

***Religion and Rhetoric at the Courts of the
Theodosians, c. 379-404 A.D.***

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

DECLARATION

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University of similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Classics Degree Committee.

ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the process of Christianisation at the courts of the Theodosian emperors in a twenty-five year period at the end of the fourth century and the start of the fifth. It does so through the orations of two pagan orators who carved out successful careers for themselves during this period: in the Greek East, at the court of Theodosius I in Constantinople, the Aristotelian philosopher and rhetor, Themistius; in the Latin West, the poet Claudian, who delivered a number of orations in the form of epic poems at the court of Honorius, and the boy-emperor's *de facto* regent Stilicho.

The central argument of the thesis is that the religious significance of the 'classicising' material in both Themistius' and Claudian's rhetoric have been underrated in recent scholarship. Both orators refer extensively to pagan gods, pagan mythology, pagan philosophers, and the literature of the pagan past. Most scholars however have preferred to play down, or even deny, that this has anything to do with pagan religious identity, observing that these orators delivered their speeches to largely Christian audiences, which had come to regard such material as aesthetic and antiquarian. I argue that Themistius and Claudian were able to use these references ambiguously and ambivalently; that is, in such a way that they could be regarded as irrelevant to religion by Christian members of the audience, while inviting the 'activation' of religious identity by pagan members. In doing so, Themistius and Claudian were able both to fulfil the epideictic purpose of their orations to unite the audience in praise of the emperor, and to represent pagan identity in the political sphere.

I also make the case that the Theodosian period has been overemphasised in the scholarship as a watershed in the process of Christianisation. While many have seen in these decades a turn towards a more aggressive and intolerant 'imperial' Christianity, I argue that pagan religious identity still had a significant role to play in both politics and culture, and indeed was accepted by the Christian regimes of Theodosius and Honorius. By comparing Themistius and Claudian, and arguing they played similar roles, and achieved similar effects, I suggest that the pace of religious change in these years was less dramatic than has been supposed.

The thesis is divided into three parts. Part I lays out the historiographical and methodological issues that underpin my argument. The first chapter offers a discussion of religious identity in late

Antiquity, followed by an exploration of some key themes in the historiography of Christianisation in the fourth century. The second chapter presents my reading strategy for the orations of Themistius and Claudian, addressing the nature and role of epideictic rhetoric, and the relationship between literature, mythology, and religion in late-antique texts. Parts II and III are dedicated respectively to Themistius and Claudian. Each part has an introduction briefly describing the historical circumstances each orator faced, in particular the position and policies of the Theodosian emperors. I then provide a contextualising chapter, in which I address the main historical questions associated with each author and their work; this is followed by my analysis of the religious material in each set of orations (for Claudian, his *carmina maiora*; for Themistius, his orations delivered during Theodosius' reign, i.e. *Or.* 14-19, 31 and 34). In the conclusion, I offer some discussions and observations about the consequences my reading of Themistius and Claudian has for our understanding of the process of Christianisation in the fourth century.

CONTENTS

DECLARATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
ABBREVIATIONS	viii
Preface	ix
Part I: Religion and Rhetoric	1
Religion and Religious Identity in the Fourth Century	2
Epidictic, Literature, and Religion	20
Part II: Themistius, Constantinople, and the Greek East	46
Introduction: The Emperor and the Philosopher	47
Themistius in Context	51
Religion in Themistius' Orations	66
Part III: Claudian and the Latin West	103
Introduction: A Poet in Theodosius' World	104
Claudian in Context	108
Religion in Claudian's <i>Carmina maiora</i>	119
Conclusions: Religion and the Roman World in the Fourth Century	152
Bibliography	163

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations follow the *OCD* (4th edition) for classical texts and those given in vol. 3 of Jones (1964) for late-antique texts, with the following additions and variations.

CLAUDIAN'S WORKS

<i>P&O</i>	<i>Panegyricus Dictus Probino et Olybrio Consulibus</i>
<i>Ruf.</i>	<i>In Rufinum</i>
<i>Gild.</i>	<i>De Bello Gildonico</i>
<i>Eut.</i>	<i>In Eutropium</i>
<i>Fesc.</i>	<i>Fescinna de Nuptiis Honorii Augusti</i>
<i>Epith.</i>	<i>Epithalamium de Nuptiis Honorii Augusti</i>
<i>III Cons.</i>	<i>Panegyricus de Tértio Consulatu Honorii Augusti</i>
<i>IV Cons.</i>	<i>Panegyricus de Quarto Consulatu Honorii Augusti</i>
<i>Theod.</i>	<i>Panegyricus Consulatu Flavii Manlii Theodori</i>
<i>Stil.</i>	<i>De Consulate Stilichonis</i>
<i>VI Cons.</i>	<i>Panegyricus de Sexto Consulatu Honorii Augusti</i>
<i>Get.</i>	<i>De Bello Getico</i>
<i>Carm. min.</i>	<i>Carmina Minora</i>

OTHER WORKS

Bas., <i>Adul.</i>	Basil of Caesarea, <i>Oratio ad Adulescentes</i>
Jul., <i>C. Gal.</i>	Julian, <i>Contra Galileos</i>
Jul., <i>Ep. ad Them.</i>	Julian, <i>Epistula ad Themistium</i>
Prud., <i>Apoth.</i>	Prudentius, <i>Apotheosis</i>
Prud., <i>C. Symm.</i>	Prudentius, <i>Contra Orationem Symmachi</i>
Prud., <i>Psych.</i>	Prudentius, <i>Psychomachia</i>

Preface

One of the chief historiographical dangers of studying Christianisation is that it becomes entirely a Christian story. It is a narrative with clear protagonists – Christian emperors, theologians and clerics – and an even clearer teleology: the establishment of medieval Christendom. It invites us to see Christianity as the active agent working on the passive ‘raw material’ of paganism. It becomes difficult to treat pagans, with the exception of a few famous names, on their own terms. The nameless majority become those merely awaiting conversion. In recent years, scholars have begun to publish more histories of this period with a focus on pagans – most notably Ed Watts’, *The Final Pagan Generation* and Alan Cameron’s, *The Last Pagans of Rome*.¹ But, as the very titles of these books make clear, they too are founded on much the same teleology – a pagan ‘decline and fall’, which is the inevitable corollary of the ‘triumph of Christianity’. The fourth century was undoubtedly a period of transformation, and therefore of beginnings and endings. But it also means that we risk losing the perspective of fourth-century pagans who, while they were well aware that they lived in a changing world in which their religious way of life was increasingly under threat, would not have considered themselves the ‘last’ anything.

For this reason, I have chosen to focus on a relatively brief period of time, a quarter of a century, 379 to 404. These were the years of Theodosius I and his sons Honorius and Arcadius, with whom scholars often associate some of the most rapid and, indeed, brutal years of Christianisation. I, however, will emphasise continuity rather than change, taking from these years a snapshot of fourth-century history. In order to do so, I will be examining the careers and public works of two pagan orators, Themistius and Claudian. The thesis will be constructed as a complementary pair of ‘parallel lives’ for two figures, who, despite having much in common, have never been studied comparatively. Indeed, as I will argue, their historiographical separation is a symptom of an overly teleological reading of the Theodosian period. Themistius and Claudian, this thesis contends, belong to very much the same world.

The rhetorical works of these two orators are an extremely useful source for the historian. They place us right at the heart of the Theodosian court, the centre of the political Christianisation of the Roman Empire, where imperial ideology was created and contested. The rhetoric of these authors

¹ Watts (2015) and Cameron (2011). One might also cite works such as Gassman (2020a) and studies of individual pagans such as Kahlos (2002), Sandwell (2007a) and Cribiore (2013). See also works from continental scholarship (often taking, as I discuss below, a rather different approach to their anglophone equivalents), such as Chuvin (1990) and Ratti (2010).

gives us a unique insight into how the ‘Theodosians’, the imperial family and their political circles, saw themselves. It shows us how political values and ideas were discussed, what it was and was not acceptable or useful to say in the most public of fora. I will exploit the great value of imperial panegyric, that, in complex ways, gives the historian access to the ideas, beliefs and assumptions both of the individual rhetor, and of the audience to which they spoke. Through their orations, I will examine how Themistius and Claudian were able to reconcile their own individual religious identities with their roles in service of Christian emperors; how they were affected by, and sought to affect, the Christianisation of politics and culture.

In studying Themistius and Claudian together, I am taking a “pan-imperial” approach to late fourth-century history, encompassing both the Greek East and Latin West. While it is of course important to take into account the differences between the two halves – for example, the existence in the western Empire of an ancient, established, and extremely wealthy senatorial elite that had no equivalent in the East – I do not believe that this is an insuperable barrier. My thesis deals with the very apex of imperial politics, a court society that bridged this gap perhaps more than any other group. In moving between eastern and western centres, the emperor was faced by different challenges and often different personnel, but did not fundamentally need to alter his manner of ruling.

This thesis will proceed in three parts. Part I will be devoted to methodology and historiography. In the first chapter, I will address the nature of religious identity in late Antiquity and the ‘pagan-Christian divide’, and give an overview of the state of scholarship on the religious history of the fourth century and, in particular, Christianisation, and the way my work on Themistius and Claudian will relate to it. The second chapter will lay out my reading strategy for the rhetorical works of my two chosen authors, covering the nature of epideictic oratory, and the relationship between literature and religion in Graeco-Roman paganism. Parts II and III will be devoted to Themistius and Claudian respectively. Each will contain a contextualising chapter, situating the orator in their individual political, literary and religious context. I will then proceed to a detailed study of the place of religion in their orations of this period, drawing out specific elements in which I will argue a pagan view is being represented, and demonstrating how the whole is constructed as an expression of pagan identity. Finally, I will offer conclusions about how this study might cause us to reconsider the religious and political history of the later Roman Empire.

Part I: Religion and Rhetoric

Religion and Religious Identity in the Fourth Century

In this, the first of my two introductory chapters, I will address the main methodological and historiographical concerns central to this thesis. Firstly, I will discuss the issue of religious identity, laying out my approach in relation to recent scholarship on this important question, and providing a rationale for my terminology. In the second section, I will offer an (inevitably) select account of recent historiography on the fourth-century Christianisation. Finally, I will explain why I have chosen the parallel lives of Themistius and Claudian as the focus of this study.

Pagans and Christians

The scholarship of the mid-twentieth century generally regarded pagans and Christians as two implacably opposed groups. Over recent decades, this narrative has been challenged: not only was there little in the way of direct religious conflict, but attempting to divide late Roman society into ‘pagans’ and ‘Christians’ is itself a deeply problematic exercise. Some have gone further: Maijastina Kahlos has argued that the ‘pagan–Christian’ binary is entirely the creation of Christian apologetics and polemic.¹ Neil McLynn neatly summarises the historian’s dilemma: ‘This is a topic where modern critical techniques have dissolved old paradigms without yet establishing a usable replacement.’² Both the word itself, and the concept which it represents, are undoubtedly troublesome. First the terminology: pagan, from the Latin *paganus*, was a term applied by western Christians to those who were neither Christians nor Jews. Quite how this term came to be commonplace (and indeed it is much more frequent in the fifth century, scarcely appearing earlier than the second half of the fourth) is unclear – the etymology suggests the rural against the urban, and the civilian against the military, but it seems unlikely that the Christians who used the word colloquially were conscious of such genealogies.³ Even if we accept Alan Cameron’s persuasively argued case that the word was not inherently pejorative, it nonetheless cannot escape the implication of ‘insiders vs outsiders’, casting those outside the Church as ‘the other’.⁴ In all our surviving texts, only one pagan can be observed applying the word to himself, and most readers have considered this a deliberate irony.⁵

¹ Kahlos (2007), 15 and *passim*.

² McLynn (2009), 572.

³ For recent summaries of the etymological debate, and the process by which the word entered the vernacular, see Kahlos (2007), 22–26; Cameron (2011), 14–25; Gassman (2020a), 79–81.

⁴ Cameron (2011), 18–21; see the critique of Lizzi Testa (2013), 41.

⁵ Longianus in Aug., *Ep.* 234.1; McLynn (2009), 573, though Lizzi Testa (2013), 40–41 argues it may have been sincere.

But if ‘pagan’ is unsatisfactory, no alternative has been found to replace it. The apparently neutral and comfortingly polysyllabic ‘polytheist’ was fashionable for a period, but the growing literature on monotheistic forms of religion outside of Christianity and Judaism has made it clear that the term risks inaccuracy, and is not quite as free of pejorative connotations as it might first appear.⁶ *Hellene* at least has the advantage of being a term that some fourth-century authors actually applied to themselves, but, as Michelle Salzman argues, it, ‘tends to give everything an Attic patina and obscures the fact that the religion under consideration entailed also Roman, Egyptian, and native cults that were venerated by Roman citizens.’⁷ Moreover, this term risks entanglement with issues of ethnicity and culture from which it was never quite extricated in Antiquity.⁸ Other terms and phrases have been proposed, but none is satisfactory. Many scholars have, quite reasonably, taken the view that it is safest to continue to use ‘pagan’ as our quotidian terminology, if for no other reason than that the dangers are well-established. As McLynn rightly remarks, it ‘generates its own scare-quotes’.⁹

More significant than debates over *what* label we use, is the question of *whether* we should label at all. A great deal of scholarly discussion has focused not just on whether ‘paganism’ is an appropriate term, but whether the religious phenomenon that we call paganism can really be held to have existed, or whether we should rather see it as the rhetorical creation of Christian polemicists. Kahlos argues that:

Paganism was never a religion and there were no pagans before Christianity. Christians invented paganism, not only as a term but also as a system. The emergence and phases of the concept pagan illustrates the evolving Christian self-consciousness, Christian eagerness to become separate and different from other, non-Christian people.¹⁰

⁶ Used, for example, in Fowden (1998). Cameron (2011), 25-32 enumerates the problems. ‘Pagan monotheism’ has been a growing subject of scholarly attention since around the turn of the century; see in particular the edited volumes Athanassiadi & Frede (1999), Mitchell & Van Nuffelen (2010a) and (2010b). As is clear from these studies, there was a substantial number of people in late Antiquity who were neither Christians or Jews, but who included a single Supreme Deity in their religious systems. It is too simple, however, to claim that ‘monotheism’ came to to dominate society in this period. There were many, amongst them one of the subjects of this study, Themistius, who wrote both of ‘God’ and ‘the gods’, who believed in a highest, ‘monotheistic’ God, and in the more traditional gods of Graeco-Roman religion; see Sandwell (2010) on the flexible use of monotheistic and polytheistic language. Some have sought to categorise such people as ‘henotheists’, for example, Versnel (2011), 239-307, or ‘megatheists’; Chaniotis (2010). I am sceptical of the value of such taxonomies, and we may also doubt whether such pagans can be neatly separated from allegedly monotheistic Christians, who averred a trinitarian theology, and the existence and power of angels and saints. It is preferable to think of monotheism and polytheism as ‘modes’ of language, belief and worship, rather than rigid and mutually exclusive categories. I shall therefore not attempt to define whether the various pagans under discussion were monotheists or polytheists.

⁷ Salzman (2008), 188.

⁸ Further discussion of Hellenism below, p. 6.

⁹ McLynn (2009), 573. See also recently the discussion of Gassman (2020a), 4-5.

¹⁰ Kahlos (2007), 18.

Central to the idea of paganism as a polemical construct is the observation of the vast diversity of non-Christian and non-Jewish cult across the Mediterranean world.¹¹ The differences between the religion of the traditionalist senator in Rome; the worshipper of Serapis in Alexandria; the Athenian Neoplatonist philosopher; and the Gallic soldier devoted to Mithras were, undoubtedly, considerable. On the other hand, we encounter perhaps less dramatic, but nonetheless comparable, variations within Christianity itself.¹² Leaving aside issues of sectarianism and heresy, we might ask what the Christianity of philosophically educated bishops such as Augustine or Gregory of Nazianzus had in common with the Christianity of the Egyptian monk or the British peasant? One thing they shared was the self-applied label of “Christian”, a claim to commonality which the “pagans” lacked. But we should not make the mistake of seeing Christianity as a self-evident, strictly bounded category in contrast to nebulous and mutually exclusive forms of non-Christian religions. On the contrary, pagan religion has frequently been noted for its syncretism, both philosophical and practical. Graeco-Roman culture had provided an interface that made myriad local cults mutually intelligible and acceptable.¹³ For a Roman senator to worship in the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus did not at all imply that he could not also participate in mystery cults originating in the eastern Mediterranean. The notion of a split in the non-Christian Roman elite between devotees of ‘traditional’ cult and those of ‘oriental’ religions has been thoroughly discredited.¹⁴ One need only observe the eclectic affiliations of the aristocratic Roman couple, Praetextatus and Paulina.¹⁵

I do not mean to claim here that there were not significant social, cultural, theological and practical differences between adherents of ‘pagan’ religion. As Mattias Gassman has recently argued, the unanimity of even the elite pagans of Rome ought not be overestimated, but this need not mean that a genuine pagan religion did not exist.¹⁶ There were differences of opinion and emphasis on matters of traditional religion, and especially on how its adherents should behave in an increasingly Christian world. But such differences can be found in any religious tradition, even among those who

¹¹ Kahlos (2007), 15-16; McLynn (2009), 573; Cameron (2011), 27; see also the argument of Frankfurter (1998), 31-36, emphasising the essentially local nature of religion.

¹² Acknowledged in Kahlos (2007), 16; Kaldellis (2007), 120.

¹³ See the argument of Bowersock (1990), 13. On the integration of religious traditions across the Roman Empire, see Rives (2007), 132-157.

¹⁴ An influential view in the first half of the twentieth century, see the important early contribution of Robinson (1915); Bloch (1945), 203. Scepticism towards the utility of these demarcations was expressed in Matthews (1973); Markus (1974b), 15-17. See now Hedrick (2000), 65-66; Gassman (2020a), 3-4.

¹⁵ *CIL* 6.1778, 1779, 1780; with Kahlos (2002), 71-84; Gassman (2020a), 151-160, emphasising the importance of Paulina in the presentation of her husband’s religiosity on this monument.

¹⁶ Gassman (2020a), 142-144, 165-167 on the various stances and opinions taken by senatorial pagans. Gassman also argues (in particular in his third chapter, at 76-106), that the religious eclecticism of the Roman aristocracy was a genuine phenomenon, not simply an invention of Christian polemicists; this represented a genuine pagan religiosity devoted to the worship of manifold gods.

are otherwise closely aligned (this is certainly the case in late-antique Christianity). It did not prevent aristocratic Roman pagans from regarding one another as co-religionists.¹⁷ On a wider scale, we need not see the various ‘strands’ of pagans as either mutually exclusive or unintelligible.

My argument, therefore, is that we can reasonably understand ‘pagans’ as group; not that they acted as such at all times and in all circumstances, but that they nonetheless held some form of collective identity. In the course of this thesis, I will be looking at a very narrow band of pagan experience, that of the imperial courts and senatorial elites in Constantinople, Milan and Rome. The religiosity of an urbane student of philosophy such as Themistius may have had very little in common with that of an illiterate peasant, but for my purposes that comparison is not a particularly relevant one. It is much easier to argue for a common religious identity among the elite pagans of these great imperial centres than it is for paganism defined in its broadest sense. It may be better to speak of ‘paganisms’ than of ‘paganism’, but in the case of these small elite groups, one can reasonably claim to be speaking of a single religious strand.¹⁸ It might be argued that the ‘paganism’ of the eastern, Greek-speaking elite at Constantinople was different from the ‘paganism’ of the traditionalist ‘Romans of Rome’ in the West. But even if true, this is largely moot – each group knew that they were the ‘non-Christians’, the ‘pagans’ in their context.

And this brings us to a crucial point, one that is often given insufficient weight in discussions about the nature of late Roman paganism. It is no doubt true to say that there was no ‘pagan religion’ before Christianity became dominant in the Constantinian age. In the oft-quoted quip of Henry Chadwick, ‘The pagans did not know that they were pagans until the Christians told them they were.’¹⁹ But, once they were told, as it were, they did know. That ‘paganism’ came into being as a category in response to Christianity is no doubt true, but this does not mean that it was merely a Christian construct. It began to be reflected in social reality, especially in the latter half of the fourth century. Charles Hedrick argues forcefully:

This entire discussion seems to be founded on a misapprehension of the nature of social identity. It begins from the presumption that any group can be something outside of its relation to other groups; that it is meaningful or useful or possible to treat a religious

¹⁷ As argued in Markus (1974b), 16-17.

¹⁸ ‘Paganisms’ in Jürgasch (2016), 131.

¹⁹ Chadwick (1985), 9. See for example Fowden (1998), 539 on the ambiguities of religious definition under Constantius II. Though I also note the arguments of Digeser (2006), arguing for the emergence of a ‘Hellenic’ identity as early as the third century, and of Gassman (2020a), 6-8, who makes the case that the boundaries of traditional religion began to be determined by its own adherents – the ‘persecuting’ emperors of the third and early fourth centuries. In these we may see the outlines of the more defined religious identities that emerged in the decades after Constantine.

category, be it “paganism” or “polytheism,” as something innate, as the product of an autonomous self-consciousness. Social identity, like individual identity, must be treated in systematic rather than essential terms. It is the product of a set of relationships, not of an intrinsic self awareness.²⁰

We can observe in the fourth century the emergence of a self-conscious religious identity amongst these ‘not-Christians’. Especially in the East, Julian’s reforms seemed to have acted as a catalyst for this.²¹ Paganism, at least among the elites, coalesced around “Hellenic” identity, to which Julian attributed a strong religious component. The debate about the nuances of Hellenism, which in the fourth century also encompassed cultural, linguistic or ethnic identities, is too extensive to be detailed here.²² What we can say is that in some contexts members of particular elite milieu would use *Hellene* and *Hellenism* to mean roughly what we would mean by ‘pagan’ and ‘paganism’.²³ By attempting to define what it meant to be a ‘Hellene’, and being very clear that it meant not being a Christian, Julian helped to polarise the two religious groups in a more dramatic fashion.²⁴ As has often been observed, it is perhaps no coincidence that the person who did perhaps most to crystallise pagan identity had been brought up as a Christian.²⁵ In regard to chronology, one important question is whether Julian was the initiator of this greater polarisation, or rather embodied and reinforced a pre-existing trend.²⁶

In the post-Julianic era, the evidence for better defined religious identities becomes stronger, and by the Theodosian period they appear increasingly well delineated. It is in this period that the term *paganus* first appeared in imperial legislation; and in this period pagan writers more clearly appear to divide the world into two religious groups.²⁷ Most of the scholarship on this issue has focused on the second half of the fourth century. Amongst leading recent contributions, Bella Sandwell and Éric

²⁰ Hedrick (2000), 52. See also Stenger (2018), 394. It is useful to note that problems of the definition of religious identity are by no means unique to late Antiquity – compare, for example, discussions of who can be appropriately termed a ‘Catholic’ in the ‘Protestant’ England of Elizabeth I, another religious definition created and contested in a highly polemical environment; Shagan (2005), 14-16; Collinson (2009), 85-86.

²¹ Kahlos (2007), 18-19; Stenger (2018), 401.

²² See, from an extensive bibliography, Bowersock (1990); Limberis (2000); Kahlos (2007), 20-22; Kaldellis (2007), 120-172; Stenger (2014).

²³ See, for example, Jul., *Ep.* 22.429c to the priest Arsacius: ‘Hellenism is not yet faring according to my commands, because of those who share in it (‘Ο Ἑλληνισμὸς οὐπω πράττει κατὰ λόγον ἡμῶν ἔνεκα τῶν μεπόντων αὐτόν).’ Libanius also uses *Hellene* in what appears to be a religious sense, see Lib., *Ep.* 285 with Cribiore (2013), 177-178. On Libanius’ use of Hellenism to refer to religion, see Stenger (2014).

²⁴ Stenger (2018), 401. See also Watts (2006), 77-78; Kahlos (2007), 21; Sandwell (2007a), 9; Tanaseanu-Döbler (2012), 140. Drake (1996) argues concomitantly that Julian’s reign pushed Christians into more antagonistic positions, see also Gaddis (2005), 88-97.

²⁵ Kahlos (2007), 19 n. 32.

²⁶ This latter position was taken by Fowden (1998), 559, who sees Julian as a reaction to the harsh rhetoric of Constantius II. See also Kahlos (2009), 75; Stenger (2018), 401.

²⁷ *CTh* 16.2.18 of 370; see Kahlos (2007), 24. See also, for example, Lib., *Or.* 30.53; Ando (1996), 176.

Rebillard, have written mainly on the late fourth and early fifth centuries respectively. Watts' *longue durée* study of intellectual culture in late-antique Athens and Alexandria found that the previously fluid philosophical milieu in both cities was increasingly divided along religious lines in the last decades of the fourth century and at the start of the fifth.²⁸ Dennis Trout, in important articles on such subjects as the epitaphs of Petronius Probus and the *Carmen contra paganos*, demonstrates the increasing importance of finding one's place in the landscape of religious identity among the Roman aristocracy in this period.²⁹ 'Pagan' identity seems, logically enough, to have become more clearly defined as the fourth century wore on.

An alternative approach to breaking down the dichotomy between 'pagans' and 'Christians' has been to create taxonomies on the basis of the strength of religious allegiance. For nearly a century, historians studying fourth-century society have discussed groups such as 'half-Christians/half-pagans', 'Christianizing pagans/paganizing Christians'.³⁰ Two of the most influential recent interventions have been those of Kahlos, who divided late Roman society into pagans, Christians, and *incerti*, those who identified with both or neither camp; and Cameron, who proposed a five-fold division between 'committed' Christians or pagans, 'centre' Christians or pagans, and a central group of individuals who resist categorisation.³¹ The problems with this methodology are manifold, even if one accepts that such taxonomies, with their inevitable generalisations, are a helpful historical tool.³² Firstly, they encourage the treatment of religious identities as fixed and fully formed, rather than seeing them as flexible and continually negotiated.³³ They assume that 'Christians' are a definite and observable historical category; a problematic approach, even more so when applied to 'pagans'. Secondly, these taxonomies are usually based on a division between 'moderate' and 'zealous' religious adherents. They slip, explicitly or implicitly, into the view that those who are not 'zealous' are not 'really' Christians or pagans, and that the mark of true religious commitment is hostility to those of a different persuasion.³⁴ To take one example, Raffaella Cribiore describes moderate pagans as those who 'were not strong in their religious convictions or embittered toward the Christians', a subtle elision of two states of mind that did not always (even, perhaps,

²⁸ Watts (2006), 77-78, 186.

²⁹ Trout (2001); Trout (2016). Cf. also his work on the epigraphic poetry of Pope Damasus, Trout (2015), esp. 39-47.

³⁰ Kahlos (2007), 26-27 lists the various coinages.

³¹ Kahlos (2007), 2, 30-38; Cameron (2011), 176-177.

³² See, for example, the critique of Cribiore (2013), 172-173; Jones (2014), 7; Rebillard (2020), 16-23.

³³ Cf. Stenger (2014), 270

³⁴ Cameron (2011), 176 acknowledges the need to avoid such value judgements, but I do not think he escapes them with the term 'committed'. The antonym of committed is, of course, uncommitted; the inevitable implication being that those who were not hostile to the religious other did not take their religion particularly seriously. This may have been true in some cases, but it seems presumptuous to generalise, and certainly implies a value judgement about what religious commitment 'should' look like.

ordinarily) go together.³⁵ The question of how to deal with those of a different religious belief is not a question of identity. We cannot judge the strength of religious sentiments on the basis of religious hostility, and we should certainly not seek to categorise different forms of religious identity on this basis.

A more useful approach to the question of religious identity can be found in the works of Éric Rebillard, who builds on the work of the sociologist Rogers Brubaker to explore the notions of ‘groupness’ and ‘salience’.³⁶ Rather than treat religious identity as a constant or absolute, this approach regards it as something flexible and dependent on context. ‘Groupness’ (not an elegant term, but a useful concept) refers to the notion that identity groups do not exist permanently, but are brought into existence momentarily, an event rather than a permanent reality.³⁷ Religious identity is just one identity among many to which an individual may choose to give ‘salience’ in any given situation.³⁸ These notions lead Rebillard to criticise the taxonomies of Kahlos and Cameron:

All these attempts to refine the dichotomy between pagans and Christians continue to give unique relevance to a singular classification. We saw that religious affiliation was given salience only intermittently and that it had no unique relevance in determining Christians’ behaviour. Thus the issue cannot be reduced to a question of level of commitment or degree of conversion. When we take into account the fact that individuals hold multiple identities, we are led to abandon derogatory categories of analysis, whether they be semi-Christians, centre-pagans, or *incerti*.³⁹

Similar ideas are developed by Bella Sandwell in her influential study on Libanius and John Chrysostom.⁴⁰ Both Sandwell and Rebillard see religious identity as a tool that could be used or not used (given salience, to use Rebillard’s terminology) by the individual. Religious leaders, such as John Chrysostom or Augustine wished their congregations to see their Christian identity as their primary one, a ‘hierarchical’ arrangement, that would see them acting first and foremost as a Christian in any given situation.⁴¹ Julian, one might add, will have felt much the same for paganism. But most Christians and pagans found the practical needs of day-to-day life required a more flexible, ‘lateral’ arrangement of identities – that is to say, they did not think and act as pagans and Christians all of the time. As Sandwell explains, ‘In such a model, individuals can choose or change social identities in order to gain the best material outcome for themselves. Religious identity is

³⁵ Cribiore (2013), 172.

³⁶ Rebillard (2012), (2015) and (2020). See also Cribiore (2013), 138-139.

³⁷ Rebillard (2012), 2.

³⁸ Ibid., 4.

³⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁰ Sandwell (2007a). Cf. also Williams (2017), esp. 22-30 on Christian identity in late fourth-century Milan.

⁴¹ Sandwell, (2007a), 6; Rebillard (2012), 78-79.

something that can be suppressed or expressed, depending on whether it is stigmatised, useful, or meaningful to do so at a particular time.⁴²

On the whole, I find this approach much more satisfactory than the taxonomies of Kahlos, Cameron, and their predecessors. There are undoubtedly dangers to be avoided here. It would be unwise to construct yet another binary between those who ordered their identities hierarchically against those who did so laterally. As David Brakke remarks, lateral arrangements could hardly be entirely flat; individuals will have given their religious identity varying levels of priority.⁴³ Sandwell portrays the deployment of religious identity by Libanius as a very much a strategic choice, with an eye to gaining advantage in the ‘game’ of late-antique society.⁴⁴ This perhaps obscures the potential for religious identity to be a matter of principle, a theme to which I will return in my conclusion.

If it is accepted that religious identity is flexible and contingent on circumstance and context, then it is possible to continue to speak of ‘pagans and Christians’. When I discuss in the chapters that follow the ‘pagans’ of the Roman Senate, for example, I do not conceive of them as a permanent, unchanging and bounded religious group, let alone the ‘pagan faction’ of earlier scholarship.⁴⁵ Rather, I see them as a collection of individuals with a shared religious identity – which need not imply that their approach to religion was uniform or that there was no room for disagreements – which could be activated when they gave salience to it. Hence, when I discuss the ‘religious significance’ of a passage or phrase, what I refer to is an attempt on the part of the orator to create a moment of groupness, to activate the latent religious identities of the pagans in their respective audiences. This religious significance is not an inherent feature of the text, but only exists in relation to members of the audience. When Themistius or Claudian made a religiously significant remark, they invited the listening pagans to activate their religious identity. The choice of whether or not to do so remained with the audience.⁴⁶

Fourth-Century Narratives

Two great narratives underpin the study of late Antiquity: one is the fall of the Roman Empire in the West; the other is the Empire’s Christianisation. This thesis speaks to the latter. However, while the ‘fall of the Roman Empire’ describes a reasonably well-defined phenomenon, Christianisation is

⁴² Sandwell (2007a), 8.

⁴³ Brakke (2014), 1753.

⁴⁴ Sandwell (2007a), 100-111, 114-119. See with the caveats of Cribiore (2013), 137-139; Van Nuffelen (2014), 297.

⁴⁵ See now Gassman (2020a), 142, 165-167.

⁴⁶ See below, pp. 39-43 for discussion of how this functioned in the epideictic context of Themistius’ and Claudian’s orations.

a rather more nebulous concept. It can be, and has been, variously defined.⁴⁷ One can observe in scholarly literature three broad areas of study that Christianisation can connote. Firstly, the study of demography, that is, how many people identified as Christians, how quickly or slowly the process of religious conversion ran across different social strata and in different regions. Secondly, the ‘cultural’ aspect, that is, the manner in which Christianity changed the everyday practices and social structures of the Empire’s inhabitants; and the way in which Christian ways of looking at the world came to dominate thought and discourse amongst the Empire’s literary elite, the creation and acceptance of new categories such as ‘pagan and Christian’, ‘religious and secular’.⁴⁸ Finally, the political aspect, the way in which Christians came to control the levers of power in the Empire, and use them to police what was religiously acceptable.⁴⁹

I will be concerned principally with the latter two: ‘cultural’ and ‘political’ Christianisation. In the rest of this section, I will lay out some of the major scholarly trends regarding Christianisation. I wish in particular to point out how narratives of fourth-century religious history continue to privilege the latter decades and especially the reign of Theodosius I, as the key turning point in this process. While it has been framed and debated in a variety of different ways, it remains the case that most accounts of Christianisation see the fourth century as qualitatively different from the fifth, by which point (it has been argued) Christianity had truly come to dominate the Roman Empire.

There are innumerable ways in which the cultural Christianisation of the Roman Empire has been conceived and studied, ranging from the use of amulets, to changes in marital conventions, to the adaptation of classical poetic forms. In my summary here, I can only select some of the broader themes which are most relevant to this thesis. Narratives of cultural Christianisation tend to see a change in the landscape between the middle decades of the fourth century and its final years. One recent influential account that provides a useful exemplar is Watts’ *The Final Pagan Generation*. Watts’ argument is founded on the idea of a ‘generation’ as a social unit. His ‘final pagan generation’, by which he means the last people to grow up in a pagan society (represented by Symmachus, Ausonius, Praetextatus and Themistius), faded from the scene in the late 380s and early 390s, leaving their children a very different world, in which the religiously neutral imperial system that

⁴⁷ See the comments of Brown (1995), x; Markus (1990), 6-7; Van Hoof & Van Nuffelen (2015), 4-5. See, more recently, the caution of Brown (2012), 82-83 against underestimating the scope of Christianisation; and Frankfurter (2018), 6-7 on the multiple discrete processes that constitute Christianisation. I also note the warning of Hunt (1993), 143 that Christianisation ‘is so big an aspect of late Antiquity as to be all but beyond the control of the historian... it is in danger of becoming meaning~~less~~’.

⁴⁸ Diverse examples of this approach may be found in, for example, Markus (1990); Brown (1993); Brown (2012); Sandwell (2007a); Lim (2009).

⁴⁹ Examples of this include Hunt (1993); Noethlichs (2006).

had existed in their time was increasingly exposed to the forces of Christianisation. This account runs parallel with one of the key approaches to fourth-century history, 'secularity'. This notion, of some theoretical complexity, was propounded most significantly by Robert Markus. He argued that in the 390s the Roman Empire was 'desecularised', as Christian thinkers collapsed the distinction between the Church and the Roman Empire, creating a single Christian polity. He elsewhere describes this as 'Western Europe... being drained of the secular'.⁵⁰ Markus' approach has been followed by others, such as Salzman, who portrays Symmachus in Rome in the last decades of the fourth century, fighting against those Christians who wished to desecularise aristocratic life and friendships.⁵¹

The political aspects of Christianisation have, somewhat understandably, been dominated by discussions of tolerance and intolerance. There is a vast bibliography on this subject, which attempts to plot the course from the newly Christian state of Constantine, with a majority non-Christian population, to the ever more theocratic Byzantine Empire, in which whatever pagans (as well as Jews and various 'heretical' stands of Christianity) remained were, if not actively harassed by the government, at least excluded in more or less tangible ways.⁵² Some recent scholarship has expressed scepticism, on theoretical grounds, about describing late Roman government at any stage as 'tolerant'. The classic account of tolerance in Antiquity is given by Peter Garnsey:

Toleration implies disapproval or disagreement coupled with an unwillingness to take action against those who are viewed with disfavour in the interest of some moral or political principle. It is an active concept, not to be confused with indifference, apathy or passive acquiescence... Toleration implies a degree of acceptance as well as a degree of disapproval.⁵³

The key is that tolerance, properly conceived, is based on principle, not simply the absence of means or impulse to attack or persecute. Garnsey's view is that outside of a few slightly insipid theoretical discussions, tolerance of this kind was absent from Antiquity, including, if not especially, the Christian empire of Theodosius.⁵⁴

Few if any would now comfortably attribute the final destruction of paganism to the reign of Theodosius, but, in discussions of rising Christian intolerance, the events of the 380s and 390s

⁵⁰ Markus (1990), 15.

