neoplatonism on Themistius is evident, especially where he addresses the divinity of the emperors. Them. Or. 5. 64b. Zucker 2015, 360; Also see. Ballériaux 1994, 199; Coda 2020, 16-20. But it is also understood that Themistius had differences with the theurgical Neoplatonists. Mehr 2024, 29. Eugenius, the father of Themistius, is also known to have been a Neoplatonist philosopher. Ballériaux 1996, 135-160.

10 Kupreeva 2000, 397.

11 PLRE I, Themistius I, col.889.

12 Them. Or. 27, 332d. Vanderspoel 1995, 32-35; Heather – Moncur 2001, 1.

13 Watts 2000, 74.

14 Vanderspoel 1995, 43; Heather – Moncur 2001, 76, fn.79.

15 Stertz 1976, 349-358.

16 Vanderspoel 1995, 100-104; Cribiore 2015, 62; Omissi 2020, 39.

onarium to the emperor at his triumphal procession in the city of Rome, which makes Themistius' visit to Constantius II in Rome understandable. Thus, the political initiative of the Constantinopolitan Senate was mediated by Themistius both as an envoy and through his oratory (Oration 3)¹⁷.

It is also known from the Oration 4 that during these years he was responsible for planning the library of Constantinople, which was founded by Constantius II and where the transcription of manuscripts into codices was carried out¹⁸. He also stated in the same oration that he had donated a private collection to the new library of Constantinople. Themistius, who lived most of his life in Constantinople, also visited Antioch and Phrygia¹⁹. It is understood that Themistius lost his position of power when the pagan Julian became emperor and started regaining his position after 363²⁰. Ironically, the career of Themistius, who supported paganism, was characterised by ambiguity during the reign of a pagan emperor. In 383/384 Themistius became *Praefectus Urbi* of Constantinople, which greatly expanded his authority and influence both in the capital and throughout the empire²¹. For this promotion, the pagan epigrammatist Palladas, criticises with the following words:

*You, seated above the heavenly wheel, hast desired a silver wheel. Oh, infinite shame!
Erst you wast of higher station and hast straight become much lower. Ascend hither to
the depths; for now you hast descended to the heights*²².

Themistius states that there are some criticisms against him, but that this also happened to philosophers such as Plato and Socrates and that they are jealousy²³. Moreover, as several detailed accounts of Libanius suggest, rivalries between intellectuals (rhetoricians, sophists, philosophers, etc.) were already present in the Late Antique world, and the idea of having a common religion was probably not the first thing prioritized at that time²⁴. Nevertheless, Themistius' pragmatic attitude and the rise of his political career caused Palladas to emphasize him as a traitor. Penella cites Themistius' acceptance of the position of *Praefectus Urbi* as the reason for the criticism, but the satirical and insulting verses of Palladas can also be interpreted in terms of rivalry. The Oration 34 of Themistius is almost a response to such criticism²⁵.

17 Heather – Moncur 2001, 114–125.

18 Them. Or. 4. 59-61; Vanderspoel 1995, 77, fn. 29.

19 PLRE I, Themistius I, col.890.

20 As Watts notes, Themistius' close relationship with Emperor Constantius II, and even his continued support for Constantius II in the Civil War, which became seriously visible in 361, led to his first contact with Julianus being relatively cold. Brauch 1993, 83; Watts 2000, 117; Errington 2000, 873; Bolgov 2014, 179.

21 Heather – Moncur 2001, 17; cf. Stenger 2007, 399-415; Wilkinson 2009, 57; Kahlos 2011, 287.

22 Ant. Pal. 11, 292. Transl. by Paton, modified. Here it appears that Themistius was placed in the wrong period (i.e. the period of Valentinian and Valens) when he was Praefectus Urbi; the view that Themistius was Praefectus Urbi during the reign of Theodosius I is more widely accepted. Dindorf 1961, 634-635; Stertz 1976, 354; Von Haehling 1978, 121; Nochi 2016, 309.

