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978-1-107-02657-5 - Themistius, Julian, and Greek Political Theory Under Rome:  
Texts, Translations, and Studies of Four Key Works

Simon Swain

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

This volume presents texts, translations, and studies of four works of Greek political theory from the time of the Roman Empire. It is built around Themistius' *Letter to Julian*, a work of political advice and praise dating to the middle of the fourth century, which survives in a complete form only in Arabic translation. Themistius' *Letter to Julian* cannot be studied aside from Julian's own *Letter to Themistius* on the responsibilities of power, and this is the second major text treated here. To set the scene for these works I shall discuss a more standard political letter of the 340s or 350s, Sopater's *Letter to Himerius*, on his brother Himerius' responsibilities as a new governor. Finally, in the Appendix I shall complement the *Letter to Julian* by examining the only other genuine Greek treatise of political thought and advice to have been translated into Arabic, the *Letter of Aristotle to Alexander*, which appears to date to the period of the High Roman Empire and is wholly lost in Greek. The studies around these four works touch on politics and political thinking in general but are not in any way designed to constitute a history of Greek political literature in the Roman period. The focus is rather on the texts at hand and particularly on aspects of the career of Themistius and his relationship with Julian.

Advice to those in power was a long-established part of the Greek literary tradition. A body of rulership literature was apparently already available by the start of the third century BC, when Demetrius of Phalerum 'recommended King Ptolemy to acquire and read books on kingship and leadership' on the ground that 'the things courtiers are not brave enough to recommend to kings are written in books'.<sup>1</sup> Advice could take a variety of forms, appearing both as free-standing speeches, letters, or treatises or embedded in other works. The balance between advice and recommendation (*paraenesis*) on the one hand and praise and encomium (*epainoi*) on the other was necessarily an unstable one. It was always understood that an encomium was 'designed

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Sayings of Kings and Generals* 189d.

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for reading and pleasure, as well as honouring someone'.<sup>2</sup> Thus once the original occasion was past, even the most idealizing treatment of an individual could acquire a general utility as a picture of a good, imitable ruler and thereby gain a long shelf life for the advice implicit in it. By making the virtues of the recently deceased Evagoras 'memorable for ever' to encourage 'the younger generation to strive for virtue' (*Evagoras* 5), the classical Greek orator Isocrates both invented prose panegyric, as he affirms,<sup>3</sup> and made it into a guide of how to be the best man and the best ruler. The *Evagoras* self-consciously shows that the choice of topics to be included for praise and recommendation was especially significant for the speaker and the honorand, and this continued to be an important factor in determining the usefulness of the treatment as a model. The codification of good, virtuous behaviour by the classical Greek philosophers lent the literature of advice and praise an intellectual resource that joined forces with the idealizing techniques pioneered by Isocrates and others and made King Ptolemy's bedside reading both appealing and instructive.

Roman rule invigorated the Hellenic tradition by introducing the need to address a large number of governors or emperors who were, initially at any rate, not Greek but whose education in Greek allowed them to appreciate or at least understand Hellenic values and ideas of how rulers should conduct themselves and be proud of it. For Roman audiences, advice and encomium remained part of the same spectrum. The classicizing culture of antiquity ensured that foundational works of rulership literature such as Isocrates' *Evagoras*, *To Nicocles*, *Nicocles or The Cyprians* and Xenophon's *Agesilaus* continued to be read and imitated both because of these authors' abiding importance in the educational system and because they conveyed to each generation afresh the message of how to be a good leader. Xenophon's agreeable picture of the Persian prince Cyrus the Great's upbringing, deeds, and kingship was another enduring classic, combining encomium, biography, and historical romance to make a portrait of a popular and successful ruler that, as Ausonius tells its long-dead author, 'you could discern in our Gratian, if you could only step forward to today's time'.<sup>4</sup> Texts like these were everywhere complemented by an array of snippets which 'writers reforming the characters of kings' repackaged from 'the sentiments of the poets' to express or modify any relation of power before them.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Cicero, *De oratore* 2. 341.