⁵¹ Salzman (2010). Somewhat confusingly, some scholars also refer to secularisation as a trend concurrent with and contingent upon Christianisation, for example, traditional Roman festivals being 'secularised' in order to survive in the new Christian order. See, for example, Salzman (2007), 117; Lim (2009).

⁵² Kahlos (2009), 4-5 summarises the major scholarly contributions.

⁵³ Garnsey (1984), 1. See similarly Drake (2000), 419.

⁵⁴ Garnsey (1984), 17. More recently, Kahlos (2009), 2, 6-8.

appear in most accounts as the vital turning point. While this transition has been softened somewhat in recent years, it still plays a significant role in the scholarship, and Theodosius remains the central protagonist.⁵⁵ The first charge levelled against Theodosius is his legislation, promulgated with the alleged intention, on one hand, of establishing Christianity as the ‘state religion’ of the Empire; and on the other, of eliminating pagan cult.⁵⁶ Two phases of this attack fell at the start of the 380s and the 390s respectively. The first prong is represented by *CTh* 16.1.2 of 380 and *CTh* 16.5.6 of 381. These imperial pronouncements laid out in detail the theology of the Nicene faith, and condemned those who did not hold to it as heretics. While the language speaks more to Christian sectarian and doctrinal struggles than to its battle against paganism, some have seen them as a novel attempt to delineate acceptable religion on doctrinal grounds. For scholars such as David Hunt, these edicts aimed to establish Nicene Christianity as the ‘normative religion’.⁵⁷

The second prong is the anti-pagan legislation of the early 390s. In three laws of 391-392, *CTh* 16.10.10-12, Theodosius reinforced and extended the injunctions of his predecessors, striking at the basis of pagan cult.⁵⁸ Together this legislation has been seen as creating an environment qualitatively different from that of earlier decades. For Salzman, these laws mark the ‘official end of tolerance for religious differences’.⁵⁹ Kahlos describes this as the point at which the Christian state’s attacks on paganism became ‘systematic’ and ‘oppressive’.⁶⁰ Ernesti argues that they represented a new and previously unknown encroachment on private religious practice.⁶¹ While scholars often admit that we should not overestimate the efficacy of these laws, they continue to be put forward as a crucial turning point in the narrative of late-antique religion.⁶²

⁵⁵ See Theodosius’ place in historical overviews of the period, for example, Chuvin (1990), 65, 71-72; Veyne (2010), 103-104; Elton (2018), 143-146; Kulikowski (2019), 114. The nuancing of recent accounts (while still maintaining a significant role for the reign of Theodosius) can be seen in Errington (2006), 233-274; Lee (2013), 44-49; 52-54.

⁵⁶ Cameron (2011), 61, collates some of the dramatic language that has been used to describe these edicts.

⁵⁷ Hunt (1993), 146-147; 157. See also Liebeschuetz (1990), 157-158; Salzman (1993), 364-365; Williams & Friell (1994), 53; Ernesti (1998), 19-25; Drake (2000), 403; Gaddis (2005), 71-72; Noethlichs (2006), 121-122; Kahlos (2007), 102. As Errington (1997a), 415 notes, the use of this law in *Justinian’s Code* has likely influenced modern interpretations.

⁵⁸ For a summary of these laws, see Fowden (1998), 553; Ernesti (1998), 65-67.

⁵⁹ Salzman (2007), 110.

⁶⁰ Kahlos (2009), 65, 90.

⁶¹ Ernesti (1998), 86-87. See similarly Leppin (2003), 176.

⁶² For example, Fowden (1998), 553; Curran (2000), 215-217; Shaw (2011), 223-225; Trombley (2011), 49. One important dissenting voice has been Alan Cameron, who warns against seeing these laws in overly dramatic terms, Cameron (2011), 60; though, as will be discussed below, Cameron still makes the reign of Theodosius a turning point. McLynn (2009), 576-577 is also sceptical. Hunt (1993), 157 notes that these laws were targeted against public officials, not the population in general, see also Salzman (1993), 372-373. As Frankfurter (1998), 23-34 observes, such edicts might be seen as much as evidence of continuing pagan practice as of its prohibition.

In addition to his legislative attacks on religious minorities, Theodosius is further charged with creating an environment in which extra-legal violence against pagans and their cults was given licence, perhaps even actively encouraged. For those unconvinced that the laws of the 380s and 390s had much real effect on the ground, there are always the vivid descriptions of Christian mobs led by fanatically ascetic monks. If Theodosius did not destroy Graeco-Roman paganism himself, then he was willing to give a free hand to those who would. These dramatic moments of conflict, of which the destruction of the temple of Serapis in Alexandria is the most prominent example, have captured the imagination of historians since the fifth century.⁶³ Peter Brown called the mid-380s to mid-390s a ‘decade of violence’, which saw Theodosius abandon ‘the more distant, less brutally confrontational style associated with earlier rulers’ and allow ‘the vehemence of local power-groups, the Christian bishops and the monks, to have a free hand’.⁶⁴ Watts bookends his account of the ‘final pagan generation’ with the attack on the Serapaeum, which he refers to as a ‘momentous event’ which ‘highlighted the vulnerability of large centers of traditional religion’.⁶⁵ For Watts, this was a key marker of the transition between the older ‘pagan generation’ and new generation that had grown up in a Christian world. In a slightly different register, it is also notable that it is in this period that two of late Antiquity’s most famous ‘defences of paganism’ were composed, Symmachus’ *Relatio* 3, on the Altar of Victory and the funding of the state cults of Rome, in 384, and Libanius’ *Oration* 30, ‘For the Temples’, addressed, or at least, so the text claims, to Theodosius himself, at around the same time.⁶⁶ These texts often contribute to a narrative of beleaguered paganism.

Very few would now maintain that Theodosius I, or his sons Honorius and Arcadius, were intent on eliminating religious dissent – if nothing else, the evidence of them having perfectly cordial

⁶³ Ruf., *HE* 11.23-24; Soc., 5.16.

⁶⁴ Brown (1998), 646. Similarly Brown (1992), 107-108, 113-115; Brown (1995), 49-50, though striking a slightly cautious note; MacMullen (1984), 97-98, 117-119. Hahn (2015), 380 asserts that religious violence reached its ‘first climax’ under Theodosius, arguing that it was under his rule that the Roman state lost or abdicated its monopoly on ‘legitimate’ violence’, which it now shared with the Church (see in particular 399-404). See also Leppin (2003), 166; Shaw (2011), 223-225 on the impact of Theodosius’ legislation. Williams & Friell (1994), 58 contrast Theodosius’ favour towards individual pagans with his complicity in anti-pagan violence. Ernesti (1998), 86, while noting Theodosius’ preference for order and persuasion rather than violence and force, comments that he tolerated those who went further, and was part of the same environment. For a more equivocal account of the Theodosian regime’s attitude towards sectarian conflict and the ‘holy men’ who often inspired it in, see Gaddis (2005), 208-210, 233-235. Further discussion on the relationship between the imperial regime and local outbreaks of religious violence, below, pp. 156-157.

⁶⁵ Watts (2015), 1-2; 215. Cf. Watts (2006), 189-191. See also MacMullen (1984), 99; Drake (2000), 404. Hahn (2015), 392-393 argues for the (albeit mostly reluctant) complicity of the imperial authorities in the destruction of the Serapaeum. On the destruction of pagan monuments and images, see Trombley (2008), 153-156; Kristensen (2013), 70-71.

⁶⁶ Lib., *Or.* 30 was not delivered to Theodosius in person, and may have been intended (initially at least) for a private audience. See Liebeschuetz (1972), 26-31; Swain (2004), 382; Wiemer (2011), 163.

relationships with plenty of pagans makes it clear that the situation was not so simple.⁶⁷ Some scholars have downplayed these reigns and placed the turning point elsewhere.⁶⁸ Nor would anyone claim the 380s and 390s saw the final end of paganism as a religious, intellectual and cultural force. But it remains the case that these decades continue to play a vital role in the narrative of Christianisation. This remained the case even after the publication, a decade ago, of Alan Cameron's *Last Pagans of Rome*, an enormously important work for the study of Christianisation. Cameron's argument, the culmination of several decades of work on this subject, is primarily intended to demolish in detail the notion of a late fourth-century 'pagan revival' that was current in much scholarship of the twentieth century – the idea that pagan aristocrats were united in a great cultural, intellectual and political project in defiance of Christianity, culminating in defeat by the Christian army of Theodosius at the Battle of the River Frigidus in 394.⁶⁹ In working towards this conclusion, Cameron arrives at a number of subsidiary positions with relevance to my discussion. Firstly, he downplays the role of aggressive religious policies on the part of Theodosius and other emperors in the diminution of Roman paganism. For Cameron, paganism left the stage not with a bang but a whimper, dying a fairly 'natural' death; it did not need 'destroying' by the Christian authorities.⁷⁰ The legislation of the early 390s is for Cameron an undramatic expansion of earlier rulings, rather than a new phase in the history of Christian intolerance.⁷¹ He also particularly argues against the notion that religious significance can be read into the classicising and mythological literature of the fourth century.⁷² The debates of subsequent scholarship have been to a great extent shaped in response to Cameron's work; especially in continental Europe, attempts have been made to maintain the notion of a 'pagan reaction', or at least defend the idea that 'conflict' is an accurate characterisation of some pagan-Christian interactions in the fourth century.⁷³

⁶⁷ Ernesti (1998), 68-69 for the known pagans who reached high office under Theodosius.

⁶⁸ Drake (1996), for example, sees the reign of Julian as the driving force in the Christian turn towards intolerance. See also Gaddis (2005), 88-97.

⁶⁹ The notion of a 'pagan revival' was already present in the earliest decades of the twentieth century, see, for example, Robinson (1915). Bloch (1945) and (1963) are the classic statements of the argument; see also Matthews (1973), 180-181, 195; Markus (1974b); Matthews (1975), 241-247; Lippold (1980), 47-48; Chuvin (1990), 69-70; Williams & Friell (1994), 130-135. More recently, it has been reasserted, *contra* Cameron, by, for example, Hedrick (2000), 37-71. See also Janßen (2004), 12-16; Veyne (2010), 101-105, whose dramatic account of religious conflict simply ignores scholarly controversies on these issues. For the literary aspects of the 'revival', see below, p. 27 n. 112.

⁷⁰ Cameron (2011), 12.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 60-74.

⁷² I address this argument in detail in the next chapter.

⁷³ In particular, the essay collection (mostly by Italian scholars) edited by Rita Lizzi Testa (2013), which scrutinises details of Cameron's argumentation while remaining broadly positive towards the overall narrative. See on the issue of conflict, Lizzi Testa, Salzman & Sághy (2016), 1-3. A forthright defence of the 'resistance' narrative can be found in Ratti (2012a) and (2012b), explicitly *contra* Cameron, and railing against the positive reception of his work in 'la presse anglo-saxonne', and against the general inadequacies of the historiographical 'l'école anglo-saxonne' (esp. Ratti (2012a), 180-182); cf. also Paschoud (2012), which, while not wholly unsympathetic to Cameron's approach, raises many technical issues and criticises Cameron for being polemically extremist in the development of his argument.

Despite his rejection of the ‘pagan resistance’ narrative, with its last stand at the Frigidus in 394, Cameron nonetheless still places his ‘death of paganism’, his ‘last pagans of Rome’, at the end of the fourth century. One notable feature of *Last Pagans* is the extent to which Cameron buttresses a conventional chronology, while refuting many of the traditional arguments for that narrative. As Éric Rebillard comments in a review, ‘Cameron seems to have been, to some degree, captured by the very thesis he strives to refute.’⁷⁴ The 390s remain a crucial turning-point. To take an example, some of his comments on the prosopography of the years following the Battle of the River Frigidus – despite his argument that the Frigidus was not a ‘religious event’ – are highly revealing: ‘Whether or not all post-Frigidus officeholders were Christians, in the absence of evidence to the contrary it will have been prudent to assume that they were. It is unlikely that many were open or committed pagans.’⁷⁵ Acknowledging, as we must, that paganism could mean different things in different places and periods, he concludes that, ‘If we define paganism as the civic cults of the pre-Christian Graeco-Roman world, official Roman paganism really did effectively end with the disappearance of the priestly cults in the early fifth century.’⁷⁶ This is a tightly circumscribed, but nonetheless significant, verdict.

Despite a good deal of recent scholarship that has complicated the narrative, the reign of Theodosius and of his heirs has remained a crucial watershed in the historiography of fourth-century Christianisation. Both those historians who believe in a final cultural and political conflict between paganism and Christianity, and those who argue that paganism faded wanly out of existence see the 380s and 390s as the turning point. Debates tend to focus on the question of how far Theodosius and his regime were responsible for these rapid developments – whether they actively sought Christianisation through repressive policies; devolved this responsibility to a newly militant and political Church; or simply washed their hands as aggressive ascetics and clergy took it upon themselves to sweep away the Empire’s traditional religion. What is notable, furthermore, about all these approaches is that they focus largely on Christianisation as an almost entirely Christian phenomenon: pagans become either the passive recipients and observers of this great cultural, social and political process, or as fighting a heroic, but ultimately futile, resistance to it. Christianisation and the end of paganism are often treated as identical, but, as Garth Fowden observes, ‘Although there is an obvious connection between the triumph of Christianity and the

⁷⁴ Rebillard (2013), 297; see also Kelly (2015), 233.

⁷⁵ Cameron (2011), 377. See also the comments of Cameron (2016), 79 on Protadius, and 101 on Q. Fabius Memmius Symmachus; Rebillard (2013), 297.

⁷⁶ Cameron (2011), 783.

demise of polytheism, these were two distinct processes with independent timetables.⁷⁷ They are obviously deeply intertwined and overlapping, but they are not the same thing. This thesis will be concerned with how pagans related to the process of Christianisation, how they carved out a place for themselves in a Christianising society, how they lived in a changing world; an analysis that goes beyond narratives of resistance or demise. Simply put, I wish to write a narrative of Christianisation told from a pagan perspective.

Parallel Lives: Themistius and Claudian

Themistius and Claudian are productive subjects of study for understanding Christianisation. These are two authors with much in common who have been ‘kept apart’ in late-antique scholarship. While acknowledging that there are some important differences between their careers and their contexts, I will in this thesis present them as ‘parallel lives’, who, when compared, reveal much about the religious and political history of the later fourth century.

The points of similarity between Themistius and Claudian are numerous. Both were orators, usually reckoned to be pagans, who carved out highly successful careers for themselves, delivering panegyrics in a classicising style, at the courts of Theodosian emperors. Both formed apparently close political relationships at court: with Honorius’ *de facto* regent Stilicho in the case of Claudian, and Themistius with the emperor Theodosius himself. Nonetheless, there have been, as far as I can ascertain, no studies in which they are compared, and it is rare to find them treated in detail between the same covers. They recently approached proximity in a collection comparing Rome and Constantinople, but even here direct comparison is almost entirely absent.⁷⁸ There are, undoubtedly, understandable reasons for this. Most obvious is the linguistic barrier: Claudian wrote in Latin, Themistius in Greek.

Perhaps the main element that has militated against a comparative study is the question of literary genre: Themistius, a philosopher by training, wrote his orations in prose, while Claudian wrote mostly in hexameter poetry. For reasons that I will argue have more to do with the predispositions of modern classicists, this has led to Themistius being ‘claimed’ by historians, while Claudian is seen as the province of ‘literature’. This is perhaps best illustrated by the most significant modern studies on the two authors. Most recently, Themistius has been written on by historians such as Peter Heather and John Vanderspoel, whose focus is less on literary form and influence than on what his orations

⁷⁷ Fowden (1998), 558.

⁷⁸ Articles by Vanderspoel, Gillett, and Kelly in Grig & Kelly, eds., (2012). Themistius is discussed briefly in Gillett (2012), 267 n. 4, where it is argued that he performed a rather different role to Claudian.

can tell us about the political context in which they were delivered.⁷⁹ The latest monographs on Claudian are those of Catherine Ware, Clare Coombe, and Gabriela Ryser, written from a literary perspective.⁸⁰ One consequence of Claudian being considered first and foremost as a poet, is that scholars have attributed less weight to his role as an orator. This has both influenced the way in which Claudian himself has been read, and meant that comparisons with other panegyrists have seemed less productive compared to those with epic poets. My concern, as a historian, will be to draw Claudian more into the field of historical studies, but it would be equally true to say that the scholarship on Themistius' orations as literature is rather thin.

I would argue further, however, that another cause underlies the historiographical separation between Themistius and Claudian, one that is rooted in the narratives of fourth-century Christianisation. As I noted, the later fourth century, and in particular the reign of Theodosius I, is seen as a period of rapid Christianisation, and a concomitant dwindling of paganism. This has had a subtle – but profound – effect on the way these two authors are read. Themistius, whose last years fell in the reign of Theodosius, who retired and most probably died before the legislative and sectarian depredations of the 390s, is seen as a figure of the mid-fourth century, and largely unproblematically as a 'pagan' author.⁸¹ His orations are often held to represent the output of a pagan philosopher, though one generally well disposed towards Christianity and seeking to find common ground. He belonged to an era in which few would argue that it was particularly difficult to live as a pagan intellectual, and indeed such a figure, expressing himself in mild and inoffensive terms, might even have been welcomed as a reassurance to pagan members of the elite on whom the Christian regime continued to depend.

Claudian, though, is generally seen as a part of a very different world. His first surviving oration was delivered on the first day of 395, a few months after the Battle of the River Frigidus. While most would accept that he was a pagan, this is generally seen as having no bearing on the interpretation of his work. Throughout his 1970 study on Claudian, Alan Cameron argues against seeing Claudian as the mouthpiece of the pagan aristocracy, a conclusion to which he held decades later in *Last Pagans of Rome*, writing that: 'the "pagan" imagery of which critics once used to make so much is now recognised to be purely literary'.⁸² Cameron portrays Claudian as working within a doubly Christianised sphere – those for whom he wrote were 'overwhelmingly' Christian; and he is writing

⁷⁹ See Vanderspoel (1995); Heather (1998b); Heather & Moncur (2001).

⁸⁰ Ware (2012); Coombe (2018); Ryser (2020). See also the comments of Van Hoof & Van Nuffelen (2015), 6-7.

⁸¹ See for example his role in Watts (2015). On Themistius as a 'pagan' author, see Penella (2000a), 3; Heather & Moncur (2001), e.g. xii, 24, 41-42.

⁸² Cameron (2011), 207-208.

in a newly Christianised literary landscape, in which mythological characters and themes survive only as decorative symbols, stripped of any genuine religious symbolism. Questions of Claudian's religion and its potential connection to his orations tend to be dismissed.⁸³

While, then, only a decade separates the end of Themistius' public career with the beginning of Claudian's, a much greater gulf stands between them; a decade of Theodosian rule, during which occurred some of the most famous landmarks in the story of the death of Graeco-Roman paganism. To oversimplify: Themistius is seen as part the historiographical fourth century, what Pierre Chuvin termed the 'wavering century', in which Roman society was only semi-Christianised, and paganism was a vital concern, while Claudian is seen as part of the historiographical fifth century, living in a considerably more Christianised, Theodosian world, in which only the pale shades of the old religion survived.⁸⁴ This points to one of the key advantages of a study comparing Themistius and Claudian. It allows us to test and challenge these narratives of the Theodosian period as a time of rapid Christianisation. By demonstrating the continuities between these two orators and the way they related to their religious environment, I will show that the pace of Christianisation was rather more gradual than is often supposed, and that the early 400s were not quite so different from the early 380s as has been suggested.

In doing so, I will explore the ambiguities and ambivalences of pagan intellectuals living in a partially Christianised world. I will argue that through their panegyrics both Claudian and Themistius attempted to resist the forces of political and cultural Christianisation. As I will outline in the next chapter, their orations were intensely political texts, which both reflect and reveal the context in which they were written. I will argue that both orators used their works to assert a pagan identity in the political sphere, and to claim that the classical cultural heritage could not easily be separated from traditional religion, against those who wished to build a Christian state, and those who wished to cut off classical literature from its sacred roots.

It is essential to clarify that I do not mean that either Themistius or Claudian felt a deep hostility towards Christianity, simply that they were not willing to bow to its total dominance of Roman politics and society. I do not see them as heroic religious dissidents in the mould often cast for pagan intellectuals by the scholarship of the mid-twentieth century, with its focus on 'the conflict between

⁸³ For example, Coombe (2018), 8.

⁸⁴ Chuvin (1990), 36-56. Gillett (2012) exemplifies this trend, presenting Claudian as the beginning of a fifth-century movement rather than the end of a fourth-century one. More generally, see the comment of Veyne (2010), 84 that 'one can speak of a Christian Empire only from the extreme end of the [fourth] century onwards'.

paganism and Christianity'. An important strand of my approach, for reasons that I will detail in the next chapter, is that the Christian regimes to which they spoke allowed this stance and these arguments. A political sphere that admitted Themistius and Claudian thus conceived, is by definition one that was not fully Christianised. This will therefore cast doubt on the dominant narratives I have discussed about the place of the Theodosius and his sons in fourth-century religious and political history.

Epideictic, Literature, and Religion

In this chapter, I will lay out my reading strategy for the orations of Themistius and Claudian. In the first section, I will discuss my understanding of late-antique panegyric and the role theories of epideictic can play in relation to these texts. In the second, I will address the relationship between religion and literature in late Antiquity, and the classical world more generally. In particular, I will argue against the scepticism of much recent scholarship towards the notion of reading any religious meaning into such texts. Instead, I will put forward a view of them as deliberately religiously ambivalent, drawing on approaches to the sacred in material culture. In the third section, I will bring these two strands together, and lay out how I understand the nature and function of religion in Themistius' and Claudian's orations within their rhetorical context. I complete the chapter with a prospectus of my textual analysis in Parts II and III.

Reading Rhetoric

Rhetoric is one of the most abundant and productive sources available to the historian of late Antiquity. Along with legal decrees, the rhetoric of the imperial court is the most direct route into the heart of Roman politics. The key to my approach lies in an appreciation of epideictic. While there is a well-developed methodology for approaching panegyric as epideictic, it has been applied sporadically by scholars of the fourth century. Themistius and Claudian have been particularly underserved in this regard.⁸⁵ The dominant approach to these two orators, as with several others in late Antiquity, has been to describe them with such terms as 'propagandist', to see them as mouthpieces of the regimes they served.⁸⁶ I will therefore lay out the contributions of recent scholarship to our understanding of epideictic, the advantages of using these to understand Themistius' and Claudian's rhetoric, and the questions this raises with regards to the role of religion in their orations.

Epideictic is one of the three branches of rhetoric identified by Aristotle, the rhetoric of 'praise and blame'. While other, more confrontational forms of oratory withered in the autocracy of imperial

⁸⁵ For example, in the major studies on Themistius, 'epideictic' appears only once in Heather & Moncur (2001) (xv, describing Themistius' *Or.* 22 and 30), and not at all in Penella (2000a). There is a brief discussion in Vanderspoel (1995), 11-13, but has little impact on Vanderspoel's reading of Themistius' rhetoric (see below, p. 61 n. 94). In the scholarship on Claudian, it is absent from the hugely influential Cameron (1970); there are brief mentions in Dewar (1996), 89 and Ware (2012), 21-22 in the context of an overview of the history of panegyric.

⁸⁶ See discussion below, pp.23-24.

Rome, epideictic flourished.⁸⁷ It is of course important to be aware of the dangers of simple taxonomies. Categorisation is not always tidy, and there are a variety of sub-genres of epideictic – for example, consular panegyric, historical epic and invective.⁸⁸ It was also common outside ‘imperial’ contexts, being a feature of many civic occasions. The unifying trait of epideictic oratory is display.⁸⁹ It formed part of the tapestry of late-antique ceremonial, it was ‘occasional’, often directly associated with the calendar of Roman and imperial celebrations: Claudius Mamertinus’ panegyric for Julian celebrates the New Year in 362, and the orator’s accompanying accession to the consulship; Symmachus celebrates the *lustrum* of Valentinian’s reign in 368 or 369 and his third consulship in 370; Eusebius in 336 marks the thirtieth anniversary of Constantine’s proclamation as emperor; Pacatus celebrates Theodosius’ triumphal *adventus* into Rome in 389.⁹⁰ This is also the case with the orations of Themistius and Claudian.⁹¹

Epideictic is integral to these celebrations rather than being an external reflection on them. As Walter Beale notes, ‘The epideictic or “rhetorical performative” act is one that participates in the reality to which it refers.’⁹² This is not the commentary of an independent witness, but rather an integral part of the drama. To quote Sabine MacCormack:

Panegyric can thus be understood as one element among many in the evolution of imperial ceremonial. In this ceremonial, the surviving panegyric was not a detached ‘mirror’ reflecting events outside itself; it was the speech of an actor in a play – in the permanent quasi-liturgical drama by which late antique men sought to articulate the modes of contact between the emperor, his subjects and his invisible but ever-present companions: the gods, and later, God.⁹³

⁸⁷ Pernot (2015), 9-10, 13-14, 23. Though I note the caution of Flower (2013), 37-38 that our conception of late Antiquity as a golden age of epideictic may be more the result of vagaries of textual transmission than a genuine contrast with previous centuries.

⁸⁸ On difficulties of taxonomy, see Carey (2007), 236; Rees (2018a), 214. On sub-genres, see Petkas (2018b), 194. On late-antique invective, the ‘blame’ element of epideictic, see Flower (2013), esp. 49-61. Invective was seen as the mirror image of panegyric, the techniques of which were inverted to turn praise into criticism, and as such can be studied through the same methodological lens. See Bartsch (1994), 170-180 on the ‘praise-blame axis’.

⁸⁹ From ἐπίδειξις (display); Petkas (2018b), 194.

⁹⁰ On the occasional nature of panegyric, see Rees (2002), 17-18; Ware (2019), 292.

⁹¹ Most of Themistius’ orations of the Theodosian period can confidently be assigned to ceremonial occasions, such as the emperor’s *dies imperii*. See discussion of individual orations on pp. 62-64. A large part of Claudian’s corpus are poems explicitly written for accessions to the consulship. There are cases that are less clear (for example, Claudian’s invectives), but these too ought to be seen within the context of the formal life of the late Roman court, as I argue below, p. 111 n. 33.

⁹² Beale (1978), 226.

⁹³ MacCormack (1981), 8. See also Flower (2013), 42-43.

The content of an epideictic oration communicates, not primarily a specific judgement on the subject or a truthful account of events, but a set of values – in the case of panegyric, the ideal conception both of the emperor, and of the Roman state.

The content of epideictic matters, therefore, as evidence of the social values the orator wished to communicate. This focus on values is at the heart of modern theories of epideictic, propounded by scholars such as Laurent Pernot. Like the other elements of the ceremonial of which it so often formed a part, it was the role of epideictic to embody and bring about social and political unity, and it did so primarily by commending adherence to accepted socio-political values. As Pernot argues,

We are speaking of “consensus” and “ideology.” And what we notice, indeed, is that the principal vocation of epideictic oratory is the reinforcing of the public’s adherence to accepted and recognised values. Gods, cities, sovereigns, civic leaders, institutions: it praises what everyone already respects or is thought to respect. Its purpose is not to say the truth, but to reaffirm and re-create afresh the consensus around prevailing values.⁹⁴

A helpful modern example of this aspect of epideictic might be the retirement celebrations of an eminent academic. At such an event, this person will be praised as an example of the values which the academic community holds; their work-ethic, for example, their passion for their subject, or their ability to inspire their students. More negative or controversial subjects – a row with a colleague, for example – will be ignored.⁹⁵ The task of the speaker is not to persuade the audience that the honorand possesses these qualities, the audience has indicated, in ritual terms, by their very attendance, that they accept this. Rather, the object is to unite the audience in celebration of the person in question, and, perhaps more significantly, the academic ideal in the abstract of which they are held to be a personification. In the case of an imperial panegyric, the community is the imperial court in its various configurations. The orator is not primarily trying to persuade this audience that the emperor is worthy of praise, for those in attendance already accept this as a given (at least in ritual terms: a nuance which I shall discuss further below). Rather, they are uniting the audience around the praise of the emperor, and beyond that, an accepted ideal of what an emperor should be like.⁹⁶ They will therefore naturally seek to avoid any content that would be inimical to that unity.

This has profound implications for our understanding of the relations between the orator and the political authorities which they served. Understanding this relationship is one of the key tasks of the reader of panegyric. We are limited in our knowledge, because the process of composition of

⁹⁴ Pernot (2015), 98.

⁹⁵ Flower (2013), 46-47 on the prescription to avoid any negative comments.

⁹⁶ Flower (2013), 43.

political orations is lost to us. We do not know how direct the input of the imperial regime was into these great speeches that were such an important part of that regime's self-understanding and presentation. Various terms with modern inflections, such as 'propagandist', are common in works on Themistius and Claudian.⁹⁷ I will avoid such terminology, and instead focus on the insights that understanding them both as epideictic orators can provide.

Epideictic, clearly, is a form of 'authorised speech'.⁹⁸ It is not the place to look for political or social dissent or persuasion, at least in any simple sense.⁹⁹ Even if the orator had been personally opposed to some policy or action of the regime which they were praising, the highly ceremonial occasions on which they delivered their orations were not the environment in which to voice such feelings. It is occasionally alleged that an orator committed a *faux pas*, a mistake or error of judgement.¹⁰⁰ Oratory permeated the later Roman Empire; it was a highly competitive profession, and the rhetoricians whose work survives, including Themistius and Claudian, were at the very top. This required not just great literary skill, but also finely tuned political instincts. They would not have reached the heights that they did if they had been in the habit of causing their audience, imperial or otherwise, to wince with displeasure – and even if they had done so, the offending remark would surely have been judiciously excised from any published text.¹⁰¹ The corollary of these arguments, and a vitally important one for the development of this thesis, is that everything in the orations which I will be studying received at least the tacit assent and approval of the imperial regime for which they were delivered.

⁹⁷ Claudian is referred to as propagandist in Levy (1958), 338; Cameron (1970), 42-62 and (2000); Matthews (1975), 257-258; O'Flynn (1983), 27; James (1998), 153; Gillett (2012), 278; Coombe (2018), 30-31; Kulikowski (2019), 131. Themistius in Maisano (1995), 12; Heather (1998b), 148; Ernesti (1998), 446; Heather & Moncur (2001), xiv; Van Renswoude (2019), 75. See also Errington (2000), 864; Watts (2015), 176-178. The term 'propaganda' has also been widely applied in scholarship on other fourth-century panegyrics. For example, to Mamertinus' panegyric for Julian, see Blockley (1972), 437; Lieu (1989), 9; the Constantinian *Pan. Lat.* in Warmington (1974). A major collection of essays on these texts is entitled *The Propaganda of Power* (Whitby (1998)). See also Bartsch (1994), 162; Hoffer (2006), 87 on the relationship of Pliny's panegyric for Trajan to contemporary imperial 'propaganda'. For a more sceptical approach, see for example, Nixon (1993); Nixon & Saylor Rogers (1994), 28-31; Rees (2002), 23-24. With regard to Constantinian panegyric, Maranesi's recent study prefers the words *diffusione* and *promozione* over propaganda; see the methodological discussion, Maranesi (2016), 19-26. See Ware (2019) 294, 296-297 on the continuing role of propaganda in contemporary debates on panegyric.

⁹⁸ Pernot (2015), 83.

⁹⁹ I discuss below, pp. 25-26, the possibility of subtle forms of dissent.

¹⁰⁰ For example, Sandwell (2010), 107 on Them., *Ox.* 15.188d; see discussion of this passage below, p. 82. Charlet (2005), 207-208 and (2013), 268-269 argues that in *VI Cons.* Claudian gave his most definitive and impassioned statement of his belief in the traditional culture and religion of Rome, which left him out of favour with Honorius' regime.

¹⁰¹ This does not rule out covert forms of subversion, but orators of the calibre and experience of Claudian and Themistius did not deliver accidentally offensive remarks.

This, however, was not simply a message transmitted by the imperial regime, by means of the orator, onto a passive audience. Late-antique panegyrics were finely crafted literary masterpieces, which, like all such art, bear the imprint of their makers. These were not policy dossiers, and no matter how direct we believe the channels from imperial decision-makers to orators were, the content was still shaped and fashioned by the author more than the dedicatee. I am generally sceptical about the level of ‘briefing’ that preceded each panegyric. Plenty of orators were ‘outsiders’ to the court, loyal subjects of the emperor, but with their own interests to represent.¹⁰² Even those more closely connected to the inner circles of the imperial regime, as was the case with both Themistius and Claudian, were not simply reading from a script dictated to them by political masters.¹⁰³ There is, it should be noted, no direct evidence of any emperor instructing an orator to disseminate a specific political message, nor ‘vetting’ their speech prior to delivery.¹⁰⁴

Moreover, viewing imperial panegyric as ‘propaganda’ misjudges the role of the audience, casting them as ‘recipients’ of a ‘message’, of which it was the job of the orator to ‘convince’ them. It seems to me *a priori* unlikely that the regime would use these great ceremonial occasions to communicate new, possibly controversial ideas and information. Understanding the orations as epideictic however, invites us to reassess the audience as active participants in a celebration of socio-political unity. They were not there to be convinced of the good of the emperor or any of his actions, by their very presence they had already indicated, in ritual terms, that they accepted these. Augustine famously wrote about the despair he felt as he prepared to deliver an oration at the imperial court in Milan: ‘In [my panegyric], I would lie, and win favour from those who knew I was lying.’¹⁰⁵ His misery rests not in the fact that his blatant lies would make the speech unsuccessful, that he would be unable to persuade his audience, but the very opposite. Shadi Bartsch’s analysis of Pliny’s panegyric for Trajan reveals the orator’s anxiety to prove the sincerity of his praise. Subjects of an autocratic regime were

¹⁰² Nixon & Saylor Rogers (1994), 29-31. Nixon (1993), 231 makes this point with respect to some of the authors of the *Pan. Lat.* Symmachus delivered his *Or.* 1-3 as a senatorial ambassador to the imperial court, see Sogno (2006), 1-21. We might also think of the unusual and ambiguous position of Julian, panegyrist as Caesar to an Augustus.

¹⁰³ I explore the political role of both Themistius and Claudian in the chapters on context below. It should be noted that there is no simple division between ‘court’ orators purely representing the emperor and ‘independent’ speakers with their own interests. A senatorial ambassador like Symmachus could attune himself to the nuances of imperial ideology, see Sogno (2006), 16-17. See also Rees (2002), 23-25 on a selection of the earlier *Pan. Lat.*; Drake (1976), 46-47 on this balance in Eusebius’ panegyric for Constantine.

¹⁰⁴ For ‘vetting’, see for example Errington (2000), 864 on Themistius. Those historians who claim to reconstruct such a relationship do so from the internal evidence of the panegyrics themselves; not an invalid methodology, nor without its uses, but one that risks circularity (i.e. ‘the orator says this, therefore the emperor must have wanted it said, *ergo* the orator is disseminating the message of the regime’). I also note the argument of Rees (2002), 24-25, that the very number of panegyrics delivered (the merest fraction having survived), should make us sceptical of any effective system of central control.

¹⁰⁵ Aug., *Conf.* 6.6.9.

well aware that praise for the ruler was not necessarily meant to come from the heart.¹⁰⁶ This did not, in itself, reduce the utility of panegyric.

Themistius and Claudian were undoubtedly closely bound to the regimes which they served. They both were called upon numerous times to deliver orations for formal court occasions, and both received considerable preferment and advantage from their respective emperors. I will have more to say in my contextualising chapters on Themistius and Claudian about their respective political positions and circumstances. My aim will be to apply those theories of epideictic which I have laid out here, and from which neither orator has yet benefited in the scholarship. These theories provide us with two guiding principles, which are very usefully applied to Themistius and Claudian: that their orations are a form of authorised speech, which celebrate and bring about political and social unity; and that they are in no simple sense a direct communication by the imperial regime for which the orator is merely a channel. Themistius and Claudian were both closely involved in the creation and propagation of ‘imperial ideology’, but that this ideology was not a single, monolithic, internally consistent set of ideas to be conveyed to the audience. Rather, it was plural, often inconsistent and occasionally competing discourses of praise shaped around the persona of the orator, but coherent in its celebration of the Roman emperor and the Roman state.

It should be noted, furthermore, that no audience can in reality be perfectly united, and alternative viewpoints and dissenting voices sometimes can be detected, breaking through the serene millpond of elevated rhetoric. The world of ceremony was at a remove from that of transactional power politics, but it can never be entirely separated from it. As Pernot notes:

The discourse of praise lends itself admirably to hidden meanings. The affirmation of universally recognised values is not exclusive of the adoption of more limited positions, reflecting the interests or the convictions of a group or a person. It is normal to insert precise messages in speeches of praise, in the form of not only advice, requests, and petitions but also complaints and recriminations.¹⁰⁷

As Bartsch argues, the ‘axis’ of praise and blame, mirror images of one another, can, in the context of an autocracy where all criticism of the ruler must be veiled, a form of doublespeak which invites the audience to understand precisely the opposite meaning to the panegyrist’s flattery. Julian’s

¹⁰⁶ Bartsch (1994), 148-162 (though cf. the comments of Innes (2011), 78-79). This is not to say that praise *must* always be insincere: genuine political alliances, even personal warmth, can develop between autocrat and subject (I argue below, p. 61, that Themistius was genuinely well-disposed towards Theodosius, an emperor who valued and rewarded his skills). But sincerity was not the criterion by which a successful panegyric was judged, because convincing persuasion was not the object.