23 Them. Or. 21. 246c. cf. Downey 1955b, 296.

24 Lib. Or.1. 84-85. Likewise, Themistius criticized Himerius, who was also a rival of Libanius. Cribiore 2007, 56.

25 Them. Or. 34; Dagron 1968, 50; Penella 2000, 38.

During the reign of Emperor Valens (364-378), in 376, Themistius was sent on an embassy to Trier and then to Rome to visit the Roman Emperor Gratian in the West, to whom he delivered a panegyric²⁶. Themistius also served as tutor to Valens' son, Caesar Valentinianus Galates, for five years²⁷, and towards the end of his life he was appointed by Theodosius I (379-395) as tutor again for the education of Caesar Arcadius²⁸. The 12th-century Byzantine poet and grammarian John Tzetzes, in the section on orators, mentions that philosophers served as secretaries to various emperors, Himerius of Prusias for Emperor Julian and Themistius for Theodosius I. It is known that Themistius had a close relationship with many emperors²⁹. According to Barceló, professional orators such as Libanius and Themistius were not expected to give an objective account of the events of the Empire, but rather to depict the 'desired reality' in engaging terms³⁰. In this respect, the Christian emperors did not care whether Themistius was a pagan or a Christian, but how well he could perform his profession. Themistius' lack of explicit opposition to the Christian belief in God and his relationship with the emperors made him a popular figure³¹. As in the case of Valens, it is also understood that some Roman emperors did not know Greek, but entrusted Themistius with an important function for communication with the local population³².

Religious tolerance and the survival of the Roman Empire were undoubtedly essential for Themistius³³. The fact that he did not support the Usurpation of Procopius³⁴ and Marcellus during the reign of Valens and even dealt with Procopius' initiative with a status quoist approach in a sarcastic manner³⁵, as well as his controversial relationship with Julian, shows that he supported the most favourable opinion for Roman Empire³⁶.

Themistius, had a remarkable political career, but was also a highly productive figure, producing several philosophical works in addition to his orations and letters: Παράφρασις Ἀναλυτικῶν ὑστέρων (*Paraphrase of the later analyses*) Παράφρασις τῆς Φυσικῆς ἀκροῦσεως (*Paraphrase of the physics lecture*), Παράφρασις τῶν Μετὰ τὰ φυσικὰ Λ (*Paraphrase on metaphysics 12*), Παράφρασις τῶν Περὶ ψυχῆς (*Paraphrase about the soul*), Παράφρασις τῶν Περὶ οὐρανοῦ (*Paraphrase about the Sky*), and Περὶ ἀρετῆς (*About the Virtue*)³⁷

26 See. Them. Or. 13; Vanderspoel 1995, 180-181; Kelly 1970, 375 and 384; For a recent study focusing directly on the Valens-Themistius relationship, see. Swain 2001.

27 Vanderspoel 1995, 172; Errington 2000, 889.

28 Them. Or. 18. 324, 1-17; Dihle 1989, 460. Also see. Heather – Moncur 2001, 15.

29 Tzetzes 6, 320.

30 Barceló 2004, 74.

31 Them. Or. 19. 229a; Chadwick 1993, 39.

32 Mehr 2024, 18.

33 For Themistius' demands for religious tolerance and the emperors' policies on this issue, see below.

34 According to Amm. Marc. 26. 9. 11, Procopius was related to Julian on his mother's side and was born into a noble family in Corycus in Cilicia. However, claiming his right to the throne during the reign of Valens, he revolted (on September 28, 365) with the support of two legions in Constantinople and took control of the city and its immediate surroundings, and this uprising was crushed by the Battle of Thyatira and later the Battle of Nacolea. Amm. Marc. 26. 9; Zos. 4. 7. 3- 8. 5.

35 Them. Or. 7. 91a-c.

36 See Errington 2000, 882-883; Niccolai 2023, 41-59.

37 DNP-Supplemente 2, 597.

Gregory of Nazianzus, a church father, also addressed him as “Great Themistius” and “King of words”³⁸. His philosophical works are undoubtedly as important as his orations³⁹.

As Dihle indicates, Themistius’ rhetorical activities and educational approach seem to have focused primarily on philosophy, in the sense of presenting lectures to a wider audience shaped by the rules of rhetoric, rather than the practice of developing teaching dialogue in small circles of students, which was the prevailing model in the dominant schools of philosophy in the Roman world, i.e., in Athens and Alexandria⁴⁰.

Themistius, besides being a philosopher, served as a delegate to the Constantinopolitan senate, as head of the chair of philosophy and as *Praefectus Urbi*, well-informed in state affairs and the policies of the emperors and respected by many circles⁴¹. Based on Libanius’ letters, it is thought that Themistius died around 390⁴².

Themistius, who gradually became a Constantinopolitan orator and politician, is in a sense a figure that helps to understand the fourth-century Roman world. His orations allow us to approach Roman Anatolia and other regions from a different perspective and to consider his orations partly as historical sources. Themistius’ orations focus mainly on the religious environment, imperial politics, and various details of late Roman cities.

