

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03858-5 - Theodosius II: Rethinking the Roman Empire in late Antiquity

Edited by Christopher Kelly

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER I

RETHINKING THEODOSIUS

Christopher Kelly

Dramatic interventions in court politics require careful planning. In their celebratory narration they acquire a certain faultless precision. Mark the Deacon's biography of Porphyry, bishop of Gaza (in Palestine), applauded that holy man's achievement in presenting the first petition to be approved by Theodosius II – a feat all the more remarkable as the emperor was not yet one year old. The story (here much abbreviated) runs as follows.¹ Mark, Porphyry and a group of committed Christians journeyed to Constantinople in the hope of convincing the Emperor Arcadius (Theodosius' father) to order the demolition of the temple of Zeus Marnas in their home town. Through court and church connections, they obtained the support of Arcadius' wife, Eudoxia; in return, Porphyry promised the pregnant empress a son. But the emperor was not persuaded; fearing the disruption of tax revenue, he preferred a more gradualist approach (the shutting of the temple and the withdrawal of civic privileges from professed pagans), 'For a sudden change would be troublesome for the people.'² As Porphyry had predicted, Eudoxia gave birth to a prince: Theodosius. She then renewed her efforts on Porphyry's behalf. On the day of Theodosius' baptism, as the

¹ *V. Porph.* 33–50 (eds. Grégoire and Kugener 1930) with discussion in Jones 1964: 134–6; Holum 1982: 54–5; Elton 2009: 136; Van Nuffelen 2010: 237–8, 2012: 191–3. This retelling of Mark's tale conceals some of the inaccuracies which pockmark the text; not least, the entirely wayward chronology of Theodosius' birth (correctly, April 401), baptism (not otherwise attested, see Barnes 1989a) and elevation to *augustus* (10 January 402). Those claiming that the core of the text preserves Mark's eyewitness account argue that the narrative which survives is a later version 'expanded somewhat and dramatized, introducing chronological inaccuracies' (Holum 1982: 55 n. 31 following Grégoire and Kugener 1930: especially xxix–xlvi, ciii–cix). Barnes 2010: 260–83 – much less forgiving of these errors – argues strongly for a composition in the mid sixth century (at the earliest); for further debate and comment, see usefully Trombley 2001: 1246–82; Millar 2006: 26 n. 58.

² *V. Porph.* 41.12–13.

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imperial party emerged from church – the high-ranking dignitaries dressed in white ‘as if covered in snow’, all carrying candles ‘so it seemed that stars were shining on the earth’³ – Porphyry (as instructed by Eudoxia) rushed forward and presented the courtier carrying the baby boy with a petition for the demolition of the temples in Gaza. The courtier (fully briefed) ‘placed his hand under the infant’s head causing it to nod, and proclaimed before all: “His Majesty has commanded that the matters requested in the petition shall be carried out.”’⁴ Under renewed pressure from Eudoxia, Arcadius gave way: “This is a tough request, but much tougher to refuse, since it is our son’s first ruling.”⁵

For those critical of Theodosius II, the dazzling tableau of Porphyry’s staged intervention at the infant emperor’s baptism might serve as a poster for the next four decades of the reign: an image of a passive ruler swaddled in ceremony, surrounded by self-interested courtiers and manipulative bishops, and agreeing to a proposition adroitly promoted by a pious empress. The vignettes of Theodosius preserved (elaborated or invented) by Byzantine chroniclers have reinforced a view of an ineffectual ruler who, careless of matters of state, preferred his faith, his hobbies and his horses. Here is a studious emperor with an aptitude for mathematics and astronomy; an avid bibliophile with remarkably neat handwriting (who even in the theatre preferred to practise his calligraphy rather than watch the show); an accomplished modeller in clay; a keen sportsman, archer and experienced equestrian who so enjoyed a competitive chukka that he had a polo field laid out in the grounds of the Great Palace at Constantinople.⁶ Here too is an emperor dominated by the eunuchs of the palace household, all too easily distracted from serious matters, ‘just like children with toys’; a ruler so negligently uninterested in reading his official

³ *V. Porph.* 47.15, 17–18.

⁴ *V. Porph.* 48.11.

⁵ *V. Porph.* 49.9–10.

⁶ Zonaras 13.23 (III 244B); Cedrenus 586 (*PG* 121: 637B); Nicephorus Callistus, *HE* 14.3 (*PG* 146: 1064A–C); for Theodosius the Calligrapher, see George the Monk II 604.8–9 (eds. C. de Boor and P. Wirth, Stuttgart, 2 vols., 1978); Glykas, *Annales* 4.260–1 (*PG* 158: 488c and 489c) with Lippold 1973: 967; Alan Cameron 2002: 126, 2011: 434; on the polo field (the Tzykanisterion), see Janin 1964: 118–19; Horn 2006: 64; Canepa 2009: 180.