¹⁰⁷ Pernot (2015), 102-103.

orations for his loathed cousin Constantius II and his wife, which include some curiously double-edged remarks, are often read in such a way.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, the rituals of which epideictic formed such an important part could only temporarily paper over the inevitable discords of Roman political life. As Ruth Webb observes:

dissent, and knowledge of the less glorious aspects of the subject, certainly existed outside the speeches, in the general knowledge of the audience and in individual opinion... This was the wider background against which the epideictic orator struggled to ensure that one view prevailed, and that his audience were given reason to assent, if only temporarily, to this view.¹⁰⁹

While persuasion is not integral to epideictic in the same way that it is to judicial or deliberative rhetoric, it is not necessarily absent either. Scholars have paid increasing attention to the argumentative and persuasive structures inherent in epideictic.¹¹⁰ The encomium of ideal types around which much epideictic is built can function as a form of moral exhortation. The panegyric can act as a *speculum principis*, inviting and encouraging the recipient to live up to the virtues attributed to them.¹¹¹ I shall return in a later section of the chapter to the implications this has for our understanding of the role of religion in Claudian and Themistius. It will suffice at this point to say that, while I will not be seeking to identify dissent, *per se*, in their orations, I wish to be alive to their argumentative structures and exhortative qualities.

I have argued that panegyrics should be seen as socially unifying epideictic. I have also previously described how the aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that they are a statement of pagan identity, a form of resistance to forces of Christianisation within the political sphere. This may strike the reader as paradoxical. How can Themistius and Claudian be viewed both as masters of epideictic, and engaged in religious controversy? In a society divided at least to a degree by religious identity,

¹⁰⁸ Bartsch (1994), 155-157, 169-180 on the awareness of panegyric's potential for doublespeak and the relationship between praise and blame. See also Ahl (1984), esp. 204-208 on 'figured speech'. For such an interpretation of Jul., *Or.* 1-3, see Tougher (1998); Tougher (2012), 27-30; Drake (2012), 36-40; Greenwood (2021), 25-27. These orations have been seen as deliberately subversive; Athanassiadi (1981), 60-62; though more positive readings are certainly possible, see Drake (2012), 40; Ross (2018); Niccolai (2019), 50-51 with n. 195. There are dangers in reading these orations through our knowledge of Julian's private feelings and later actions. In any case, Julian's political circumstances, as well as his personality, are unusual amongst fourth-century panegyrists.

¹⁰⁹ Webb (2003), 134. For an example of this, see James (2012), 52-53 on Julian's panegyric for Eusebia.

¹¹⁰ On the role of persuasion and argumentation in epideictic, see, in particular Webb (2003), *passim*; Webb (2009), 160-164; Pernot (2015), 87-91.

¹¹¹ On the exhortative element in panegyric, see Pernot (2015), 93-94, 103-104; Ware (2019), 293. Ware (2013), 313-314 discusses the potential for giving advice in panegyric, though suggests that the increasingly autocratic nature of imperial rule made this more difficult than in previous centuries. See also Vanderspoel (1995), 13 on panegyric and the defence of the values of *paideia*; Van Renswoude (2019), 73-76 on the relationship between panegyric and the tradition of philosophical *parrhesia* in Themistius.

we might expect an the epideictic orator to avoid religion altogether, or restrict themselves to the most bland religious formulations – and indeed, this is what we often see in modern secular societies, where speakers in such contexts, to borrow a phrase from the twenty-first-century political lexicon, ‘don’t do God’. This is not the case with Themistius and Claudian however, or indeed any other late-antique orator. They certainly do not avoid religious language and themes. And while some readers have portrayed them as doing so in a secularised or otherwise religiously neutral manner, this is precisely the understanding against which I am arguing. The rest of this chapter will seek a solution to this problem.

Culture, Mythology, and Religion

One of the most significant changes in the scholarship of late Antiquity over the last fifty years has been the reversal in the way in which the relationship between literature and religion is regarded. Historians of the earlier twentieth century, those who believed in an elite pagan ‘reaction’ to Christianity saw literature (indeed, any form of art) that referred to pagan deities, cult, or mythology as an integral part of this ‘last stand’; the senatorial pagans using classical culture as a cornerstone of their religious identity.¹¹² These senators, despite their occasional frivolities, were seen as a learned class, consciously engaged in the preservation of classical culture, a task that was as religious as it was academic.¹¹³ As the narrative of a fourth-century society polarised between pagans and Christians has collapsed, so too has the dichotomy between pagan and Christian literature.¹¹⁴ It has been shown again and again that all but a small, if noisy, section of educated Christians took just as much pleasure in these things as did their pagan neighbours, and saw no particular conflict between classical culture and their faith. This literary culture, which used to appear to historians as explicitly pagan, is now framed rather as ‘secular’, of no religious significance whatsoever.¹¹⁵ For most Christians, it was simply a non-issue, it was the world in which they had been raised, for these, in Alan Cameron’s words, ‘classical culture, culture based on the poets and ancient mythology, was the only culture there was’.¹¹⁶ Even an antithesis between ‘secular’ classical literature and Christian literature, explicitly founded on the Bible becomes untenable under the mildest scrutiny. The

¹¹² The connection between the pagan ‘revival’ and classical culture is averred in Bloch (1945), 240-241; Bloch (1963), 207-217. See also Markus (1974b), 5, 12-13 who propounded the notion of an increasingly polarised battle over classical culture between pagans and Christians from the 380s onwards, after a more comfortable accommodation in earlier decades. On this historiography, see now Cameron (2011), 6-8; Gassman (2020a), 3-4; Ryser (2020), 54-55.

¹¹³ In particular the alleged religious and intellectual coalition in late fourth-century Rome, the ‘circle of Symmachus’, played a significant role in this interpretation; Bloch (1963), 216-217; Markus (1974b), 9-11.

¹¹⁴ See Van Hoof & Van Nuffelen (2015), 4-6; Ryser (2020), 15.

¹¹⁵ For ‘secular’ culture, see Cameron (2011), 7-8.

¹¹⁶ Cameron (2004a), 343. Literary and even philosophical education was not generally segregated on religious lines in the fourth century, pagan and Christian youths studied together under the same teachers; see now Tanaseanu-Döbler (2012), 101-102.

Church Fathers, of whom Augustine is only the most obvious example, wrestled and often rejected their classical education, but could never fully escape it.

To discuss references to pagan mythology in epideictic rhetoric, as if they had anything to do with ‘genuine’ pagan religion, therefore, may appear to turn back the tide of scholarly progress. To be clear, I do not at all wish to reject these conclusions wholesale. It is absolutely clear that to claim that all authors who wrote about pagan gods or pagan mythology were at the very least crypto-pagans themselves is impossible. Further, I accept, with Cameron, that it is wrong to assume that ‘anyone who wrote on mythological themes, while not necessarily a serious pagan, was at any rate not likely to be a serious Christian’.¹¹⁷ As I discussed in the previous chapter, I am dissatisfied with attempts to correlate religious identity with hostility to anything that was ‘outside’ of one’s religion, in this case classical culture. But just as earlier historiography was over-hasty in its reading of mythological works as pagan, so contemporary scholars have risked overconfidence in their refutation. As Neil McLynn comments, ‘Having overcome earlier tendencies to see all pagan images as symbols of anti-Christian defiance, we have perhaps become overhasty in denying them any numinous qualities.’¹¹⁸ Just as I do not wish to return in an uncomplicated way to previous narratives of religious conflict, neither do I wish to flee from the ‘secular’ interpretation of classicising literature straight back into the arms of an unsubtle religious interpretation. Rather I am, in a sense, attempting to break down another set of binaries: those between ‘conflict’ and ‘coexistence’; ‘religious’ and ‘secular’. In a recent monograph on the relationship between religion and classicising literature, Rob Shorrock eschews any attempt to discern religious identity through literature, preferring to talk about ‘poets of Christ’ and ‘poets of the Muses’, rather than Christians and pagans; an approach that he explicitly concedes as ahistorical: ‘My interest is not in the historical reality of flesh-and-blood poets, but in the way that the texts we have in front of us communicate and debate ideas.’¹¹⁹ I, on the other hand, wish to deal with the historical reality of individual religious identity, and see productive lines of enquiry in examining the content of literary texts in the context of the religious identity of both author and audience.

The reluctance to see religious significance in the literature of the later fourth century has been particularly influential in the scholarship of Themistius and Claudian. Gilbert Dagron’s study set the direction in the 1960s for most later work on Themistius:

¹¹⁷ Cameron (2004a), 340.

¹¹⁸ McLynn (2009), 585. See also Gassman (2020a), 12-13 on the weaknesses of a purely ‘secular’ reading of late fourth-century civic rituals.

¹¹⁹ Shorrock (2011), 8.

Son originalité consiste plutôt à rompre le tête-a-tête stérile christianisme-paganisme pour envisager les oppositions religieuses du point de vue qui l'intéresse, celui de la culture et de la politique. De cette façon il échappe à l'impasse du 'paganisme', *mais s'il convertit son hellénisme en quelque chose, c'est en un humanisme, non en autre religion*.¹²⁰

This interpretation has been followed by subsequent scholarship, which presents Themistius' rhetoric as seeking a 'middle ground' between pagan Hellenism and Christianity. Themistius does not avoid questions of the divine, but presents them in such a way as to be acceptable across the religious divides: Jörg Ernesti refers to him as a 'Meister der Vermittlung zwischen den Positionen'.¹²¹ The dominant image of Themistius has been of a mild-mannered, 'humanist' philosopher, happy to muddle along in an increasingly Christian world, occasionally appealing for sectarian tolerance, based on a common worship of the same supreme God.¹²² While historians have acknowledged his undoubted paganism, Themistius' orations have been interpreted as carefully constructed exercises in religious neutrality. The content of his orations which references pagan gods, Greek philosophers, and classical literature was not 'religious', but represents a universally respected *paideia*.¹²³ Themistius is often seen as promoting a generic, generally acceptable monotheism, at least when he is dealing with the divine 'seriously'; his references to the more traditional pagan pantheon are purely literary and cultural. Ernesti comments that:

Der gebildete Heide der Kaiserzeit hatte zu den alten Göttern oftmals nurmehr ein distanziertes, nicht eigentlich religiöses Verhältnis (im christlichen Sinne einer Gewissensbindung), war aber durch Dichtung, Erziehung und Herkunft mit ihnen vertraut. Themistius scheint die mythischen Göttergestalten der Dichtung, die er als kulturelles Allgemeingut ansieht (er spricht besonders von Homer stets mit großer Achtung) als gemeinsamen, seinen christlichen wie seinen heidnischen Zuhören zugänglichen Anknüpfungspunkt...¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Dagron (1968), 149, my emphasis: "His originality consists rather in breaking the sterile Christian-pagan dialogue in order to consider religious oppositions from the point of view that interests him, that of culture and politics. In this way he escapes the dead end of 'paganism', but if he changes his Hellenism into something, it is into humanism, not into another religion."

¹²¹ Ernesti (1998), 455, 'a master of mediation between positions'; see also 445: Compare, for example Vanderspoel (1995), 18; Heather (1998b), 138-139; Heather & Moncur (2001), 24; Tanaseanu-Döbler (2012), 128; Skinner (2015), 246-248; Van Renswoude (2019), 74.

¹²² Them., *Or.* 5. Also his lost oration to Valens mentioned in Soc., 4.32. On Themistius and humanism, a respect for and transmission of Hellenic literary culture that transcends religious divides, see also Lemerle (1986), 55-66.

¹²³ For example, Heather & Moncur (2001), 64; Leppin (2003), 61; Sandwell (2010), 119. Further discussion in Part II.

¹²⁴ Ernesti (1998), 458-459: 'The educated pagan of the imperial era often had only a distant, not really religious relationship with the old gods (in the Christian sense of a commitment of conscience), but was familiar with them through poetry, education and tradition. To Themistius, the mythical gods of poetry, which he regards as common cultural property (he always speaks of Homer with great esteem), seem to be a common point of contact accessible to his Christian and pagan audience...' Cf. Heather & Moncur (2001), 64.

Claudian's religious identity has been seen similarly as irrelevant to his rhetoric, certainly since Cameron refuted the notion of a connection between the poet and the pagan aristocracy of Rome, demolishing the idea of Claudian as the spokesman of a senatorial pagan resistance, and the old idea that he was a member of the 'circle of Symmachus'.¹²⁵ This has very significant repercussions for the way Cameron reads the 'pagan' content of Claudian's orations; that is, he does not see them as being pagan at all. They are merely antiquarian aesthetic flourishes: 'in literature the old mythology had long since become merely decorative, and in any case bore so little relationship to contemporary paganism that none but a few extremists gave its pagan associations a thought.'¹²⁶ There have been some dissenters, particularly on the continent: Isabella Gualandri, in a chapter reviewing Cameron's treatment of Claudian, while generally approving of his project, professes her view that in various places 'Claudian's poetry has an unmistakably pagan flavour'.¹²⁷ Ratti goes rather further, describing Claudian as a 'militant' pagan, whose poetry should be seen as part of the 'conflict' between paganism and Christianity.¹²⁸ Nonetheless, Cameron's has been the dominant reading of Claudian, certainly in Anglophone scholarship.¹²⁹

Two very recent monographs suggest a further reassessment of Claudian's relationship with religion may be taking place. Philip Hardie's 2019 work, *Classicism and Christianity in Late Antique Latin Poetry* compares Claudian's use of the classical literary heritage (in particular Virgil), and the traditional purposes to which he turns it, to the reuse and reassessment by Christian authors such as Paulinus and, most prominently, Prudentius. For Hardie, there is little meaningful distinction between 'pagan' and 'Christian' poetic traditions in late Antiquity; they draw on the same themes, images, and techniques, but use them for differing purposes: on one hand the proclamation of the Christian faith, on the other, the development of a more traditionally Roman imperial ideology.¹³⁰ This is a very productive approach, one that I employ extensively in my chapters on Claudian. Hardie, however, does not, for the most part, follow the argument into the realm of religious or political

¹²⁵ Cameron (1970), 214-227, 249 for circle of Symmachus. In contrast to earlier scholarship, for example Levy (1958), 339, 345 arguing that Claudian's poetry is designed to appeal to the pagan aristocracy.

¹²⁶ Cameron (1970), 199. Reiterated at Cameron (2011), 207-208.

¹²⁷ Gualandri (2013), 145. Cf. the similar views propounded in Gualandri (1989), and her reading of *VI Cons.* in Gualandri (2015). Similar conclusions are reached by Charlet (2013), 268: 'au moins culturellement païenne'.

¹²⁸ Ratti (2010), 282: 'Son paganisme avéré, militant même par endroits...' He offers (281-289) a variety of arguments, some convincing, some less so, for a religious reading Claudian's invectives; these follow a not dissimilar line in some respects to my analysis of Claudian, but serve an attempt to situate the poet '...dans le cadre précisément du conflit entre païens et chrétiens' (281), the traditional historiography of which Ratti remains one of the strongest advocates.

¹²⁹ To take a selection of authors who have followed Cameron's views: Roberts (1989b), 335-336. Dewar (1996), xx-xxi; Schindler (2009), 170-171 and Schindler (2015); Ware (2012), 48-53.

¹³⁰ Hardie (2019), with chapters on contrasting visions of Rome, pagan and Christian views of the cosmos, concord and discord, paradox, and allegory. Hardie is by no means the first to acknowledge the relationship between the poetry of Prudentius and Claudian, see below, pp. 115-116.

history, or ask what this contrast with contemporary Christian poetry tells us about Claudian's religious identity.¹³¹ As has been noted by reviewers, Hardie views poets such as Claudian and Prudentius as part of an almost timeless continuum with the classical (Virgilian) past, rather than asking what makes them distinctively 'late-antique'; the merits of this argument will be debated by scholars of Latin poetics, but it is certainly not one that lends itself to answering historical questions.¹³²

Gabriela Ryser's 2020 monograph, *Education, Religion and Literary Culture in the 4th Century CE* considers Claudian's unfinished epic, *De Raptu Proserpinae*. She seeks to relate the poem to a tradition of Orphic and Neoplatonic philosophy, and remains open to religious readings, but does not wish to see it as exclusively religious.¹³³ Her assessment of Claudian is, in some ways, not dissimilar to the scholarly understanding of Themistius, whose works supposedly aim to create a religious 'middle ground'. For example, on one of the major themes of the poem, she comments that:

Although the question of a beneficent divine principle was of importance to the Christian and the pagan Neoplatonic discourses in Late Antiquity, the formulations of the poet do not seem to claim allegiance to either religious or philosophical affiliation with his treatment of the topic. Rather, he touched upon a topic which occupied the minds of late antique society at large regardless of belief.¹³⁴

Both of these works move beyond the approach that considers religion irrelevant to Claudian's poetic project. My analysis has a certain amount in common with both, and draws on many of the same ideas. Neither, however, confronts head-on the question of the relationship between literature, religion, and politics in Claudian's works to which Cameron has provided the most complete and influential answer.

In the remainder of this section, I wish to address three assumptions that seem to underlie the aestheticising, cultural approach to both Themistius and Claudian, which are: (1) that, despite the fact that the pagan gods had been intertwined in classical culture from its inception, 'religion' and 'literature' were fundamentally separate fields, and that it is therefore inappropriate to seek any

¹³¹ Hardie's concerns are largely perpendicular to those of Cameron; while Cameron (1970), and (2011) appear in the bibliography, there is no sustained engagement with questions of religious identity, or of a 'pagan revival'. He is, for instance, non-committal as to whether Augustine is right to describe Claudian as a pagan; Hardie (2019), 88. Though he is open to the possibility that Claudian's works may have a 'playfully polemic edge' (146) in their relationship with Christian poetry.

¹³² Noted by Trout (2020), criticised more strongly by Peltari (2020).

¹³³ Ryser (2020). See in particular the discussion at 366-377.

¹³⁴ Ryser (2020), 380. She also discusses (381) how Claudian's poetry is part of a classical literary culture that was important to the Roman elite 'independently of their religious affiliation'.

genuine religious significance in epideictic rhetoric such as the orations of Theodosius and Claudian; (2) that even if there had been a connection, it vanished in the last decades of the fourth century, and particularly in the post-Theodosian period as pagan mythology was ‘aestheticised’ in a newly Christian society; and (3) that there is only one possible response to the ‘pagan’ content in fourth-century oratory, that speeches are either ‘religious’ or they are not.

Literature and Religion

The first issue that I wish to explore, is the idea that there was, in the classical world, an unbridgeable separation between religion and literature. This is a problem that applies much more widely than the rather particular conditions of late Antiquity, and is rooted in the very nature of Graeco-Roman religion. In stark contrast to the Abrahamic religions, paganism was famously not a ‘religion of the book’.¹³⁵ This has posed considerable challenges for scholars. Where does the true locus of this religion lie? It had no central authoritative texts around which to base a tradition of exegesis. While a vast number of authors wrote about the divine, from poets like Homer and Virgil, to philosophers like Plato and statesmen like Cicero, their relationship with ‘genuine religion’ has been disputed. All we can say confidently is that they do not have the same relationship with religious experience that, say, the Pauline epistles do within Christianity.

Many scholars of Roman literature, and in particular poetry, have preferred to answer that it has at best a tangential relationship with religion. To give one illustrative example, Michael Roberts, in his discussion of Latin *epithalamium*, rejects outright the possibility of any link between mythological imagery and religious experience, not only in the post-Constantinian example of Claudian, but even in the first-century poet Statius:

mythology, especially in a stylised context like the *epithalamium*, had long been deprived of all substantial pagan belief. The process of secularisation is already complete in Statius. It was this detachment of artistic representations of the pagan gods from any system of religious belief that furnished, at least among the cultural elite, the conditions for the reappropriation of mythical schemata as an encoded model of human relations.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Scheid (2003), 18 cites the lack of a central revealed text, and concomitant lack of ‘dogma’ and ‘orthodoxy’ as the first of the defining ‘major principles’ of Roman religion. Instead, this was a religion based on ritual and ‘orthopraxis’. See also Scheid (1992), 122; Rives (2007), 7-8. There were of course various sacred and religious texts that played their part (see, for example, the discussion of Rüpke (2014), 153-164), and, as I argue here, literature could be religious. But adherents of traditional Graeco-Roman religion had nothing that played an equivalent role to the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity.

¹³⁶ Roberts (1989b), 335-336. Roberts is not clear in what period, if ever, he thinks it would be worth seeking a non-secular literature.

This perspective has been challenged, however, by the work of Denis Feeney, especially in his 1998 monograph *Literature and Religion at Rome*. He argues that it is misguided to treat literature and ‘real religion’ as separate and opposed categories.¹³⁷ This separation, he shows, depends on a rather narrow definition of what Roman religion was, forgetting that ‘religion’, as much, indeed, as ‘literature’, are our concepts, which we must take great care in mapping onto the ancient world.¹³⁸

Knowing that Roman religion did not depend upon texts in the manner of Christianity, some have chosen instead to locate the kernel of true religion in the practicalities of cult, in temples and sacrifices, rather than poetry.¹³⁹ Cameron suggests that, ‘Much of the divine apparatus of ancient poetry bore little relation to living cult practice’, as if this were a clinching argument.¹⁴⁰ But Feeney convincingly argues that literature was as much a method of ‘doing religion’ as is ritual, both a locus of knowledge and experience within the variegated concept which we call Roman religion. He concludes that:

As moderns with a nostalgia for genuine experience, we may wish that Roman literature had been more ‘faithful’ to ‘real’ religion, but this is to overlook the fact that there was no one real religion for literature to be faithful to in the first place. Further, the wish to make Roman literature track other supposedly more real practices derogates drastically from the important cultural work which literature was enabled to do by virtue of its own characteristic power.¹⁴¹

There is, further, a tendency to suppose that the ancient audience of mythological literature did not believe in the stories they were told, in any way that is recognisable to us, and therefore they cannot have taken this literature seriously as religion. It is generally assumed that the educated Roman elite was too sophisticated to believe in their myths, except in a rarefied allegorical form – certainly scepticism towards the scurrilous deeds attributed to the gods, the *fabulae poetarum*, is a tradition that goes back at least as far as Plato, and was ready made in late Antiquity for the defence against the aspersions of Christian polemicists.¹⁴² But myth was, as Gabriela Ryser puts it ‘a shared “area of contact” between religion and literature’.¹⁴³ We mistake Graeco-Roman religion if we assume it

¹³⁷ Feeney (1998), see also Feeney (1991).

¹³⁸ Feeney (1998), 1.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 7 on the search for authentic religious experience, also 115-117.

¹⁴⁰ Cameron (2007a), 29.

¹⁴¹ Feeney (1998), 141. See also the arguments of Ryser (2020), 33-38.

¹⁴² Liebeschuetz (1995), 196; Lepelley (2010), 479; Cameron (2007a), 29; Ryser (2020), 34-36. Note the inclusion of myths into Julian’s conception of *paideia*; Tanaseanu-Döbler (2012), 111-112.

¹⁴³ Ryser (2020), 31. See also on the role of myth in Roman religion, Scheid (2003), 178-181; Rives (2007), 28-32; Rüpke (2007), 126-130.

depended on belief in the same way in which Christianity does.¹⁴⁴ Feeney illustrates the different modalities of belief that operated in Roman religion.¹⁴⁵ Not just a modern abstraction, this can be seen in Varro's tripartite theology, three modes of talking about the gods, that of the state, the poets, and the philosophers.¹⁴⁶ Discussing the work of Virgil, Feeney writes that:

we must recognise that there was no one homogeneous background of 'belief' for the poem to map itself onto in order to succeed. The variety of ways of talking about the divine which the poem assumes in its audience, and uses itself, is so diverse that it means virtually nothing to ask the question: 'Did Vergil's audience believe in the gods of the *Aeneid*?'¹⁴⁷

Compare, say, the reaction of the audience of Claudian's *De Bello Gildonico* to his narration of the divine events brought about by Gildo's crimes: 'Now fearing ruin, and weakened by the denial of fruits of the field, Roma made haste to the threshold of Olympus... At last she reached heaven, fell prostrate at the knees of Jupiter the Thunderer, and commenced such a sad plea.'¹⁴⁸ If you had asked members of court, pagan or Christian, whether they believed that these things had taken place, that Roma had really fled to the throne of Jupiter, and made a lengthy appeal for help, I suspect you would be met by bafflement.

Moreover, though the notion of the 'lying poet' was undoubtedly a trope in Antiquity, poets did claim for themselves a form of divine knowledge. Since the days of Homer and Hesiod, poets had portrayed themselves as inspired by the Muses, a tradition that continued into the fourth century.¹⁴⁹ Familiar and formulaic though this may be, we should not underestimate the extent to which it reflected a genuine understanding of the religious role of the poet. In late Antiquity, this was a live question: Julian, of course, included poets among those classical authors whom he regarded it as impossible for Christians to teach properly. He makes it clear that they are the recipients of divine revelation: 'The gods led Homer and Hesiod and Demosthenes and Herodotus and Thucydides and Isocrates and Lysias in all their learning. Did not some think themselves dedicated to Hermes, others to the Muses?'¹⁵⁰ Julian's position that Christians should be excluded from *paideia* was probably a minority one, but he seems to be reflecting a genuine commonplace about the divine

¹⁴⁴ Scheid (2003), 19; Rüpke (2007), 86-87. I note the arguments of Bendlin (2000) and Bendlin (2001), 200-201 that belief, in the sense of individual religious sentiment, should not be eliminated from our understanding; it is nonetheless clear that questions of doctrine and orthodoxy, so central to Christianity, were largely irrelevant to the ritual and mythology of Roman religion. A usefully balanced discussion can be found in Rives (2007), 47-50.

¹⁴⁵ Feeney (1998), 14-21.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 15-16. See also Rives (2007), 21-23; Rüpke (2007), 119-122.

¹⁴⁷ Feeney (1991), 180; Ryser (2020), 37-38.

¹⁴⁸ Claud., *Gild.* 17-18, 26-27.

¹⁴⁹ Shorrock (2011), 14, 21. I discuss extensively below the role of the Muses in Themistius and Claudian.

¹⁵⁰ Jul., *Ep.* 36.423A. See the comments of Ryser (2020), 46-47.

inspiration of classical authors.¹⁵¹ Notable too is that this access to divine wisdom is not limited to poets, but also rhetoricians. It was a claim that continued to be made by philosophers, orators and poets into the fourth century.¹⁵²

Feeney's monograph refers principally to Republican and early Imperial poetry, and is especially interested in the comparison of Greek and Latin Literature. There is no reason, however, that the methodology employed should not also be applicable to late Antiquity.¹⁵³ If anything, as I shall explore further below, pagans in this period had become more comfortable with the notion of connecting classical literature with the divine – Themistius makes frequent reference to the supernatural wisdom present in the works of Homer and Plato, and Claudian makes significant use of the traditional notion of the poet's divine inspiration. Feeney's arguments suggest that we should not reject the possibility that references to the gods in these authors have a 'genuine' religious significance, even if they seem to bear little relation to contemporary pagan cult. To say that the references to the divine in the works of Claudian and Themistius do not correspond to what they or their pagan audience believed about the gods is, while not necessarily false, somewhat to miss the point, and certainly insufficient to dismiss entirely their religious significance.

Ambivalence, Ambiguity and the 'Aesthetic Turn'

If it is accepted that we cannot in principle disconnect classical literature from religion, it might still be protested that special circumstances prevailed in late Antiquity. This was, after all, no longer the world of Homer, Plato, Virgil or Ovid, but a rapidly Christianising society. The arguments that scholars have put forward against reading authors of this period in a religious frame tend to focus more on this late-antique shift than on a general understanding of the relationship between literature and religion in Graeco-Roman culture. The narrative may be briefly summarised: Christians, as they came to dominate the Empire intellectually and culturally, required a means by which they could annex the social power of the classical tradition, the only education which the vast majority of the elite knew or valued. In order to eliminate the potential problems caused by the fact that this tradition was steeped in pagan religion, they aestheticised and secularised this content, turning the gods into mere symbols, figures of antiquarian interest.

These are undoubtedly important and often accurate observations. Indeed, while this evolution in attitudes was ongoing throughout the fourth century and into the fifth, one can identify a

¹⁵¹ For Julian's attitude to Christian teachers, and pagan reactions to it, see below, p. 60.

¹⁵² On the religious role of philosophers in late Antiquity, see Fowden (1982). For orators, see Pernot (2015), 85.

¹⁵³ On the continuing ethical and (potential) religious role of *paideia* in late Antiquity, see Ryser (2020), 39-40.

particularly significant shift in the Theodosian period, an ‘aesthetic turn’.¹⁵⁴ This is reflected most clearly in attitudes towards pagan mythological statuary. Legislation issued by Theodosius in 382 instructed that these statues should be respected for their artistic value, rather than condemned for their association with pagan cult.¹⁵⁵ This attitude is also evinced in the next decade by the Christian poet Prudentius in his *Contra Symmachum*, in which he appeals to pagans.

I wish you now to put aside childish festivals, ridiculous rites and shrines unfitting for such a kingdom. Wash the marble stained with dripping blood, nobles; let pure statues, the works of great artists (*artificum magnorum opera*), be allowed to rest; these are to be the most beautiful ornaments of our land, and polluted usage ought not to corrupt the monuments of art (*monumenta... artis*), which were turned to vice.¹⁵⁶

These passages stand in stark contrast to the attitude displayed earlier in the century by Eusebius, who claimed (however dubiously), that Constantine had transferred a great quantity of mythological art to his new capital for ‘the laughter and mockery of those who saw’.¹⁵⁷ Statuary depicting mythological figures continued to be a feature of the urban landscape throughout late Antiquity, sometimes left in place, sometimes transposed to new locations.¹⁵⁸ As we can see from the fact that Constantine chose to decorate his new capital with antique sculptures, Christians had been coming to terms with these figures throughout the fourth century. It was in the Theodosian age, however, that these attitudes came to be articulated more clearly, an acceptance of them as objects of aesthetic value and a determined rejection of their religious associations. At the end of the fourth century, and in the first half of the fifth, museum-like assemblages of classical statuary, including cult images, began to be created, such as the collection of the Christian courtier Lausus at Constantinople; the triumph of artistic appreciation over the religious.¹⁵⁹

As I have said, the leading voice in reading pagan poets in an ‘aesthetic’ rather than ‘religious’ manner is Alan Cameron. I noted in the previous chapter that the reign of Theodosius continues to represent a major turning point in *Last Pagans of Rome*, and this is true of his view of the relationship between literature and religion. Undoubtedly, Cameron sees this as a broader fourth-century

¹⁵⁴ Various authors have described this as a process of ‘secularisation’, see for example. Caseau (2011), 485-488. I prefer the term ‘aestheticisation’ as raising fewer methodological problems, and to avoid overlap and confusion with the work on the secular by Markus and others (see above, p. 11).

¹⁵⁵ *CTh* 16.10.8. See further discussion of this legislation below, p. 96.

¹⁵⁶ Prud., *C. Symm.* 1.499-505.

¹⁵⁷ Eus., *V. Const.* 3.54. Recent scholarship has been unimpressed by Eusebius’ interpretations of this transposition of statuary to Constantinople; see Coates-Stephens (2017), 310. I discuss Constantine’s intentions further below, p. 95.

¹⁵⁸ Jacobs (2010), 271; D’Annoville (2016), 349-350 for the relocation of statuary.

¹⁵⁹ On the Lausus collection, see Mango, Vickers & Francis (1992); Bassett (2000); Stirling (2014), 103-104. Bassett (2015), 251-257 arguing that this collection represented a new approach to the reuse of antique sculpture in Constantinople. On similar collections at Rome, see Coates-Stephens (2017).

phenomenon.¹⁶⁰ But it is notable that that of the five ‘pagan writers’ a religious reading of whom he attempts to refute in Chapter 6, four of them wrote during the Theodosian period.¹⁶¹ It also worth noting how Cameron explains his fundamental objection to the notion that Claudian wrote ‘pagan’ verse.

While there is no way of discovering his personal beliefs, there is one thing we do know for certain. All Claudian’s poems were written for Christian patrons, and most of them publicly performed in front of an overwhelmingly Christian audience at court in Milan. Beyond question his poetry appealed to at any rate to lay Christians. Even if Claudian himself was a pagan, his work cannot have been thought to reflect pagan or subversive values by those who knew him best.¹⁶²

Cameron does not go so far as to say that to produce pagan art in the Theodosian period would have been unsafe, in the sense that it might bring down the wrath of the imperial regime. But it remained his view that genuinely pagan art could not be produced in a Christianised sphere such as the imperial court of Honorius.¹⁶³

This view can be found elsewhere. Roberts, as I noted above, saw even the poetry of Statius as fully ‘secularised’. But he also saw the reign of Theodosius as marking a new era, citing as I have the lines of Prudentius that attack pagan statuary:

With the closing of the temples and interdiction of cult practice by Theodosius even official attitudes changed: from the abolition of paganism to the preservation of its edifices and fittings, now cleansed of direct association with religious cult...The aesthetic perception of the pagan gods long achieved in practice by the educated classes and the disassociation of those gods from religious belief now achieve definitive form through imperial legislation.¹⁶⁴

Roberts sees a direct analogy in this process between the material arts and literature.¹⁶⁵ Further examples could no doubt be cited. As Christopher Jones comments: ‘Those who consider the events of the 390s as marking the end of traditional Roman religion tend to assume that what remained was a form of “cultural” or “erudite” paganism, as if authors could not in real life have quietly venerated pagan gods or believed what they say about them.’¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁰ See for instance, Cameron (2011), 419.

¹⁶¹ Cameron (2011), 206-230. The four are: Rutilius Namatianus, Ammianus Marcellinus, Pacatus, and Julius Obsequens (whom Cameron would prefer to leave undated, but for the sake of argument assumes is late fourth or early fifth century). The exception is Marius Victorinus. Cameron also deals with Claudian in this chapter.

¹⁶² Cameron (2004a), 341, reiterated at Cameron (2011), 208.

¹⁶³ Cf. his views on poetry in fifth-century Egypt, Cameron (2007a), 21, 43.

¹⁶⁴ Roberts (1989b), 336.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 336.

¹⁶⁶ Jones (2014), 113-114. Jones argues here for the increasing difficulty of saying much definitive about the religious identity of figures in this period; a point that I shall contest with my reading of Claudian.

As I explained above, I do not dismiss the plain fact that one of the ways in which Christians came to reckon with the classical tradition was to reduce the religious elements within it to mere aesthetics. Nor do I particularly object to the notion that these attitudes became more articulated and explicit as the fourth century progressed. What I take issue with is the assumption that this settled the argument, that once the ‘aestheticising’ approach took hold, it was the only possible way of looking at pagan imagery in literature.

Jas Elsner writes of late-antique imagery that, ‘the Christianity or paganness of a work of art lay not in its iconography but in how its viewer chose to see it’.¹⁶⁷ Philip Hardie demonstrates the way in which the building blocks of classical imagery were available to both pagan and Christian authors in late Antiquity, and could be reconfigured by those authors to tell different stories about Rome, and the universe itself; for example in his comparison of the poems of the Christian Lactantius and Claudian on the phoenix. The phoenix for Lactantius symbolises the Christian idea of resurrection, while in Claudian it represents the traditional notion of imperial *renovatio*.¹⁶⁸ These classical images are not ‘inherently’ pagan or Christian, but were used and reused in both traditions to very differing ends in late Antique texts. I wish to take this dynamic a stage further. I will explore not just how pagan and Christian authors ‘debated’ themes and images, but how those themes and images could be ‘debated’ by the author’s audience.¹⁶⁹ Authors like Claudian, I will argue, not only used images that were open to various uses and interpretations, but used them in ways that were themselves ambiguous and ambivalent.¹⁷⁰

Those who have argued against reading mythology in late-antique literature in a religious way have fallen into the trap of assuming that a text can have only one interpretation. This approach neglects to consider that it may be ambiguous and ambivalent, susceptible to more than one explanation, and indeed designed by the author to be so. A text need not be *either* religious *or* literary, it may be

¹⁶⁷ Elsner (1998), 747. On the complex links between literature and the visual arts in late Antiquity, see now Elsner & Hernández Lobato (2017), 12-18.

¹⁶⁸ Lactant., *De ave phoenice*; Claud., *Carm. min.* 27; Hardie (2019), 140-149. Claudian may well be alluding to Lactantius’ poem (146). For a strongly anti-Christian reading of this poem, see Ratti (2010), 282-283.