Phenomena of the fourth century: Religious Identity and (In)Tolerance

In the early Late Antiquity, the Roman middle class was economically weakened, civil servants and soldiers resorted to illegal taxes and extortion to solve their financial problems, the masses of ordinary people were distracted from their daily work due to excessive taxation and the crisis environment, and the local elites started becoming active in church affairs⁴³. At the beginning of the fourth century, the period beginning with Constantine I, when Christianity gained its freedom and began to receive the support of the emperors, was largely triumphant with Theodosius I at the end of the century⁴⁴. In other words, it is an era of some irreversible religious changes. So much so that it would not be wrong to call the fourth century “the age of synods and councils” for Christians. As Ando points out, Themistius was apparently intelligent enough to understand the events taking place in the Late Roman Empire at that time⁴⁵.

The letters of Pliny the Younger indicate that there were Christians in Anatolia during the reign of Trajan (and possibly before), but it is difficult to estimate

38 Greg. Naz. Ep. 24; Ep. 112.

39 Heather 1998, 129; The philosophical works of Themistius also fill a very important gap in the world of ancient thought. In Ballériaux’s words: “Thémistius n’est nullement à négliger si l’on veut écrire l’histoire de la pensée grecque à cette époque de l’Antiquité tardive= If we are to write a history of Greek thought in this period of Late Antiquity, Themistius must not be neglected”. Ballériaux 1994, 200.

40 Dihle 1989, 460; cf. Bolgov 2014, 180-181.

41 Errington 2000, 870.

42 Lib. Ep. 18; Dihle 1989, 459.

43 Momigliano 1963, 7-9; Brown 2002, 49-52.

44 Lee 2006, 94-131.

45 See. Ando 1996, 171-207; cf. Csizy 2013, 347-354.

their exact number⁴⁶. Pliny the Younger, the governor of Pontus and Bithynia, in a letter to Emperor Trajan, stated that Christianity, which was an empty and contagious belief, could be controlled and prevented. During the reign of Septimius Severus, the balance began to shift, and the persecution of certain Christian individuals and groups became more visible, to the extent that it found a limited place in the works of sources and authors such as *Historia Augusta*, Eusebius and Tertullianus.⁴⁷ During the “Great Christian Persecution” under Diocletian and the Tetrarchy, the anti-Christian policy became much more obvious and harsher.⁴⁸

A number of changes have also emerged in classical pagan traditions and rites. Neoplatonism, which was one of the most important of these changes and centred on Plato’s relationship between God and the universe, spread in the Late Roman world as a new philosophy-paganism school, starting with Plotinus and Porphyrius, combining it with the theurgy which Iamblichus evaluated as a means of communicating with God⁴⁹. The fact that Iamblichus and his pupils were initiated into various pagan cults made this philosophical approach visible in the religious structure of the Eastern Mediterranean cities in the fourth century as an interwoven and remarkable phenomenon⁵⁰.

The religious atmosphere in the eastern Mediterranean cities during and after the reign of Constantine is usually analysed through the works of Christian authors while the works of the pagan orators and intellectuals of the period, though not inferior in content, have been relatively obscured. While the orations and letters of the orator Libanius provide some important information about the cultural milieu and the situation of the pagans, Themistius provides much more detailed and remarkable information about the religious factions. In this context, his Oration 24, the Nicomedean Oration, has survived as a very interesting historical text showing the religious-based rivalry in Anatolian cities in Late Antiquity:

You do often gather together to enjoy such presentations, and you love your banquet-givers because they are inventive, generous, and unstinting in their provisions, because they always set a Sicilian table and prepare many cunningly wrought contrivances for you. Some of these men sing a native song, others sing a song that is Syrian and from Lebanon. They beguile you with their music, whether it is domestic or imported⁵¹.

Themistius, who taught philosophy and rhetoric for a short time in Nicomedia around the 340s, draws attention to the existence and rivalry between three different philosophical (and possibly religious) groups in Nicomedia, as can be

46 Plin. epist. 10, 96–97.

47 SHA. Sept. Sev. 17.1; Eus. HE. 6.1; Tert. ad Scapula, 4.

48 In fact, according to the witness of Lactantius, after the destruction of the church in Nicomedia, the centre of the Christian persecution, some pagans, mocking the situation of the Christians, not only verbally abused them but also physically attacked them. See. Lact. inst. 5. 2. 3–4.