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papers before signing them that he once mistakenly authorised his wife to be sold into slavery.⁷ Here is a hen-pecked monarch pushed around by his eldest sister, the Empress Pulcheria, who as a teenager publicly proclaimed her perpetual virginity. Even contemporaries were struck by the piety of the imperial court, which was said to resemble a monastery, Theodosius and his three sisters rising early each morning to pray together and fasting twice a week.⁸ Monks who visited Constantinople in the late 440s reported that the emperor wore a hair shirt concealed under his purple robes – and had done so for thirty years.⁹

Modern scholarship (until quite recently) has been dismissive of Theodosius: ‘a man of intelligence and sincerity but little backbone’.¹⁰ The dislike is deep-rooted in Enlightenment disapproval. Tillemont, although appreciating Theodosius’ artistic enthusiasms, sets the disparaging tone.

Mais il manquoit de cette grandeur d’ame & de ce courage nécessaire à un Souverain pour gouverner par lui-même, & du discernement ou de la force qu’il faut qu’ait un Prince pour choiser ceux qui sont dignes de lui donner conseil, & sur qui il peut décharger d’une partie de ses soins.¹¹

Edward Gibbon followed closely (though with markedly less sympathy for the emperor’s liberal pursuits).

The unfortunate prince, who is born in the purple, must remain a stranger to the voice of truth; and the son of Arcadius was condemned to pass his perpetual infancy, encompassed only by a servile train of women and eunuchs. The ample leisure, which he acquired by neglecting the essential duties of his high office, was filled by idle amusements, and unprofitable studies ... Theodosius was never excited to support the weight and glory of an illustrious name.¹²

The claim of a significant weakening in imperial authority is sharpened by comparison between Theodosius II and his imperial grandfather. Theodosius I (379–395) was an experienced officer

⁷ John of Antioch 288 (= Priscus [3]) quoting 10–11; Theophanes 594I (101.13–17); Theodore Lector 352; John of Nikiu 87.29–33 (trans. Charles 1916: 107).

⁸ Soc. 7.22.3–4.

⁹ John Rufus, *Pler.* 99 (*PO* 8.1: 173.12–13) with Brown 2002: 143 n. 89.

¹⁰ Holum 1982: 130.

¹¹ Tillemont 1738: 22–6 quoting 26.

¹² Gibbon 1781b: 317; brief surveys of modern scholarly censure in Wessel 2001: 285–6; Zecchini 2002: 529–30; Ilski 2005: 3–7; Meier 2007: 135–6.

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who had fought in Britain and on the Danube frontier before he became emperor in his early thirties.¹³ His military successes included taking armies across the Balkans in 388 and 394 to suppress two rebellions in the West. Theodosius II – ‘born in the purple’ in April 401 and proclaimed co-emperor by his father, Arcadius, when he was nine months old – is the longest reigning emperor in the history of the Roman empire. Arcadius died when his son was seven. For the next forty-two years (408–450), Theodosius was largely confined to Constantinople: he never saw most of the empire over which he ruled; he never fought on campaign; he never commanded troops in the field.¹⁴ When Theodosius I died in 395, he could fairly claim to have secured the political integrity of the Roman empire which then passed to his sons: Honorius in the West and Arcadius in the East. Over five decades later, when Theodosius II (still without a male heir) was unexpectedly killed in a hunting accident, Roman rule in the West had been significantly compromised by the emergence of independent states in Gothic France and Vandal North Africa. On these quickly sketched criteria, the ‘effete, bookish, and ... palace-bound’¹⁵ grandson seems to fall far short of the grandfather. To quote A. H. M. Jones (rarely so tartly epigrammatic): ‘none of the male descendants of Theodosius the Great inherited his ability or force of character: they reigned rather than ruled the empire.’¹⁶

This volume does not attempt a full-scale revision of Theodosius’ reputation. It neither comes to praise him nor to bury him beneath the weight of ancient or modern disapprobation. Rather, it aims to build on recent important re-evaluations of key aspects of the eastern Roman empire in the first half of the fifth century. The ten chapters which follow this introduction (Part I) concentrate on three principal areas of interest: the wider circumstances that informed the workings of the court (Part II), literary and cultural

¹³ *PLRE* 1 904 (Theodosius 4); Leppin 2003a: 29–33.

¹⁴ For Theodosius’ journeys (for the most part to seaports on the Bosphorus or Sea of Marmara), see Dagron 1974b: 85–6, 97–8; Lee 2000: 35; Millar 2006: 9–10; Elton 2009: 135.

¹⁵ Holum 1982: 101. ¹⁶ Jones 1964: 1 173.