¹⁶⁹ On this debate, see, for example, Hardie’s comments on the theme of rejuvenation: ‘The rejuvenation of Rome is a recurrent theme in late antique panegyric of the city as a paradoxical theme, and the object of a tug-of-war between imperial panegyrists and Christian apologists, with their opposed views of what constitutes that rejuvenation’; Hardie (2019), 168.

¹⁷⁰ Hardie (2019), 48 gestures to the possibility of such a dynamic, but does not explore it further: ‘All the elements of Claudian’s visions of heaven and hell [in *Ruf.*] can be traced to sources in the non-Christian tradition of Latin poetry, chief among which are the works of Virgil, but one can sense how attractive – and assimilable to a Christian worldview – this dualistic plot would have been to Christian readers at the court of Honorius’

both, no more than an image need be religious or non-religious. From our own contemporary experience, we can identify texts, images, and indeed even rituals that are religious in form and content, but also have a power and significance for those who are not adherents or believers.¹⁷¹ The orations of Themistius and Claudian, therefore, do not need to be *either* aggressively pro-pagan, and offensive to Christian ears, *or* devoid of religious content altogether. They could be and, I will argue throughout this thesis, were, designed to represent a pagan worldview and appeal to a pagan religious identity, while also being open to interpretation by Christians as simply displays of classical erudition and rhetorical skill. I do not mean, and this is important to note, that the pagan content was hidden beneath an inoffensive veneer, that Claudian and Themistius were secret dissidents, part of a pagan underground. On the contrary, my argument is that these religious elements were there in plain sight, and it was up to the individual audience member what to do with them.¹⁷²

It is undoubtedly true, as Cameron has argued, that, most Christians had by this period incorporated classical mythology and pagan imagery into their culture, and took no issue with it whatsoever.¹⁷³ Indeed, had this not been the case, I doubt Themistius and Claudian would have written as they did – it was precisely because this material was inoffensive to most Christians that they were able to make use of it. But this does not necessarily imply that it had lost its religious meaning for pagans. As Gabriela Ryser has recently argued, ‘although involvement with classical culture is not unique to pagan religiosity, this does not exclude the possibility that for pagans it might have had a religious dimension’.¹⁷⁴

Religion in Rhetoric

In this section, I will bring together the arguments sketched out in the chapter so far, and describe how I understand the function of religion in Themistius’ and Claudian’s rhetorical context. I do not at all think, it is important to make clear, that the *principal* purpose of either author’s orations was religious. As epideictic orations, that was the glorification of the emperor (or other recipient), and the ritual presentation and encouragement of political unity. I do not see the religious content of Themistius’ and Claudian’s orations as detracting from the central political purpose, on the contrary it may even be seen as a buttress to it.

¹⁷¹ See the comments of Gradel (2002), 365-366 on the ambivalence of rituals.

¹⁷² A similar argument is made by Ryser (2020), 58, 61-62.

¹⁷³ Cameron (2004a), 342-343.

¹⁷⁴ Ryser (2020), 55.

In the chapters that follow, by close examination of the texts, I hope to demonstrate that Claudian and Themistius allowed a pagan interpretation of their rhetoric, one that presented their religious identities, and invited the activation of the pagan identity of members of their audience. There are, I will argue, numerous individual passages in which one can observe both authors engaging critically with Christian ideas, and putting forward a pagan point of view. But, moreover, the entire tenor of their works is highly pagan. That is to say, I argue that the fact that these works are packed with pagan divinities, pagan mythology and pagan philosophy, a fact that scholars have felt the need to ‘explain away’, since it seems to contrast so starkly with the accepted notion of a Christianised court, may be taken, to a certain extent, at face value. These pagan references are not simply a form of eccentric, antiquarian ornamentation, they are central to the literary enterprise.

But, as I argued above, it is crucial to understand this religious quality as ambiguous and ambivalent. It is *possible* to read Themistius and Claudian in a highly religious way, but it is not *necessary* to do so. Ambiguity and ambivalence is, it is important to note, not the same as neutrality. True religious neutrality in epideictic is almost impossible to achieve, since to be ‘neutral’ is to take a stance of some description. This is crucial to understanding their orations as both religiously charged, and also effective epideictic. As I discussed above, one option for the epideictic orator is to avoid religiously charged material altogether, the ‘don’t do God’ method. This is clearly not the approach taken by Themistius and Claudian. The alternative is to rely on ambivalent language, which the audience can understand according to their religious preferences. For the Christian members of the audience, Themistius and Claudian could be appreciated through an aesthetic lens, the potential religious implications neutralised, thus providing no sense of contradiction or disunity.¹⁷⁵ Hence the ‘the shining and unanimous face of the society’s universal understanding’, as Pernot describes it, was still presented, simultaneously with a pagan rather than a Christian worldview.¹⁷⁶

It is noteworthy that the vast majority of fourth-century imperial panegyric is conducted in a classical mode, with little or no reference to Christianity. The bulk of the fourth-century corpus is either written by known pagans – Claudian, Themistius, also Libanius and Symmachus – or written

¹⁷⁵ In this sense, ambivalence and ambiguity, as I conceive them, are different from the ‘doublespeak’ often identified as a feature of panegyric (see above, pp. 25-26). Doublespeak involves a primary, ‘surface’ meaning and a secondary, ‘cryptic’ meaning obtained by inverting the speaker’s statements, parsing their omissions etc. In my approach to ambivalence and ambiguity in Themistius and Claudian, I give neither potential reading priority as the ‘surface’ meaning, nor do I think the pagan material is cryptic.

¹⁷⁶ Pernot (2015), 99.

in a traditional style into which the new Christian universe barely intrudes.¹⁷⁷ The only imperial panegyric of the fourth century that features explicitly Christian content is that of Eusebius, the speech of praise given on the occasion of Constantine's tricennial celebrations in 336.¹⁷⁸ The great Christian orators of the fourth century, authors such as Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom, devoted their rhetorical talents principally to sermons.¹⁷⁹ This is perhaps particularly surprising when one considers that the later generations to whom we owe the survival of these texts were overwhelmingly Christian.¹⁸⁰ How to explain the fact that the Christian emperors of this century preferred to be praised in a non-Christian idiom? Part of it is doubtless that this was a highly traditional form that took time to evolve away from its heritage, carrying with it, not least in the works of Themistius and Claudian, the considerable charisma of classical *paideia*.¹⁸¹ But the discussion of this chapter also suggests another reason. Epideictic orations in an unambiguously Christian mode, would have excluded the pagan members of the court, and thereby failed to achieve the fundamental purpose of uniting the audience.¹⁸² But classically styled orations, even those that made extensive reference to the divine, were open to ambivalent readings that meant no audience-member was cut off from these vital celebrations of imperial power.

Themistius and Claudian create, in their rhetoric, imaginative worlds in which Christianity is absent, or at least de-centred. These two authors, I will argue, present an image of a Roman Empire still dependent on its traditional gods for its welfare and prosperity, where the precepts of the great philosophers of the classical world are still the ultimate ethical and intellectual standard, and where

¹⁷⁷ Flower (2013), 75-76 on the slow Christianisation of panegyric. One panegyrist – Pacatus, author of *Pan. Lat.* II(12), has recently been identified as a Christian; Turcan-Verkerk (2003); Cameron (2011), 228-229. But this has been deduced from external evidence, it is not apparent in his panegyric.

¹⁷⁸ Even Eusebius avoids the name of Christ in his panegyric, and has been seen as propounding a rather abstract, philosophical version of Christianity (thought it still contains theological material, and refers to the defeat of pagan 'idols'; Eus., *Laud. Const.* 10.2). See discussion of Drake (1976), 46-60, Drake (2015), 302-303; also Barnes (1981), 253-254; Flower (2013), 69-71 on Eusebius' synthesis of traditional and Christian material. The closest the remainder of the century approaches to a Christian imperial panegyric are Ambrose's funerary eulogies for Valentinian and Theodosius, a significant development, but one that was circumscribed by the very specific circumstances of a funeral held in a cathedral; Vanderspoel (1995), 19; Lunn-Rockliffe (2008), 192.

¹⁷⁹ Vanderspoel (1995), 16-18; Quiroga Puertas (2007), 38-41. See also Flower (2013), 37 on Augustine's rejection of panegyric in *Conf.* 6.6.9 (see above, p. 24) as part of the shaping of his own conversion from classical rhetoric to plain-spoken Christianity.

¹⁸⁰ I note the comments of MacMullen (1997), 4 on the bias towards the survival of Christian texts.

¹⁸¹ Flower (2013), 36-37, 44 on the power of traditionalism in epideictic. For the relationship between *paideia* and social and political power, see the now classic discussion of Brown (1992), 35-70. I discuss this theme further below, especially in the chapters on Themistius and my conclusion.

¹⁸² The need for ambiguity and ambivalence cut both ways. Only in Libanius' panegyrics for Julian do we find explicit attacks on Christianity, at liberty to speak thus because Julian's ideology encouraged the cultural and political exclusion of Christians. See, for example, Lib., *Or.* 12.33-34, 69; 13.12-13, 45-46. It is possible that Themistius' lost panegyric to Julian (see below p. 53) may have contained similar material, but Themistius' own religious thought makes this unlikely. Furthermore, Claudius Mamertinus' oration for Julian, *Pan. Lat.* III(11) contains nothing of this kind; Lieu (1989), 11-12.

Homer and Virgil still represent the wellsprings of culture. But it may have been the intention of these orators to appeal gently to their Christian audience, even on a subconscious level, to render them incrementally more favourable – or at least, more tolerant – towards the pagan way of seeing the world. This is not the same as presenting requests for specific changes in policy – for example, in my discussion of Claudian, I will demonstrate how he taps into the famous ‘Altar of Victory’ controversy, by presenting Victoria as a divine figure responsible for imperial protection.¹⁸³ My argument will not be that Claudian is petitioning for the return of the altar to the Roman *curia*. Rather, he is presenting an imaginatively arresting vision of the Empire as a place that still depends on pagan divinities such as Victoria. Without advocating a specific policy, Claudian carves out a space in the political sphere for the pagan understanding of divine Victory as a potent guardian of empire, the neglect of whose cult placed Rome at risk.

I have thus far focused on the perspective of the Christian members of the audience, in order to resolve the apparent problem of discussing religious controversy in relation to epideictic. It may of course seem strange to speak of a ‘pagan response’ vs a Christian response. Is this not to fall into the trap of making a fundamental division between Christian and pagan groups? There is certainly a danger here of simply reiterating the discredited notion of a ‘pagan faction’ in the Roman court. In order to avoid this, I will think of Themistius’ and Claudian’s rhetoric in terms of the ‘activation of identity’ and the creation of ‘groupness’. The religious content in their orations, I argue, is intended to activate the pagan-ness of the pagans in the audience. We have seen that the outcome of epideictic is the instantiation of a community. I see no reason why this could not apply to a subset of the audience, as well as the audience as a whole. This instantiation is by its very nature momentary, dependent on and specific to a certain circumstance – the political ritual of which epideictic oratory was key element. In this sense, therefore, epideictic rhetoric is a natural place to seek ‘groupness’, the temporary unification of otherwise disparate political actors. This notion builds on the approaches developed by Rebillard and Sandwell surveyed in the previous chapter. Pagans could identify and accept the religious significance of the orations, and activate their identity accordingly, experiencing a moment of collective unity that linked their pagan religion with a broader celebration of the Roman state. In acknowledging the pagan-ness of Themistius’ and Claudian’s praise of the emperor, the way they founded their rhetoric, their political ideology, on traditional religion, they gave salience to the religious identity they shared both with the orators and with other pagan members of the audience. But this unity was a transitory experience, rather than a permanent feature of the political life. ‘Groupness’, then, is a vital concept because it allows us to both assert

¹⁸³ See below, pp. 125-129.

the relevance of pagan religious identity to late Roman politics, while guarding against the well-established historiographical dangers of constructing a pagan ‘faction’ that acted in consort, politically, socially and culturally.

There is no question here of a true ‘pagan understanding’ opposed to a naive misunderstanding on the part of the Christians. If we accept the orations as deliberate ambiguous and ambivalent, then both readings remain equally valid. Nor does this religious material undermine or work against the political unity that was the chief purpose of the panegyrics. It still invites those pagan members of the audience to celebrate imperial rule, only within the framework of traditional religion. It does not require nor seek to create a permanent religious factionalism, let alone one that is expressed in political opposition to the Christian emperor – quite the contrary. Rather, on one hand it invites the pagan members of the elite momentarily to be united in their religious identity in the context of imperial ceremonial, while on the other, it calls upon the emperor and his regime to recognise the importance of traditional religion to the Empire. Above all, therefore, it creates a space for the legitimate expression of pagan religious identity within the Roman political sphere, indeed, at its very apex.

Outline of Parts II and III

This, then, is how I will approach the orations of Themistius and Claudian in the Theodosian age. I deal first in Part II with Themistius and then in Part III with Claudian. Each part has an introduction briefly describing the historical circumstances each orator faced, in particular the position and policies of the Theodosian emperors, and considering how my reading affects our understanding of the Theodosian age. I then provide a contextualising chapter, in which I address the main historical questions associated with each author and their work; this is followed by my analysis of the religious material in each set of orations.

In the first chapter of Part II, I contextualise my reading of Themistius’ orations from three perspectives. I address the question of Themistius’ religious identity and its relationship with his self-fashioning as a philosopher. I consider how Themistius’ positions himself with regard to other contemporary ‘strands’ of pagan thought, in particular the Iamblichaeon Neoplatonism represented most prominently by the emperor Julian. I discuss his political career, establishing that he was an orator intimately tied to the various regimes of the eastern Empire, but with his own independent influence. I then examine the nature of Themistius’ rhetoric, arguing that it is better understood as epideictic than as propaganda. In the second chapter, I analyse the religious content of Themistius’ orations of the Theodosian period. I discuss, in turn, the way he uses pagan gods, Hellenic

philosophy and classical literature, his relationship with Christianity, and his construction of imperial divinity. I demonstrate that, *contra* the scholarly consensus that has portrayed Themistius as a ‘moderate’ looking to create a neutral religious ‘middle ground’, in all these aspects he in fact presents a pagan epideictic, which, while respectful of Christianity, propounds traditional Hellenic philosophy and religion. I then proceed to an in-depth study of Themistius’ presentation in his orations of a group of Muse statues that stood in the senate-house of Constantinople. I discuss the way in which Themistius’ rhetoric relates to contemporary ideas about ‘pagan’ artworks and religious ambivalence in both literature and the material arts. I conclude by assessing Themistius’ place in the historiography of the fourth century, and in particular the scholarly view of him as a pivotal figure in the transition between a pre- and post-Theodosian world.

Part III follows much the same pattern with regard to Claudian. I begin the contextualising chapter by discussing his religious identity, and what we are able to deduce about his relationship with Christianity. I consider his literary influences and genre, and the place of mythology in his poetic project. I then examine his relationship with Stilicho’s regime of the 390s and early 400s, in particular engaging with Cameron’s argument that Claudian is a propagandist. I seek to demonstrate, as in the case of Themistius, that such an approach is unhelpful; that while Claudian had a very close affiliation with Stilicho, to regard him as a propagandist is to misunderstand the nature and purpose of his rhetoric. In the second chapter, I examine the role of various pagan deities, selecting in particular those figures through whom Claudian appears to be engaging with contemporary religious discourse. I also analyse Claudian’s portrayal of the emperor, both in his references to imperial divinity, and his use of traditional Roman conceptions of the imperial office. In the case of Claudian, we have the opportunity to compare his works with a direct contemporary and rival, the Christian poet Prudentius, and to examine the numerous references and allusions each makes to the other’s work; it is through this contrast in particular that I seek to dislodge the argument that Claudian is uninterested in religious matters. As with Themistius, I focus on the use of ambiguity and ambivalence, arguing that this allows Claudian to create an epideictic that is both acceptable to the Christian authorities, while also providing the opportunity for the activation of pagan religious identity, and moments of pagan ‘groupness’.

In the Conclusion, I offer some discussions and observations about the consequences my reading of Themistius and Claudian has for our understanding of the process of Christianisation in the fourth century. I consider once again the question of religious identity, and make the case for a reassessment of pagan religious identity, that goes beyond narratives of conflict and resistance, while not reducing pagans to passive observers of the religious upheavals of this period. I then discuss the

relationship of religion to the Roman state, and ask how, in an age in which politics was seen as profoundly religious, figures such as Themistius and Claudian, who did not conform to the imperial position in these matters, could flourish, and indeed be granted a key role in shaping and communicating political ideology. I end the thesis with reflections on the historiography of the Theodosian period, and with my argument that these decades should not be seen as a watershed moment, the end for the 'last pagans'.

Part II: Themistius, Constantinople, and the Greek East

Introduction: The Emperor and the Philosopher

What would Theodosius have felt as he had his first sight of Constantinople, glittering on the banks of the Bosphorus?² Perhaps not the wild surmise we might imagine; Constantine's new city had not yet gained the ancient charisma of Alexandria or Antioch, still less Rome itself. In the decades since its founder's passing, it had been treated as a way-station rather than a pre-eminent imperial capital.¹ The overwhelming emotion may have been one of relief after a difficult and frustrating start to his reign, in which he had failed to complete the urgent task for which he had been elevated: rebuilding the eastern field army and restoring order after one of the Romans' most traumatic military disasters at Adrianople.² Taking up the reigns of power in Constantinople would allow Theodosius to pursue a different style of government and cast his reign in a new light.

Theodosius, as he entered the city, was thirty-three years old, not a young man, but neither a seasoned veteran of imperial politics. He had been brought up in the army, and probably lacked the polish a first-rate education bestowed, smoothing its recipient's path in elevated social and political circles.³ Theodosius' father had been executed a mere three years before his son became emperor. Theodosius was well-acquainted, therefore, with the brutal consequences of failure in Roman politics. His own elevation to the purple was irregular, he had no dynastic claims to rule.⁴ Hailing from Spain, he had none of the contacts and networks in the city from which he would rule that made for effective government.⁵

We must be wary of projecting his later reputation – Theodosius “the Great”, last ruler of a united Mediterranean world, hammer of heretics and pagans – on to the 380s. This reputation had begun to form in Christian memories during the decades after his death. Augustine recounts that:

From the very beginning of his reign, he did not rest from working against the impious to relieve the Church with most just and merciful law, which the heretic Valens had cast down, strongly favouring the Arians; he rejoiced more greatly to be himself a member of this Church than to rule over the whole earth. He commanded the images of the pagans,

¹ For Constantinople's reversal of fortune, see Dagron (1974), 84-86, who describes Theodosius' advent in 380 as ‘une deuxième consécration de la ville’. See also Errington (2006), 213; Croke (2010), 241.

² Heather (2010), 185.

³ McLynn (2005), 102-103.

⁴ Ibid., 93-94 (arguing that Theodosius may have been elevated to the purple at the initiative of his troops rather than of Gratian), *contra* Errington (1996b).

⁵ Errington (1997b), 22; Heather (2010), 192; Kulikowski (2019), 96-97.

wherever they were, to be cast down, understanding well enough that earthly blessings reside not with demons, but with the power of God.⁶

Historians of the twentieth century largely accepted this image of Theodosius as (to borrow Jörg Ernesti's appellation) a *princeps christianus*; the debate focused on whether he had an inherent piety and zeal for religious conflict, or whether this was induced by the influence of clergymen, in particular Ambrose, during the course of his reign.⁷ This image, as I explored in Part I, has shaped the modern historiography of the fourth century; the familiar narrative running from proclamations of Nicene orthodoxy in the early 380s to the decrees against pagan worship in the early 390s and the destruction of great temples such as the Serapaeum. There is, perhaps, a temptation to treat Theodosius' arrival as a turning point in the history of imperial rule, the point at which the Byzantine image of Christian kingship exercised permanently from Constantinople begins to be delineated. Justinian and his successors come into view as Augustus and Trajan fade away.⁸

Though the historiography of fourth-century Christianisation has continued to focus on Theodosius' reign as a turning point, recent scholarship has reassessed the emperor's role in these events, casting him less as a fiery zealot directing a campaign of intolerance and asserting his own definition of orthodoxy through edicts such as *CTh* 16.1.2, the *cunctos populos*.⁹ During his early years in Constantinople, Theodosius spent as much effort burnishing his credentials as a traditional Roman emperor as he did intervening in ecclesiastical affairs.¹⁰ Within months of his arrival in the city, he had begun a major new architectural programme. An important early project was the

⁶ Aug., *Civ. Dei* 5.26. Thought by Ernesti (1998), 19 to refer perhaps primarily to *CTh* 16.1.2. Cf. for example, Soz., 7.20; Theod., *HE* 5.20. See also the pagan historiography, Zos., 4.33.4. On the development of the Christian image of Theodosius, see Errington (1997a). Recently, Quiroga Puertas (2021) has discussed competing pagan and Christian portrayals of Theodosius.

⁷ Bloch (1963), 197, for example, writes that Theodosius 'fell under the spell of St. Ambrose'; see also Chuvín (1990), 65. Holum (1982), 15-21 and Williams & Friell (1994), 67-72 emphasise Theodosius' personal devoutness, and portray Ambrose's influence on and exploitation of these sentiments. See though Liebeschuetz (1990), 157-158 putting the case that Theodosius' determination to defend and advance Nicene orthodoxy was a personal stance held since before he became emperor; see also Van Dam (2007), 344-345. For a reassessment of Theodosius' relationship with Ambrose (though one that still argues for a close alliance between the two from 390 onwards), see McLynn (1994), 291-360; similarly Leppin (2003), 153-167.

⁸ For Theodosius as a watershed in the evolution of the imperial role, see, for example, Bowersock (1986); Drake (2000), 465-478; Van Dam (2007), 342-353; Sizgorich (2009), 105-106.

⁹ Ernesti (1998), 19-25, describes the *cunctos populos* edict as 'programmatischen', but notes that it had only mild and circumscribed effects. Recently, McLynn (2005), 79-88; Errington (2006), 215; McLynn (2010), 222 have emphasised that it was a document with very limited practical purpose, most likely the result of the efforts of Nicene petitioners while Theodosius was in Thessalonica. See also Errington (1997b), 41-66; Errington (2006), 221-230; McLynn (2012) on the Council of Constantinople. Playing down the emphasis of Theodosius' personal piety, see Errington (1997b), 33; Ernesti (1998), 86-88.

¹⁰ For example, Leppin (2003), 181: 'der allerchristlichste Theodosius zuallererst ein römischer Kaiser' ('the most Christian Theodosius was first and foremost a Roman emperor'). See also Watts (2015), 181, 189 on Theodosius' parallel programmes in secular and ecclesiastical affairs during the establishment of his reign in Constantinople.

forum, imitating and rivalling the one that Constantine had bestowed upon the city, and beyond that, the great Forum of Trajan in Rome.¹¹ It featured, again with more than a nod to Theodosius' Spanish predecessor, a column with a spiral relief of the emperor's victories.¹² These imperial-Spanish links were further reinforced by a portrait of Hadrian, and of Hercules, a god closely associated with these emperors.¹³ Statuary of both ancient and contemporary manufacture proliferated across the city in a way that it had not since Constantine's initial decorative efforts.¹⁴ Later in Theodosius' reign, the Hippodrome was decorated with an Egyptian obelisk, suggesting powerfully Constantinople's status as the New Rome.¹⁵ Themistius proclaimed his emperor as the city's third founder, after the original settlers of Byzantium and Constantine.¹⁶ Theodosius' project was strikingly secular, emphasising a universal Romanness, rather than attempting to create a new Christian capital. As Sarah Bassett comments, the 'ultimate goal [was] the aggrandisement of the city in the overarching terms of *romanitas*... the Theodosian project was more in accord with the standard Roman practice of imperial glorification'.¹⁷

These developments of the urban landscape – expressions of imperial munificence – should be seen in conjunction with the rather murkier business of regime building. Ingratiating and integrating himself and his immediate circle with the principal power-brokers of the eastern Senate would be perhaps the most significant task of Theodosius' early reign. It was through these men that a Latin-speaking soldier from the far West could hope to govern the vast expanses of the Hellenic East.¹⁸ John Matthews' classic account describes the problems that an emperor would face, and the strategies he could deploy to overcome them, from dynastic marriages to judicious appointments to high office.¹⁹ Even before he had arrived in the city, Theodosius had begun appointing new senators, an obvious means of patronage, and receiving petitions.²⁰ This process of accommodation between

¹¹ Mango (1985), 43-45. Bassett (2004), 82; Croke (2010), 258-259, who argues that work on the forum must have begun shortly after Theodosius' arrival, good evidence, *pace* McLynn (2012), 362, that Theodosius made at least a medium term commitment to the city. On urban development under the Theodosians, see Dagron (1974), 90-92; Matthews (1975), 118-119; Jacobs (2012).

¹² Bauer (2001), 37. Matthews (1975), 108-109 on Theodosius' encouragement of the connection with Trajan.

¹³ Bassett (2004), 93; Croke (2010), 259.

¹⁴ Bassett (2004), 85; 90-91; Jacobs (2012), 143-144, 148. Extensive discussion below (pp. 90-100) on the statuary of Constantinople and its religious significance.

¹⁵ Ward-Perkins (2012), 59-60.

¹⁶ Them., *Or.* 18.222c-223b.

¹⁷ Bassett (2004), 81-82. See also Mango (1985), 43.

¹⁸ The challenges faced by a western emperor arriving in the East were not new, Constantine had faced similar problems, and his solutions were rather similar to Theodosius'; see Heather (1994), 14-16.

¹⁹ Matthews (1975), 101-121. See also Watts (2015), 172-173.

²⁰ Them., *Or.* 14.183c-184a for the appointment of new senators, with Heather & Moncur (2001), 229 n. 72. Theodosius' reception of petitioners is recounted in Zos., 4.25.1; 27. Zosimus' tone is disapproving, but his account suggests the sort of legislative activity and distribution of patronage that would have been natural, even necessary, for a new emperor. See McLynn (1994), 107; Errington (1997b), 24; Heather (2010), 194; Slootjes (2021), 226.

new emperor and senatorial elite was one in which Themistius played a significant role. The philosopher could make himself useful to the new emperor's regime and an alliance was forged.²¹ Themistius, not unusually, relished a close relationship with the emperor. As a civic patriot, he would have looked on the munificence bestowed upon his beloved *kallipolis* with delight; as a pagan philosopher, he perhaps regarded Theodosius' attempts to impose himself on the theological and institutional wrangling of the Christians with a wry eye. Nothing in Theodosius' actions in the early 380s would have concerned him seriously from a religious point of view; not even the fire and brimstone of *cunctos populos*, which, after all, rained down on Christian sectarians, not pagans.

Themistius, then, is a useful figure through whom to study the early years of Theodosius' reign in Constantinople. He allows us to glimpse this period beyond the image provided by the Theodosian Code (in particular the religious material of the sixteenth book), and by the ecclesiastical historians of the fifth century. Through Themistius we can see the world of Constantinople's elite, into which the dramatic events of church history – ecumenical councils, the throning and dethroning of bishops, the battles over orthodoxy – seem scarcely to intrude. This is the world of the Senate, not the cathedral. This is the world which does not loom very large in our surviving (overwhelmingly Christian) texts, but which historians have begun to reclaim. Through studying Themistius' orations, we can see this world through pagan eyes. For those like Themistius, as I argue in the chapters that follow, these were not years of momentous change, in which they were occupied with a desperate struggle to defend pagan religion, but rather with the entirely traditional concerns of Graeco-Roman government: the defence of the borders, the establishment of just rule, and the excitement of an imperial patron for their city. Themistius' orations give us evidence that paganism was very much alive and active in the public sphere of Theodosius' Constantinople.

²¹ See below for discussion on Themistius' political position in Constantinople.

Themistius in Context

Themistius before Theodosius

Themistius was born in around 317, probably in Paphlagonia, a region of northern Asia Minor.²² Themistius was from a philosophical dynasty: his father Eugenius was an expert on Aristotle, and his grandfather was a philosopher honoured under Diocletian.²³ Tracing Themistius' movements in his early decades has proved difficult, though he seems to have spent some of his youth in Constantinople.²⁴ He also held a teaching post in the city of Nicomedia, most likely in his twenties.²⁵ These early decades seem to indicate a high-flying but not otherwise outstanding academic career, much as might have been expected from a man of his family background. At some point in these years – the dating has proved controversial – he delivered what would become his *Or.* 1, a first chance to show his skills in the medium for which he would be remembered, an imperial panegyric for Constantius II. A recent study of this oration by Alexander Skinner has brought forward the dating to 342, when Themistius was twenty-five – a rubric to the speech, most likely written by the author himself, looking back without complete satisfaction on this piece of *juvenilia*, tells us that it was written by a young man who had yet to master his craft.²⁶ If this was the moment at which Constantius recognised in Themistius a rising political star, it would take him several years (over a decade, if the speech can be placed in 342) to act on this impression. Sometime in the late 340s or early 350s, Themistius' academic career took him once again to Constantinople, where he would number among his pupils a young Julian.²⁷

As a publicly funded professor in Constantinople, Themistius was hardly plucked from scholarly obscurity when Constantius adlected him to the Senate in 355.²⁸ Nonetheless, his rise to become a major political player, not just in Constantinople but in the wider eastern Empire, was vertiginous. The emperor not only gave the philosopher a seat in the Senate, but also provided a glowing public

²² Them., *Or.* 2.28d for Paphlagonia. His birthdate is deduced from a remark made in *Or.* 1.18a that he is the contemporary (ἡλικιώτιδος) of Constantius II; see Vanderspoel (1995), 31-33; Penella (2000a), 1; Heather & Moncur (2001), 1.

²³ See Themistius' funeral oration for his father, *Or.* 20. On Themistius' grandfather, see Vanderspoel (1995), 32-33; Skinner (2015), 241.

²⁴ Suggested by *Or.* 17.214c, 34.12; Vanderspoel (1995), 31.

²⁵ *Or.* 24 is delivered to the Nicomedians, see discussion in Penella (2000a), 22-24, now with Skinner (2015), 244-246.

²⁶ '... νέος ὢν ἐτι· διόπερ οὐδὲ πάνυ κρατεῖ τῆς ἰδέας'. See Skinner (2015) for this dating; see previous arguments for 347 or 350 in Vanderspoel (1995), 73-77; Heather & Moncur (2001), 69-71; Errington (2001).

²⁷ On Themistius' return to Constantinople, see Heather & Moncur (2001), 43 n. 2; see below, p. 53 n. 40 on Themistius' role in the education of Julian and other imperial youths.

²⁸ Errington (2000), 867 on the aspects of Themistius' background and career that recommended him to Constantius.

endorsement (or, at least, allowed one to be delivered in his name), the *Demegoria Constantii*, praising Themistius' learning and character.²⁹ Further honours and responsibility followed rapidly. In 357, Themistius was in Rome, as an ambassador for his adopted city, to deliver a panegyric to Constantius.³⁰ A statue of Themistius was also erected in Constantinople.³¹ Themistius, looking back over his career in the 380s, would assert that from this time he held ἡ προστασία, a presidency or position of leadership – probably a general reflection of his pre-eminence rather than a formal office.³² Most significantly of all, Constantius bestowed on Themistius the weighty responsibility of expanding the Senate, and it was as a result of this assignment that the philosopher acquired lasting influence.³³ A law from 361 singles him out as a permanent member of the board that appointed new senators.³⁴ This handed Themistius a continuing power of patronage. In the late-antique world, this ability to grant favours was the primary source of influence, and Themistius' networks, we can deduce, criss-crossed the eastern Empire.³⁵

Constantius' patronage, therefore, provided Themistius with an enduring source of political influence in the Senate of Constantinople, one that lasted into the Theodosian age.³⁶ What we do not know is how he chose to wield his power. Heather and Moncur described Themistius as a 'faction leader'.³⁷ This term is, to my mind, of limited use. Themistius did not represent or lead any particular constituency or interest group within the Senate, either in terms of social background, or opinion. Those who owed him a debt of loyalty were linked by little more than their connection to him. The historiographical risks are particularly great if we turn this alleged 'faction' into a 'pagan party'.³⁸ It is perhaps more productive to think of Themistius as a major node in the Empire's socio-political networks. If he so desired, he could tug on the strings of those networks, perhaps to very

²⁹ Themistius may have had a hand in the translation, or even composition, of his own letter of recommendation; Heather & Moncur (2001), 97 n. 154.

³⁰ *Or.* 3, which accompanied the presentation of a gold crown to the emperor. See Errington (2000), 871-872; Heather & Moncur (2001), 114-119 for discussion of the context.

³¹ Them., *Or.* 4.54b.

³² Them., *Or.* 34.13. The case against understanding this as a specific office is convincingly made by Heather & Moncur (2001), 320 n. 117, *contra* Vanderspoel (1995), 68-69. It has also been claimed that Themistius was proconsul of Constantinople under Constantius; see for example, Penella (2000a); 1-2, see Heather & Moncur (2001), 44-47 for a persuasive refutation.

³³ Them., *Or.* 34.13; Dagron (1974), 124-135.

³⁴ *CTh* 6.4.12.

³⁵ See, for example, the request for assistance made on behalf of young protégées by Greg. Naz., *Ep.* 24 and 38. Themistius may also have been instrumental in the career of Gregory's brother Caesarius; see Elm (2012), 225.

³⁶ Pace Brauch (2002), 94; Watts (2015), 193-194, who see Themistius' power as having declined by this point.

³⁷ Heather & Moncur (2001), 39. Reiterated in Heather (2010), 200; taken on by Moser (2018), 270-271. See also Leppin (2003), 62.

³⁸ This point is somewhat equivocal in Heather & Moncur (2001): they do not explicitly argue for a 'pagan' faction, but portray Themistius' faction as being based in the 'traditional Hellenic' elites of the eastern Empire, which they see as having a religious dimension, at 57-58; see also Moser (2018), 267-268.

great effect. But he could not simply command cooperation in the way the phrase ‘faction leader’ implies.

Themistius seems to have enjoyed personal contact with a number of emperors. He boasts in *Or.* 34 that he had been the ‘table companion’ of an emperor, probably Valens, something that he seems to have enjoyed across his long career.³⁹ He also took a hand, or at least was intended to, in the education of a number of imperial youths, from Julian to Arcadius.⁴⁰ Personal access to the emperor was, of course, one of the great political prizes in the Roman world.⁴¹ Themistius’ dual value to a succession of emperors is clearly illustrated here: as one of Constantinople’s main power brokers, and as a master of Hellenic *paideia* he was a man worth accommodating. There was, it is clear, no great separation between Themistius’ role *qua* politician and that *qua* intellectual. From the moment Constantius elevated him to the Senate, the two became inextricably intertwined.

Themistius endured one brief period out of political favour and, ironically, it was under his fellow pagan, Julian. The philosopher-emperor, one of Themistius’ pupils in his youth, met his former teacher on his own ground, offering a critique of Themistius’ political philosophy, as well as some stinging personal admonishments.⁴² The two seem to have had very real intellectual differences, which mattered rather more to Julian than they would have to any other late-antique emperor. Themistius took part in a debate with a philosopher of Julian’s circle, Maximus of Ephesus, with the emperor weighing in on the side of the latter.⁴³ This eclipse of Themistius’ career was a relative one; he delivered a panegyric (now lost) for Julian, and his contact with the emperor, even if occasionally tense, indicates his continuing relevance.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, in contrast with the close alliances he forged particularly with Constantius and Theodosius, his relationship with Julian stands out as noticeably frosty.⁴⁵ The references he makes to the last pagan emperor in later speeches are distinctly negative, beyond even what might be expected when alluding to such a controversial figure.⁴⁶

³⁹ Them., *Or.* 34.14, see with Heather & Moncur (2001), 322 n. 126. He also dined with Constantius, as Lib., *Ep.* 66.2 makes clear.

⁴⁰ That Themistius taught Julian is evident from *Ep. ad Them.* 257d, 259b, see Smith (1995), 27; Vanderspoel (1995), 118; Elm (2012), 83 n. 88. Some scepticism has been expressed on the basis of Julian’s likely age at the probable time of their encounter in 348/349; Marcone (2020), 342. But Julian was in his late teens, and Themistius would surely have leapt at the opportunity to teach a member of the imperial household. For the relationship with Arcadius, see Them., *Or.* 16.204c, 213a-b, with Heather & Moncur (2001), 271 n. 217, 283 n. 262. Theodosius also appears to have left Arcadius in Themistius’ care during a campaign; Them., *Or.* 18.224c, with Vanderspoel (1995), 210-211.

⁴¹ See now, on the value of direct contact with the emperor, Künzer (2020).

⁴² Jul., *Ep. ad Them.*; see further discussion below, p. 59, 87.

⁴³ Ammonius, *In Aristotelis Analyticorum Priorum Librum I*, 1.1.24b with Heather & Moncur (2001), 142; Elm (2012), 106-107.

⁴⁴ This panegyric is mentioned in Lib., *Ep.* 818, 1430.