49 See. Dillon 2007, 34–41; For the philosophical ideas of Plotinus, see Edwards 1994, 137–147.

50 Nesselrath 2013, 120.

51 Them. Or. 24. 301. Transl. by Penella.

seen in the passage above⁵². According to Vanderspoel, these groups, which aimed to influence the citizens and change their religious approach⁵³, were pagan - “native”, Christian - “Syrian” sophists - rhetoric teachers, and Neoplatonist - Iamblichan - “Lebanese” theurgical philosophers⁵⁴. Penella on the other hand, argues that Libanius, who is referred to as Lebanese, and the Syrians are Jews. Although Penella’s view is more recent and widely accepted, it is noteworthy that religious diversity throughout the empire included the theurgical philosophers-Neoplatonists. It is also noteworthy that Themistius follows a kind of rhetorical strategy, i.e., euphemism, by using ethnonyms to describe religious groups⁵⁵. Themistius tells us in his Oration 5 that the creator of the universe delights in diversity and wishes that the Syrians, that is, the Christians, should organize their affairs in one way, the Hellenes in another, the Egyptians in another, and that he divided them into small parts because he wanted the Syrians not to be uniform among themselves⁵⁶.

Neoplatonist philosophers were apparently among the most important groups of the fourth century. Before Julian became emperor, he is known to have studied under the Neoplatonist philosopher Maximus of Ephesus in Ephesus or Nicomedia, probably in 350s⁵⁷. Maximus of Ephesus and various Neoplatonist philosophers were to face persecution under Valens⁵⁸. The Neoplatonist philosopher Sopatros from Apamea in Syria, who came to Constantinople during the reign of Emperor Constantine I, was also accused of witchcraft by both the Christian and pagan populations due to the famine in Constantinople⁵⁹. From this historical information provided by Eunapius, it is understood that there was a contentious atmosphere between groups with different religious beliefs, such as Christians, traditional pagan, and Neoplatonist philosophers, even to the point of false accusations. It is also noteworthy that in Oration 5, Themistius mentions the religious groups in Constantinople during Julian’s reign as follows: “We were worse towards one another than the Persians, the legal disputes of the two reli-

52 Themistius also addresses here a little-known fact about the location and economic means of the city of Nicomedia: “...If I hadn’t known you had a claim to virtue, I would never have liked you so much, even if the Sinus Astacenus [gulf of Astacus (İzmit Körfezi)] brought more wonderful and perfect things than it actually does, or if the Sangaris [Sangarius River (Sakarya Nehri)] brought gold dust instead of grain...” Them. Or. 24. 307. It appears that the Sangarius River (also referred to as the Phrygian River. Them. Or. 24. 305) was used for the transportation of consumer goods and food from neighboring cities, probably from Phrygia and the coastal settlements of the Black Sea, and it is also possible to say that there were various river ports on the banks of the river for loading and unloading goods.

53 Sozomen mentions how some Christians were able to convert pagans to Christianity through philosophy. Sozom. 3.14. 27.

54 Souda, s.v. Ἰάμβλιχος; Vanderspoel 1988, 127-128.

55 cf. Demandt 1989, 415.

56 See. Them. Or. 5. 70a. In Oration 5, he refers to Egypt, which has its own pagan religious tradition, as a separate entity from the Greeks, while he refers to Christians as Syrians, like Julian’s usage of Galileans. Heather – Moncur 2001, 170, fn.106.

57 Eunap. VS. 7.1. The Souda states that Maximus was from Epirus or Constantinople/Byzantium. See Souda. s.v. Μάξιμος. Henck (1999/2000, 111) states that Maximus of Ephesus and Julian met in Ephesus.

58 See below.

59 Eunap. VS. 6. 2. According to Zosimus, Consul Ablabius also played an important role in this event. Zos. 2. 40.

gious factions throughout the city were more damaging than their attacks...⁶⁰ However, it is thought that the reference here is to Julian's policy, not to the pagan or Christian population, and that the Persians, an armed enemy, were chosen as the metaphor here⁶¹. It also shows that Themistius, interacting with emperor Jovian, tried to heal the religious divisions after the reign of his predecessor Julian⁶². Themistius seems to have tried to create an atmosphere of tolerance towards religious divisions in both the Eastern and Western Roman provinces.

In his Oration 23, delivered in Constantinople after 357, Themistius explains that even though the cities in Galatia were small compared to other cities, their inhabitants were very interested in philosophers and sophists:

*I say nothing about the city of Antiochus [i.e., Antioch in Syria] and all the men I met there who craved and got hold of my merchandise. I say nothing of those I met in the Hellenized [parts of] Galatia. Those [Galatian] cities are not so great, nor can they contend with this greatest city [of ours], but you know that their citizens are sharp-minded and smart and quicker to learn than even the very Hellenic are. Once the philosopher's cloak appears among them, they immediately cling to it, as iron clings to a magnet. What would these men not give to be able to bring the teachings of Plato into their cities from abroad? These are men who, for Demosthenes' juridical orations or Thucydides' history, pay almost as much to experts in those classics as Xerxes did to Themistocles, son of Neocles! ...*⁶³

It is clear that in the mid-fourth century, the local elites and educated inhabitants of Galatia, especially Ancyra, still showed a strong interest in philosophical thought. In other words, a similar cultural environment to that of the second and third centuries was still alive in Galatia⁶⁴.

