


A FACTORY OF MAGNIFICENCE: THEMISTIUS, THUCYDIDES, AND CONSTANTINOPLE

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Abstract: In Themistius' orations there are many clear and direct references to the Greek literature of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. However, there are also more subtle references to these classical texts. In this paper, two references to classical Greek historiography are identified in Themistius' Oration 18. As we shall see, in order to praise the refashioning of Constantinople by Theodosius the Great, Themistius subtly quoted a passage by Xenophon. In order to highlight the splendour of the city of Constantinople, he also used as a reference one of the most eminent classical *encomia* of cities, that is, Pericles' funeral oration from the second book of Thucydides' History. Both references served to enhance Themistius' already good relations with Theodosius I, who had recently renovated Constantinople with new monuments. This research thus stresses the relevance of quotations in Themistius' orations when studying his political agenda, including quotations that are less obvious and less easily identifiable.

Keywords: Constantinople, Themistius, Theodosius I, Thucydides, Xenophon.

Themistius' Oration 18 was dedicated to Theodosius I and delivered in the senate of Constantinople in late 384.¹ When Themistius delivered this speech, he was the urban prefect of Constantinople. Themistius became the prefect of Constantinople in 384 and

¹ For the date of the oration, see Dagron 1968, 23–24, according to whom it was delivered before the Senate in the winter of 384–385. According to Vanderspoel (1995, 210–213), Oration 18, which was delivered when Themistius was the prefect of Constantinople, mentions Theodosius' campaign against Magnus Maximus in the summer of 384, and it is clear that Themistius was going to become the teacher of the emperor's son, Arcadius, as at the end of the speech he invites him to follow his own teachings (18.224b–225c). The oration was thus perhaps given in the summer of 384, certainly before the birth of Honorius on 9 September 384, as Honorius is not mentioned in it. According to Maisano (1995, 625), the delivery of Oration 18 took place after September 384 and perhaps during the winter of 384/385. In fact, in a passage of this Oration (217d), Themistius shows that Theodosius was in the sixth year of his reign at the time of the speech.

probably resigned from the position at the turn of 384 and 385.² Oration 18 deals with Theodosius' attempt to subdue Maximus, who had usurped Gratian's throne in the West, with the urban transformation of Constantinople by Theodosius, and with Themistius' role as the teacher of philosophy of Theodosius' son, Arcadius.³ A central passage of this oration (222a–223b) focuses on the enhancement of Constantinople by Theodosius I, who made the city larger and enriched it with new buildings, in addition to distributing provisions to its inhabitants:

πλοῦτος [...] βόσκει δὲ τὸ μέγα τοῦτο ἄστν καὶ τὸν πολὺν δῆμον, καὶ οὐ μόνον βόσκει, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐκτείνει τὸ ἐνδεῆσαν ὑπὸ τῆς πάλαι ῥαδιουργίας, καὶ οὐκ ἐκτείνει μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐπαύξει τὸ σιτηρέσιον, ὅτε ἀγαπητὸν ἦν μὴ ἐλαττώσαι. οὐκ οὐκ δεῖ ἡμῖν ξενηλασίας συνεχῶς, καθάτερ τῆ μητροπόλει, φαρμάκου τῆς ἐνδείας χαλεπωτέρου, ἀλλ' ἐπιρρέουσιν ἀκωλύτως σὺν τῆ τῶν καλῶν περιουσία οἱ χρησόμενοι αὐτοῖς ἐπ' ἐξουσίας. [...] οὐκ ἐμπελάζει ὑμῶν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς, οὐδὲ τοῦ ἄστεος τὸν κύκλον ὁρᾶτε ἐξ ἡμιδεοῦς γέμοντα ἤδη ἀφράστου ἡδονῆς, καὶ οὐ τὰ κενὰ τοῦ περιβόλου κρείττονα τῶν συνοικουμένων, οὐδὲ γεωργοῦμεν εἰσω τεύχους μείζονα χῶρον ἢ κατοικοῦμεν, οὐδὲ ὄρειον τὸ κάλλος τῆς πόλεως καὶ διεσπασμένον, ἀλλ' ἐμπέπλησται ἅπας καὶ ἐξύφονται οἷον πέπλος ἄχρι τῶν θυσάνων πεποικιλμένος χρυσοῦ καὶ πορφύρα αὐλῆ τε βασιλέως ἐπωνύμῳ καὶ λουτροῖς δὴ καὶ στοαῖς καὶ ἡβητηρίοις, καὶ τὸ κράσπεδον πάλαι τῆς πόλεως νῦν ὀμφαλός. ὦ πάτερ, ὦ εὐδαίμον Κωνσταντῖνε, ἄρα αἰσθάνῃ ὅτι τὴν πόλιν ὁ βασιλεὺς ἀντι λαγαρᾶς καὶ ὑποσόμενου μεστήν ἐποίησεν ἀγλαΐας, καὶ τὸ κάλλος αὐτῆς ἤδη ἀληθινὸν καὶ οὐκέτι σκιαγραφία; Καὶ δὴ οὐ τὰ μὲν κοινὰ ἐπιδίδωσι, τὰ δὲ ἴδια ἀπολισθαίνει, ἀλλ' αὐξεται ὡσπερ ζῶν ἅμα ἡ πόλις, καὶ μιᾶς ὡσπερ ἅπαντα κατεχούσης ἐπιπνοίας ἐκ τοῦ ζήλου τοῦ βασιλικοῦ καὶ ἄρχοντας καὶ ἰδιώτην, ὃς μὲν πρόδομον ἐγείρει, ὃς δὲ θάλαμον, ὃς δὲ ἀνδρῶνα, ὃς δὲ καὶ ἐπτάκλινον ἢ ἐννεάκλινον οἶκον [...] ἀπολαύει δὲ καὶ τὰ προάστεια τῆς περὶ τὸ ἄστν φιλοτιμίας [...]. μεστή δὲ ἡ πόλις τεκτόνων καὶ οἰκοδόμων καὶ ποικιλλόντων καὶ παντοδαπῆς δημιουργίας, καὶ εἴποις ἂν αὐτὴν ἐργαστήριον μεγαλοπρεπείας. ὥστε εἰ κατὰ λόγον ὁ ἔρωσ ἐπιδιδοίῃ τῷ βασιλεῖ, εἰς νέωτα ἡμῖν ἐτέρου κύκλου δεήσει, καὶ ἀμφισβητήσιμον ἤδη ἔσται εἰ μείζων καὶ ἀριπρεπεστέρα ταῖν πόλεωιν, ἦν Θεοδοσίος προσόφρηε τῆ Κωνσταντίνου, ἢ ἦν ὁ Κωνσταντῖνος τῆ Βύζαντος.

A richness [...] that not only feeds this great city and this large population, but also gives back to it what had been previously lacking due to indolence. This richness does not merely restore the distribution of wheat, but increases it, whereas it would have been sufficient if it had not been reduced still further. Nor do we need a continuous expulsion of foreigners, as in the metropolis – a solution that is more difficult than the problem itself. Instead we see, in addition to the plenty of goods, an unstopped growth of the number of the people who will easily enjoy them. [...] And don't you see with your own eyes that the entirety of the city, which was half-empty before, is now full of ineffable pleasures, and that there are not more empty spaces inside the boundaries of the city than inhabited spaces? Nor do we cultivate inside the city a larger portion of land than the one we inhabit, and the appearance of the city is not mountainous and irregularly distributed, but it is all full and is embroidered like a peplos that is decorated until its limits with gold and purple and with the palace that takes its name from the emperor, and with baths and porticoes and gymnasia, and what used to be the periphery is now the centre. Oh father, oh fortunate Constantine, don't you see that the emperor made the city full of splendour, instead of hollow and half-empty, and its beauty is now authentic and no longer like a picture? And the public buildings do not grow without a growth of the private ones, but the city grows all together like a living being, and as if a single inspiration was dominating everyone due to the imperial zeal, both the leaders and the private citizens, someone

² See Dagron 1968, 11. For the date of his office see also Vanderspoel (1995, 187, 209), who dates the prefecture to 384 and discusses the opinions of other scholars on this topic, and Heather – Moncur (2001, IX, 13), according to whom he was the urban prefect in 383/384–384/385.