⁴⁵ Daly (1980), 7; Smith (1995), 27-29; Heather & Moncur (2001), 18, 139-140; Jones (2010), 501.

⁴⁶ Jones (2010) collects the references.

This brief interlude aside, Themistius' career from the 350s onwards was one of almost uninterrupted success and prominence. He delivered panegyrics for every eastern emperor from Constantius to Theodosius. As the urban prefecture controversy would show, he was not without his critics and opponents.⁴⁷ But a thirty-year flourishing on the civic and imperial stage in the brutal world of Roman politics is noteworthy in itself – a reasonable case could be made for Themistius as the most successful political figure of the fourth century. On Theodosius' arrival in Constantinople in 380, Themistius had decades of experience as a political operator in the Senate and beyond.

Themistius and his religious identity

Understanding Themistius' religious identity is crucial to understanding the religious significance of his orations. In this section, I will examine Themistius' religious identity in the context of the debates that took place between the various strands of 'philosophical paganism' in the fourth century, and against the wider religious background of late Antiquity. I will argue that Themistius represented what might be termed the mainstream of elite paganism, and was therefore well placed to instantiate pagan identity in his orations. In particular, I will argue against those who have seen Themistius as a somewhat anaemic pagan, largely due to his apparently hostile relationship with the Emperor Julian. I will portray Themistius as a pagan, indeed one rather more in touch with the religious sensibilities of his peers than Julian and his circle. As I have also suggested, we should also not understand his paganism as a permanent 'label' that explains all of his actions, but rather as one of a number of identities that could be deployed according to circumstance.

It is not, of course, a simple task to understand Themistius' religious identity. We have only, on the one hand, the high artifice of his orations, and on the other, the rather dry technicalities of his philosophical works. Faced with such texts, it may seem foolhardy to claim that we can understand Themistius' religion. Certainly, we must be careful in handling the texts, accepting that his panegyrics are nothing like an unmediated expression of conscience. But we need not despair. Themistius was a public figure, and therefore constructed his religious identity in public. His innermost beliefs and feelings about the gods, and his quotidian religious practice are not the main concern here, what matters is how he positioned himself within the religious landscape.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ See below, p. 61 n. 89.

⁴⁸ There are perhaps some hints of Themistius' personal religious practice in his orations: for example, the contrast he makes between 'legal sacrifices' (θευσίας ἐννόμους) and those who practise magic (γοητεύουσιν) in *Or.* 5.70b is intriguing.

For this purpose, Themistius' orations can be useful. Certainly we need to remain aware of the audience for which Themistius was writing. It is true, for example, that Platonic ideas and allusions dominate the philosophical material in his orations, whereas we know that Themistius *qua* philosopher had a more complex relationship with the Neoplatonic tradition.⁴⁹ This was no doubt because Plato was more respected and better known among the largely non-specialist audiences Themistius addressed than his own preferred philosopher, Aristotle. But Themistius' public image was as a truth-telling, even iconoclastic, philosopher.⁵⁰ This was no doubt to a certain extent an artifice, but Themistius' rhetoric was of greater value to the imperial regimes he served because of his personal charisma as a philosophical expert.

Themistius the Philosopher

Whatever else he was in his long career, it was as a philosopher that Themistius wished to be seen and remembered. He identified himself with Philosophy at various points during his orations.⁵¹ He presented himself before emperors attired in his *tribonion*, the humble cloak of the philosopher, and pointedly declined the material rewards of his political success, or at least (he insisted) only accepted them with great reluctance.⁵² In so doing, he was fulfilling an ancient and traditional role, one that he himself traced back to Socrates and Aristotle – to bring philosophy into the realm of politics.⁵³ He cast himself as a master of *paideia*, an incorruptible speaker of truth, bearing the authority and charisma of the philosopher's *parrhesia*, which allowed him to dispense divine wisdom both to emperors and the Roman body politic.⁵⁴ It was for this that he was adlected to the Senate by Constantius, who commended specifically the benefits of his doctrine of political engagement.⁵⁵

What, then, was the relationship between Themistius' self-representation as a philosopher and his religious identity? As Peter Brown noted, the role of 'free-speaking philosopher' was assumed in late Antiquity by Christian bishops and ascetic 'holy men', whose self-proclaimed freedom from social constraint and disregard of material concerns granted them a similar aura.⁵⁶ This transition was

⁴⁹ O'Meara (2003), 206-208; Penella (2014).

⁵⁰ Heather & Moncur (2001), 11.

⁵¹ For example, Them., *Or.* 5.63c; 34.7.

⁵² *Tribonion*: Them., *Or.* 34.14; on his refusal to accept rewards: *Or.* 23.292a-293c; he concedes in *Or.* 31.353a-c that he accepted marks of honour from the emperor, but insists he has not sought them; Brown (1992), 68; Heather & Moncur (2001), 12; Leppin (2003), 60.

⁵³ He adduces Socrates and Aristotle to support his position in, for example, *Or.* 31.352b-d, 34.5-6; Van Renswoude (2019), 70. On Themistius' ideal of 'active', 'political' philosophy, see O'Meara (2003), 206-208; Elm (2012), 96-106.

⁵⁴ *Parrhesia* is mentioned specifically by Themistius as a gift of philosophy in *Or.* 5.64a. See also *Or.* 15.190a-b. On this tradition, and Themistius' place in it, see Brown (1992), 68-70; Van Renswoude (2019), 64-79.

⁵⁵ *Demegoria Constantii*; see 22b for politically active philosophy; Elm (2012), 81.

⁵⁶ Brown (1992), 71-117, see in particular 108-113 on Ambrose; more recently Van Renswoude (2019), 79-86.

natural enough, since like his Christian successors, Themistius brought with him not just academic authority but the charisma of divinely-granted wisdom. Technical expositions of Aristotle or Plato may seem from a modern perspective to have little to do with religion. But the philosopher, as Garth Fowden argued in an important paper, was a ‘holy man’ in late Antiquity in his own right.⁵⁷ While Themistius had his disagreements with certain rival pagan ‘holy men’, it is within this culture and tradition that we should see him operating. Note the terms in which he discusses his father Eugenius’ commitment to both Plato and Aristotle: ‘Going from the Lyceum into the Academy, he [Eugenius] did not change his robe, but often, having sacrificed (προθύσας) to Aristotle, followed it with a service of worship (ἱερουργίαν) to Plato.’⁵⁸ Eugenius’ teaching is like a priest showing an initiate a beautiful temple, participating in sacred ceremonies, in which ‘Aphrodite was with the torch-bearer, and the Graces together embraced the rite’.⁵⁹ The language is, of course, not literal, but it is nonetheless striking. Much like the poet, the philosopher sought access to the divine, depending on ‘divine lot alone (θεία μοίρα μόνη)’.⁶⁰ Throughout Themistius’ orations, philosophy and its great exponents are discussed as objects of sacred reverence. The abundant references to the divine that fill the panegyrics are not incidental, nor ornamental; rather they are integral to Themistius’ conception of his role as the inheritor of the supernatural wisdom of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, standing in the presence of a godlike emperor. In this sense, his religious identity was deeply bound in his presentation as a philosopher.⁶¹

The question remains, though, whether it was this specifically religious role that emperors valued in their dealings with Themistius. When Constantius praises Themistius as a true philosopher and ἄνδρα ἀγαθόν in the *Demegoria*, is he recognising the value of Themistius’ particularly pagan form of wisdom? Peter Heather considered this question with regard to Themistius’ alliance with Theodosius:

Themistius offered Theodosius... cultural reassurance. Themistius was a non-Christian, a philosopher with a specialism in Aristotle but huge knowledge of Plato too, whose Hellenic cultural credentials were in one sense impeccable... If Themistius gave his stamp of approval to the regime of a Christian emperor, it offered reassurance to the still many non-

⁵⁷ Fowden (1982), 33 and *passim*. See also Ryser (2020), 49-51 on the relationship between philosophical education, mythology, and religious identity.

⁵⁸ Them., *Or.* 20.235c-d.

⁵⁹ Them., *Or.* 20.235b.

⁶⁰ Them., *Or.* 21.246b. Note also Them., *Or.* 23.296a-c, in which Themistius claims that his philosophy has received commendation from the Delphic oracle.

⁶¹ *Pace* Tanaseanu-Döbler (2012), 135, who sees Themistius’ exclusion from Eunapius’ *Vita Sophistarum* as evidence of the former’s lack of interest in religious matters.

Christians in the governing classes of the empire that they had nothing to fear, whatever religious novelties the regime might be introducing.⁶²

This is a major element of Heather's understanding of Themistius, but it raises some difficulties that are at least partially unresolved. Firstly, it is not clear where he draws the boundaries of culture and religion: in his earlier work, Heather makes much the same point about cultural reassurance, but is less explicit in applying it to religion.⁶³ I have a certain sympathy with this argument, in that I also see Themistius as the focus for pagan religious identity in Theodosius' Constantinople. But, I feel, we ought to be more precise about the nature of this dynamic.

An association with Themistius the philosopher was certainly something that emperors desired. *Paideia* and philosophy were valued by both pagans and Christians.⁶⁴ As famous a Christian as Gregory of Nazianzus praised Themistius' learning.⁶⁵ So while an accommodation with Themistius could, no doubt, offer 'cultural reassurance', confirming that Theodosius, the born-and-bred army man from the most westerly reaches of the Empire, would pay due deference to the great traditions of Hellenic *paideia*, Heather's argument faces difficulty in transposing this into an argument about religion; such 'cultural reassurance' appealed to both pagans and Christians.⁶⁶ The dangers of turning the philosopher into the leader of a 'pagan faction' are particularly obvious here. My argument, as I laid out in the introductory chapters, is not that elements of the classical tradition, such as Themistius' image of the philosopher, appealed only to pagans; rather that this does not preclude a religious interpretation. It is perhaps possible to reframe this argument more productively by considering it in terms of religious ambivalence and ambiguity. Being a philosopher was integral to Themistius' religious identity, and he could be seen by pagans as fulfilling the role of a pagan sage, a philosophical holy man, furnished with the sanctity of such a figure. But this did not mean that the Christians with whom he dealt – be they emperors, senators in Constantinople, or even

⁶² Heather (2010), 187; see also Leppin (2003), 61; Van Renswoude (2019), 74-75. Vanderspoel (1995), 88 makes a not dissimilar argument about Themistius' initial appointment by Constantius.

⁶³ Heather & Moncur (2001), 23-24. Here, they write that: 'As a philosopher, [Themistius] was the guardian of traditional *paideia*. If he could speak in favour of a particular Christian emperor, and if that emperor was happy to favour him, this sent an important signal to Hellenic elites. Whatever worrying *cultural* [my emphasis] novelties that Christian ruler might have introduced, he nevertheless continued to support traditional values to the extent that an old-fashioned philosopher, the guarantor of *paideia*, could both find him praiseworthy and be treated respectfully by him in turn.'

⁶⁴ See Brown (1992), 118-126 on the continuing power of *paideia* to transcend confessional boundaries.

⁶⁵ The 'king of speech' and 'the great Themistius', Greg. Naz., *Ep.* 24.1, 38.1. These may, of course, have been the pleasant courtesies of an epistolary friendship, but it is notable that Gregory proclaims his connection with Themistius by including him in his letter collection; Storin (2017), 85-86. Elm (2012), 219-228 notes similarities of thought between the two.

⁶⁶ McLynn (2005), 102-103.

clergymen like Gregory – saw him in such terms; rather they regarded him as a skilled exponent of classical *paideia* and Hellenic philosophy which they all respected.

Themistius and late-antique paganism

One of the most striking aspects of Themistius' writings is his philosophical and religious syncretism. As he says in his funeral oration for his father, '[Philosophies] are like little roads parting and falling away from a great, broad one; some wandering more, some less, but meeting together at the same end.'⁶⁷ This notion of many roads leading to the truth recurs famously in *Or.* 5, delivered in celebration of the emperor Jovian's consulship in Antioch in 364. In it, he praises Jovian for his wisdom in legislating for religious tolerance, and sets out the philosophical arguments for doing so.⁶⁸ Themistius does not claim that divine wisdom was limited merely to the great Hellenic philosophers, but was present also in the 'Egyptians' and 'Syrians' (i.e. the Christians, a rather more respectful alternative to Julian's 'Galileans').⁶⁹ This notion was based on an understanding of the ineffability of the divine.⁷⁰ But we should not mistake Themistius' by imputing to him the belief that all religious systems were equally valid – indeed, without mentioning specifics, he is explicit in the first of the passages just quoted that this is not the case.⁷¹ That he leaves it to the audience to assign a hierarchy is a good example of Themistius' propensity for religious ambivalence in his orations.

It is clear that Themistius did have significant quarrels with some pagans, in particular with the Iamblichan Neoplatonism represented by Julian. In particular, Themistius believed that the calling of the philosopher was to engage directly with political society, working practically to elevate and improve it. As Fowden has argued, this set him in direct opposition with many Neoplatonic holy men, who favoured withdrawal from society to cultivate the inner life.⁷² Themistius seems to have regarded the ideas of this 'wing' of Neoplatonism as pseudo-philosophical, contrasting the 'new song' of the Iamblichans with the 'hereditary and ancient song of the Academy and Lyceum'.⁷³

⁶⁷ Them., *Or.* 20.236b.

⁶⁸ Them., *Or.* 5.68d-69a. On the context of the arguments for religious tolerance in *Or.* 5, see Errington (2000), 876-878; Heather & Moncur (2001), 149-158 correcting the reading of Vanderspoel (1995), 148-154, who sees this oration as a dissident act against the Christian regime. The legislation to which Themistius refers cannot be identified, it seems to have been omitted from the Theodosian Code. The oration became well-known; it is referred to approvingly in Soc., 3.25. The fact that these arguments were delivered in the epideictic context of a consular celebration suggests that they were uncontroversial and could be expected generally to be approved.

⁶⁹ Them., *Or.* 5.70a. For Themistius' use of this label for Christianity, see Heather & Moncur (2001), 170 n. 106, *contra* Penella (2000a), 128-129 n. 1.

⁷⁰ Them., *Or.* 5.69b. See Armstrong (1984), 8-9; Ando (1996), 182.

⁷¹ See also, for example, Themistius' criticism of the philosophy of Epicurus at *Or.* 34.30.

⁷² Fowden (1982), 54-59. See also Heather (2010), 187.

⁷³ Them., *Or.* 23.295b. See with Fowden (1982), 44; Penella (2000a), 122 n. 25. Cf. also *Or.* 24.301b with Vanderspoel (1995), 43-44. More generally on Themistius' quarrels with this form of Neoplatonism, see Maisano (1995), 20-22.

These disagreements had a significant effect on Themistius' relationship with Julian. We find direct attestation to this in Julian's *Letter to Themistius*, in which the emperor criticises him in no uncertain terms, attacking the philosophical underpinnings of the congratulations offered to him on his elevation to Caesar.⁷⁴ Heather and Moncur play down the intensity of the rift, describing the tone of the letter as 'far from bitter: more a respectful academic disagreement'.⁷⁵ But Julian's critiques are sharp, and the issues he addresses are not abstruse but of the greatest intellectual and practical importance. Julian throws Themistius' praise back into his teeth, and attacks, rather snidely, Themistius' use of philosophy in panegyric: 'I supposed, on the one hand, that it was in no way permitted for you to flatter or lie...'⁷⁶ This was not simply a private correspondence from a former pupil to his master, but a public dressing-down from a reigning emperor.⁷⁷ As discussed above, Themistius' relationship with Julian throughout his reign appears to have been genuinely tense.

What does this mean for Themistius' religious identity? It is certainly true that Julian and his fellow Iamblichaeans professed a great enthusiasm for traditional cult, regarding themselves as the true defenders of the ancestral religion.⁷⁸ But this does not mean that anyone who was not seized with enthusiasm for Julian's entire programme was not a proponent of, or participant in, pagan cults.⁷⁹ Indeed, Julian's passion for theurgy, and its blood sacrifices, met with distaste from many of his fellow pagans; blood sacrifice was generally not seen as an integral part of their religion.⁸⁰ The pagan historian Ammianus Marcellinus was broadly positive towards Julian, but still concluded that he was 'more superstitious than a proper observer of the sacred'.⁸¹ Libanius too, though eulogising Julian's revival of sacrifice in his funeral oration, seems to have been largely unenthusiastic about this element of Julian's programme.⁸²

⁷⁴ On the vexed issue of the dating and context of this letter, see now Swain (2013), 53-57.

⁷⁵ Heather & Moncur (2001), 140, similarly Vanderspoel (1995), 119-122.

⁷⁶ Jul., *Ep. ad Them.* 254a-b. Marcone (2020), 343-344.

⁷⁷ Swain (2013), 57-58, see also Elm (2012), 86, who argues that the letter has a political edge.

⁷⁸ Fowden (1982), 52-53; Tanaseanu-Döbler (2013), 144-145.

⁷⁹ Deligiannakis (2015), 180; On the variety of pagan reactions to Julian, see Marcone (2020).

⁸⁰ On the decline of blood sacrifice in late Antiquity, see Bradbury (1995); Stroumsa (2011); Maxwell (2012), 854-856. On Julian's belief in theurgic sacrifices, see Smith (1995), 104-113; Bradbury (1995), 340-341. See also Belayche (2002) exploring the contributory strands to Julian's commitment to sacrifice. More broadly on his relationship with Iamblichaeon theurgy, see Tanaseanu-Döbler (2013), 136-148.

⁸¹ Amm., 25.4.17. See with den Boeft (2008). Ammianus' own religious views have proved difficult to access and categorise, but he was certainly a pagan, and religion runs through the *Res Gestae*; see discussions in Rike (1987), esp. 1-7; Davies (2004), 226-285.

⁸² For positive references to blood sacrifice, see Lib., *Or.* 18.126-127; discussion in Sandwell (2007a), 95-98

Themistius' combination of openness towards a variety of philosophical and religious influences, his public commitment to the toleration of religious differences, and his evident misgivings about Julian, have led some scholars to frame Themistius' pagan identity as 'weak'. Penella calls him a 'flexible pagan'.⁸³ He is described by Cribiore as 'a pagan, but not a fervent one', one of the 'grey pagans'.⁸⁴ As I have noted, this reflects a misunderstanding of the nature of religious identity.⁸⁵ But it also risks leading us to misjudge the way Themistius positions himself in the religious landscape. *Or.* 5, was not the work of a philosophical maverick, but, as Heather and Moncur have argued, delivered in accordance with the wishes of Jovian's regime, in line with policies that the emperor was already putting in place.⁸⁶ Indeed, I would go further: *Or.* 5 is a great epideictic celebration of a commonly accepted value. Themistius may have given particular attention to the philosophical underpinnings of religious tolerance, but it was valued by the Roman elite, both pagan and Christian. Both Ammianus and Libanius seem to have been uneasy about Julian's treatment of Christians; the former reserved particular disapproval for Julian's writings against Christian teachers, suggesting that 'one thing [he did] was harsh, however, and ought to be hidden by perpetual silence'.⁸⁷ Symmachus may have been influenced by Themistius' arguments in his *Rel.* 3.⁸⁸ Themistius' support for tolerance is no reason to see his pagan identity as insipid, or frame it any differently to the other elite pagans of his day.

Themistius and the politics of Theodosius' Constantinople

Themistius had a close relationship with the Theodosian regime – indeed in the early 380s, he was part of that regime. In 384, Themistius was appointed to the Urban Prefecture of Constantinople – a high and unusual honour for a man of his now advanced years, especially given his punctiliousness

⁸³ Penella (2000a), 3.

⁸⁴ Cribiore (2013), 176. See similarly Lippold (1980), 84; Vandespoel (1995), 18; Ernesti (1998), 445; Kahlos (2011), 293-294.

⁸⁵ See discussion above, pp. 7-8.

⁸⁶ Heather & Moncur (2001), 33-34; 154-158.

⁸⁷ Amm., 22.10.7; Marcone (2020), 347. See McLynn (2014) for a detailed discussion of the texts associated with Julian's move against Christian teachers. Watts (2015), 114-115 argues convincingly that Julian's desire to make *paideia* the preserve of pagans worked against the grain of elite culture, disrupting social networks. See also Vandespoel (1995), 126. For Libanius, see Cribiore (2013), 155-160; Marcone (2020), 338. As Tanaseanu-Döbler (2012), 103 notes, Julian's approach to this issue was novel, even among the fiercest opponents of Christianity.

⁸⁸ Vandespoel (1995), 25.

in avoiding the appearance of reaping material benefit from his political success.⁸⁹ Theodosius brought him perhaps even into his inner circle, inviting him to aid in the education of his son and heir, and, of course, relying on him to deliver a series of panegyrics as he attempted to secure his rule in a strange city. Themistius seems to have thrown himself eagerly into the service of Theodosius, perhaps even to the detriment of his own reputation.⁹⁰ It was a mutually beneficial relationship, but Themistius may have been enthused by the emperor's patronage of Constantinople, the orator's adopted home city, and its renewal as an imperial capital.

Theodosius made use of Themistius' rhetorical talents every bit as much previous emperors; the philosopher delivered eight orations in approximately six years.⁹¹ Recent scholars have seen a symbiotic relationship between orator and emperor, the former using his talents to disseminate the message of the latter to the Senate of Constantinople, and beyond that the wider elite of the eastern Empire. Heather calls him a 'publicist', a 'spokesman', a 'kite-flyer', or 'spin doctor' for Theodosius, even, that most contested of terms, a 'propagandist'.⁹² This account argues that the chief purpose of the speeches is to present, justify, and win adherence to the course on which the emperor had decided.⁹³ That Themistius was an 'insider', privy to, perhaps even part of, imperial policy-making, I find entirely convincing. That his orations present the 'state of the Empire' in a way that was consonant with the emperor's view and intentions, I likewise concur.⁹⁴ Here, however, my accord with Heather's interpretation ends.

⁸⁹ This prefecture has occupied scholarly attention, invited by the three orations Themistius dedicated in rapid succession to defending his decision to accept the post (*Or.* 17, 31 and 34). The criticism that prompted the three orations has been explained as religiously motivated; Matthews (1975), 117-118. This was suggested by an apparent reference to an epigram by the pagan poet Palladas in *Or.* 34.9, 30, a fierce anti-Christian who had been seen as Themistius' principal critic; Cameron (1965a), 221-223; Heather & Moncur (2001), 288-289, 292-293. This view has been rendered untenable by the recent re-dating of Palladas' life, Wilkinson (2009) and (2012). No religious dimension to the dispute can be inferred, and Themistius' determination to refute his critics may mislead us as to the scale and intensity of the controversy.

⁹⁰ McLynn (2005), 99.

⁹¹ As noted by Leppin (2003), 62.

⁹² Publicist: Heather (1998b), 143; Spin doctor: Heather (2010), 189; Kite-flyer, spokesman: Heather (2010), 203. For propaganda, see citations above, p. 23 n. 97. See also Errington (2000), 863-865; Moser (2018), 268; Van Renswoude (2019), 75-76; Kulikowski (2019), 99. An alternative view is that of Leppin (2003), 61, who rejects this terminology and sees Themistius occupying a rather ambivalent position as a conduit between emperor and Senate; cf. Maisano (1995), 10, 28.

⁹³ Heather (2010), 189.

⁹⁴ *Contra* Vanderspoel (1995), who portrays Themistius as a relatively independent philosopher, increasingly so in his later career, even, at times a 'public dissident' (154, 218), his alignment with the policies of some emperors coincidental, based on his own convictions (155, 187). The orations are seen in part as attempts to sway the emperor (201). I do not think this a tenable way of reading Themistius, though it provides a counterpoint to the 'propagandist' argument. Heather's views have been considerably more influential in recent scholarship, it is with them that I principally engage.

Regarding Themistius as a mere mouthpiece ignores and minimises his secure and respected position in the Senate of Constantinople.⁹⁵ Moreover, it attributes a fundamentally persuasive function to the orations. Heather regards them as key elements in Theodosius' government's effort to 'get across' its message, and win support for its policies.⁹⁶ As I suggested in my discussion of epideictic, speeches of praise can use some of the trappings of persuasive language, and have a certain persuasive function. But these orations were not policy briefings. The audience were not surprised by the content, wondering in advance, for example, about, say, whether Themistius would indicate that the emperor would take an eirenic or an aggressive line towards the Goths, in the same way that their modern counterparts await an announcement from a government minister. I do not doubt that Themistius may well have had a role in winning support for Theodosius' regime amongst senators. But this was done by using personal and political networks, not through the eloquence of these great set-piece orations.

It is much more productive to understand the orations as epideictic. They were certainly 'authorised speech', but not the direct communications of the emperor to his subjects via Themistius. They celebrated a consensus that had already been won, not one that the orations were fighting to establish. It is important to note the contexts in which they were delivered. The orations of the Theodosian period fall into three categories: First is the earliest oration of the period *Or.* 14. The second group are the main body of panegyrics to Theodosius, that is *Or.* 15, 16, 18 and 19. The third category are those orations which relate to Themistius' urban prefecture, *Or.* 17, 31 and 34. While each individual oration of course had its own particular features, these divisions reflect Themistius' changing position, audience, or intention.

It is the context of *Or.* 14 that has caused the most scholarly contention. Its content is dominated by appeals to the new emperor to show favour to Constantinople — hence it is entitled a *πρεσβευτικός*. It can be dated to the spring of 379, after Theodosius' elevation to the purple in January of that year.⁹⁷ It has been argued by Errington that at this stage, Themistius was still an 'outsider' to the imperial regime, that this oration was an ambassadorial speech written without knowledge of Theodosius' policies and preferences. This position is largely based on Themistius' statement that he had been delayed in joining the rest of the delegation from Constantinople by illness, giving Themistius little time to ingratiate himself with the new emperor.⁹⁸ But it is in fact more likely that

⁹⁵ For example Errington (2000), 864 says Themistius' panegyric material was 'vetted'.

⁹⁶ For example Heather (2010), 191, 200-201. See also Errington (2000), 864-865.

⁹⁷ So Vanderspoele (1995), 195-196; Heather & Moncur (2001), 218.

⁹⁸ Them., *Or.* 14.180c. Errington (1996a), 8-9.

this represents a period of negotiation in which the basis for a relationship between Themistius and Theodosius was established.⁹⁹ It is evident from *Or.* 14 that Theodosius was showing favour to Constantinople by expanding the Senate.¹⁰⁰ The relationship had already been secured. Crucially, also, while the speech lacked the grandest ceremonial trappings of other orations, it was still a formal address, an official embassy on behalf of the city of Constantinople, very much an epideictic setting.

The second group of speeches is less controversial. These were given on formal occasions, part of the natural rhythm of court life. *Or.* 15 is most probably to be dated to the celebration of Theodosius' *dies imperii* on 19 January 381.¹⁰¹ *Or.* 16 was delivered before the Senate in January 383, celebrating the consulship of Saturninus, with the emperor in attendance and receiving praise for his wise choice of recipient for such a reward.¹⁰² We are less certain of the dates and circumstances of *Or.* 18 and 19. It may be that the former was delivered on Theodosius' *dies imperii*, this time in January 384.¹⁰³ *Or.* 19 offers up even less information, but was probably delivered between the death of Gratian in August 383, and the birth of Honorius in September 384, though a later dating is by no means impossible.¹⁰⁴ Both, once again, appear to be delivered with the emperor and Senate in attendance.¹⁰⁵

It is important to note the heavily ritualised nature of these occasions. An imperial anniversary such as the *dies imperii* was accorded the same significance as a major religious festival, and in many ways was one. Such celebrations had formed part of the imperial cult in the pre-Christian empire, and retained much of the same symbolic weight.¹⁰⁶ Later in the decade, Theodosius would explicitly accord these days the same status as the anniversaries of the foundation of Rome and Constantinople, and the festal days of Easter.¹⁰⁷ The *processus consularis*, too, of which we may

⁹⁹ Heather & Moncur (2001), 224.

¹⁰⁰ Them., *Or.* 14.183c

¹⁰¹ Vanderspoel (1995), 199; Heather & Moncur (2001), 230.

¹⁰² The exact date is disputed. Vanderspoel (1995), 205, and Heather & Moncur (2001), 255 place it on 1 January, as part of the formal celebrations of the new year and the new consul. For an alternative dating Errington (1996a), 14 n. 77. For the emperor's presence and the senatorial audience, see *Or.* 16.200c, 201a.

¹⁰³ As suggested by Errington (2000), 895, referring to Themistius' explicit mention of Theodosius' regnal year at *Or.* 18.217d, Cf. *Or.* 15.190b. Vanderspoel (1995), 210-211 prefers a date in the summer of 384.

¹⁰⁴ Leppin & Portmann (1998), 301.

¹⁰⁵ *Or.* 18 is addressed throughout to the emperor – 'ὦ χρηστέ' (219a); 'ὦ φέριστε' (220c) – and in parts to Arcadius – 'ὦ φίλε παῖ' (224d). The senatorial audience is not explicit, but may perhaps be inferred from 'ὦ φίλοι' (223c), as suggested by Leppin & Portmann (1998), 289 n. 19. *Or.* 19 is titled with the rubric 'Ἐρρήθη δὲ ἐν τῇ συγκλήτῳ, and at 228a mentions the 'Muses, who in our Senate-temple dwell together', and addresses the emperor directly, as at 229a.

¹⁰⁶ Kantirea (2013), 46-47.

¹⁰⁷ *CTh* 2.8.19.

reasonably assume *Or.* 16 played a part, was a major fixture in the Roman calendar.¹⁰⁸ The profusion of rhetoric offered by Themistius in these years may attest to the increase in ritual and ceremonial that was a feature of Theodosius' reign in the city.¹⁰⁹

The prefecture orations are more difficult. *Or.* 17 probably represents Themistius' acceptance speech at the senatorial ceremony that marked his entry into the office.¹¹⁰ While there is no evidence that Theodosius himself was present, the oration is full of laudatory remarks for the emperor, who has shown his wisdom by elevating Themistius. *Or.* 34 does not provide evidence for its occasion, but the emperor does seem to have been in attendance, and Themistius once again intertwines praise for his imperial patron, and for philosophy itself, with defence of his own record.¹¹¹ *Or.* 31 is different again: it is clearly addressed to the Senate, and mentions the emperor only in passing. This oration in particular stretches the definition of epideictic beyond what it can reasonably bear, being explicitly controversial, and having no apparent ceremonial context.¹¹² I will not exclude it from my study, since it includes some extremely interesting religious material, but it does need to be handled slightly differently. It cannot be claimed it represents a 'consensus' view in the same way as epideictic demands, but we can at least be confident that it says nothing offensive that could not be uttered in that most public arena, the Senate of Constantinople.

Finally, we need to consider the issue of the audience for these panegyrics. Themistius' home territory was the Senate of Constantinople, and most of the orations are either addressed directly to the Senate, or in contexts where its members would naturally have dominated. They were not the only audience, of course, and we might reasonably assume that other groups were in attendance: members of the imperial household; western allies of Theodosius who had come east with him when he took up the throne; wealthy residents of Constantinople who had not achieved senatorial status, perhaps even ordinary citizens; and (an intriguing possibility, though we lack the evidence to probe further) churchmen.¹¹³ It is the Senate, however, that was the most significant constituency, likely both in terms of numbers and of political importance. These were the men whose consent and co-operation Theodosius needed successfully to rule the eastern Empire. Themistius himself

¹⁰⁸ Olovsson (2005), 180.

¹⁰⁹ For the increase in ceremonial, see Croke (2010), 254-255.

¹¹⁰ Dagron (1968), 49; Penella (2000a), 35; Heather & Moncur (2001), 298-299.

¹¹¹ For example, Them., *Or.* 34.1. See Heather & Moncur (2001), 311 n. 68. *Pace* Penella (2000a), 38, a senatorial audience is surely the most likely.

¹¹² *Or.* 17 and 34 are clearly different from the straightforward panegyrics, but contain plenty of 'epideictic' material; we are dealing here with the fluid genres, not rigid categories.

¹¹³ Heather & Moncur (2001), 158 suggest clergymen may have made up part of the audience for *Or.* 5. Certainly their presence at some of the major imperial celebrations at which Themistius spoke is conceivable.

played a part in the defining developments of the Senate of Constantinople. Constantius II elevated it from a largely local body to a pan-imperial institution. New recruits were brought in from the curial classes of the eastern cities, and Roman senators domiciled in the East were asked to transfer their membership.¹¹⁴ The senators of Constantinople are no longer seen as part of an ‘aristocracy of service’, new men whose status depended on promotion through the bureaucratic ranks. They were generally drawn from the traditional landowning elites, and did not give up these provincial estates.¹¹⁵ The Senate was, therefore, the forum in which the emperor could directly access the regional elites who were so crucial to the governance of the empire.¹¹⁶

The religious makeup of the Senate in these decades is very difficult to determine. Unlike for the western elites, for which a number of prosopographical studies investigating religious transformation have been undertaken, we are largely in the dark about the Christianisation of the Senate of Constantinople. Vague allusions are sometimes made to the ‘Hellenic’ elites that allegedly remained recalcitrant and traditionalist in these decades, though the pace of Christianisation is assumed to have picked up by the time of Theodosius.¹¹⁷ But there is no particular *a priori* reason why conversion should have been slower in the East than in the western provinces. The safest conclusion is probably that it was by Theodosius’ time majority Christian, though with a split between the ascendent Nicenes, and still large numbers of homoians. There was also most likely a shrinking but nonetheless significant pagan contingent.¹¹⁸ What it is vital to understand however, is that these were not ‘religious factions’. They did not act in concert in political matters, and their religious identity did not factor – to use Rebillard’s terminology, was not given salience – in their quotidian business of working with the imperial authorities to govern, piece by piece, the Roman Empire. They were not ‘Christian senators’ or ‘pagan senators’, but senators who happened to be Christian or pagan. In senatorial affairs, their religious identities remained dormant unless specifically activated.

¹¹⁴ There is an extensive literature, see now Moser (2018), 214-276.

¹¹⁵ Heather (1998a), 196; Skinner (2013), 18-19; Moser (2016).

¹¹⁶ Sandwell (2007b); Skinner (2013), 49-50.

¹¹⁷ Heather & Moncur (2001), 22, 24; Heather (2010), 187-188. See also Holum (1982), 13-14. Dagron (1974), 377-387 considers the fragmentary evidence concerning the pagan population of Constantinople; his conclusions, which focus on the reign of Theodosius I as a turning point, rely rather heavily on Christian texts.

¹¹⁸ There is no evidence that the Senate of Constantinople was a ‘Christian’ body, against the more traditionalist Roman Senate; Skinner (2008), 147. See, for example, its relationship with Julian; Amm. 22.7.3. Themistius himself had a role in shaping the Senate’s membership, and seems to have recruited a number of intellectuals who were often, if not exclusively, pagan; see Dagron (1974), 132-133; Vanderspoel (1989), 163; Heather (1994), 12-13, esp. n. 8 (listing some of the individuals whom Themistius is known to have recruited); Moser (2018), 265-266. Also perhaps noteworthy is that Themistius was not the only pagan to hold the urban prefecture in these years (he was, for example, preceded in the office by his fellow pagan Clearchus); see Dagron (1974), 291-294. For Clearchus, see Bradbury (2004), 238-239; Criboire (2013), 177.

Religion in Themistius' Orations

Paganism, Philosophy and *Paideia*

Themistius' orations are full of the divine. The classical pantheon, Zeus, Hera, Apollo, and their peers appear regularly. No less than these deities, the orations abound with quotations from, and references to, the great philosophers of the classical past, above all Plato, but also Aristotle, Pythagoras, and a range of less celebrated peers. Neither is incidental to Themistius' rhetoric, rather they are the thread he uses to weave the great tapestry in which he depicts the glory of Theodosius and the Roman state. Themistius saw his rhetoric, and the emperors whom he served, as part of an ancient tradition stretching back to Homer, a tradition largely unperturbed by the rise of Christianity. The question is how we interpret this material. In this section, I will argue for the religious significance of Themistius' use of pagan deities and classical literature. This did not, as I have explained, mean that the speeches were in any sense offensive to the Theodosian regime or to other Christians in his audience, who had learned to parse such material as being of cultural but not religious import. Nonetheless, on the other side of this ambiguity was a genuine pagan meaning, which could be used to 'activate' pagan religious identity.

Pagan Deities

I will begin by examining the direct references to pagan deities in the orations. These, I will argue, were not simply aesthetic flourishes, but of genuine religious significance. As I discussed above, recent scholarship has tended to treat Themistius' references to the traditional pagan pantheon as a matter of culture, rather than religion. Such an attitude is apparent in Heather and Moncur's volume on Themistius.