From the middle of the fourth century onwards, the socio-economic structure of the eastern Mediterranean cities began to change, and that especially Anatolian cities also underwent a major religious change. However, as can be seen in von Haehling's outstanding work, it is also known that in many cities during this period the pagan population was equivalent to Christianity and that the governors of the provinces were generally people of pagan faith⁶⁵. As Cameron summarized, "personal loyalties were still more important than religious loyalties"⁶⁶. In this respect, the view that many cities/ provinces in Eastern Roman Provinces had become a Christian region by the middle of the fourth century is unfounded, but the increasing influence of bishops in public life coincides with this period⁶⁷. Themistius emphasized in various orations that the pagan population was still the

60 Them. Or. 5. 69c.

61 For Julian's anti-Christian policy in Constantinople, see. Socr., HE. 3.12.3; Also see. Bowersock 1978, 79-93; Smith 1995, 189-218.

62 Themistius' oration to Jovian focuses on the fact that emperors cannot determine the routines of belief and worship, which are always subject to change, in other words, a kind of freedom of worship. Daly 1971, 72-73. Also see for Jovian, Amm. Marc. 25. 5-5ff

63 Them. Or. 23. 299. Transl. by Penella.

64 Julian's letter to Arsacius, the High Priest of Galatia, also shows that he intended to further increase the presence of the pagan population in the Galatian cities. Julian. Ep. 22.

65 See. Von Haehling 1978, 510.

66 Cameron 1993, 73.

67 Cameron 1993, 71-77.

main element in many cities of Asia Minor and the eastern Mediterranean, and various emperors, especially Jovian, embraced religious tolerance even after the reign of Julian⁶⁸.

Emperor Jovian sparing the life of Vindaonius Magnus, who burned a Christian church in Berytus during the reign of Julian, in return for rebuilding the church from his own resources is another remarkable example given that demonstrates imperial policies to overcome the pagan-Christian antagonism in Eastern Roman Provinces⁶⁹. Although the reign of Jovian, which lasted only about one year, was a period of renewed and irreversible strengthening of Christianity after Julian, the emperor seems to have maintained a strong religious tolerance towards the pagan population and issued a law of religious tolerance⁷⁰. In fact, we learn that Jovian allowed temples to be opened for pagans and offerings to be made in accordance with the rules, but he closed down various false religion-cult centres, which Themistius described as “nests of deceit”, and did not allow those who practiced necromancy⁷¹. Barceló suggests that Jovian, who was apparently not a pious Christian, was proclaimed emperor in response to the hesitant acceptance of Julian’s religious policy, especially in the east of the empire⁷². Themistius also presented the peace treaty as a victory for Jovian, rather than blaming Julian for the losses in the Persian campaign, as Christian writers did, and apparently wanted to honour him for his religious tolerance with this event as well⁷³.

While Themistius directly or indirectly refers to all the religious diversity mentioned above, he also recognizes it as a natural consequence of the empire and emphasizes the inevitable role of the rulers in this regard⁷⁴. Themistius’ orations are also noteworthy for the traits that are considered ideal or appropriate for emperors, because these traits can also influence religious diversity. He apparently takes some historical figures as role models for himself and makes it clear why he comments on emperors’ traits: He recognized as his predecessors the Arius for Augustus, Thrasyllus for Tiberius, Dio Chrysostom for Trajan and Epictetus for the two Antonines (i.e., Antonius Pius and Marcus Aurelius)⁷⁵.