<sup>3</sup> *Evagoras* 8–11 ἀνδρὸς ἀρετὴν διὰ λόγων ἐγκωμιάζειν.

<sup>4</sup> Ausonius, *Speech of Thanks to the Emperor Gratian for his Consulship* 15; the date is 379. On the *Cyropaedia*, *Evagoras*, and *Agesilaus*, see Hägg (2012) 30–66.

<sup>5</sup> Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 489 commenting on an Homeric tag standard in this context (*Iliad* 2. 196 θυμὸς δὲ μέγας ἐστὶ διοτρεφέων βασιλῆων; e.g. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1379a5, Stobaeus, *Anthology* 4. 6. 2).

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From the historical perspective it is highly regrettable that the rulership texts of the Hellenistic age have largely been lost, for the period of the first great monarchies obviously enlarged the opportunities open to the idealized king and his spokesman. Some would place in this era the substantial extracts of the Neopythagorean works of Ecphantus, Diotogenes and Sthenidas, which survive in Stobaeus' *Anthology*; but they are better dated to the early Roman Empire.<sup>6</sup> The remaining parts of the late Hellenistic text that has attracted most attention, Philodemus' 'On the Good King According to Homer', show that it dealt with criticism of Homer more than kingship (Asmis 1991). At least we have (most of) Philo's important but understudied treatments of the Patriarchs (especially *On Joseph, or the Life of the Politician* and the *Life of Moses*), which join other examples such as the questions on kingship at the banqueting scene in the *Letter of Aristeas* or Polybius' aside on kings and tyrants at *Histories* 5, 10–11 to alert us to the range and purposes of the catalogue of themes in the Hellenistic backlog.

The literature of the classical and Hellenistic eras naturally had a great influence on the ideas and in some cases the structure of rulership literature at Rome, as we see in well-known works like Seneca's *De clementia* or Pliny's *Panegyricus* to Trajan. But there is no sign from the earlier periods of anything as sophisticated as the celebrated kingship orations of Dio of Prusa, which were written under and supposedly for Trajan and became standard reading, or of anything as comprehensively practical as Plutarch's *Political Precepts* from the same time. These works reflect the revival of confidence in the Greek east that we observe in many domains during the later first century, and indicate the positive reception of the new Antonine regime and the feeling that political life could be discussed openly after the fall of the previous dynasty. It is certainly no coincidence that the reign of the next emperor, the 'philhellenic' Hadrian, saw a number of works – Marcellus of Pergamum's 'Hadrian, or On Kingship', Sarapion of Alexandria's 'Panegyric to King Hadrian', Aspasius of Byblos' 'Encomium to King Hadrian' – which took him as a model king, no doubt mixing more praise than advice.<sup>7</sup> Regrettably, all of these are lost. Some of the standard themes are included in Aelius Aristides' great oration *To Rome* delivered before Antoninus Pius, but apart from a handful of titles (like Nicagoras' 'Embassy Speech to Philip the Roman King' or Callinicus of Petra's 'Address to Galienus' and 'Great Imperial Oration'), the principal remains in Greek before the fourth century are the paired speeches of advice by 'Agrippa' and 'Maecenas' to Augustus in Book 52 of Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, Ps.-Aristides' *To the King*, a speech

<sup>6</sup> Cf. ch. 1, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps add Philo of Byblos' 'On the Kingdom of Hadrian'; but this may have been entertainment of some kind.

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perhaps to a real if unknown emperor which shares the mixed pattern of praise and indirect advice and may well date to the middle of the 3rd c., and the excerpts of a highly ornate and religious encomium to ?Diocletian and Maximian incorporated in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, to which I return in the Epilogue (p. 95). This lack may now be filled to some extent by the *Letter of Aristotle to Alexander* included in this volume.