³ Dagron 1968, 46; Vanderspoel 1995, 210, 212–213.

builds a vestibule, and others a bedchamber, a banqueting hall, and a house with seven or with nine rooms. [...] Even the periphery enjoys the ambition that characterises this city [...]. The city is full of carpenters and builders and decorators and all kinds of craftsmen, and you could define it as a factory of magnificence. Thus, if the emperor's ambition grows (as it is expected to do), next year we will need another circle of walls, and we will wonder which one of the two cities is bigger and more splendid, between the city that Theodosius embroidered on Constantine's city, and the one that Constantine embroidered on Byzantium's city.

Themistius shows that Constantinople is welcoming to immigrants, as they are not expelled, unlike how they are treated in Rome (Constantinople's "metropolis"). In addition, there are no longer empty swathes of land inside the city, which is now full of new buildings, even in its peripheral quarters.⁴ The founder of the city, Constantine, is invoked so that he can admire (from the hereafter) the development of his own creation. In Constantinople, both private and public buildings are continually being constructed. Due to this ceaseless building activity, the city can be defined as a "factory of magnificence." If Constantinople keeps growing, it will need new walls to protect it. Finally, Themistius suggests that people will consider Theodosius' role in the development of Constantinople as an even more impressive feat than the founding of the city by Constantine the Great.

There was indeed an urban development of Constantinople under Theodosius I, and monuments such as the *Forum Theodosii* and the *Tetrapylon* are attested by archaeological and literary evidence.⁵ However, it is not certain that the urban development of the city was so intensive that the construction of new walls had already been planned under Theodosius I. Themistius may have been exaggerating in this passage by suggesting that new walls should be constructed soon. On the other hand, the construction of the *Porta Aurea* under Theodosius I, on a spot where walls would be later constructed, has been considered by Jonathan Bardill as evidence that there were indeed plans.⁶ What we know with certainty is that new walls were needed some decades later, under the empire of Theodosius' grandson, Theodosius II: the "Theodosian walls" were thus begun in 404/405 and completed in 413.⁷

Constantinople had been founded only half-century before the reign of Theodosius I, whose building projects helped Constantinople attain the prestige of more ancient cities. The rhetorical activity of Themistius, who was a loyal subject of Theodosius, could be equally helpful. Themistius thus helped to increase the prestige of Constantinople.

However, Milena Raimondi recently demonstrated that Themistius did not see Constantinople as a "new Athens." Passages on Athens in those orations of Themistius that deal with Constantinople highlight the differences between Athens and the New Rome, more than their similarities.⁸ Athens and Constantinople are juxtaposed in two speeches

⁴ Sarris 2015, 25, on the other hand, maintains that the outskirts of Constantinople continued to be less densely built and inhabited than its centre. For the expulsion of foreigners from Rome see Maisano 1995, 634, commentary *ad loc.* For the identification of the "palace that takes its name from the emperor (*scil.* Theodosius I)" see Maisano 1995, 636, commentary *ad loc.*

⁵ Bauer 1996, 187–203; Concina 2009, 9.

⁶ Bardill 1999, 686, 695–696.

⁷ For the Theodosian walls and the date of their construction see Kalkan – Şahin 1994; Lebek 1995; Jacobs 2012, 119.

⁸ Raimondi 2020.

given in 357 (*Or.* 3 and 4). However, in these orations Constantinople is presented by Themistius as hosting a community of people that is ultimately better than that of classical Athens.⁹

My article accepts Raimondi's argument and takes into account the many references to the Greek literature of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE that she analyses, however it adds new evidence on the use of classical imagery by Themistius. As we shall see, Themistius drew from classical Greek historiography in order to use, in his orations, concepts and expressions that could confer prestige to Constantinople.

There is a reference to Xenophon in the passage we are analysing (18.222a–223b). The detailed praise of the recent building activity in Constantinople leads to the final definition of the city as a “factory of magnificence” (ἐργαστήριον μεγαλοπρεπείας). Is the metaphorical use of ἐργαστήριον, the Greek word for “workshop, factory,” an invention by Themistius? The word ἐργαστήριον actually seems to have been used in a metaphorical sense for the first time by Xenophon. In his commentary to Oration 18, Riccardo Maisano suggested that Themistius is probably referring here to Xenophon's *Hellenica* 3.4.17.¹⁰ This passage, along with a passage of Xenophon's *Agesilaus* (1.26), contains the expression πολέμου ἐργαστήριον. Xenophon referred to the city of Ephesus, which became a sort of “war factory” during King Agesilaus' military preparations against Tissaphernes in 395 BCE. This expression became so iconic that Polybius quoted it, while attributing it to Xenophon, in Polyb. 10.20.7.¹¹ However, a metaphorical use of ἐργαστήριον also appears elsewhere in late antique texts, as stressed by I. Matijašić. In fact, it was used by Libanius in *Or.* 55.34, and by Emperor Julian in *Ep.* 82.¹²