Religious tolerance, something that Christian writers do not emphasize much (or apparently try to ignore), is an important aspect of the Jovian and Valentinian (i.e. reign of Valens) periods that Themistius emphasizes⁷⁶. In his Oration 6, Themistius hints that Jovian’s religious tolerance policy was partly continued under Valens, albeit in a more pro-Christian direction. Themistius’ position in the eyes of the emperors and his efforts to create an environment of religious tolerance within the empire can also be seen in the work of Socrates

68 Jones 2010, 502ff.

69 PLRE I, Magnus 12, col.536; Theod. HE, 4. 22.10; von Haehling 1978, 554.

70 Penella 2000, 195; Marcos 2014, 153-177. Cancik – Cancik-Lindemaier 2016, 204ff.

71 Them. Or. 5. 70b.

72 Gottlieb – Barceló 2000, 178.

73 Drijvers 2022, 61. Also see for the Persian campaigns, Amm. Marc. 25. 3. 1-20; Eutr. 10. 16; Sozom. 6. 1. 13 – 6. 2.

74 In this respect, Themistius seems to have followed Dio Chrysostom’s approach, who participated in politics and offered views on the ideal ruler. See. Dio Chrys. Or. 1 and Or. 2.

75 Them. Or. 5. 63d.

76 Ando 1996, 180.

Scholasticus and later Sozomen⁷⁷. The information on the reign of Valens the semi-Arianist emperor shows that the pro-Christian policies of the emperors were not as strict as thought.

In the meanwhile, Valens, making his residence at Antioch, was wholly undisturbed by foreign wars; for the barbarians on every side restrained themselves within their own boundaries. Nevertheless, he himself waged a most cruel war against those who maintained the 'homoousian' doctrine, inflicting on them more grievous punishments every day; until the philosopher Themistius by his Appealing Oration somewhat moderated his severity. In this speech he tells the emperor, 'That he ought not to be surprised at the difference of judgment on religious questions existing among Christians; in as much as that discrepancy was trifling when compared with the multitude of conflicting opinions current among the heathen; for these amount to above three hundred; that dissension indeed was an inevitable consequence of this disagreement; but that God would be the more glorified by a diversity of sentiment, and the greatness of his majesty be more venerated, from the fact of its not being easy to have a knowledge of Him.' The philosopher having said these and similar things, the emperor became milder, but did not completely give up his wrath; for although he ceased to put ecclesiastics to death, he continued to send them into exile, until this fury of his also was repressed by the following event⁷⁸.

This passage not only shows us that oratory was still powerful, but also provides interesting insights into shifting imperial politics. Socrates (and later Sozomen) briefly says that after the Emperor Valens made Antioch, the capital of the Diocese of the East, his imperial residence, his policies softened thanks to the rhetoric of Themistius, and adds that the emperor adopted a policy of religious tolerance towards both different Christian communities and various pagan groups, and that his punishments were less severe than before⁷⁹. It is also possible to conclude that the followers of the Nicene Creed were the majority of the Christian groups in Antioch and its neighbourhood in the fourth century.⁸⁰ In addition to the above account of events during the reign of Valens, Sozomen mentions the gradual Christianisation of many Upper Syrian cities, except Antioch⁸¹.

The above narrative, in which Socrates specifically mentions the role of Themistius, suggests the following: Themistius is likely to have included in his influential oration his idea of what a Roman Emperor should be like. The type of emperor described by Themistius as "a living law (i.e., *nómos émpsychos*) that adapts itself to each individual" was, according to him, a necessity⁸². In his view, Valens should have been in this position (i.e., Roman Emperor) as a high advisor/

77 Sozom. 6. 36. 6-7.

78 Socr. HE. 4. 32. Transl. by A. C. Zenos.

79 See also, Cod. Theod. 9.16.9; Sozom. 6. 37.1; The policy of tolerance here is thought to be close to the religious policy of the reign of Emperor Constantine. Heather – Moncur 2001, 155.

80 cf. Kaçar 2003, 120-125.

81 Sozom. 6. 34.

82 Them. Or. 8. 118d; Also, the cult-lord function of the emperors, as Daly calls them, was important to him. Daly 1971, passim. According to Dvornik, the definition of 'living law', a product of Greek political philosophy, was copied by Clement from Philo. It was introduced to Christianity by Clementius and adapted to Christianity over time. see. Dvornik 1966, 589-603.

judge. He also describes Valens as “the most merciful emperor” in his Oration 7⁸³. Apparently, this was also another art of rhetoric, that is a way obliging the emperor to be merciful. Themistius’ passage on the public celebration of the reign of Valens is also exaggerated, reflecting the Panegyric tradition⁸⁴.

However, various pagan figures associated with a conspiracy, including the Neoplatonist philosopher Maximus of Ephesus, could not be saved from being killed despite Themistius’ efforts⁸⁵. The fact that Hilarius of Phrygia, Simonides, Patricias of Lydia, Andronicus of Caria and many others who were suspected of being involved in witchcraft, which was known to have been banned by the emperor Jovian, were beaten, tortured, and sentenced to death shows that the anti-pagan practices under Valentinian and Valens were much harsher than their predecessors⁸⁶. It is noteworthy that Themistius does not directly mention Neoplatonic philosophers in his works.