In the Roman world, panegyric rhetoric blossomed on the back of an empire-wide appreciation of the standards and expectations surrounding the exercise of power and as a response to the needs of cities and individuals to react to the constant presence of governors, high officials, and emperors. *To the King* is one survival of a large output of speeches to such figures, the vast majority of which were no doubt pure encomium. We have no idea if we have lost many works of advice in the narrow meaning of the word but one senses they were not common. Our knowledge increases greatly with the end of the third century. It is probably right to place here the treatises *On Epideictic* ascribed to Menander Rhetor, which include inter alia the theoretical outline of the *basilikos logos*, the ‘imperial oration’ (Russell and Wilson 1981: p. xl), and other types of speech in which emperors and governors may be celebrated. There is no proof that this dating is correct. However, if it is, we may view the ‘unusually full and explicit’ chapter on the *basilikos logos* as the indirect result of the needs of the new regime of the Tetrarchs with its multiple courts and greatly increased administrative class. Menander Rhetor offers guidance on how to praise, and from the Latin orators of Gaul there survive eleven panegyrics on emperors from the Tetrarch Maximian to Theodosius the Great (the so-called Panegyrici Latini), who have taken note of the rhetorical handbooks (but not necessarily that of Menander) and give us examples of the sorts of speeches that were made in praise of emperors from all over the empire (Nixon and Rodgers 1994). At a higher literary level we have from the middle of the fourth century the great panegyric orations of Julian on Constantius and his wife Eusebia (Or. 1–3) and Libanius Or. 59 on Constans and Constantius. Nor should we forget the potential of (fictitious) funeral speeches for delivering the ideal portrait – one thinks particularly of Libanius Or. 18 on Julian. All these works, like the Themistian corpus of speeches to the emperors from Constantius to Theodosius, carefully harmonize the deeds of their addressees with the qualities of the ideal monarch. Thus in the school tradition Julian’s second oration to Constantius (Or. 3) came to be known as ‘On Kingship’ for its explicit treatment of the ideal monarch in combination with the heroic actions (*praxeis*) of the emperor.

The new arrangements of the Tetrarchy may have been a factor in the re-emergence of works of political theory and advice, which is the back-

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ground to the three main texts studied in this volume. From the pen of one of the leading philosophers of the later third and early fourth century, the Neoplatonist Iamblichus of Chalcis, there survive extracts from a number of public letters, several of which treat political topics or advise on the values upon which public life and the exercise of power must depend. The addressees appear to have been high-ranking officials or other notables. Iamblichus' fame makes it reasonable to assume a wide readership for these texts. Given the Neoplatonists' deep fondness for Pythagorean writings, we may be tempted to see the Neopythagorean kingship treatises as another reason for Iamblichus' wish to write political discourses. We should also note the contacts in his address book who needed such advice and above all, of course, we must reckon with his personal self-confidence as a wealthy philosopher whose right to judge virtue and vice was accepted according to the usual understanding. The Iamblichian interest in political writing seems to have established a pattern which was continued at least by Sopater, Themistius, and Julian, all three of whom were closely connected to the philosophical currents of their day as well as being men of political experience at a regional (Sopater) or court level.

The two works I focus on particularly in this volume – Themistius' *Letter to Julian* and Julian's *Letter to Themistius* – help us understand the political ideas and profiles of two of the most important figures of the fourth century. Themistius had a truly remarkable career as the orator for a succession of emperors (Constantius, Valens, Theodosius, possibly Julian also). The older generation of scholars dismissed him as a self-serving flatterer and court toadie, and of course there is truth in this. But such a dismissive characterization fails to understand political process and Themistius' role in the presentation of difficult decisions and policy by his emperors. In fact his corpus is unique in antiquity. Many of the public speeches must be the result of careful consultation with the emperor and his senior advisors. It may be that the particular circumstance of his paganism made Themistius especially useful to Christian emperors seeking to rule a religiously divided state. He put himself forward inter alia as a representative of the Eastern elites and his repeated claims to intellectual credibility, upheld by some<sup>8</sup> but thoroughly irritating to many, as we see from his own works and from his absence from key writers like Ammianus Marcellinus, made him helpful to Christian emperors dealing with the Greek-speaking upper classes. For these elites, whether pagan or Christian in religion, were Hellenized in education and

<sup>8</sup> Including famously Constantius in the *Demegoria Constantii*, which was transmitted as part of the corpus.