Themistius used, for instance, the traditional names for the old gods and goddesses (Zeus etc.), where the context – implicit or explicit citation of Homer or other ancient authors – demanded it. In more abstract passages, however, he consistently adopted the usage *Theos*, which can only really be rendered 'God' with a capital G.¹¹⁹

On this reading, Themistius deliberately couched his references to explicitly pagan deities in literary quotations, where they were, so to speak, quarantined. As I shall argue below, there are reasons to believe that this reading of Themistius' use of Homer and other writers of the Greek canon is questionable, and that placing the gods in a 'literary context' does not rob them of their religious power – if anything the opposite is true. It also evinces a modern judgement that Themistius, as a

¹¹⁹ Heather & Moncur (2001), 64.

philosopher, when he spoke ‘seriously’ of the divine did so in monotheistic terms, that he did not really ‘believe’ in the traditional gods. Instead, it might be helpful to consider the effect that Themistius’ role as a philosopher has on the references to pagan deities in his orations. Themistius’ identification of himself with philosophy is key to his rhetoric; this applies to his orations in their entirety, not simply the sections that sound ‘philosophical’ to modern ears. This does not in itself say anything definitive about the interpretation of individual passages, but should encourage us to listen more attentively to what Themistius says about the pagan gods.

It is furthermore, *pace* Heather and Moncur, simply incorrect to say that Themistius does not refer to Greco-Roman deities outside the context of allusions, explicit or otherwise, to the literary canon. Take, for example, *Or.* 15.189c: ‘How blessed is he, to whom belongs this righteousness, and the same power of Zeus, and is not only lord of men, but indeed, of the elements... therefore let us, friends, hold tightly to this goddess [Εὐδικία] who is of Zeus himself’. No particularly literary allusion can be detected here. There is no implicit or explicit use of Homer, nor any formula such as ‘the poets say’. We have therefore an “unquarantined” appearance of a member of the Greco-Roman pantheon. It might perhaps be argued that a reference to Zeus was not particularly offensive to Christians, who might read it as a sign of a shared monotheistic sentiment. But there is no evidence of Christians treating Zeus as interchangeable with the God of the Bible. The mythological misdeeds attributed to him made such a theological or literary connection unacceptable.¹²⁰ Indeed, familiar as they were with the canon of Hellenic literature, they were fully aware of the mythological character of Zeus. Theodosius, when he heard himself compared to Zeus, would not have thought that Themistius actually meant to liken him to the Christian God. Furthermore, even within the same oration, Themistius shows himself perfectly willing and able to use the more obviously neutral θεός, so this represents an active choice.¹²¹ This does not mean that the use of Zeus was provocative, that it would have given offence to the Christian audience. They would have been completely capable of reading it as an aesthetic flourish resounding with praise for Theodosius. The pagans in the audience, however, will have been able to observe this Christian emperor being praised with the name of their ancient god.

¹²⁰ See, for example, Bas, *Adul.* 4.5; Eus., *Laud. Const.* 7.4.

¹²¹ Them., *Or.* 15.191b. *Contra* Errington (2000), 881 who describes Themistius’ Zeus as ‘a diffuse god’ in ‘chosen literary clothing’ cf. also Maisano (1995), 13.

Nor is this a unique occurrence. In *Or.* 16, Themistius declares that: ‘Kingly Zeus is my audience, and with Zeus, the king, and his retinue with him.’¹²² As if for emphasis, there is a repetition of the personal name of Zeus, τοῦ Διός rather than τοῦ θεοῦ. Again, there is no literary context to this remark; Ζεὺς ‘βασιλῆιος’ is not a Homeric epithet, but is used rather by Themistius to draw a parallel between Zeus and Theodosius, the βασιλεὺς mentioned only a few words later. Parallels between the emperor and the divine are of course common in literature of the fourth century, and in Themistius’ own work. It was a central plank of imperial ideology, which thus makes the use of Zeus, rather than θεός, all the more striking. Naturally, there are monotheistic resonances in Themistius’ reference to Zeus – inevitably so, or the parallel of earthly and heavenly monarchy would be less felicitous. Fourth-century pagans were able to think of Zeus within a monotheistic conceptual framework.¹²³ While acknowledging the rhetorical uses to which Themistius could put the ‘generic monotheism’ of this period, we should also keep in mind that ‘monotheistic’ did not mean ‘Christianising’.¹²⁴ There were many pagans who tended towards monotheism whose attitude towards Christianity was extremely hostile. θεός may have been regarded as religiously neutral language, but Zeus, even when given the trappings of monotheism, was explicitly pagan.

Zeus is by no means the only pagan deity who appears in Themistius’ orations of this period outside of an obvious literary context. Other gods from the classical pantheon appear by name. Take for instance the following from *Or.* 15: ‘Now it is not easy to sing to Ares, the Muses ought to lead the chorus to the king, bringing with them into their dance their leader Apollo.’¹²⁵ Or, elsewhere, Ares once again appears, on this occasion contrasted with Demeter and Dionysus ‘they [the Goths with whom Theodosius has made peace] are making the iron from their swords and armour now into hoes and sickles, and, taking leave of Ares, they pray to Demeter and Dionysus.’¹²⁶ Here, of course, Themistius is being explicitly polytheistic, making reference to the traditional Olympian pantheon, which could not fit comfortably into any Christian worldview. To reiterate, I do not see Themistius as attempting in these passages to cause discomfort to the Christians in the audience. They would have been perfectly comfortable with Ares as a symbol representing war, while Apollo, Demeter and Dionysus stood for peace and its blessings of abundance and revelry which Theodosius claimed to

¹²² ‘Ζεὺς δὲ βασιλῆιος ἀκροατὴς καὶ μετὰ τοῦ Διὸς αὐτὸς βασιλεὺς καὶ πᾶσα ἡ μετ’ αὐτὸν δορυφορία.’ Them., *Or.* 16.201a. Heather & Moncur translate ‘Royal Zeus is my audience, and, with God, the king himself together with his whole entourage’, but the repeated use of the personal name of Zeus is noteworthy. Cf. the translation of Leppin & Portmann (1998): ‘Der königliche Zeus ist Zuhörer und mit ihm...’

¹²³ For example Libanius, see Cribiore (2013), 216-222.

¹²⁴ On Themistius’ exploitation of monotheistic language, see Ando (1996), 182; Heather & Moncur (2001), 64; Sandwell (2010).

¹²⁵ Them., *Or.* 15.185b-c.

¹²⁶ Them., *Or.* 16.211b. See below, pp. 77-78, for more on this passage, which seems to include a biblical allusion.

be bringing. But for the pagans, these were still divine figures in whose temples they could worship. Themistius presents the opportunity to activate a pagan identity.

There are also examples of passages in which Themistius does not refer to the pagan gods by name, but nonetheless uses polytheistic language. For instance, in *Or.* 15 he says that ‘the gods are givers of good things’.¹²⁷ Themistius could quite easily avoid the use of this plural, but feels no need to do so. Nonetheless, it is certainly a problem for those who see Themistius as constantly seeking a rapprochement with Christian language and thought that he chooses often to refer to plural gods.¹²⁸ Themistius clearly often falls back on ‘generic monotheism’, but he does not do so universally, even when it would be entirely possible to do so.

In contrast with Claudian, who provides frequent descriptions of pagan temples and practice, Themistius largely avoids such references. This is largely a matter of literary style, Claudian as a poet constructs his epics around jewel-like *ekphrases* of pagan architecture and rites. Themistius, as a philosopher and a prose panegyrist is considerably less visual in style. This does not mean that he considered such material offensive. To note a few passing references: in a passage mentioned above from *Or.* 15. the Goths are praying (προσεύχονται) to Demeter and Dionysus. This we need not take literally, but that does not mean it ought to be dismissed. Themistius is trying to construct an entirely positive image of Theodosius’ peace and it is noteworthy that he does so by means of a picture of traditional religion. Similarly in *Or.* 14 there is, as an analogy or aphorism: ‘God prefers those who often burn incense to those who offer tripods’, and Plato is portrayed as ‘praying’ for his ideal king at *Or.* 17.215b.¹²⁹

One important reference to an ancient pagan practice is the appearance in *Or.* 19 of the oracle of Delphi: ‘When Lykurgus the Spartan entered the great sanctuary in Dephi, the Pythia spoke thus to him: “You come, O Lykurgus, to my abundant temple, friend to Zeus and to all who have their home on Olympus, and I know not whether to prophesy you a god or man.”’¹³⁰ A lengthy speech from the Pythia follows, after which Themistius, in his own voice, asks:

¹²⁷ Them., *Or.* 15.193d. See also, for example, 34.16.

¹²⁸ Pace Sandwell (2010), 119 who writes that Themistius includes polytheistic conceptions in his ‘neutral religious language’; this however is based on the view that Themistius is reclaiming Homer as a ‘neutral text’, see further discussion below.

¹²⁹ Them., *Or.* 14.182a. Heather & Moncur (2001), 227 n. 61 understand this as a proverbial phrase, though it cannot be identified elsewhere.

¹³⁰ Them., *Or.* 19.225c-d.

Now, O beloved Pythian, you must give us an answer. For if the ruler of one city or a small share of the Peloponnese... on account of his mildness alone made you uncertain as to what name to call him by, what would you say, O blessed, about the emperor of more or less all the land and sea... would you still be in doubt whether he was a god or a man when he came to us into the temple?¹³¹

Being referenced is the famous tale of Sparta's legendary law-giver told by Herodotus, and indeed Themistius quotes directly from the hexameter poem the historian records.¹³² The Delphic oracle was a focus of religious controversy in the late fourth century. Christian authors of this period held that the prophecies of all the ancient oracles, of whom the Pythia was of course the most renowned, had fallen silent at the coming of Christ, one of the signs that the demonic power of the pagan idols had been vanquished.¹³³ Julian considered reviving the oracular springs at Daphne, and may have sought an oracle from Delphi itself.¹³⁴ It is sometimes asserted that Theodosius himself was responsible for the elimination of the Pythian oracle, though the evidence for this is slight.¹³⁵ It is clear, however, that the Delphic oracle was in decline in the fourth century, and this was celebrated by Christian triumphalists. The oracles were tied to pagan religious identity, part of a religious inheritance that pagans could recognise and respond to. In this context, Themistius' decision to give, not just a passing mention, but a lengthy speech to the Pythia is interesting.¹³⁶ The majority of the passage is set long before the coming of Christianity, but Themistius brings it into the present by asking the oracle to declare its judgement of Theodosius' divinity. Clearly this request is not literal, and oracular pronouncements were a familiar part of the classical tradition. Theodosius would not have considered this a demand for him to reverse the decline of the oracles. But they had been a key element in traditional Greco-Roman religion for a thousand years, and Themistius' use of them here invites the pagans present to activate that religious identity.

Another passage of interest in *Or.* 15 is Themistius' reference to a rain miracle, brought about by the prayers of a Roman emperor:

When the army of Antoninus, emperor of the Romans, whose very surname was 'Pious', was pressed hard by thirst, holding up his hands to heaven, the king said 'I exhort you by

¹³¹ Them., *Or.* 19.227b-c.

¹³² Hdt. 1.65.3.

¹³³ For example Eus., *Praep. Evang.* 4.2; Prud., *Apoth.* 435-443. See Shorrock (2011), 33-36. For further discussion, see p. 130.

¹³⁴ On Daphne: Amm., 22.12.8; Shorrock (2011), 34-35. Julian allegedly received the 'last oracle' of Delphi; see Gregory (1983) for discussion. On Julian's relationship with oracles, see now Greenwood (2021), 106-109.

¹³⁵ Shorrock (2011), 33-34. The archaeology of the site suggests some sort of violent destruction, but there is no reason to attribute this to Theodosius; Gregory (1983), 362.

¹³⁶ Themistius also makes a brief allusion to Lykurgus' visit to the Pythia in *Or.* 15.193c, and uses the same anecdote in *Or.* 7.97c-d. Note also *Or.* 23.296a-c.

this hand, with which I have taken no life, and beseech the giver of life.’ And he so shamed the god with his prayer that from a clear sky came clouds bearing water for the soldiers. And I have seen an engraved image of this deed, the emperor praying amidst the battle array, the soldiers setting down their helmets for the rain, and filling them to the brimful with running water, the gift of God.¹³⁷

Themistius is recounting here a well-known story in late Antiquity, that of the battle of the Romans against the Quadi in 172. The ‘Thunderer’ legion had been saved in that battle by the intervention of a miraculous rain shower, and the divine cause had long been debated – it had variously been assigned to Jupiter, to an ‘Egyptian magician’ or a ‘Chaldean theurgist’, or, in the earliest surviving literary account of the battle, written by Tertullian, to the Christian God.¹³⁸ A version also appears in Claudian.¹³⁹ It is notable that Themistius chooses to include this narrative that had been contested between Christians and pagans. In one sense, Themistius presents it in non-partisan terms, attributing it to a neutral, monotheistic God. On the other hand, he certainly does not accept the Christian narrative which, as presented in Tertullian and Eusebius, attributed the miraculous intervention to the prayers of Christians in the emperor’s army. In Themistius’ version, the emperor, whose personal piety is emphasised, did his own praying. This may appear a minor variation, but actually stands in direct contradiction to the explicit statement of Eusebius that the miracle happened through the prayers of the Christians.¹⁴⁰ A retelling of this story that pushes against the Christian interpretation seems precisely intended to invite the activation of pagan religious identity. Themistius does not make use of the more obviously pagan narratives, involving magic, and yet he also rejects the Christian explanation, giving credit to the piety and purity of a (pagan) emperor. Themistius is suggesting that not only Christian prayers are acceptable to the ears of the Almighty. He invites the pagan audience to join with him in affirming that a pagan emperor was capable of calling down favour from on high, in resistance to a common Christian narrative; joining, then, in a moment of pagan ‘groupness’.¹⁴¹

Philosophy and *Paideia*

Themistius’ oratory is deeply influenced by the traditions of Greek philosophy, informed by his training and self-presentation as a philosopher. In his orations he often identifies himself explicitly

¹³⁷ Them., *Or.* 15.191b-c.

¹³⁸ The attribution to the Egyptian magician is found in Cass. Dio, 72.8; for Tertullian’s account, which also mentions prayers to Jupiter, see *Ad Scapulam* 4. It is also recounted in Eus., *HE* 5.5. A full catalogue of the sources can be found in Kovács (2009), 23-93.

¹³⁹ See discussion below, p. 138 n. 182.

¹⁴⁰ Eus., *HE* 5.5.

¹⁴¹ Pace Ernesti (1998), 454: ‘Mit seiner Schilderung des Regenwunders... könnten Anhänger beider Religionen einverstanden sein’ (‘With his description of the Rain-Miracle... followers of both religions could agree’).

with the figure of ‘Philosophy’. This was, as I discussed above, an image which he took extremely seriously, cultivated assiduously and defended robustly. We need not, of course, take uncritically his assertions that his various imperial masters represented the ideal of the Philosopher–King envisioned by Plato, but it does mean that we ought to pay close attention to his discussion of philosophy and philosophers.

Explicit and implicit use of Plato dominates the philosophical content of the orations – in quantitative terms the only canonical author with comparable status is Homer.¹⁴² This is perhaps somewhat surprising, as Themistius’ own focus, rather unusually for the fourth century, was Aristotle.¹⁴³ This discrepancy between his ‘political’ and ‘academic’ writings requires explanation. Heather and Moncur refer to the fact that the influence of Neoplatonist thought on Christian doctrines had created a Platonic ‘common-ground’.¹⁴⁴ It would therefore make sense for Themistius to put Plato at the heart of his rhetoric. There is doubtless some truth in this – many of the axioms of late-antique political ideology were Platonic in basis. But that Neoplatonism was inherently amenable to Christianity was, at best, highly disputed in late Antiquity – some of the great Neoplatonist philosophers of the age were some of the Church’s ferocious critics. Themistius was certainly not one of these, but neither does he go out of his way to construct a particularly ‘Christian’ view of Plato and his doctrines, portraying him on one occasion, as we have seen, as a polytheist, asking ‘the gods’ for the ideal Philosopher–King.¹⁴⁵ This was less an attempt to create a religious common-ground as it was relying on the already existing literary common-ground. As Penella observes, Plato had a reputation as the great philosophical stylist, whose elevated phrases were more fit to grace the court of a king than the more involved, technical language of Aristotle.¹⁴⁶

It is not only the extent to which Plato is cited by Themistius that is significant, but also the reverence with which he does so. Themistius’ favourite epithet for the Athenian is θεσπέσιος.¹⁴⁷ This is an interesting choice of terminology; θεσπέσιος was a term used by Christian authors of the fourth and fifth centuries to describe sainted biblical figures.¹⁴⁸ It may be that Themistius is deliberately paralleling this usage to ‘canonise’ Plato. At the very least, he is endowing Plato with a sacrosanctity beyond that which Christian authors, even those with a high regard, would have

¹⁴² Penella (2014), 145.

¹⁴³ Vanderspoel (1995), 20-22.

¹⁴⁴ Heather & Moncur (2001), 62-64.

¹⁴⁵ Them., *Or.* 34.16.

¹⁴⁶ Penella (2014), 153.

¹⁴⁷ Them., *Or.* 16.204a; 17.215b; 18.224b; 34.5.

¹⁴⁸ The apostles, for example, are referred to as θεσπέσιοι at Eus., *HE* 3.24.3; the prophets in Ath., *Homilia in Mt.* 27.11 6.

granted him. People name ‘their life’ (τὸν ἑαυτοῦ βίον) after him, as they do with Aristotle – a group that implicitly excludes Christians, who name their lives after Christ.¹⁴⁹ Plato ‘passed beyond heaven itself’ (αὐτὸν ὑπερέβη τὸν οὐρανὸν).¹⁵⁰ Plato as he is portrayed by Themistius acts as a channel for divine revelation, what is more a clearly non-Christian revelation. The notion that Plato was a ‘holy man’, a figure of religious importance, was widespread in late Antiquity.¹⁵¹ Themistius had his quarrels with several contemporary Neoplatonic ‘holy men’, but these were over the interpretation of Plato on the active versus contemplative life, not the question of whether Plato’s wisdom was of divine origin.

While Plato is by some distance the most commonly cited philosopher in the *Orations*, others do appear. Aristotle is, of course, frequently name-checked, including receiving the θεσπέσιος epithet, as, less frequently, are Pythagoras and Socrates.¹⁵² Some are frankly obscure, and may have tested the education of the non-specialist audience: how many senators in Constantinople, for example, would be familiar with ‘Thrasya, Priscus, Bibulus and Favonius’?¹⁵³ In all these cases we have even less reason to believe that Themistius is propounding a Christian-friendly view of Hellenic philosophy. The philosophers on whom Themistius relies are part of the canon of Greek literature, but in no sense are they merely cited as aesthetic embellishments. Their ideas are used to form the scaffolding for the affirmation of late-antique political values. They are integral, and represent Themistius’ faith in the continuing relevance of philosophy – pagan philosophy – in an increasingly Christian world. Themistius undoubtedly regarded philosophy as a form of divine revelation, a revelation that, in the fourth century, was in implicit conflict with Christian claims that the revelation of Christ and the Scriptures provided an exclusive route to God. The many Christians in Themistius’ audience will have found little objectionable in the commendation of Plato and of philosophy more generally, which they recognised as a key part of the tradition of *paideia* of which they considered themselves the heirs. For Theodosius, the career soldier from the West, praise in these philosophical terms was precisely what he wished for in order to appeal to these Hellenic elites. The epideictic purpose is clear. The pagan audience however could have seen the commendation of a philosophical worldview which they saw as an alternative, rather than a buttress, to Christianity. They were invited to recognise a view of philosophy that was inherently pagan, and activate their pagan identities in response.

¹⁴⁹ Them., *Or.* 31.354b.

¹⁵⁰ Them., *Or.* 34.5.

¹⁵¹ Fowden (1982), 34-35.

¹⁵² ὁ θεσπέσιος Ἀριστοτέλης; Them., *Or.* 18.225a. See also 34.6-7. Socrates: 31.352c; Pythagoras: 15.192b.

¹⁵³ Them., *Or.* 17.215b.

For Themistius, divine wisdom was not limited to the great philosophers, it was behind the whole canon of Greek literature, and in particular its fount and origin, Homer. He did not see a distinction between them, but saw them as part of the same great tradition of *paideia*. He writes, for example, that ‘the divine Plato is likely to have learned this lesson from Homer’.¹⁵⁴ This, more than anything, should caution us against seeing a distinction between the ‘philosophical’ sections of the orations, which should be taken seriously, and the ‘literary/mythological’ passages, which should be taken as purely aesthetic. Homer is not a dead source of antiquarian aesthetic material, but part of living tradition, overflowing with philosophical and religious wisdom. Homer is cited in the manner of a philosopher, and as an authority on matters philosophical: ‘We should listen to him [Homer]. For he does not call us to a lengthy speech, whence he thinks to discern the godlike king.’¹⁵⁵ In this sense, Themistius is actually rather close to Julian’s claim that the authors of the Greek classics received their wisdom from the gods.¹⁵⁶

In my earlier discussion of the pagan gods, I confined myself to references for which there is no identifiable literary allusion being made, in order to challenge the claim made by Heather and Moncur that Themistius deliberately softens the blow of his paganism by locating it within the traditional literary canon. But framing the pagan gods in Homeric quotation and allusion does not make them less relevant to questions of religion – if anything, the opposite is true. These passages are not trivial ornamentation, but should be seen in the context of the portrayal of Homer as the bearer of philosophical truths.¹⁵⁷ This runs counter to Isabella Sandwell’s recent interpretation of Homer in Themistius. She builds on the ideas of Heather and Moncur which were discussed above, accepting the idea that Themistius ‘contains’ or ‘quarantines’ his references to pagan gods, but argues that these are not purely classicising. Rather this usage ‘contributes to the reclaiming of Homer as a neutral text that could be drawn on by Christians as well as pagans, even when it was overtly polytheistic’.¹⁵⁸ Sandwell claims that Themistius is, in a sense, adapting Homer to the Christian context in which he was speaking.¹⁵⁹ I see no evidence that Themistius attempts to make

¹⁵⁴ Them., *Or.* 15.189a. 20.236b calls Homer the ‘προπάτορα καὶ ἀρχέγονον’ of Plato’s and Aristotle’s wisdom. On the relationship between Homer and philosophy in Themistius, see Penella (2000b), 196-197; Penella (2014), 158-160.

¹⁵⁵ Them., *Or.* 15.188d.

¹⁵⁶ Jul., *Ep.* 36.423A. See above, p. 34. The notion that Homer contained divine truths that could be combined with Plato was a philosophical commonplace in late Antiquity; see Lamberton (1986).

¹⁵⁷ In *Or.* 32.363a-c Themistius expresses some mild scepticism about the tales in the poets, including Homer and Hesiod, which refer to moral weakness in the gods, and discusses allegorical readings of these texts – a common enough line of reasoning in late Antiquity. My point here is not that Themistius engaged in *literalist* readings of poetic texts, but that he held them as an important source of truth, even if expressed allegorically. Nowhere does he engage in excoriating criticisms of the ‘lies of the poets’.

¹⁵⁸ Sandwell (2010), 119.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

Homer ‘neutral’; indeed the comparison with philosophy seems to counter this. On the contrary, I would argue that Themistius, if anything, is emphasising the pagan nature of Homer, and of *paideia* generally, thus linking them with pagan religious identity.

Hellenic *paideia*, has been widely recognised in recent scholarship as being just as highly respected among the Christian elite as it was among the pagans. It is of course true that very few Christians would have found approving quotation of Homer unacceptable – the great epic poet had been a companion to them all since childhood. But Themistius certainly does not ‘Christianise’ Homer, or *paideia* more generally. He relies on rhetorical ambiguity and ambivalence. To Christians, having their emperor praised with references to Homer, Plato, and the rest of the Greek canon invoked the grandeur of the classical heritage, the divine allusions contributing to this, but regarded as of no religious significance. For pagans, his portrayal of *paideia* as dependent on a divine wisdom, external to, and in contradiction with, a Christian worldview, could invite them to activate their religious identity, and take pleasure in the fact that these things could still be said before a Christian emperor. Theodosius’ Constantinople was still therefore a place that valued Hellenic *paideia*, including for those inhabitants for whom it was a central element of their religious identity.

Themistius and Christianity

While Themistius’ orations are cast in the trappings of the pagan past, they also reflect on the Christian present. There is a number of references to Christian texts and beliefs in the orations, including those of the Theodosian period. Readers of Themistius have also sought to understand how he sits within the Christian intellectual culture of his day. Recent scholars have sought to portray Themistius as actively accommodating Christian language and ideas into his Hellenic scheme, in order to construct a ‘common ground’. This is a reversal of the earlier view put forward by Glanville Downey, that Themistius established Hellenic philosophy as a serious alternative to Christianity.¹⁶⁰ I will argue here that, while they may seem diametrically opposed, these two views need to be reconciled to do justice to the subtlety of Themistius’ relationship with Christianity. He makes use of biblical texts and Christian imagery, according them a degree of respect and incorporating them within a syncretic philosophy. But it is also clear that they are just one strand of his philosophical system, and, if anything, are subordinate to traditional Hellenic *paideia*. It is likewise true that he uses some terms that have Christian resonances, such as *philanthropia*, and the notion of the ‘image of God’. But these are concepts with a perfectly respectable heritage in Greek philosophy, and Themistius does nothing to ‘Christianise’ them. He is neither explicitly opposing

¹⁶⁰ See particularly Downey (1957).

Christianity, nor fully accepting it. Rather, he is playing on ambiguity and ambivalence, using concepts and language that are acceptable to Christians, but remain unimpeachably Hellenic. He is positioning himself alongside his fellow pagans, who had learned to live with Christianity, and who were content to allow Christians to participate in the classical heritage, but for whom it was also a part of their religious identity. His epideictic thus works as a unifying force, appealing both to the Christians who appreciate these biblical texts and Christian ideas, and to those pagans who thought they should not be valued too highly.

Biblical Allusions

There are a variety of more or less explicit Christian references and allusions in Themistius' speeches, including in the orations of the Theodosian period. These suggest that he had some familiarity with Christian texts, though most likely gained second hand.¹⁶¹ We can certainly imagine him even attending church services as part of court life, or out of simple curiosity.¹⁶² The most direct reference in the Theodosian orations to the Bible is made in *Or.* 19: 'He [the emperor] has trusted well in the word of the Assyrian, which says that the heart of the emperor is guarded in the hand of God.'¹⁶³ The 'Assyrian' is the writer of Proverbs 21.1. This was a favourite quotation of Themistius', and also appears in *Or.* 7 and 11. It recalls the remark he makes in his great discourse on religious tolerance, *Or.* 5, that God 'wishes the Syrians to be organised in one way, the Greeks another, the Egyptians another...'¹⁶⁴ His quotation here is reminiscent of the way in which he quotes Homer, and certainly accords the Old Testament writer a certain degree of respect. But he does not privilege this as a holy text, it is cited mostly in passing, to adorn an argument that is being made from Themistius' usual Hellenic sources.

Such usage cuts both ways: it reaches out to cross the divide between biblical and classical literature, but also relegates the Christian text to a footnote, allowable only in so far as it supports a point that can also be found in Homer and Plato. Downey suggests that: 'The obvious conclusion, which Themistius left unspoken, was that much of Christianity was imitated from paganism, and the inference was that the intelligent person ought to prefer the genuine article.'¹⁶⁵ This overstates the case, at least as far as this passage goes, but I agree that such a direct biblical reference as this is

¹⁶¹ See Dagron (1968), 152-154 on Themistius' knowledge of Scripture. Vanderspoel (1995), 34-35 speculates that he may have studied under Basil, father and namesake of the famous Cappadocian theologian, but the evidence is thin.

¹⁶² Downey (1957), 264.

¹⁶³ Them., *Or.* 19.229a. Ernesti (1998), 455 notes the use of the verb *πεπίστευκε*, which seems to link the proverb specifically with Theodosius' faith.

¹⁶⁴ Them., *Or.* 5.70a; cf. *Or.* 24.301b.

¹⁶⁵ Downey (1957), 261-262. See also Ernesti (1998), 456 who comments that, 'Das Zitat paßt nicht recht, es wirkt wie aufgepfropft.' ('The quotation doesn't really fit, it seems grafted on').

more nuanced and ambiguous than it appears. The contrast with Claudian, who, as will be discussed below, includes scarcely any biblical allusions in his panegyrics, is illuminating. Claudian's works are placed in an entirely different intellectual and imaginative sphere from Scripture, and his Christian listeners for their part could disengage the poems from questions of religion. By directing the audience to a Christian text, Themistius makes that more difficult. Themistius can be understood entirely reasonably both as making a respectful nod to Scripture, incorporating it into his syncretic understanding, and, conversely, as making it clear that he regards the great writers of the Greek past as the primary source of wisdom. Vanderspoel notes that, 'Themistius was clever and flexible enough to realise that a concept common to Homer and Christian scripture could be expressed in terms of the latter rather than the former if the opportunity to achieve his intended result, some vestigial preservation of traditional values, was enhanced.'¹⁶⁶ But direct biblical allusions are far too few in the orations to recommend such a conclusion. Themistius hardly seeks out ways in which to express his thoughts in the language of Scripture, and it is the Greek tradition that is given primacy.

Notable also is that Themistius' one direct reference is to the Old Testament rather than the New. The Gospels and Epistles are never explicitly cited by Themistius. This silence presents difficulties for those who wish to see him as 'reaching out' to Christian culture. It may of course be chance that an Old Testament verse struck Themistius as particularly apposite. But it is also not difficult to see why a devotee of Hellenic *paideia* such as Themistius might have avoided the New Testament, the rough, unpolished Greek of which embarrassed even some educated Christians.¹⁶⁷ The Hebrew Scriptures had the charisma of antiquity, so valued in the Roman world, which the New Testament did not enjoy.¹⁶⁸ Themistius need not have shared the contemptuous attitude of Julian towards the Gospels of the Galileans to feel that the ancient wisdom of the 'Assyrians' was more worthy of comparison with Homer and Plato.

Another possible allusion to the Old Testament occurs at *Or.* 16.211b: '[The Goths] are making the iron from their swords and armour now into hoes and sickles, and, taking leave of Ares, they pray to Demeter and Dionysus'. This image of peace seems to be an echo of two Old Testament passages:

¹⁶⁶ Vanderspoel (1995), 18.

¹⁶⁷ MacMullen (1984), 104.

¹⁶⁸ For Graeco-Roman interest in Judaism, see Rives (2007), 161-162. Also noteworthy is Julian's complex but often positive attitude towards Jewish religion; Belayche (2002), 116-118; Tanaseanu-Döbler (2013), 141; Greenwood (2021), 111-113.

Joel 3.10 and Micah 4.3.¹⁶⁹ Both these verses have a similar structure and use the unusual term *δρεπάνας*. If Themistius does intend to allude to Joel here, he is doing so with scant attention to the text, which is call from God rousing his people to war. The Micah quotation is apt, however – a promise of God-given peace on earth. What is of particular interest here is the conjunction of these allusions with the invocation of pagan deities. The reference to Demeter and Dionysus, gods of abundant fertility, intersects with what follows in Micah 4.4: ‘But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree...’¹⁷⁰ Whether Themistius was familiar enough with this text to make such an allusion is of course uncertain, but it is certainly plausible that he could have come across and remembered the passage. In either case, the intersection of a biblical allusion and not one but three pagan deities is striking: as I noted above in regards to this passage, the language is stridently polytheistic, and there is no obvious literary context that softens the blow. It speaks once again to Themistius’ unwillingness to accord special privileges to the Christian Scriptures. The language is of course metaphorical – neither Themistius nor his audience supposes that the Goths are really offering such worship to the pagan gods. But it is these gods that are chosen as the symbols of peace and prosperity. A scriptural reference may be woven into the literary fabric here, but it is the traditional Hellenic deities who are given prominence. Further, if the audience did note the biblical allusion, the conjunction of the Christian and the classical might even be considered to have a note of challenge; the acceptance of pagan imagery in a Christian culture required its separation from the religious, a separation that Themistius here complicates.

Some references to the New Testament have been attributed to the orations of this period, of varying degrees of specificity; it is not always easy to determine with confidence whether they are conscious allusions to particular texts or more general gestures to Christian thought.¹⁷¹ Perhaps the most direct occurs in *Or.* 16, in which Themistius tells the emperor that, ‘to give the greatest things is more blessed than to receive (τὸ δίδοναι τὰ μέγιστα τοῦ λαμβάνειν μακαριώτερον)’. This is very close to a sermon of Paul in Acts, in which the apostle attributes a very similar phrase to Christ: ‘μακάριόν ἐστιν μᾶλλον δίδοναι ἢ λαμβάνειν’.¹⁷² The sentiment, of course, can hardly be said to be

¹⁶⁹ Cf. LXX Joel 4.10 (3.10 in modern editions): συγκόφατε τὰ ἄροτρα ὑμῶν εἰς ῥομφαίας καὶ τὰ **δρέπανα** ὑμῶν εἰς σειρομάστας; Micah 4.3: ‘καὶ κατακόψουσιν τὰς ῥομφαίας αὐτῶν εἰς ἄροτρα καὶ τὰ δόρατα αὐτῶν εἰς **δρέπανα**... καὶ οὐκέτι μὴ μάθωσι πολεμεῖν’; Vanderspoel (1995), 207 n. 75; Heather & Moncur (2001), 280 n. 252. Also reminiscent of Lib., *Or.* 12.84.

¹⁷⁰ KJV translation.

¹⁷¹ For example, a possible (loose) allusion to the Lord’s Prayer in Them., *Or.* 16.210c; see Heather & Moncur (2001), 279 n. 247, and comparison of the emperor’s role to that of a shepherd, calling to mind the description of Christ as the ‘Good Shepherd’ in the Fourth Gospel; Them., *Or.* 15.186c-d; John 10.11, cf. similar terminology in *Or.* 1.10a. Downey (1957), 263; Heather & Moncur (2001), 64, 87 n. 120.

¹⁷² Them., *Or.* 16.203c; Acts 20.35. See Maisano (1995), 588; Ernesti (1998), 456-457.

uniquely Christian, and, while the wording is very close, Themistius does not quote the passage exactly.¹⁷³ The audience might well have recognised the reference, but Themistius does not credit the phrase either to Paul or to Christ, as he often does when quoting those sages he considers the pinnacle of wisdom: Homer, Plato, and Aristotle. Once again, this works both ways: not placing Jesus amongst these figures could both avoid awkward religious questions, while it could also be read as implying that he is not worthy of such company. In general, as noted above, Themistius seems to have been much more comfortable citing the Old Testament rather than the New, and he is never explicit in his references to the latter as he is to the former. This produces what was, from Themistius' point of view, no doubt a productive ambiguity, into which pagans could read an implicit disregard, while Christians were not confronted with the question of how New Testament wisdom related to traditional Hellenic ideas. Themistius' approach to Scripture, then, is neither one of careful neutrality, nor of simple derogation. Rather, it is one of ambivalence, in which the religious identity of the audience-member would determine how it was understood.

An Intellectual *Koine*?

In addition to scriptural allusions, scholarly attention has been directed at two themes to which Themistius repeatedly returns in his orations, and which appear to have significant resonances with Christian theology and discourse: the notion of *philanthropia* as the prime human, and, most especially, imperial, virtue, and the idea of the image or likeness of God in humanity. These get us to the centre of debates about Themistius' relationship with Christianity; whether he is attempting to demonstrate the pre-eminence of Hellenic *paideia*, or whether he is acknowledging and reinforcing an intellectual *koine*, a common-ground between Hellenism and Christianity.¹⁷⁴

Philanthropia, the benevolent love of mankind, is perhaps the most frequently used notion across Themistius' political orations. He regards it as the prime virtue of the ideal emperor: 'Mildness and justice and piety and the chief of these, *philanthropia*; by this alone is an emperor able to be called a god.'¹⁷⁵ It appears frequently in the Theodosian orations.¹⁷⁶ An analysis of the use of *philanthropia* in Themistius is key to Downey's argument that the orator seeks to establish Hellenism as a valid alternative to Christianity.¹⁷⁷ He argues that:

In both its public and its private aspects, Themistius' doctrine has every appearance of being intended as an answer to the teachings of Christianity, and as an effort to show that

¹⁷³ Not dissimilar notions and phrasing are used in Arist., *Eth. Nic.* 4.1.7.

¹⁷⁴ On the notion of a late-antique religious *koine*, see Markus (1990), 12; Salzman (2007).

¹⁷⁵ Them., *Or.* 19.226d-227a.

¹⁷⁶ Examples at Them., *Or.* 14.183b; 15.191b; 16.208c, 210a; 17.216a; 19.228b; 34.18, 20, 22.