Themistius is thus referring either to Xenophon or to other classicising authors of his own time. In both cases, he would be harking back to a classical expression to give prestige to Constantinople after its refurbishment by Theodosius the Great. I would suggest that Themistius was directly quoting a work by Xenophon, probably his *Agesilaus*. In fact, as shown by Raimondi, Themistius knew Xenophon's *Agesilaus* well. For Themistius, since his earliest political speeches, Agesilaus was not a model of kingship. The Paphlagonian orator is well aware of the existence of the *encomium* that Xenophon dedicated to the Spartan king, but he presents the king as an ambitious and arrogant man (*Or.* 2.27d–28a).¹³

The passage quoted from Oration 18 also harks back to another illustrious source. Although I believe this has never been pointed out before, there are striking similarities between this passage and Thucydides 2.35–46, that is, Pericles' funeral oration for the Athenians who died in the first year of the Peloponnesian war. I will highlight some passages that bear interesting similarities to Themistius *Or.* 18.222a–223b.

The people of Constantinople and Athens are supplied with plenty of provisions:

⁹ Raimondi 2020, 219–220, 223–224.

¹⁰ Maisano 1995, 636, commentary *ad loc.*

¹¹ See Seretaki – Tamiolaki 2018, 227. Cfr. Polyb. 3.6.11 for the historical context of the episode involving Agesilaus and Tissaphernes. Matijašić 2018, 197 also mentions the occurrences of this expression in Plutarch (*Marc.* 21) and Athenaeus (10.421b–c).

¹² This connection between Julian and Xenophon has been stressed by Matijašić 2018, 197, who also mentioned the use of this expression by Polybius. I owe the less minimalistic translation of ἐργαστήριον as “factory” instead of “workshop” to Matijašić's study (the translation as “workshop” is given in the *LSJ*).

¹³ Raimondi 2020, 222, 233–234.

Them., *in*: **πλοῦτος [...] βόσκει δὲ τὸ μέγα τοῦτο ἄστῳ καὶ τὸν πολὺν δῆμον**, καὶ οὐ μόνον βόσκει, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐκτίνει τὸ ἐνδεῆσαν ὑπὸ τῆς πάλαι ραδιουργίας, καὶ οὐκ ἐκτείνει μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐπαύξει τὸ σιτηρέσιον, ὅτε ἀγαπητὸν ἦν μὴ ἐλαττώσαι.

Thuc. 2.38.2: **ἐπεσέρχεται δὲ διὰ μέγεθος τῆς πόλεως ἐκ πάσης γῆς τὰ πάντα**, καὶ ζυμβαίνει ἡμῖν μηδὲν οἰκειότερα τῇ ἀπολαύσει τὰ αὐτοῦ ἀγαθὰ γιγνόμενα καρποῦσθαι ἢ καὶ τὰ τῶν ἄλλων ἀνθρώπων

Because of the greatness of our city the fruits of the whole earth flow in upon us; so that we enjoy the goods of other countries as freely as our own.¹⁴

Due to the plenty of supplies, there is no need to ban foreigners, either in Constantinople or in Athens.¹⁵ The word used in both texts to indicate a ban for foreigners is **ξενηλασία**.

Them., *in*: **οὐκ οὐκ δεῖ ἡμῖν ξενηλασίας συνεχοῦς**, καθάπερ τῇ μητροπόλει, φαρμάκου τῆς ἐνδείας χαλεπωτέρου, ἀλλ' ἐπιρρέουσιν ἀκωλύτως σὺν τῇ τῶν καλῶν περιουσίᾳ οἱ χρησόμενοι αὐτοῖς ἐπ' ἐξουσίας.