Nevertheless, the number of Christian officials in the first half of the fourth century was small, and the experience of pagans in administrative and public life suggests that it was impossible to completely dispense with pagan elements in Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean during this period⁸⁷. In this respect, even though there was friction between the Christians and the pagan population in the fourth century, sometimes actual and sometimes propaganda-based, it is difficult to say that the Roman emperors after the Constantinian dynasty supported the Christians with all their power⁸⁸. The Oration 30 of Libanius, which is dated to the reign of Theodosius I, and deals with the actions of Christians against the pagan temples, also mentions the involvement of some Christian clergy and regional officials behind them, such as Maternus Cynegius, the praetorian prefect of the East, in anti-pagan actions — without an imperial decree⁸⁹. Similar cases are also well known from some epigrams of Palladas and Socrates Scholasticus⁹⁰. Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria, pursued a harsh policy of intolerance and aggression against the pagans in the region and had the Serapeum destroyed in 391⁹¹. In fact, it is known that about a decade before Emperor Theodosius I’s edict banning pagan cults⁹², the Proconsul of Asia repaired the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus and that a relief dedicated to Emperor Theodosius I and his family

83 Them. Or. 7. 128. 14; See Valens’ religious tolerance. Almasi 2004, 90-91; The major element that is shown mercy and forgiven by Valens here are the people who supported Procopius. Mehr 2024, 23.

84 Them. Or. 13.168a-b.

85 Dagon 1968, 36-37; Heather 1998, 148; Heather – Moncur 2001, 143. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, Maximus of Ephesus was killed by order of Phestos (Festus), Proconsul of Asia. See. Amm. Marc. 29. 1.42; Zosimus states that a rumor of a fictitious conspiracy was deliberately spread under the leadership of the co-emperor Valentinian, and that the real aim was to eliminate the friends of Julian the Apostate. Zos. 4. 2; 4. 13 – 15. cf. Eunap. VS. 7. 4. 11.

86 Zos. 4. 14-15.

87 Von Haehling 1978, 514.

88 Von Haehling 1978, 614-616.

89 Lib. Or. 30; Zos. 4. 37; PLRE I, Maternus Cynegius 3, col.235 – 236; Also see. Watts 2013, 105-114.

90 Socr. HE. 5.16.1; Sozom. 7. 15; Benelli 2016, 998-999.

91 Cameron 1993, 75; Benelli 2016, 999.

92 For Theodosius I’s edicts concerning paganism, see Cod. Theod. 16. 10. 1-12.

was included in a frieze added there⁹³. Thus, for pagans in the western Anatolian cities, Constantinople and Antioch in the fourth century, conditions were still tolerable until the end of the century⁹⁴.

It is highly likely that Themistius was a pagan who favoured religious diversity but was also close to pagan monotheism⁹⁵. The idea that God possesses a mystery that cannot be accessed by human beings in the same way, and that it is impossible to have a faith that can be maintained in the same way everywhere, is undoubtedly Themistius' primary thought⁹⁶. Themistius' advocacy that emperors should be tolerant not only of pagans but also of other religious approaches within Christianity is also a product of this perspective, and it was undoubtedly enabled by Anatolia, where the triad of Christian and pagan culture-religion-politics intertwined.

In the fourth century Themistius not only acknowledged that there had been a change in the emperors and thus in the Roman Empire, but also pointed in this manner to how the emperor should be, i.e., *philánthrōpos*⁹⁷ and *nómos émpsychos*⁹⁸. These definitions, which can be handled differently in terms of political philosophy, are also seen as instruments to ensure religious diversity for Themistius. The idea of *nómos émpsychos*, which Themistius uses, points to the absolute authority of the emperor in the legal meaning. In his Oration 1, he expresses it in the following sentence:

*The king who loves mankind acknowledges the deficiency of inexactitude in the written law, and himself adds what is impossible for it, since, he is, I think, himself the law and is above the laws*⁹⁹.

In this sense, it is also clear how Themistius sees fourth century emperors. Here again, there is the predominance of the Hellenistic type of ruler ideas ("lawgiver" and "philanthropist") seen in Anatolian and Eastern Mediterranean cities¹⁰⁰. These definitions, which were undoubtedly the product of a common political philosophy, were welcomed by both religious groups, whether pagan or Christian¹⁰¹. According to Downey, Themistius' theory of the emperor's traits and function emphasizes the inseparability of the emperor from the paganism on which the Christian ideal of the ruler is based¹⁰².