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activity under Theodosius (Part III), and the presentation of imperial piety and power (Part IV). The four chapters in Part II (*Arcana imperii*) – Jill Harries on imperial decision-making, Doug Lee on military commanders, Thomas Graumann on the procedural framework for the first Council of Ephesus and Peter Van Nuffelen on the contemporary historian Olympiodorus – put pressure on the problems of constructing a satisfactory account of the complex political dynamics of the reign, in particular the role and influence of competing groups at court in Constantinople. Part III (Past and present) – Giusto Traina on cartography, Richard Flower on heresiology and Mary Whitby on Greek literature – focuses on the institutional and textual organisation of knowledge. It exposes some of the contemporary concerns of Theodosian authors, most pressingly an insistence that the empire (whatever the political fragmentation in the West) could still plausibly be presented as a unity. Lastly, Part IV (*Pius princeps*) – Christopher Kelly on imperial ceremonial, Luke Gardiner on the literary tactics of the contemporary church historian Socrates and Edward Watts on the enduring reputation of fifth-century emperors in Christian communities in Egypt – explores the difficulties of presenting, praising and remembering Theodosius II as a pious Christian ruler.

Arcana imperii

In late summer 431, in the immediate and muddy aftermath of the church council held at Ephesus, Theodosius invited two opposing delegations of eight bishops to a series of five formal hearings at the Rufiniana palace in Chalcedon (just across the Bosphorus from Constantinople). In their written briefs and in person before the emperor and his entourage – most importantly, the *consistorium*, the emperor's inner circle of advisers drawn from high-ranking officials and military commanders¹⁷ – both sides had

¹⁷ The formal criteria for membership of the *consistorium* are not known; nor how many members would be expected to be present; nor how easily those unused to court protocol could distinguish *consistoriani* from the imperial household. It was not simply a matter of spotting the eunuchs. For discussion, see Jones 1964: 1333–41; Harries 1999: 38–42; Millar 2006: 192–207, especially 193, 204, 221; Elton 2009: 134.

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an unparalleled opportunity: one to press the case against Cyril of Alexandria (accused of blatantly perverting the Council's deliberations) and to declare continuing solidarity with Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, and his disputed Christology; their opponents to demonstrate that Cyril's theology was orthodox, to argue that there had been no breach of protocol in his running of the Council and to persuade the emperor to remove Nestorius from his see. The efforts of Nestorius' supporters can be followed in a letter written to their episcopal colleagues (still in Ephesus) and in the lengthy description by Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus (in Syria), a pivotal player in mustering and maintaining the opposition to Cyril.¹⁸

Initial impressions were favourable. 'To date we have prevailed in these contests against those holding opposing views; and so successfully that all our arguments have proved acceptable to our Christ-loving emperor.' One memorable moment (to the satisfaction of emperor-watchers) came when Theodosius II demonstrated his own hostility to a theological proposition advanced by one of Cyril's advocates: 'our pious emperor was so vexed that he shook his purple robe and stepped back because of the magnitude of the blasphemy. And we saw that the whole *consistorium* made it abundantly clear to us that we were fighting on behalf of piety.'¹⁹ But that initial advantage slipped away. Theodoret's account is much less optimistic: the emperor's advisers seemingly shifted ground, sneering whenever Nestorius' name was mentioned. Theodoret suspected bribery.²⁰ The outbreak of violence at a public gathering of Nestorius' supporters led to a direct exchange of views between Theodoret and the emperor.

¹⁸ *Coll. Ath.* 66 (*ACO* 11.7, p. 77) for the communication to Ephesus; *Coll. Ath.* 69 (*ACO* 11.7, pp. 79–80) for Theodoret's account (a letter to Alexander, bishop of Hierapolis); for admirably lucid – and attractively concise – accounts of the issues surrounding the Council, see Millar 2006: 158–60; Schor 2011: 85–90; for the imperial audiences at the Rufiniana, Holum 1982: 171–2; McGuckin 1994: 103–7; Wessel 2001: 295–8, 2004: 255–62; Caner 2002: 220–2; Millar 2006: 205–7, 232; Schor 2011: 88–90. Schor 2011 amply answers Millar's call (2006: 146) for a sophisticated account of Theodoret's role in the development and maintenance of a set of complex networks of support.

¹⁹ *Coll. Ath.* 66 (*ACO* 11.7, p. 77.18–20 and 24–7).

²⁰ *Coll. Ath.* 69 (*ACO* 11.7, p. 80.8 and 13); on the allegations of a bankrupting campaign of gift-giving by Cyril, see Jones 1964: 1346; Brown 1992: 15–17; C. M. Kelly 2004: 171–2; Millar 2006: 219–21.