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culture, and Themistius' literary style and philosophical level were suitably inclusive. His consistency in his public speeches arguably tells us more about his audiences than himself. But we occasionally catch glimpses of a different voice (such as in the final section of Or. 13, where pagan practices are celebrated in front of the pagan audience of the Roman senatorial aristocracy). The *Letter to Julian* itself contains thoughts on ruling that are different from the standard themes elaborated in the orations to the emperors, and this is one of the reasons for its interest.

The *Letter to Julian* is offered here with a first English translation and a revised text. So far it has been available to historians of the later Roman Empire only through a summary in French<sup>9</sup> and a Latin translation that is not altogether close to the text.<sup>10</sup> Study of the *Letter* has been hampered by the lack of a readable, modern version, and the result of this has too often been mistakes of interpretation or condemnation of the work and doubts about its attribution to Themistius on the ground of the differences between it and his surviving corpus in Greek. As we shall see, the late fourth-century Christian author Nemesius of Emesa quoted a fair amount of the opening section,<sup>11</sup> and this evidence, together with the testimony of the Arab writers who worked on it or mentioned it, puts it beyond doubt that Themistius was the author and strongly suggests that what we have is essentially what Themistius wrote. Nor is there much reason to think that the rest of the *Letter* has been abridged or altered greatly. What will emerge, I hope, is an original contribution to political literature which shows Themistius in a somewhat different register.

Julian needs no introduction, and his *Letter to Themistius* is a well-studied document. I give here a new English version and a very lightly revised Greek text. The relationship between the *Letter* and Themistius' *Letter to Julian* is unclear but one can hardly consider the one without the other. I shall be arguing that Julian's *Letter* belongs to the early months of his service as Constantius' Caesar and replies to a lost letter from Themistius offering congratulations on his appointment by the emperor. It seems that Themistius misjudged matters by lauding Julian as a man of divine powers who was divinely appointed. Julian must have known that Themistius was speaking in a fairly conventional manner but he was not prepared to play the game. The result was a swingeing attack containing studiedly offensive remarks about Themistius' failings as a philosopher. I shall suggest, with due caution,

<sup>9</sup> Bouyges (1924).

<sup>10</sup> Shahid (1974). Shahid's translation was done into English and then put into Latin to accord with the requirements of the Teubner series.

<sup>11</sup> Ch. 2 Annex for the details.



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that we may see Themistius' *Letter to Julian* as a response to this and perhaps from around the same time. But it is quite possible that the *Letter to Julian* is indeed from the period of Julian's reign and that we must take at face value the statements and assumptions in the text that it is an address to the 'king'. As with the Themistius, I offer a study of the background of Julian's work. In addition, I shall discuss in some detail the strained relationship between the two men and explore Themistius' contrastingly positive evaluation of Valens in order to examine how he conceived of 'philosophy' as the way to achieve political stability and accountability in government and personal success for himself and those who supported him.

To set these original documents in context, I begin the volume with an example of a more standard Neoplatonic political letter in the direct tradition of Iamblichus. Its author, Sopater of Apamea, was the like-named son of Iamblichus' favourite pupil. Sopater *père* was a philosopher and courtier, who had attached himself to Licinius and after his death lived a dangerous life at the court of Constantine. Here he met his death in the 330s at the hands of a conspiracy in which religious politics probably played a part. His other son, Himerius, had a son called Iamblichus. Like his father, Sopater the Younger shows a familiar blend of elite political and intellectual activity. His *Letter to Himerius* on the occasion of Himerius' appointment as a governor is a fine example of the expectations and requirements of his class. It is also a good example of the Neoplatonic political thinking to which Themistius' *Letter to Julian* owes much of its background. It dates to around the same time and gives us a useful perspective on what Themistius was trying to do and what themes he included or omitted. I give here a first English translation.