One of the main features of Themistius' orations mentioned above is his understanding of the religious diversity in Roman Anatolia and the need for all religious groups to live together, and the emperors are the authorities responsible

93 Cameron 1993, 172.

94 cf. Dagron 1974, 119; Karakuş 2022, 132 ff. In the same period, we know that examples such as Palladas sold his books due to poverty (and Christian oppression) and sought another occupation. Benelli 2016, 1000.

95 Sandwell 2010, 101-126; Kahlos 2011, 301.

96 Chadwick 1993, 28.

97 See. Downey 1955a, 199-208; Downey 1957, 259-74; Kundakçı 2017, 22ff.

98 See. Aalders 1969, 315-329.

99 Them. Or. 1. 15b. Transl. by Heather-Moncur. In Or. 5. 64b, 16. 212d and 19. 227d, Themistius reiterates this philosophical idea.

100 Stertz 1976, 351-355; Tussay 2022, 142-143; Mehr 2024, 226-229.

101 Dvornik 1966, 616-619.

102 Downey 1955b, 299.

for ensuring this diversity. What this study hopes to show is that comprehensive information about fourth century Anatolia can be gleaned not only from church historians or historical texts, but also from relatively obscure literary sources, especially about religious milieu and imperial politics.

Conclusions

Themistius was a pagan orator, counsellor, teacher, administrator and philosopher, but he was a man who had friendly relations with and influence over the Christian emperors such as Constantius II, Jovian, Valens and Theodosius I. Themistius, in his time, was in a sense an influence on the Late Roman Emperors, as were the intellectuals of the Second Sophistic period, such as Polemon of Laodicea, Aelius Aristides or Dio Chrysostom and other political friends. According to his own words, he precisely considered himself, like Dio Chrysostom, Thrasyllus or Epictetus as an intellectual advisor to the Roman emperors.

Almost the last of the politically influential sophists, along with Libanius and Himerius, Themistius was able to survive as a pagan thanks to his rhetorical skills and, moreover, he held very important positions in the new imperial residence Constantinople. He was the only pagan political intellectual to remain so long at the Eastern Imperial Court and Constantinopolitan Senate. By providing detailed information through his testimony in terms of the Anatolian History of Religions, he also allowed us to understand the religious political role of the emperors. The orations of Themistius also provide rare insights into local religious rivalries in Nicomedia and the interest of pagans in philosophy in the Galatian cities.

Although Themistius acknowledged that the Roman Empire had become different from its former religious character, he argued that all religions should be tolerated in accordance with the social structure of the Roman Empire. Likewise, he did not support anti-Christian policy as Julian had done. Themistius was aware that the religious conflict in the Roman Empire (much of it in the eastern part) was holding the Empire and the emperors back. He often made direct or indirect references to this. What he really wanted was a peace that would enable coexistence between traditional and Christianity. This was perhaps most approached during the short reign of Jovian. He did neither support Julian's pro-Pagan policies nor Valens' conflicts against the Nicene creed, which would have weakened Christianity. These ideas also played a central role in Themistius' approach to the politics of the emperors.

The religious landscape in Constantinople or major provincial capitals of Ancyra, Nicomedia, Antioch, according to Themistius, was still balanced and there was still an interest in pagan culture and *paideia*. In Constantinople there was also the imperial library containing pre-Christian books. In addition to the traditional pagan communities, Neoplatonists had also appeared on the scene during this period. In the fourth century, divisions were not yet entirely based on religions, but there was also inter-religious or intradenominational rivalry, as Themistius revealed in his orations. Nevertheless, in the social structure, Christianity increasingly gained a strong foothold, while pagan religions were losing their former support from the emperors.

Themistius was one of the most important products of the new capital

Constantinople and Roman Anatolia, and his ideas contained historical elements of the deep-rooted Hellenic tradition. He was also a strong follower of classical Greek philosophy. The idea of the emperor as a law-giver, philanthropy, tolerance of various religions was common in the political philosophy of the pre-Christian Anatolia and Eastern Mediterranean. Having both a philosophical and religious background, an intellectual who supports religious tolerance such as Themistius, it is understandable that the qualities that an emperor has or should have are also included. The orations of Themistius show that in the religious policies of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, contrary to popular belief, anti-paganism did not become an imperial policy, on the contrary, different approaches were adopted and implemented by each emperor. Not all the emperors were fundamentalist Christians, just as Themistius was not a fundamentalist pagan. In this respect, various officials and Christian clergymen were much more influential in enabling Christianity deny co-existence for other religions.

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