¹⁷⁷ Downey (1955); Downey (1957), 267-268.

pagan thought and belief was able to give a man quite as satisfactory principles both of statecraft and of the conduct of private life... In the realm of personal ethics, it seems equally clear that Themistius, with his teaching of *philanthropia*, was attempting, to provide a pagan counterpart for the Christian doctrine of *agape*.¹⁷⁸

On the other hand, it has been taken by more recent scholars, particularly Heather and Moncur, as demonstrative of Themistius' desire to harmonise Christianity and Hellenism:

By the fourth century, *philanthropia*, far from being a uniquely Hellenic term, was another concept generally in use by both Christians and pagans... *Philanthropia* would thus have been a very odd term to adopt if one were attempting to counter the influence of Christianity in state circles. On the contrary, the championing of *philanthropia* confirms that Themistius aimed deliberately to occupy the by now extensive middle ground between Hellenic *paideia* and the Christian imperial religion.¹⁷⁹

It is undoubtedly true that *philanthropia* is a term with a respectable heritage, originating in classical Greece, and later appearing in Plutarch, among others.¹⁸⁰ It is also used in the New Testament, though infrequently. It is twice used to refer to acts of interpersonal kindness, and once to refer to the divine kindness of a saving God.¹⁸¹ It was, however, a term in common usage among fourth-century Christians.¹⁸² It is also used among Themistius' pagan contemporaries, including, interestingly, Julian.¹⁸³ In particular, there is a precedent for the understanding of *philanthropia* as a divine quality imitated by the emperor in Eusebius' panegyric for Constantine.¹⁸⁴

Themistius' frequent application of *philanthropia* to the political context is unusual, but this is clearly a notion that could be used comfortably in either a pagan or a Christian context.¹⁸⁵ Is Themistius then attempting to 'claim' *philanthropia* for Hellenism, or is he trying to exploit the religious *koine* between pagans and Christians? The fact that the term is so popular among fourth-century Christians, and that Themistius follows Eusebius in his usage, makes Heather and Moncur's argument appealing. The term itself was clearly commonplace and unobjectionable.¹⁸⁶ On the other hand, the use of a concept that was popular among Christians need not imply a positive attitude towards Christianity; Julian's inclusion of it demonstrates that. To make a comparison with

¹⁷⁸ Downey (1955), 202-203.

¹⁷⁹ Heather & Moncur (2001), 67.

¹⁸⁰ Downey (1955), 199-200; Daly (1975), 23-24.

¹⁸¹ Acts 27.3 and 28.2; Titus 3.4 respectively; Downey (1957), 271.

¹⁸² See Downey (1955), 204-207; Heather & Moncur (2001), 67; Swain (2013), 37 with n. 40.

¹⁸³ Downey (1955), 203-204. On Julian's use of *philanthropia*, see Wiemer (2020), 230.

¹⁸⁴ Eus., *Laud. Const.* 2.6. Downey (1955), 202-203; Heather & Moncur (2001), 67.

¹⁸⁵ Daly (1975), 26.

¹⁸⁶ Heather (1998b), 139.

another aspect of the supposed philosophical *koine*, the fact that Neoplatonists tended towards monotheism does not mean that they were trying to find common-ground with Christians; many were intensely hostile. It is interesting to note some of the contexts in which Themistius refers to *philanthropia*. In *Or.* 16, Theodosius is said to have sent out the consul Saturninus, clothed in *philanthropia* in the same way Achilles had given Patroclus his own armour.¹⁸⁷ Saturninus, a ‘disciple of Orpheus’, wafts Theodosius’ *philanthropia* like the olive branches used in religious festivals.¹⁸⁸ In *Or.* 19, *philanthropia* is extolled in the voice of Apollo, speaking through the Pythia, and hymned with words dedicated to the Muses.¹⁸⁹ There are also, of course, occasions on which the idea is not framed in this way, but these examples are noteworthy nonetheless; Themistius was clearly comfortable putting *philanthropia* in very ‘Hellenic’ terms. The latter two examples in particular have a distinctly pagan religiosity, and provide the opportunity for the activation of pagan identity. Much like his biblical references, his use of the term in this context could even be seen as constituting a challenge to the Christian audience – at the least it suggests a resistance to any Christian claims of ‘ownership’ of the concept.

While not as frequent as his use of *philanthropia*, Themistius makes occasional allusions to the notion of the image or likeness of God. This is a concept with very significant resonances in a Christian context, all the more so in the fourth century when the epithet ‘image of God’, referring to the Second Person of the Godhead, played a significant role in the theological debates of the Nicene controversy.¹⁹⁰ This language of divine ‘image’ as well as related concepts were very popular among Christian theologians of this period, perhaps not least because of its parallels with Neoplatonist thought.¹⁹¹ That this idea, so prominent in Christian theology, and with potential links to the pagan philosophical tradition, appears in Themistius invites us to consider it as evidence of Themistius’ relationship with Christianity. This is noted by both Downey, and Heather and Moncur, prompting a disagreement along much the same lines as that over *philanthropia*.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ Them., *Or.* 16.208c.

¹⁸⁸ Them., *Or.* 16.209d-210a; Heather & Moncur (2001), 278 n. 243.

¹⁸⁹ Them., *Or.* 19.226d-227a, 228b.

¹⁹⁰ Humanity is also said to be created in the likeness and image of God (κατ’ εἰκόνα... καὶ καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν) in the LXX text of Genesis 1.26.

¹⁹¹ Christ is called εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ at Colossians 1.15 and 2 Corinthians 4.4; similar language is used in Hebrews 1.3. For fourth-century Christian debates, see, for example Eus., *Praep. Evang.* 7.15; *Dem. Ev.* 4.3; Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, 1.6.20. Scholarly discussion of this issue can be found in Hanson (1985); DelCogliano (2006); Young (2011). See Neoplatonist parallels at, for example, Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.1.7.1-5.

¹⁹² Downey (1957), 267-269; Heather & Moncur (2001), 65. See also Ernesti (1998), 459, taking broadly the same line as Heather & Moncur.

It should be noted first that the phrase ‘εἰκὼν θεοῦ’ does not appear exactly in the orations of the Theodosian period. Nonetheless, Themistius speaks often in his orations for Theodosius of the notion of ‘likeness to God.’ In *Or.* 15, we are told that the king ‘must bear in his soul the form of the likeness of God. (πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ὁμοιώσεως).’¹⁹³ This is, Themistius informs us, an opinion endorsed by the great Greek philosophers: Plato says that, ‘Justice with wisdom is likeness to God (ὁμοίωσιν... πρὸς τὸν θεόν).’¹⁹⁴ In *Or.* 19, Themistius informs Theodosius that, ‘the state bestowed upon you the name of divinity, not because you have much gold in your power, nor because of crowns of victory or purple robes in abundance, nor because it is easy for you to make wealth out of poverty on the spot – for all these things are lower than heaven and the image of God (ταῦτα γὰρ πάντα χθαμαλότερα τοῦ οὐρανίου καὶ τῆς πρὸς ἐκεῖνον εἰκόνης).’¹⁹⁵ This is a notion which Themistius applies generally if not exclusively to the emperor, and is keen to situate in a Hellenic context. The author to whom he most directly gestures is Plato.¹⁹⁶ While for the Christian audience, resonances with the Bible might certainly be present, Themistius does little himself to encourage such a link. Perhaps even more than in the case of *philanthropia*, Themistius appears to highlight that this is a concept that emerges from Hellenic philosophy. His references to ‘God’ almost invite the question, ‘which God?’, his references to Plato imply not the Christian deity. The language is, of course, ambiguous and Christian audiences need not read into it this implication, but for pagan members of the audience, it provides the opportunity for the activation of religious identity.

One passage merits individual discussion. This is a section in *Or.* 15: ‘Therefore, in consequence, let us ourselves seek, and exhort the poet to teach us how one who walks upon the earth, and is clothed in flesh should be thought to have the form (ἔχειν τὸ ἵνδαλμα) of him who has sat beyond the highest vaults and beyond all being.’¹⁹⁷ This passage, which describes the emperor as being in the form of God, has been noted for its echoes of that most distinctively Christian of ideas, the Incarnation. Bella Sandwell suggests that, ‘Themistius does not seem to realise how unacceptable any attempt to equate the emperor with Christ as an emanation of god or with divine incarnate might be to some Christians.’¹⁹⁸ I do not think such an error can be attributed to Themistius, certainly not this deep into his career. The reference, if it is intentional, is a loose one; ἵνδαλμα is

¹⁹³ Them., *Or.* 15.188c.

¹⁹⁴ Them., *Or.* 15.189a. See also 15.192b.

¹⁹⁵ Them., *Or.* 19.229a-b.

¹⁹⁶ Particularly *Th.* 176b; Downey (1957), 267; Heather & Moncur (2001), 241 n. 107. Themistius’ ideas are similar to those found in Eus., *Laus. Const.* 1.6, which describes Constantine as being in the likeness of God, though Eusebius himself is here drawing on Hellenistic kingship philosophy, see Bardill (2012), 341. The influence of Eusebius on Themistius is discussed below, p. 86 n. 212.

¹⁹⁷ Them., *Or.* 15.188d.

¹⁹⁸ Sandwell (2010), 107. I noted this above, p. 23 n. 100, as an example of a misstep attributed to Themistius.

not a New Testament word, nor does it appear to have been used in the fourth century in a Christological context.¹⁹⁹ Such an ambiguous allusion, concerning an emperor who is throughout the orations compared directly to God, and in the century where imperial ideology often cast Christian autocrats more or less directly in the role of Christ, is hardly unacceptable.²⁰⁰ It is not, I think, intended to be a particularly profound comparison, and it is perhaps best not pressed too hard for philosophical or political implications. Nonetheless, it is significant that Themistius put a notion familiar from Christian political theology into very Hellenic terms: ‘the poet’ is of course Homer, and Themistius goes on immediately to quote from the *Odyssey*.²⁰¹ The language used to describe the divinity is more reminiscent of Neoplatonist philosophy than of Christian theology; these are references that have the potential to invite the activation of pagan religious identity. As in the case of *philanthropia*, neither a hostile nor an entirely positive reading is satisfactory in understanding the way Themistius relates to Christianity through his use of the ‘image of God’ language. This terminology could certainly be parsed in friendly terms by the Christians in the audience. But the orator does little to encourage these links, instead attempting to reinforce the Hellenic origins of his usage. In doing so, he provides opportunities for moments of pagan ‘groupness’ instantiated by his epideictic.

Scholars have, in recent years, tended to believe that Themistius had a fairly positive view of Christianity, or at least presented one in his orations. This has been part of a wider historiographical trend to emphasise the intellectual and cultural common-ground of fourth-century Christians and pagans, and a major element in the understanding of Themistius as a ‘moderate pagan’. Downey’s view, that Themistius was aiming to demonstrate the virtues of Hellenic *paideia* as a rival to Christianity, albeit in a subtle and respectful way, has largely gone out of fashion. While not advocating a reversion to this position, I argue that more recent scholarship has gone too far in the opposite direction. What is needed instead is an understanding of the religious ambivalence inherent in Themistius’ rhetoric; that he could be understood both as well-disposed towards Christianity, and as presenting Hellenism as a rival worldview. Through the latter, Themistius provides the opportunity for the instantiation of a moment of ‘groupness’ among those who shared his religious Hellenism. Much as in my discussion of his use of pagan deities and classical texts, which version of this the audience heard was dependent on their religious identity. In both cases, the epideictic function of the oration is maintained – Theodosius is still praised, whether for being in the image of God, or for possessing *philanthropia*.

¹⁹⁹ It is, however, a Plotinian term, see, for example, Plot., *Enn.* 5.3.8.49.

²⁰⁰ See, for example, Bardill (2012), 338-384.

²⁰¹ Them., *Or.* 15.189a, quoting from *Od.* 19.109-114.

Themistius and the Divine Emperor

I have discussed thus far the appearance in Themistius' orations of the gods of the traditional pagan pantheon, and of a generically monotheistic supreme deity. Now I turn to another divine figure: Theodosius himself. Frequently during the orations, Theodosius is ascribed divine epithets and compared to divine beings. Standing behind these passages, of course, are the twin traditions, deeply intertwined by this period, of the Hellenistic ideology of the 'divine ruler', and the Roman imperial cult first established in the early Principate. It is not my intention here to discuss in detail the long genealogy of these ideas. Rather, I wish to focus on the question of what they reveal about the religious circumstances of the late fourth century. The persistence of the forms of the imperial cult, and of ascriptions of divinity to emperors in panegyric, into the fourth century is amongst the most challenging problems in the study of late-antique religion. It is a question in which issues of religious identity play a significant if complex role. At first sight, it appears entirely antithetical to a Christian worldview; indeed, refusal to participate in the worship of the emperor had been a major point of conflict between Christians and the Roman state in the century before Constantine.²⁰² To therefore have a Christian emperor, decades later, described in these terms, is a curiosity that we ought not to brush over. It appears particularly remarkable in the case of Theodosius, with his reputation for piety, an entire lifetime and more after Constantine's conversion.²⁰³

Themistius is certainly not alone in the use of such terminology, it also features, for example, in the *Panegyrici Latini*, though it was by no means universal among panegyrists.²⁰⁴ It is tempting to explain this in the context of the imperial cult – the system of temples, priests, and sacrifices with which the emperor was honoured across the Empire. It is certainly useful to know that these practices continued in the years after Constantine's conversion. Like the end of the worship of the pagan gods themselves, the end of the imperial cult was a slow and complex process, one that did not occur in any simple sense under Constantine, nor any of his fourth-century successors.²⁰⁵ It may not even have been uncommon for Christians to participate and hold priesthoods in this period.²⁰⁶ This strongly suggests that, in using the language of imperial divinity, Themistius was not invoking a dead religious tradition, abolished by the Christians as abhorrent to their faith. But we should not

²⁰² Trombley (2011), 39-47 with n. 121.

²⁰³ See the account of MacMullen (1997), 34-36.

²⁰⁴ On the *Pan. Lat.*, see Saylor Rodgers (1986). Further discussion of divine terminology in Latin panegyric is included in the chapters on Claudian.

²⁰⁵ Gradel (2002), 363-365 sees the cult of the *divi* coming to an effective end as early as the third century. On Constantine's divine status, see Bardill (2012), 339-341; Greenwood (2021), 33-34. Bowersock (1986), 299-300 sees the imperial cult as having come to an effective end by 390. However recent studies have emphasised the continuity of ritual throughout the fourth century; see Trombley (2011); McIntyre (2016), 136-137.

²⁰⁶ Trombley (2011), 38-39; Boin (2016), 151-153.

confuse cult and panegyric, and assume that they directly corresponded to one another. This can be observed in the earliest period of Roman emperor-worship: Augustus was, in cultic terms, not deified until after his death, but was referred to as a god in the panegyric poetry of his lifetime.²⁰⁷

Part of the issue, in my view, is that scholars looking at this material have been too keen to find a single ‘meaning’ behind this language, ignoring the possibilities of ambivalence and ambiguity that I discussed in Part I. The question has become a binary one: did the speaker and audience of these panegyrics believe (as has been discussed, not a term easily applied to ancient religions) that the emperor was a god? Did they take this idea seriously? Might it have been offensive to Christians? Or was it, on the other hand, merely a convention, traditional, honorary, and by this period empty, not unlike the historical trappings of a modern constitutional monarchy, symbolic of a power and majesty that no one really believes in any longer.²⁰⁸ This is not solely a late-antique problem, in that historians have often wondered how seriously Romans took the imperial cult, but it is certainly sharpened by the Christianisation of the political sphere.²⁰⁹ Attempting to impose an artificial coherence on religious ‘beliefs’ in late Antiquity, as I have discussed, is not always helpful. The more radically monotheistic Christian ontologies, which aver a great chasm between God and humanity, Creator and created, had yet to take hold, and more nuanced and gradated forms of divinity were conceivable.²¹⁰ Further, different modes of religion were available, and both pagans and Christians could regard the emperor as being in some sense numinous and superhuman without worrying overly about how this fitted into their theological scheme. The question of whether people believed that their emperor was a god is not a particularly productive one.²¹¹ This should not stop us from regarding the divinity of the emperor as a serious religious matter – and one therefore that had relevance to religious identity.

The second point, and more particular to the study of rhetoric, is that the ‘question’ of imperial divinity is not one that needs a single solution. Indeed, at this time of rapid religious change and contention, one would be very surprised to find that there was a settled answer to the matter. The fact that such language is used in panegyric tells us that Themistius was confident, at the very least,

²⁰⁷ Ov., *Tr.* 2.53-54; 3.8.13-14; 5.2.35; Hor., *Carm.* 3.5.1-3. See with McGowan (2009), 63-92. On the question of Augustus’ divinity in poetry and cult, see Feeney (1998), 114; Gradel (2002), 110. See Levene (1997) on the emperor’s divinity in earlier Latin panegyric; Bartsch (1994), 162-164 on imperial divinity in Pliny’s panegyric for Trajan.

²⁰⁸ For example, Gradel (2002), 365; Cameron (2011), 228-230; Boin (2016), 142-144. For a discussion along these lines, see Ernesti (1998), 458-460.

²⁰⁹ The imperial cult was once thought to be entirely a matter of politics (indeed, a rather cynical one), an argument dismantled by Price (1980), Price (1984a).

²¹⁰ Gradel (2002), 26, with the, to my mind, largely unsuccessful critique of Levene (2012). See Price (1980), 36, 42 on the ambiguous nature and status of the emperor.

²¹¹ Price (1980), 43; Levene (1997), 100-101.

that it would not cause widespread offence. Beyond that, it could mean a variety of things to different members of the audience. Those Christians who regarded the notion of a divine emperor as unpalatable and incompatible with their faith could treat such references in a panegyric as an archaic formula, a polite fiction. For pagans, it could be interpreted more literally, as a continuity with the ancient traditions of Roman imperial cult, and the god-kings of the Greek tradition; and therefore with ability to activate their religious identity. In either case, crucially, the same epideictic purpose is served – Theodosius and his rule is still celebrated and glorified.

To what extent was imperial divinity a feature of ‘pagan’ rhetoric? Themistius’ emphasis on the divine emperor is not unique in fourth-century epideictic, but neither is it the norm. The language of imperial divinity in late-antique panegyric is unsystematic, and generalisations are difficult. Some points of comparison are helpful in positioning Themistius. Firstly, we have Eusebius’ tricennial panegyric for Constantine. Certainly there are parallels between Themistius’ and Eusebius’ thought; whether the pagan philosopher borrows directly has been disputed, but there are undoubted similarities in their political theology.²¹² In particular, Eusebius sees the emperor in the image of God on Earth: ‘It is he who is the guide of the whole entire universe, who is over all and throughout all, and traversing in all things visible and unseen, the Word of God, from whom and through whom, bearing the image of the kingdom above, the emperor, friend to God, rules, directing the tiller of everything on earth, through imitation of a greater power.’²¹³ But there is a crucial difference between Eusebius and Themistius – Constantine in this panegyric is not ‘divine’. The emperor may be even a parallel figure with the *Logos* of God himself – but he is nowhere a divinity.²¹⁴ Given the extraordinary majesty in which Eusebius clothes Constantine, this may seem like a minor distinction, but in this context it is an important one. The emperor is the instrument of heaven on earth, but he is nonetheless mortal.²¹⁵

Eusebius is certainly not alone in avoiding the explicit statements of imperial divinity, however.²¹⁶ The same trend is also evident, for example, in Libanius’ panegyrics for Julian – an unimpeachably pagan orator speaking for the last pagan emperor; this is a context in which Christian sensibilities

²¹² Kennedy (1983), 32 avers direct influence; though see *contra* Vanderspoel (1995), 7 n. 24. It may be that both drew on the same pool of tropes about kingship, see Dagron (1968), 135-136; Cameron (1991), 132. On Eusebius’ thought about the relationship of the emperor to the divine, see now Singh (2015).

²¹³ Eus., *Laud. Const.* 1.6. Similar passages at 3.5, 5.4.

²¹⁴ Lunn-Rockliffe (2008), 192. On the parallels between Constantine and Christ/*Logos*, see Barnes (1981), 254; Bardill (2012), 354-359; Singh (2015), 139-152; Greenwood (2021), 33-34.

²¹⁵ Drake (1976), 57-58; Bardill (2012), 339-341, 356.

²¹⁶ As is argued by Drake (1976), 57-58.

were an irrelevance.²¹⁷ Libanius' Julian is a priest and a tool of the gods' providence.²¹⁸ But nowhere is he divine.²¹⁹ Julian himself similarly avoids such imputations of divinity in his panegyrics for Constantius, seeming to prefer a understanding of the emperor as *princeps*, in rhetoric if not in practice.²²⁰ One might reasonably infer that Julian, to whom such matters were of considerable import, philosophical and personal, was unhappy with language that elevated him to divine status. A suggestion of a disagreement on this subject can be found in Julian's *Letter to Themistius*, in which he writes that: 'even though a ruler is by nature a man, he ought to be godlike and divine in conduct (θεῖον εἶναι χρὴ τῇ προαιρέσει καὶ δαίμονα)'.²²¹ This is something that Julian denied he was capable of, writing that, 'For myself, to rule seems greater than the human, and a king requires a more divine nature.'²²² He portrays himself as a frail mortal, in need of divine aid, not a godlike ruler.²²³

Clearly then, we cannot attribute different rhetorical notions of imperial divinity to a pagan-Christian dichotomy, at least in any simple sense. Like so many intellectual and political debates in late Antiquity, religious divisions were only one element. But neither can we dismiss religious identity as irrelevant. It is always dangerous to suppose Julian was representative of pagan opinion; his commitment to what he thought of as traditionalism, and his idiosyncratic turn of mind may have found rather more to object to in the imputation of divinity to the emperor than most of his pagan contemporaries. The logic of Christian objections to such language is obvious in a way it is not for pagans, and it is difficult to find an example of a fourth-century Christian orator using it.²²⁴ Referring to the emperor as divine was not an inherently 'pagan' thing to do – in that all pagans would do so, and it would be offensive to Christians – but neither was making to reference to Zeus, or indeed Aristotle. They could still be used to invite the activation of pagan identity.

We must look carefully at Themistius' own words. Themistius refers to imperial divinity in several ways. Firstly, Themistius addresses Theodosius with a number of titles that allude to the emperor's

²¹⁷ Indeed, there are explicitly anti-Christian statements, see above, p. 41 n. 182.

²¹⁸ Priest: Lib., *Or.* 12.80. The gods' role in Julian's reign: Lib., *Or.* 12.60-61, 66, 68; 13.13, 16, 20, 28, 35-36. This same notion of divine mandate is integral to Julian's own writings, see Elm (2012), 286-293. Julian is also compared to Zeus at 13.44.

²¹⁹ Cf. also the lack of divine imputations in Mamertinus' oration for Julian, *Pan. Lat.* III(11), with Saylor Rogers (1986), 89-91.

²²⁰ For example, Jul., *Or.* 1.45D. See with Dagron (1968), 126. Though he does describe Constantius as θεῖος ἀληθῶς in his oration for Eusebia: *Or.* 3.123a.

²²¹ Jul., *Ep. ad Them.* 259a.

²²² Ibid., 260c.

²²³ Ibid., for example, 267a-b. For more on this dispute, see Dagron (1968), 126; Cameron (1991), 131-132; Vanderspoel (1995), 120, 124-125; Maisano (1995), 21; Watt (2012); Swain (2013), 57-60. An alternative perspective can be found in Schofield (2000), 664-665; see also Niccolai (2019), 36-37 who argues that the *Letter* is more concerned with a self-conscious display of modesty.

²²⁴ A potential counterexample in the form of Pacatus is discussed below, pp. 142-143.

divinity. To cite a selection: he is addressed as, ‘your godlike majesty’ (ὦ θεοειδέστατε βασιλεῦ), ‘divine crown’ (ὦ θεία κεφαλή) and ‘most godlike ruler’ (ὦ θεοειδέστατε αὐτοκράτορ).²²⁵ ‘θεοειδέστατος’ is a favourite adjective of Themistius, indeed, it appears to be almost unique to him. It is a superlative derived from ‘θεοειδής’, ‘godlike’, or ‘divine in form’, a term applied to some Homeric kings and heroes, resonances of which Themistius and many of his audience can be expected to have recognised.²²⁶ The term also of course reflects and reinforces Themistius’ frequent assertion that the emperor should strive to be in the image and likeness of God, something which this usage suggests Theodosius had achieved to a superlative degree, even more than the heroes of Homer. The rarity of the term, and the degree to which it complements the broader argument of Themistius’ rhetoric should caution us against dismissing these as commonplace courtesies.²²⁷ At the same time, Theodosius and the Christian audience could hear it either as an elegant classicism, a statement that their emperor exceeds the legendary kings on whose stories they had been raised, or even in the context of Christian discourse about the likeness of God in humanity. In other passages, Themistius addresses the emperor’s divinity explicitly. He is said to have been ‘disposed by nature to be divine in form (πέφυκας θεοειδής)’, nor is it ‘unbefitting’ for a king like Theodosius to ‘have a divine name (τὴν κλήσιν τῆς θειότητος)’.²²⁸ To enter his presence is like ‘entering the sanctuary of a holy place’.²²⁹ Again, these are not meaningless ‘commonplaces’, but an integral part of Themistius’ political theology. The emperor’s divine characteristics are what give him the moral authority and power to rule.

John Vanderspoel portrays Themistius’ language throughout his orations as referring to the emperor as ‘semi-divine’.²³⁰ This is, I think, an unhelpful term, as it implies an equivocation not present in Themistius’ rhetoric. ‘Semi-divine’ is too blunt to convey such subtle gradations of divinity. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that, while clearly comfortable describing him as divine, holy, and godlike, Themistius does not at any point refer to Theodosius unreservedly as a god – ‘θεότητα’, ‘θεοειδής’, but not ‘θεός’. It is a striking omission – Themistius’ terminology is hardly equivocal, but it does seem to stop short of this final step.²³¹ He does say that Theodosius will be

²²⁵ Them., *Or.* 14.180c; 14.183d; 19.229d.

²²⁶ It is, for example, used to describe Priam at *Il.* 24.217.

²²⁷ *Contra* Ernesti (1998), 460: ‘...hat es nicht viel zu bedeuten, wenn er dem Basileus bisweilen das Attribut ‘göttlich’ beilegt. Hierbei handelt es sich um ein offizielles Epitheton und nicht um eine Sachaussage (It does not mean a great deal when he occasionally applies the attribute ‘divine’ to the *Basileus*. This is an official epithet and not a factual statement).’

²²⁸ Them., *Or.* 19.230a; 34.26. See also 15.193d.

²²⁹ Them., *Or.* 15.190c.

²³⁰ Vanderspoel (1995), 82-83.

²³¹ All the more notable, perhaps, since living emperors had often been referred to as θεός in the Greek East. See the discussion of Price (1984b), 79-85.

enrolled in the ranks of the gods, but this is likely to be a reference to posthumous apotheosis, which is a rather different matter.²³²

Themistius roots this attribution of divine qualities to the emperor in the classical past, such as in this passage: ‘Whenever he (Homer) marvels at a man as a king... it is not for his helm he is there remembered, nor for his spear, nor his swiftness, but that he is “nurtured by Zeus” and “born of Zeus” and “equal to Zeus in wisdom” (διοτρηφῆς καὶ διογενὴς καὶ Διὶ μῆτιν ἀτάλαντος).’²³³ As I have said, rooting such an idea in Homer for Themistius means that it should carry greater philosophical weight, not less.²³⁴ It is also striking how often the language of imperial divinity is expressed not only in terms of generic monotheism, but also the traditional pagan pantheon. As I discussed above, Theodosius is often said to be in the image and likeness of God, which had resonances with contemporary Christian thought, but was not dependent on it. This is further evidenced by the fact that Themistius expresses the same thought in ‘pagan language’: ‘And the work in which the king is defined is this, to be like Zeus (τὸ Διὶ ὁμοιωθῆναι).’²³⁵ It is Apollo, speaking through the Pythian Oracle who is called upon to declare whether Theodosius is a man or a god.²³⁶ Christians could clearly read this as classicising; it still serves the purpose of the epideictic. But for the pagans, these expressions could have genuine religious significance.

One term applied to Theodosius illustrates the religious ambivalence of Themistius’ rhetoric: the epithet ‘σωτήρ’, saviour. The orator explicitly acknowledges this as a divine title. In *Or.* 15 he says:

For the gods are givers of good things, and by joining with them in this work, you will be enrolled in the same dance, and all their epithets will henceforth be yours: the saviour, the guardian of the city, the hospitable, the protector of suppliants. (ὁ σωτήρ, ὁ πολιεὺς, ὁ ξένιος, ὁ ἱκεσιος).²³⁷

To acknowledge that Theodosius deserves this divine epithet is to recognise his likeness to God, or the gods. And the use of σωτήρ in the fourth century activates a range of possible religious resonances. It had been an epithet of Zeus and other members of the pantheon in classical times.²³⁸

²³² Them., *Or.* 15.193d: ‘ἐν τῷ αὐτῶν χορῷ ἐγγραφῆσθαι’.

²³³ Them., *Or.* 15.188b. Quotation from *Il.* 2.169, the other epithets are also Homeric.

²³⁴ *Contra* Ernesti (1998), 458, arguing that relating imperial divinity to Homer and classical mythology ‘relativises’ (‘relativiert’) it, and makes it inoffensive, for a Christian audience.

²³⁵ Them., *Or.* 15.188b. See also 15.189c.

²³⁶ Them., *Or.* 19.227b-c. See also 15.193c.

²³⁷ Them., *Or.* 15.193d. A very similar passage can also be found in *Or.* 6.79d for Valens. See also 19.229a-b.

²³⁸ Zeus: For example, Pind., *Ol.* 5.17, a temple of Zeus *Soter* stood at Megalopolis and elsewhere in the Greek world. Other gods include Apollo, for example, Aesch., *Ag.* 512-513, and Hermes, for example Aesch., *Cho.* 1-2. Hercules is σωτήρ in Dio Chrys., *Or.* 1.84.

For Julian, Asclepius was the ‘saviour of all’.²³⁹ And, of course, it has distinctive Christian connotations, applied in the New Testament to both Christ and God the Father.²⁴⁰ Heather and Moncur see this, in line with their broader reading of the orator’s religious thinking, as testifying to Themistius’ efforts to ‘occupy a religious middle ground’.²⁴¹ It seems preferable to explain it in terms of religious ambivalence. The context in which Themistius uses the term, certainly in the first passage, is classicising and pagan. Christians in the audience could see the New Testament connotations, or they could appreciate the classical literary references, but a pagan understanding is certainly possible. Themistius is, as I have argued throughout, ambiguous, rather than ‘neutral’.

It appears that Themistius’ approach to the issue of imperial divinity is much the same as his approach to other religious material. He leans heavily on ambiguity and ambivalence, trusting that his audience would not be offended by statements that seem, on face value, to transgress the limits of Christian doctrine. His rhetoric, on imperial divinity as elsewhere, is rooted in the classical, pagan past, in Homer and Plato, something he does not avoid or disguise. Theodosius and the Christian audience could look on this as the natural trappings of imperial power, entirely unrelated to the sermons on the frailty and sinfulness of all mortals they might have heard in the cathedrals of Gregory of Nazianzus or of Ambrose, irrelevant to questions of religious identity. Pagans, however, could have heard it in the context of the classical heritage of divine kingship, stretching back through Hellenistic literature to Plato and Homer. This was the language of the pagan past, even if some pagans rejected it. It invited them to recognise it as such and activate their pagan identities in this most political of contexts.

Art, Literature, and Religion: The *Augusteion* Muses

Over the course of this chapter, I have examined Themistius’ use of varying types of religious language and imagery, and how he makes use of ambiguity and ambivalence to speak to an audience of both Christians and pagans. In this section, I wish to look in greater detail at a selection of passages that further exemplify these ideas, and connect them with parallel discussions in the visual arts. These are the frequent references Themistius makes in the orations of the Theodosian period to a set of statues of the Muses, which stood in the senate-house in Constantinople. Themistius directs his audience’s attention to them on a number of occasions. These passages provide a fascinating case-study at the intersection of a number of aspects of late-antique culture:

²³⁹ Jul., *Or.* 4.153B. See with Athanassiadi (1981), 167; Heather & Moncur (2001), 192 n. 184. On soteriological figures in Julian’s work (including Hercules as well as Asclepius), developed in response to Christian thought, see now Greenwood (2021), 65-67, 83-85.

²⁴⁰ Luke 2.11; 1 Timothy 1.1.

²⁴¹ Heather & Moncur (2001), 192 n. 184.

literature, religion, philosophy, art, and politics are all at stake here. Rhetoric and the visual arts in late Antiquity were two sides of the same coin, often depicting in different media the same political drama.²⁴² Examining the interaction of the statues and the viewer's religious preconceptions, and how Themistius portrays this in his orations, will allow us to observe in action the subtle and shifting relationship between religion and culture at the end of the fourth century. The discussion will proceed thus: firstly, I will discuss the changing place of pagan statues in the fourth century, a subject on which there has been a large volume of recent scholarly work.²⁴³ Secondly, I will attempt to trace the somewhat obscure and difficult history of the group of statues of the Muses to which Themistius refers, since the story of their arrival in the Senate of Constantinople is highly relevant to how they were understood by contemporaries. I will then examine Themistius' portrayal of the statues in his orations, and finally discuss how this intersects with the policies and attitudes of the Theodosian regime, and of the audience which Themistius addressed. I will argue that Themistius, in contrast to elite Christians of the day, attributes religious significance to these statues, sometimes making use of the ambiguity and ambivalence that was, as we have seen, such a feature of his rhetoric, though on one notable occasion making his views more explicit. This meant that these remarks on the statues of the Muses could become moments of instantiation of pagan group identity, as with his other religious references.

Pagan Statuary and Christianisation

The history of pagan statuary in late Antiquity has much to tell us about the process of Christianisation. These works, ubiquitous in cities and beyond throughout the Empire, were perhaps the single most obvious place in which the Christian present met the pagan past. Mythological statues were a common flashpoint in relations between Christians and pagans, but were also divisive within Christian communities themselves.²⁴⁴ Statuary was an unavoidable feature of the very landscape, literally looming over the empire's urban population. The greatly varying reactions of Christians to the 'idols' of the past, ranging from violent, theatrical destruction to reuse, reassessment, and deliberate preservation is itself one of the reasons why this subject continues to attract considerable scholarly attention.

Part of the problem is that images are inherently ambiguous, their meaning residing in the eye of the beholder.²⁴⁵ Many Christians were able to regard depictions of pagan divinities as beautiful

²⁴² MacCormack (1981), 10-11.

²⁴³ The term 'pagan' statue would appear to preempt the question of the religious significance of these objects; I use it as a shorthand for any depiction of a pagan divine or mythological figure.

²⁴⁴ Kristensen (2013), 17; D'Annoville (2016), 345.

²⁴⁵ In the context of pagan statuary, see Rüpke (2010), 186.

works of art and symbolic representations of a quality or virtue.²⁴⁶ The intentions of Christians who preserved in place or relocated and re-erected pagan statuary are not always obvious, and they may indeed have intended to play on that very ambiguity. We should beware of falling into ‘intentionalism’, that is to say, assuming that the intentions of those who erected pagan statues, if we can even discern them, guided the response and reaction of all.²⁴⁷

A further complexity arises from the fact that the status of images of the divine had been a matter for dispute among both Christians and pagans. In general, philosophers of the third and fourth centuries took a fairly ‘high’ view of iconic representations of gods, holding that they could in some sense be thought to represent the divine.²⁴⁸ But there were many nuances in the way such statues were perceived. There does, for example, seem to have been a difference between cult statues (i.e. those that had stood in a temple and received worship) and those outside a cultic context. Statuary was inherently more problematic for Christians than two-dimensional depictions of gods (or even, we might add, literary ones) because of its historic association and continuing potential for pagan cult.²⁴⁹ Cult statues were most intensely targeted by iconoclastic Christians, and also benefited from more drastic measures on the part of pagans attempting to protect them.²⁵⁰ But this was not always a clear distinction.²⁵¹ The cities of the Roman Empire had long displayed statues of gods and heroes in ‘secular’ settings, in bathhouses and town squares, and images in these contexts might receive veneration.²⁵² Sanctity (or its opposite in the mind of Christian iconoclasts) was not a binary, it could exist in various forms or to different extents; it was something imputed by the observer rather than inherent in the statue. The question of whether mythological statuary in the fourth century was ‘religious’ is therefore one with no simple answer.

Theodosius the *μουσηγότης*?

I now turn to consider the particular history of the Muse statues to which Themistius frequently alludes throughout his orations. Fortunately, Themistius does not simply indicate their presence, but discusses them in some detail, most notably in *Or.* 31:

²⁴⁶ It was not only statues on pagan themes that could be ambiguous, cf. the statues erected by Constantine of the ‘Good Shepherd’ and ‘Daniel’ in Eus., *V Const.* 3.49, with Cameron & Hall (1999), 298; Marsengill (2015), 273 n. 5.

²⁴⁷ James (1996), 13.

²⁴⁸ For example Porphyry, Julian, and Libanius; Deligiannakis (2015), 176-181. On Libanius’ attitude to cult statues, see Perry (2008). See also Trombley (2008), 144.

²⁴⁹ Kristensen (2013), 19.

²⁵⁰ Jacobs (2010), 286.

²⁵¹ Caseau (2011), 480.

²⁵² Lavan (2011), 439-440. Though the word ‘secular’ here betrays a Christianising attitude to the limits of religion.