The *Letter of Aristotle to Alexander* is the final offering in the volume. I provide a corrected Arabic text and first English translation. As I have said above, this document is not contemporary with the letters of Sopater, Julian, and Themistius, and for this reason I have placed the discussion of it in my Appendix. Although some commentators have fancied the *Letter* as genuinely Aristotelian, it is certainly not by Aristotle and it is probably to be placed in the High Roman period for several reasons. First, it engages heavily with Aristotle's *Politics*, which was not in favour with Iamblichus and Neoplatonist thinkers. This should put the text before, say, AD 300. Second, the simulated historical background to the discussion of the king's duties – Alexander's conquest of Persia – points to the age of the 'second sophistic' and the ubiquity of historical themes in the rhetoric of that period (broadly speaking, the first three centuries AD). Finally, the idealized, 'philosophical' Alexander of the *Letter* emerges strongly under Rome and the picture of a

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king who rules from one city and imposes a single unifying law again suits Rome and perhaps specifically the Rome of the Severans and the *Constitutio Antoniniana*. If all this is right, the *Letter of Aristotle to Alexander* is a precious specimen of rulership literature from the age of the Principate. The themes it includes and its setting of general advice in a fictional past offer useful comparisons for the main texts studied here. As the only other Greek text of political advice to have been translated into Arabic, it is highly relevant to the *Letter to Julian* in terms of the transmission of Greek thought into Arabic.

For both the *Letter to Julian* and the *Letter of Aristotle to Alexander* I shall say something about the history of their translation, and the more so with the Ps.-Aristotle because we know virtually nothing about its Greek original. Regrettably I can say only a very little about the contribution made by these works to Arabic political writing. Themistius was well known to Medieval Islam, owing to the several versions of his paraphrases of Aristotle and other philosophical works.<sup>12</sup> The translation of the *Letter to Julian* by the well-connected intellectual and courtier of the early tenth century, al-Dimashqī, marks an important development in political thought, as we see almost straightaway in its incorporation by a contemporary theorist, Qudāma ibn Ja‘far, in his ‘Book of Government’ (*Kitāb al-siyāsa*). Qudāma for the first time blended familiar Iranian themes of kingship with Greek ones to integrate God, caliph, and human society. He can also help us with one of the likely sources of Themistius’ ideas. For open on his desk alongside the Themistius was another recently translated work, the *Management of the Estate* by the Neopythagorean writer, Bryson. I shall be suggesting that the form and content of Themistius’ *Letter* – in particular, its opening ‘anthropology’ (the part quoted by Nemesius) and its sustained interest in commerce and services – show that Themistius himself had used the Bryson, which is a work little known to classicists probably because it survives as a complete text only in Arabic translation. The Neoplatonists’ rediscovery of Neopythagorean literature very likely put Bryson back on reading lists and encouraged Themistius to apply some of his ideas on the origin and management of the estate to the development of civilization, the origin of law, and society’s need of a true king to ‘manage’ and ‘govern’.

The structure of the book is as follows. Part I comprises three chapters of studies: Chapter 1 considers Sopater’s *Letter to Himerius* and uses it to set out some of the general characteristics of Neoplatonist political writing; Chapter 2 focusses on Themistius’ *Letter to Julian*; in an Annex to the

<sup>12</sup> See Daiber (1999), (2007) s.v.



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chapter I consider specific details of the transmission of the *Letter* into Arabic and the evidence of Nemesius for its authenticity; in Chapter 3 I turn to Julian's *Letter to Themistius* and examine its contents and Themistius' relations with Julian and the other emperors. Chapter 4 is a short conclusion offering further context for the kingship literature of the fourth century and touches on some of the important texts that lie outside my particular concerns (especially Eusebius, *In Praise of Constantine* and Synesius, *To the Emperor, On Kingship*). In the Appendix to the volume I present the *Letter of Aristotle to Alexander* and review questions of its authorship, date, and content. Part II gathers texts and translations.

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