Thuc. 2.39.1: τὴν τε γὰρ πόλιν κοινὴν παρέχομεν, καὶ **οὐκ ἔστιν ὅτε ξενηλασίαις ἀπείργομέντινα** ἢ μαθήματος ἢ θεάματος, ὃ μὴ κρυφθὲν ἂν τις τῶν πολεμίων ἰδὼν ὠφεληθεῖη

Our city is thrown open to the world, though and we never expel a foreigner and prevent him from seeing or learning anything of which the secret if revealed to an enemy might profit him.

Private houses are splendid, both in Constantinople and in Pericles' Athens:

Them., *in*: Καὶ δὴ οὐ **τὰ μὲν κοινὰ** ἐπιδίδωσι, **τὰ δὲ ἴδια** ἀπολισθαίνει, ἀλλ' αὖξεται ὥσπερ ζῶον ἅμα ἡ πόλις, καὶ μῖα ὥσπερ ἅπαντα κατεχούσης ἐπιτινοίας ἐκ τοῦ ζήλου τοῦ βασιλικοῦ καὶ ἄρχοντας καὶ ιδιώτην, ὃς μὲν πρόδομον ἐγείρει, ὃς δὲ θάλαμον, ὃς δὲ ἀνδρῶνα, ὃς δὲ καὶ ἐπτάκλινον ἢ ἐννεάκλινον οἶκον [...] καὶ εἴποις ἂν αὐτὴν ἐργαστήριον **μεγαλοπρεπείας**.

Thuc. 2.38.1: καὶ μὴν καὶ τῶν πόνων πλείστας ἀναπαύλας τῇ γνώμῃ ἐπορισάμεθα, ἀγῶσι μὲν γε καὶ θυσίαις διετησίαις νομίζοντες, **ἰδίαις δὲ κατασκευαῖς** εὐπρεπέσιν, ὧν καθ' ἡμέραν ἢ τέρψις τὸ λυπηρὸν ἐκπλήσσει.

And we have not forgotten to provide for our weary spirits many relaxations from toil; we have regular games and sacrifices throughout the year; our homes are beautiful and elegant; and the delight which we daily feel in all these things helps to banish sorrow.

The opposition between public and private aspects of a city also appears in the following passage by Thucydides:

Thuc. 2.37.3: ἀνεπαχθῶς δὲ **τὰ ἴδια** προσομιλοῦντες **τὰ δημόσια** διὰ δέος μάλιστα οὐ παρανομοῦμεν, τῶν τε αἰεὶ ἐν ἀρχῇ ὄντων ἀκρόασει καὶ τῶν νόμων

While we are thus unconstrained in our private business, a spirit of reverence pervades our public acts; we are prevented from doing wrong by respect for authority and for the laws.

A reference to Thucydides in another oration by Themistius confirms that this passage of Oration 18 does indeed recall Pericles' funeral oration from Thucydides. As shown by Raimondi, in *Or.* 15.184c, to celebrate Theodosius, who had re-established a peace with the Goths, Themistius claimed that he appreciated the eirenic compositions of Hesiod,

¹⁴ All translations from Thucydides are by B. Jowett.

¹⁵ See Raimondi 2020, 219 for the theme of the inclusion of foreigners in Constantinople in Themistius' speeches.

rather than the warlike ones of Homer and of Thucydides. In quoting Thucydides' proem, Themistius turned the war between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians, the greatest and most important ever fought according to Thucydides (1.1), into the "greatest and most calamitous (βαρυσυμφορώτατος) ever fought" (*Or.* 15.184c).¹⁶

Constantinople would never become the New Athens, but to exalt it, Themistius took as a reference Pericles' *encomium* of Athens in Thucydides' History—praise *par excellence* for a city. Themistius thus aimed to extol the works that had been accomplished there by Theodosius, whose feats Themistius constantly praised, in a successful effort to maintain his own political relevance.¹⁷

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¹⁶ Raimondi 2020, 233.

¹⁷ According to Dagron 1968, 11, the reign of Theodosius I was the apogee of the political career of Themistius, who was also the educator of Theodosius' son Arcadius. Under Theodosius, according to Dagron, Themistius was really involved in politics for the first time. However, according to Vanderspoel 1995, 216, during the reign of Theodosius, Themistius reached the second peak of his own career, as he had already been very powerful at the time of Constantius II. As shown by Heather – Moncur 2001, 210, Theodosius was trying to come to terms with the traditional pagan elites, and Themistius was a very useful intermediary in order to reach this compromise.