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The most pious emperor ... said, 'I know that you are holding your own meetings.' Then I said to him, 'Since you have given me the right to speak freely, listen with understanding. Is it fair that heretics and those who have been excommunicated can conduct church services, but that we who fight for the faith ... cannot enter a church?' He said, 'And what am I to do?' So I responded to him. 'What [your officials] did in Ephesus ... it was right that you gave orders to the bishop there not to allow either them or us to gather until we reached an accord.' ... And to these things he said, 'I cannot give orders to a bishop.' So I replied, 'Do not then give an order to us.'²¹

This frank discussion resulted in imperial permission for public prayer (but with no reading of Scripture or celebration of the Eucharist). For Theodoret, that was a negligible achievement for five formal hearings which had ended in failure. The emperor invited Cyril's backers to consecrate a new bishop of Constantinople. Theodoret and his seven colleagues were sent home.

The delight is in the detail. There are very few records of apparently verbatim exchanges with Roman emperors.²² Fewer still (outside the imaginary dialogues of Christian martyrs) are the accounts of those who proved unpersuasive. The meetings at the Rufiniana (only briefly outlined here) were part of a protracted series of negotiations in the latter months of 431 whose complex course can be traced in the papers of the Council of Ephesus. It is but one example of the mass of data provided by the *acta* of three church councils (Ephesus in 431 and 449, and Chalcedon in 451). In his *A Greek Roman empire: power and belief under Theodosius II (408–450)* (2006), Fergus Millar has deftly illustrated how much can be done with this 'dense array' of often highly partisan evidence to expose 'the workings of persuasion, command, reaction, and defiance'²³ across a remarkably broad range of intermediaries and interest-groups (sometimes competing, sometimes convergent, sometimes hostile), and the ebb and flow of influence in the more formally constituted advisory bodies in Constantinople (the *consistorium* and the Senate) whose support could be crucial in convincing an emperor to act.²⁴ The bulky conciliar dossiers, together with letter-collections, doctrinal tracts and the laws collected in both the *Theodosian Code* and the post-*Code Novellae* – that is,

²¹ *Coll. Ath.* 69 (ACO 11.7, p. 80.23–34), translation following Schor 2011: 90.

²² Millar 2006: 249. ²³ Millar 2006: 217, 131. ²⁴ Millar 2006: 130–234.

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“new” laws – of Theodosius II (which concentrate on 438–441), offer an extraordinary resource for understanding the inner workings of imperial government. This is nothing short of an information revolution. ‘It is this combination of the *Acta* with the rich material in legal sources which makes this reign, at the level of public persuasive discourse, by far the most fully attested period of antiquity.’²⁵

In the opening chapter in Part II of this volume – ‘Men without women: Theodosius’ consistory and the business of government’ – Jill Harries looks closely at the workings of the *consistorium* through the prism of the *Theodosian Code*. The *Code* (commissioned in 429 and delivered in its first and only edition in 437) collected 2,700 rulings issued by emperors from Constantine to Theodosius II; heavily edited, these imperial pronouncements were arranged in chronological order by topic across sixteen books.²⁶ For Harries, this act of codification – previously unmatched in scope and scale – is emblematic of the routine of law-making in the *consistorium*. ‘If the contents of the *Theodosian Code* are representative, then members of the consistory, or at least the minute-takers, had a culture of their own, which distanced them from the vicissitudes of day-to-day controversies’ (p. 74). The *Code* reveals a ‘focus on generality’ (p. 78), ‘an ambition for comprehensiveness’ (p. 78), a ‘drive for simplicity and clarity’ (p. 84). For Harries, the push towards codification is itself an indication of the lack of engagement by Theodosius and ‘the absence of a personal imperial agenda’ (p. 83). ‘Instead, we have a consistory of consolidators, well versed in the legal tradition, which they sought to systematise and perpetuate through both individual constitutions and the promulgation of the *Theodosian Code* itself’ (p. 86). The *consistorium* (Harries suggests), with its emphasis on ‘consultation and consensus’ (p. 79) was one of the chief guarantors of the stability of Theodosian government.²⁷ Across four decades,

²⁵ Millar 2006: 152; delight in ‘the uniquely detailed documentary evidence’ (at 130) is Millar’s leitmotiv: xiii–xiv, xv, 131, 149, 157, 161, 168, 197, 225, 226, 228; and note too (at 235–47) the invaluable ‘The *Acta* of the fifth-century councils: a brief guide for historians’.

²⁶ Sirks 1993: 64–6, 2007: 83–5, 138–41; see too Matthews 2000: 75 n. 49.

²⁷ Note also Millar 2006: 203 ‘the broad principle that decisions at the Imperial court were the work of a collectivity is amply borne out in the evidence’; see also 201, 215, 227.