I speak of the Muses. And, indeed, this is no small thing. You have nobly dedicated the senate-house as a temple to them, and established the statues of the goddesses in the sacred precinct on one side and the other. For one chorus of Muses did not suffice for you: Homer says all the Muses in heaven are nine, but you have received double, and the Helicon has come to the Bosphorus. And this decoration of yours is better than that of the old Romans.²⁵³

Themistius' narrative is fairly simple: he tells us that these statues were transplanted from the banks of the Helicon to Constantinople at some point before he spoke. As to the origin of the statues, we can identify them as the two sets described by Pausanias in his description of Greece.²⁵⁴ Difficulties arise in attempting to discover the point at which they were transferred to the Senate of Constantinople. Zosimus recounts their destruction by fire at the start of their fifth century, and appears to attribute their erection in the Senate to Constantine.²⁵⁵ Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* confirms that the Muses (or, at least, some of them) were moved to Constantinople by Constantine as part of his wider relocation of sacred pagan statues, but this saw them erected in the palace rather than the senate-house.²⁵⁶

Moreover, the building in which Themistius delivered his oration was most likely not built during the time of Constantine. Late-antique Constantinople had two senate-houses according to the fifth-century *Notitia Urbis Constantinopolitae*, one in Regio II (the Augusteion Senate), and the second in Regio VI. Zosimus notes that the Muses were in the former.²⁵⁷ The latter was situated in the Forum of Constantine, and was surely built by him.²⁵⁸ The Augusteion Senate is also attributed to Constantine in some later accounts, but it seems unlikely that he would construct two buildings for the same purpose over the course of his relatively short reign in the city, and it is easy to see how such traditions would attach themselves to the founder of Constantinople.²⁵⁹ Elsewhere it is attributed to Julian, the dating preferred by Sarah Bassett.²⁶⁰ But, while various texts mention Julian's institutional development of the Senate, and the respect he paid that body, none mentions any construction projects.²⁶¹ In any case, as Bassett concedes, such a large development could hardly

²⁵³ Them., *Or.* 31.355a-b.

²⁵⁴ Paus., 9.30.1; Bassett (2004), 151.

²⁵⁵ Zos., 5.24.5-7.

²⁵⁶ Eus., *V. Const.* 3.54.

²⁵⁷ Zos., 5.24.5: 'τὴν γερουσίαν οἶκον, πρὸ τῶν βασιλείων ὄντα'. On the two senate-houses, see Dagron (1974), 138-141.

²⁵⁸ Kaldellis (2016), 721. *Contra* Skinner (2008), 144-145.

²⁵⁹ Malalas 13.8. See Berger (1995), 131.

²⁶⁰ Joh. Lydus, *Mag.* 3.70; Bassett (2004), 90.

²⁶¹ Institutional development, see Zos., 3.113. For Julian's relationship to the Senate in Constantinople, see Amm., 22.7.1,3; *Pan. Lat.* III(11).24.5; Lib., *Or.* 18.154.

have been brought to completion, including its decorative schema, during Julian's brief reign.²⁶² It is possible that construction was begun under Constantius II, and continued through the reign of Julian, finishing sometime later in the fourth century, with a *terminus ante quem* of the reign of Theodosius.²⁶³ Important for our purposes is that the statues were moved for a second time from the palace the short distance to the Augusteion Senate; the dating of this senate-house, difficult though it is, would seem to place this after the reign of Julian.

I believe this second movement of the statues can be attributed to the reign of Theodosius. The Augusteion senate-house itself was most likely completed in the 360s or 370s, and its decorative scheme was presumably a work in progress during these decades. The first reference to the Muses is in Themistius' *Or.* 17 of 383/384, and they appear again in *Or.* 19 and 31.²⁶⁴ Given how Themistius enjoyed this theme, it would be surprising that it only emerges at this late stage in his career, unless they had been erected only a short time before. Furthermore, in the opening of *Or.* 15, Themistius proclaimed: 'the Muses ought to lead the chorus to the king, bringing with them into their dance their leader Apollo. For that god is both archer and Muse-leader, and he has double attire, for peace and for war, and both are fit for a king.'²⁶⁵ It becomes clear from the rest of the passage that Apollo, the μουσηγῆτης, represents Theodosius. I suggest that Themistius is here depicting, in dramatised form, Theodosius' erection of the Muse statues in the senate-house. Whether Theodosius simply moved the statues imported by Constantine, or completed the set, transferring the second group from the Helicon, cannot be determined with certainty, but the latter seems more plausible – statues of Zeus from Dodona and Athena from Lindos which flanked the entrance to the Augusteion also seem to have arrived at around this time. It is easy to understand how such an arrangement, matching and fulfilling the work of Constantine, would have appealed to Theodosius.²⁶⁶ It is true that in the passage of *Or.* 31 quoted above Themistius appears to credit his audience, that is the Senate, but it is perfectly possible to attribute the arrangements to both parties, working in partnership.²⁶⁷

Christian Emperor, Pagan Statues

What then might have been the attitude of Theodosius, if he was indeed the one responsible for the relocation of the statues? And how would the Christians of Constantinople have regarded them?

²⁶² Bassett (2004), 90.

²⁶³ Moser (2018), 262 favours Constantius as the originator of construction.

²⁶⁴ Them., *Or.* 17.215d, 19.228b, 31.355a-b.

²⁶⁵ Them., *Or.* 15.185c.

²⁶⁶ Bassett (2004), 90-91. The Zeus and Athena statues are described in Zos., 5.24.7.

²⁶⁷ The fact that Themistius credits his audience ('*Ἰὼν* have nobly dedicated the senate-house as a temple to them...') would also seem to suggest a dating recent to that speech in 384.

Christian attitudes towards pagan sculpture were not simple, and the relocation could therefore take on a variety of meanings. The earliest Christian interpretation we have of the erection of various mythological statues, including the Helicon Muses, in Constantinople, is that of Eusebius:

sacred bronze figures, which the deceit of the ancients had for a long time exalted, were set up conspicuously in all the market places of the royal city, in order that the Pythian might be seen to be exposed to shameful spectacle, elsewhere the Sminthian, in the Hippodrome the Delphic tripods, the Helicon Muses in the palace. The whole entire city that is called royal was filled with sacred bronzes of fine craftsmanship from all the nations... these playthings now being presented by the king for the laughter and mockery of those who saw.²⁶⁸

But this presentation of mythological statues being held up for ridicule of a new Christian capital does not necessarily represent the attitude of Constantine, nor of Christians more generally.²⁶⁹ Mythological statues were used across the city to convey ideological notions.²⁷⁰ The relocation and re-erection of pagan statuary was a frequent occurrence during the fourth century, often moving statues out of their original homes in temples, into the public spaces of a city.²⁷¹ It is difficult to connect these to wider campaigns of violence and oppression against pagans.²⁷²

Theodosius may also have been inspired by the ideological resonances of the Muses. They could have meaning entirely independent of religion; they could, for example, represent an ideal of wise rule, especially in combination with the statues of Zeus and Athena. To quote Bassett:

As practitioners of a way of life, the Muses were meant to be seen as inspiration for virtuous conduct for those who led the Empire. Seated with the Muses, the emperor and his Senate, inspired by their example, were one with their ideals... The statues at the Senate House both responded to and informed a vision of just rule.²⁷³

Indeed, the Muses, especially when presented independently of their traditional divine companion, Apollo, may have presented a rather less problematic face to Christians than the Olympian gods – for a Christian audience, they could easily be redolent of the culture and *paideia* in which Theodosius was keen to cloak himself.²⁷⁴ On the other hand, they were also symbols of divine inspiration and prophecy, consorts of Pythian Apollo. It is notable that Eusebius links the Muses of

²⁶⁸ Eus., *V. Const.* 3.54.2-3.

²⁶⁹ On Constantine's original intentions, see James (1996), 13-14; Shorrock (2011), 47; Bassett (2015), 247.

²⁷⁰ Lavan (2011), 441; Bassett (2015), 245-246.

²⁷¹ Jacobs (2010), 271; D'Annoville (2016), 349-350.

²⁷² Saradi-Mendelovici (1990), 51.

²⁷³ Bassett (2004), 91. See also Dagron (1974), 139-140 on the decorative schema of the senate-houses.

²⁷⁴ Jacobs (2010), 287.

Helicon with various statues of Apollo and artefacts from Delphi.²⁷⁵ This is not a question of finding the ‘right’ interpretation – deciding whether the Muses in the senate-house represented simply the wise rule of the emperor, a non-religious respect for education and culture, *or* a pagan notion of divine wisdom and oracular insight.

What might they have meant to Theodosius? Fortunately, we have independent evidence of the attitude of Theodosius’ regime towards pagan artwork, an attitude we may assume was shared widely by Christian courtiers. In 382, Theodosius issued a ruling, preserved as *CTh* 16.10.8:

Temples that formerly were dedicated to the assembly of crowds, and are now communal property for the people, in which it is reported that images have been placed which ought to be valued for their art rather than their divinity, we decree by the authority of the public council to be open continuously.

It is important to recall that this was, in its immediate application, a specific and local measure, like many Roman laws, and is marked as being issued by the *publicum consilium*, the imperial consistory. We cannot extrapolate from this a generalised ‘policy’, let alone the personal opinion of Theodosius himself. Nonetheless, it demonstrates one viable approach a Christian emperor might take in his public relationship with pagan statues, and, moreover, it is evidence of the ‘aesthetic turn’, discussed in Part I, in the Christian approach to pagan art.²⁷⁶ Mythological statuary, in both antique and newly sculpted form, did not fall out of general popularity until the sixth century, declining much more slowly than adherence to pagan worship. Instead, it was interpreted in aesthetic terms: the museological collections such as that of Lausus attest to this form of artistic appreciation.²⁷⁷

This, let us note, is a rather different attitude to that taken by Eusebius. This evolution is perhaps also reflected by a parallel passage to the *Vita Constantini* written by the fifth-century ecclesiastical historian Socrates: ‘And not only, as I said, did he strengthen the Christians, but he also brought down the pagans. For he then set up statues as an ornament in the public spaces of Constantinople and, having confiscated the Delphic tripods, displayed them in the Hippodrome of that city.’²⁷⁸ Notably here, while the relocation of statues still represents a defeat for paganism, they retain their

²⁷⁵ Shorrock (2011), 47-48.

²⁷⁶ See p. 36.

²⁷⁷ Bassett (2015), 241. See also discussion above, p. 36 on museological collections.

²⁷⁸ Soc., 1.16. See Bassett (2015), 249 n. 33.

value as works of art, rather than simply being objects of ridicule.²⁷⁹ For a Christian emperor and Christian senators, the Muses, beautiful sculptures by famed artists of Antiquity, ornamented the senate-house and represented notions of wisdom and culture. For these viewers, these were not ‘pagan statues’, but, much like classical texts, the common heritage of the educated elite.

Themistius and the Muses

This is not the view that emerges of the Muses as they are presented in Themistius’ orations. As I have noted, it became a regular theme in the orations of this period, and, indeed, Themistius himself calls it ‘no small matter’.²⁸⁰ For him, the introduction of religious artwork reinforces the sanctity of the Senate. Senators had been called ‘temple-wardens’ (ζάκοροι) by Themistius in earlier orations.²⁸¹ The introduction of these statues confirms this idea and provides it with a focus. The Muses now ‘in our senate-temple (αἱ τὸν νεῶν τὸν βουλευτῶν ἡμῶν) dwell together’.²⁸² The senators have made ‘the senate-house a temple in their honour’ and given ‘the goddesses a home here’.²⁸³ By honouring philosophy, the Senate will become a temple of the Muses.²⁸⁴ The Muses hold a very important place in Themistius’ rhetoric, with their deep associations with *paideia*, and of course, Homer. This is a link Themistius makes, for example at the start of *Or.* 15, where he recalls the Muses’ role in the famous opening of the *Iliad*, or in *Or.* 16 where he alludes to Homer enquiring of the Muses who among the Greeks was the greatest.²⁸⁵ Elsewhere in his corpus, he also speaks of the ‘Muses’ of Aristotle and Plato.²⁸⁶

Naturally, the addition of statues to the senate-house had not literally turned it into temple, and the idea of the Muse-inspired writer was a poetic commonplace. This does not make these words meaningless however. The republican Roman Senate had met often in the city’s great temples –

²⁷⁹ Bassett (2000), 20 argues that the treatment of pagan statues as ‘art’, and the narrative of triumph of defeated paganism by a display of trophies are not mutually exclusive: ‘Ripped from their sanctuaries, deprived of their altars and paraded openly as art, these spoils were indeed “excellent offerings,” great cultural treasures that have ample evidence of the Christian triumph over Hellenic superstition’ (referring in particular to the Lausus collection in Constantinople); see also Stirling (2014), 103-105. We should certainly not rule out various complex and nuanced attitudes and responses to this issue; this does seem to be implicit in Socrates’ account of Constantine’s use of classical artworks. However I would be reluctant to affirm that the ‘reduction’ of these statues to artistic objects was universally linked to Christian triumphalism.

²⁸⁰ Them., *Or.* 31.355a.

²⁸¹ Them., *Or.* 4.53b; 14.180c.

²⁸² Them., *Or.* 19.228b.

²⁸³ Them., *Or.* 31.355a-b.

²⁸⁴ Them., *Or.* 17.215d.

²⁸⁵ Them., *Or.* 15.184b; 16.202c recalling *Iliad* 2.761.

²⁸⁶ Them., *Or.* 6.84a. The connection of the Muses with philosophy goes all the way back to Plato; there was even a shrine to the Muses in the Academy; see the account of Dillon (2014); Schlapbach (2014), 45-46. The fifth-century philosopher Proclus composed a hymn to the Muses; see van den Berg (2001), 208-223. On the relationship between the Muses and *paideia*, see Murray (2004).

indeed, in formal terms, it was required to meet in a sacrosanct ‘inaugurated’ space.²⁸⁷ The senate-house in Constantinople in which Mamertinus delivered his panegyric for Julian is described by that orator as ‘hoc augustissimum consilii publici templum’.²⁸⁸ The religious status of a senate-house was, of course, a topic of great debate in the Senate’s sister institution – in the same year as Themistius delivered *Or.* 31, the ‘Altar of Victory’ controversy was coming to a head in Rome.²⁸⁹ As we have seen, Themistius took Homer seriously as a source of divine wisdom, so we ought not to be dismissive of his belief in museological inspiration either. No doubt Christians in the audience would not have been shocked by such language, and could easily have taken it metaphorically, but this does not mean that a religious interpretation is not possible.

Themistius provides more details about the context of the statues in *Or.* 19:

Therefore, come hither, O beloved Muses, who in our senate-temple dwell together, and together receive from me the hymn, which I offer to this latest *philanthropia*. For see, the man who so embraces you that he has made you living company with the empress, erecting her statue in this same sacred place, wherein there is also a statue of the emperor himself, and of the son of the emperor, and through this your dances will be forthwith more majestic in fellowship.²⁹⁰

From this it becomes clear that the statues of the Muses are accompanied by images of the imperial family: Theodosius, his empress Aelia Flacilla, and his young son Arcadius.²⁹¹ From the point of view of the emperor, there is logic to this without any notion of religious relevance: the imperial household surrounded by the Muses which symbolise wisdom, justice, and artistic inspiration. It is perhaps tempting to think that their combination with these imperial images buttresses the case for a ‘secular’ reading of the Muse statues. But it should be recalled that imperial images themselves had a sacred aura.²⁹² The statues remain ambivalent – it is perfectly possible for a Christian to see the imperial family in the company of the Muses as a purely political image. Themistius however exploits the numinous potential of the tableau, emphasising his point with a string of religious terminology: ‘senate-temple’ (τὸν νεῶν τὸν βουλευσιον), ‘hymn’ (ῥυμου), ‘sacred place’ (σηκῶ). Even *philanthropia* has religious resonances; Themistius, as discussed above, insists on it as a divine quality.

²⁸⁷ Gell., *NA* 14.7.7; Lintott (1999), 72-73; Scheid (2003), 60; Lizzi Testa (2015), 412.

²⁸⁸ *Pan. Lat.* III(11).2.3.

²⁸⁹ Themistius may be alluding to this when he says to the senators of Constantinople, ‘And this decoration of yours is better than that of the old Romans’, *Or.* 31.355b. Dagron (1974), 139 notes this a potential point of comparison.

²⁹⁰ Them., *Or.* 19.228b.

²⁹¹ The physical presence of an image of the emperor among the Muses would also reinforce the parallel between Theodosius and Apollo the μουσηγής in *Or.* 15 discussed above.

²⁹² Lavan (2011), 459-460; Kahlos (2016). An interesting parallel is found in another image of Aelia Flacilla set up in Ephesus, surrounded by various statues of Victory; see Roueché (2002).

Furthermore, Themistius links his own rhetoric and philosophy – his entire oration is a ‘hymn to the Muses’. He is here drawing on the notion of the philosopher and rhetorician as, no less than the poets, the recipient of divine wisdom and inspiration flowing through the Muses. Themistius’ rhetoric is ambivalent, and this terminology does not demand a literal understanding. But the pagans in the audience could have read religious significance into it. It is Themistius’ vision of imperial power shot through with paganism that invites an activation of pagan religious identity.

There is one important passage in which Themistius appears to advance a ‘pagan’ viewpoint rather more forcefully. Discussing the reason that the Muses have been erected in the Senate, Themistius says that:

Indeed, I now trust that it was not to make a display of the beauty of the statues that you have given the goddesses a home here, into which no one may enter except the chosen, but rather to show those who have been enrolled together that the best way for a senator to partake of prizes is not through wealth nor chariots nor rods nor axes, but through the favour of the Muses.²⁹³

This reference to the beauty of the statues (τοῦ κάλλους τῶν ἀγαλμάτων) is intriguing in the context of the ‘aesthetic turn’ of the Theodosian period. Here Themistius appears directly to reject that understanding; the intention in placing the statues in the senate-house was not for the purpose of artistic display.²⁹⁴ Themistius articulates his explicit opposition to this ‘aestheticisation’ of mythological sculpture, reinforcing it by a reference to the Muses as ‘goddesses’ (τὰς θεὰς). This is perhaps the clearest example in Themistius’ Theodosian orations of dissent towards the religious policies of the regime. It is hardly a moment of spectacular protest, but here the ambiguity and ambivalence of Themistius’ rhetoric drops away – it is difficult to read this passage in such a way as to smooth out the conflict with Christian ideas. It is perhaps no coincidence that this falls in *Or.* 31, the least ‘epideictic’ and most obviously polemical of the orations. Themistius turns his argument to the Muses at the very end of the oration, in what seems to the modern reader something of a *non sequitur*, appearing to have very little to do with his defence of his philosophical credentials in the light of his acceptance of the urban prefecture. The point is perhaps that the divine world of philosophy and of the Muses should not be separated from the apparently murky world of politics. If the Senate is a temple, then why should a philosopher not receive political office as a reward for his virtue? It is therefore integral to his argument to emphasise the sanctity of the Senate, and the divinity represented by the statues of the Muses.

²⁹³ Them., *Or.* 31.355b.

²⁹⁴ Cf. Them., *Or.* 17.215d, where Themistius states that if the Senate honours philosophy ‘then will our Senate be pre-eminent, then it will be a temple of the Muses, not filled with images of bronze, but filled with their archetypes.’

Some Conclusions: Art, Rhetoric, and Religion

Themistius' presentation of these antique statues is no more 'true' than that of Eusebius in the *Vita Constantini*. We should certainly not take his interpretation as that of Theodosius, any more than we should take Eusebius' as that of Constantine. What we are presented with is a fascinating intersection between politics, religion, art, and rhetoric. Modern scholarship on pagan statuary tends to focus on Christian attitudes. We have very few indications of pagan views, so these passing but nonetheless significant references in Themistius are of considerable value. For the most part, we see the parallel of literature and art, in both of which the classical past played an ambivalent role, brought explicitly together. Themistius' references to the sanctity of the Muses, reinforcing the holiness of the Senate and of his own philosophy, could, like the statues themselves, be taken either literally or metaphorically. Only once, and in an unusual context, does Themistius dispense with this ambiguous language, to assert that these statues should be understood as representations of goddesses, as religious symbols. Very much like the classical literature which Themistius held so dear, Themistius saw these Muse statues as symbols of the past which contemporary Christians were only willing to accept on their own terms, that is, for their aesthetic qualities and perhaps for their symbolic power. Themistius, however, reminded those in his audience who were prepared to hear him that they had a significance and power that stretched beyond these limits.

Conclusion: Themistius and Beyond

The Themistius I have presented in this chapter is a rather more pagan Themistius than recent scholarship has allowed. He is no dissident, but neither was he content to allow his beloved Hellenic *paideia*, and all that meant to him religiously, to disappear from the public sphere. He was able to serve precisely the function asked of him by Theodosius and his regime, to celebrate imperial majesty in glowing panegyric, while maintaining his philosophical and religious identity. Through masterful use of ambiguity and ambivalence, he was able to reflect and champion the religious identity of those pagans who remained among the elite of Constantinople, whilst barely a ripple of religious division blemished the sheen of his epideictic. In his use of religious material, he was able to invite the activation of pagan identity from his peers, to instigate fleeting moments of pagan 'groupness' even at the heart of the Christian court.

This reading also gives us another perspective through which to view early Theodosian Constantinople. Recent scholarship has tended to portray Theodosius as rather more pragmatic and less zealous than his earlier reputation, dealing reflexively with religious concerns as part of a wider programme to secure his precarious government. My study certainly buttresses this view to an

extent, demonstrating that the emperor was content for Themistius to display his religious identity through his rhetoric, as long as his orations fulfilled their panegyric purpose. This leads us towards the view of Theodosius that emphasises his traditional, Roman imperial style, adorning his city with civic works and classical statuary, rather than Theodosius the fearsome enemy of heretics and pagans. The pace of Christianisation in Constantinople in these years was not so rapid that pagan religious identity was not tolerated in the public sphere. Themistius' role as a pagan philosopher and orator was as valued in the 380s as it had been thirty years earlier under Constantius.

Themistius' last public oration was probably *Or.* 34, after which he appears to have retired from the political front line.²⁹⁵ Thereafter, we have only one fragment of testimony, the rather obscure comments of a letter by Libanius.²⁹⁶ Themistius' departure from the scene has been often been taken as a significant moment, not just in the political history of Constantinople, but in the religious history of the Empire. As Heather and Moncur suggest:

It was at exactly this point, under the praetorian prefecture of Maternus Cynegius from 384 to 388, that the first radical round of pagan temple destruction by Christians was unleashed. This might be pure coincidence. But Themistius' retirement removed from Theodosius' regime one of the power blocs which would have set itself precisely against this kind of more radical Christianisation. Themistius had set out his stall throughout his career... in favour of the idea that Christianity and traditional Hellenism could coexist, and it must be doubtful that Cynegius could have let loose his campaign had Themistius still been active: or not, at least, without provoking a major dispute.²⁹⁷

Heather and Moncur also argue that the fact that Themistius had no 'successor' is explained by the fact that a now predominantly Christian elite had no place for a pagan philosopher at the heart of its politics.²⁹⁸ This analysis is also inherent in the structure of Watts' *Final Pagan Generation*, which treats the retirement and subsequent death of Themistius and his peers as a watershed moment. Their absence from the scene was both a reflection and a cause of rapidly accelerating Christianisation.

²⁹⁵ See above, pp. 62-64 on the dating of these orations.

²⁹⁶ Lib., *Ep.* 18, of 388. This concerns Libanius' ongoing problems with Tatianus, Praetorian Prefect of the East in this year; Bouchery (1936), 272-274. Themistius' role is difficult to unpick; the reference 'Θεμιστίου παραβοηθούντος' seems to suggest that Libanius was hoping for Themistius' aid and intervention, perhaps evidence that the latter had not entirely retreated from political life.

²⁹⁷ Heather & Moncur (2001), 40. See also Dagron (1968), 149; Kahlos (2011), 304.

²⁹⁸ Heather & Moncur (2001), 41. See also above pp. 55-56 on the role of the truth-telling philosopher being taken over by Christian figures.

Inherent in these analyses is the belief that the reign of Theodosius represents a turning point in late-antique history. Themistius becomes a strangely anachronistic figure, holding on to an empire united by commitment to *paideia* and philosophy, in which religious differences were to be tolerated, even celebrated – a view that has often seemed naive in the light of the historical currents, already present in the 380s, that would come to a head in Theodosius’ legislation of the 390s. He appears, like Symmachus and Libanius, both authors of ‘pleas for tolerance’ in the 380s, a last stalwart of dying paganism. This is not necessarily how it appeared to contemporaries. The continuing importance of Themistius’ rhetoric is demonstrated by its influence in the works of Synesius a decade or so later.²⁹⁹ He left the scene still as a figure of significance in Constantinople, propounding the same, fundamentally pagan Hellenism for which he had been adlected to the Senate three decades earlier. Themistius was not a man living in a world he no longer recognised.

²⁹⁹ Petkas (2018a), esp. 133-134.

Part III: Claudian and the Latin West

Introduction: A Poet in Theodosius' World

Claudian, it might be thought, belongs to an entirely different world to Themistius. He writes, after all, in a different language and in a different part of the Empire. While a native Greek-speaker, the vast majority of his securely attributed surviving work is in Latin. He was, it is generally agreed by both contemporaries and posterity, the greatest poet of his age. To read the rich oratory of Claudian, abundant with poetic allusions and vivid *ekphrasis*, is undoubtedly a very different experience to that of reading the stately philosophical prose of Themistius. As I discussed in Part I, a scholarly chasm appears to have opened up in the modern literature between Themistius and Claudian, and this does not seem entirely to be the result of their differences of language and medium.¹ While Themistius was part of the 'mixed' religious history of the fourth century, a member of the 'final pagan generation', Claudian is very much situated within a new Christian world.

Let us return to the Roman Empire as it stood at the beginning of 395. There was much to both please and concern Theodosius as he celebrated the New Year. He was the undisputed master of the Mediterranean world. Not yet fifty, he could hope to rule unchallenged for years to come, and he had two young sons to secure his dynasty. It was a moment of rare calm. His most recent challenger Eugenius had been utterly routed in a hard-fought battle on the River Frigidus months earlier. Claudian captures the moment in his portrayal of the emperor resting beneath the boughs of a tree, with an aspect like Mars, weary but sated with victory.² On the other hand, Theodosius was attempting to restore order after yet another damaging civil conflict, and barracked together over the winter in Milan were troops who had fought on both sides at the Frigidus, the defeated army of Eugenius alongside Theodosius' eastern field army. The atmosphere in the city was no doubt tense.³ Worse, Theodosius himself was ill, or would very soon become so. He died on 17 January 395, the last person to rule a united Mediterranean. It was quite the transformation from the hastily-elevated soldier who had limped into Constantinople a decade and a half earlier.

The transfer of power was a relatively smooth one by the standards of the late Empire – Theodosius had a clearly designated heir in both East and West. The only complication was Honorius' age, at eleven still too young to rule in his own right. Stilicho, one of Theodosius' right-hand men, a relation by virtue of his marriage to Theodosius' niece Serena, seems to have assumed supervision

¹ See p. 17.

² Claud., *P&O* 113-123.

³ Cameron (1970), 163-164; McLynn (1994), 355.

of Honorius without too much controversy.⁴ However, Stilicho's decision to assert his guardianship of Arcadius as well, in far-off Constantinople and comfortably of age in 395, would cause considerably more strife. The situation was an inherently unstable one. Managing Honorius' transition into full rights and powers would be a delicate task. Stilicho, with Honorius' majority coming ever closer, held a precarious position at the head of the western government.⁵ He did his best to hold together the fragile alliance of the army, the Roman senatorial aristocracy whose power and wealth were vital to holding the West, and the Church, especially the Nicene Christian community in Milan led by Ambrose, a bishop rarely reluctant to involve himself in imperial politics.⁶ Honorius' age further encouraged a trend towards a greater focus on the ceremonial role of the emperor. A child could not lead an army, but he could play a plausible part in the rituals of imperial rule.⁷

This increasingly ritualised form of rule naturally enhanced yet further the importance of epideictic rhetoric.⁸ Honorius and Stilicho were fortunate to happen upon, in Claudian, the most talented writer of his era, whose fusion of panegyric and poetry could lend a sheen of majesty to the emperor's underwhelming achievements, Roman legitimacy to a half-barbarian general of questionable authority, and a façade of imperial destiny in uncertain times. It was a dangerous and complicated world into which the young Egyptian poet emerged.⁹ Theodosius had undoubtedly left a changed empire. The political gravity of the Roman world had shifted to Constantinople. Rome's fate was ever more tightly bound to the barbarian peoples who had settled within the Empire, an issue that would dominate the reign of Honorius. We cannot know for sure when Claudian arrived in Italy, but it was probably not long before he delivered his consular oration for the Anicii brothers,

⁴ Though mention of Stilicho is notably absent from Ambrose's funeral oration for Theodosius. On the transition, see Matthews (1975), 257-259; Blockley (1998), 113-114; McEvoy (2013a), 142-145.

⁵ Sanchez-Ostiz (2018), 311.

⁶ McEvoy (2013a), 148-152. On the Senate during this period, see Sogno (2006), 78-85. For Ambrose's importance, McLynn (1994), 365-366.

⁷ McEvoy (2010), 162-170; (2013a), 204-213; Icks (2014), 94-95.

⁸ Sanchez-Ostiz (2018), 311.

⁹ Claudian's Egyptian origins are suggested by several references in the *Carmina minora*. He refers to *nostro... Nilo* (*Carm. min.* 19.3), and refers to the *commune solum* which he has in common with the Egyptian Hadrian (*Carm. min.* 22.56-58), and calls Alexander the Great *conditor hic patriae* (*Carm. min.* 22.20). See Cameron (1970), 2-3. Some unconvincing arguments have been made against this, for example, Christiansen & Christiansen (2009).

little more than a fortnight before Theodosius' death. He quickly bound himself to Stilicho and to the Christian court in Milan.¹⁰

Through Claudian, I wish to reassess the religious framing of this period, as defined by the events of the early 390s. As I explored in Part I, the first half of the 390s has been seen as a time of dramatic religious change, rapid political Christianisation focusing on three main events: the legislation clamping down further on pagan worship in 391 and 392; the near-contemporaneous destruction of the temple of Serapis in Alexandria, and, the final act of Theodosius' reign, the victory on the River Frigidus over the usurper Eugenius, and his senatorial allies. The actual consequences of these events for pagans have come under increasing scrutiny, but they continue to dominate the historiography.¹¹ A native Alexandrian, Claudian may even have been a witness to the destruction of the temple of Serapis.¹² As a pagan writer, he would no doubt have noticed that he was part of an increasingly rare breed. On the other hand, he had probably lived most of his formative years under Theodosian rule, unlike Watts' 'final pagan generation', he only knew a world in which Christianity was the norm. The events of the 390s probably changed little for him. In the Italy of Honorius and Stilicho, he was to carve out a spectacularly successful, if short, career.

As with Themistius, I will make the case that Claudian's pagan references should be read as religiously 'significant', as related to his religious identity, and indeed inviting the activation of religious identity in pagan members of his audience. I argue, again in parallel with my reading of Themistius, that Claudian relied on the ambiguity and ambivalence of the imagery he used. His speeches cast Honorius and Stilicho as epic heroes, true Roman successors to Aeneas and his peers, fighting battles with gods and monsters on a cosmic scale; epideictic celebrations of the power, virtue, and legitimacy of the imperial regime. Like Themistius' assertions of Theodosius' god-given,

¹⁰ Stilicho appointed Claudian to the post of *tribunus et notarius*, a high-ranking secretarial position in the imperial consistory, most probably a wholly ceremonial office, conveying the rank of senator as a *vir clarissimus*. Claudian's statue base, *CIL* 6.1710, mentions the honours. On the *tribunus et notarii* see Jones (1964), 2.573-574; Teitler (1985), 16-18. Cameron (1970), 190-191 represents Claudian as connected to an 'extreme' Christian faction, led by Stilicho's wife, Serena, a 'bigot', in Cameron's words. The evidence for Serena's religious extremism is slim. See now Busch (2015), 40-52, esp. 44 on the classicising portrait Claudian gives of her in his *Laus Serenae* = *Carm. min.* 30. Those figures whose religious identity is known in the *Carm. min.* are Christians, but this need not represent a Christian 'party', and there are some for whom we have no evidence.

¹¹ See discussion above pp. 11-16. For recent discussions on these events see: on the legislation *CTh* 16.10.10-12, Errington (2006), 247-248; McLynn (2009), 576-577; Cameron (2011), 59-74; on the destruction of the Serapaeum, now usually portrayed as the result of local initiative, not a decree from Theodosius, Errington (2006), 250; Hahn (2008), 339-345; Cameron (2011), 62-63. On the Frigidus, see now the detailed discussion in Cameron (2011), 93-131.

¹² We know nothing of Claudian before his arrival in Rome. It has been suggested that he left Egypt in the wake of the destruction of the Serapaeum, though it was certainly not unusual for poets to leave their hometown in search of fame and fortune; Cameron (1970), 28-29. The 'wandering poets' of Egypt, of whom Claudian was one, are described in Cameron (1965b).

philosophically-guided rule, this imagery appealed to pagans and Christians alike. I shall also demonstrate that Claudian wrote consciously in contrast and opposition to contemporary Christian authors, opposing their reassessment and reuse of the classical tradition, and instead promoting a pagan perspective on Roman politics and culture. Through these arguments, I hope to present a new perspective on the progress of Christianisation in the earliest years of the fifth century.

Claudian in Context

Claudian and his religious identity

That Claudian was a pagan is generally accepted.¹³ Our main guide is Augustine who calls Claudian ‘a stranger to the name of Christ’, a phrase which undoubtedly means pagan.¹⁴ Claudian was the author of a brief Easter hymn, *De Salvatore*, a miniature in nineteen lines of reflection on the theological mysteries of the Christian faith; the coda calling on Christ to bless the emperor suggests strongly that this was a court commission and did not necessitate commitment to Christianity any more than a mythological poem required a pagan religious identity.¹⁵ When we consider also the levity he takes with the cult of saints in *Carm. min.* 50, and the antipathy he displays to Christian poets such as Prudentius, we are left with a balance of evidence that encourages us to take Augustine at his word. It is, of course, not impossible that the bishop of Hippo was mistaken (though Claudian was a well-known personality on the imperial stage, and Augustine is clearly familiar with his verse), or he may be tightly circumscribing the boundaries of Christian identity, excluding Claudian on the grounds of his mythological poetry.¹⁶ We cannot, it is true, prove that Claudian thought of himself as a pagan. Maijastina Kahlos has recently categorised Claudian as *incertus*; apart from the objections to this taxonomy I have already discussed, I would also observe that our ‘uncertainty’ arising from a lack of biographical evidence need not correspond to any ‘uncertainty’ in Claudian himself.¹⁷ My analysis of his rhetoric supposes that Claudian presented himself publicly as a pagan, and, I think, demonstrates that a coherent and productive reading can be constructed on this basis.

Unlike Themistius, Claudian almost entirely avoids direct engagement with Christianity in his rhetoric.¹⁸ He clearly knew enough about Christian beliefs to write *De Salvatore*, but this is certainly no more than could easily have been picked up while living in a majority Christian city like Milan. If he had read Christian texts for himself, he displays no trace of them in his poetry. Claudian did

¹³ The classic discussion is in Cameron (1970), 189-192.

¹⁴ ‘a Christe nomine alienus’: Aug., *Civ. Dei.* 5.26; Cameron (1970), 191. Cf. Aug., *Enchiridion* 1.4, which contrasts ‘a Christe nomine alienus’ and ‘haereticus’. Orosius 7.35.21 calls Claudian ‘paganus peruicacissimus’, but he is almost certainly following Augustine. This itself suggests that it is right to interpret Augustine’s phrase as meaning pagan, rather than someone who claims the name of Christian (in the bishop’s opinion) shallowly or heretically.

¹⁵ Claud., *Carm. min.* 32.

¹⁶ For Augustine’s familiarity with Claudian’s verse, see below, p. 136-137.

¹⁷ Kahlos (2007), 15, 41-42. She also claims that he ‘obviously wanted to be regarded as a Christian’ (41), which I take to be a misunderstanding of *De Salvatore*; cf. a similar side-stepping of the issue in Schindler (2015), 21. Rebillard (2020), 22 makes a similar criticism of Kahlos’ implication that the *incerti* were themselves ‘uncertain’. See discussion of Kahlos’ taxonomy above, p. 7.

¹⁸ See discussion below, p. 140.

write on the cult of saints, however, and he has left us the intriguing poem, *In Iacobum*.¹⁹ Here, he appears to be mocking the *magister equitum* Iacobus for his devotion to the saints, and his trust in them to protect the Alpine passes from barbarians.²⁰ This is a crucial piece of evidence, not only because it is a very rare occasion on which Claudian's poetry admits that he is living in a Christian world, but also because of its apparent hostility. Cameron thought that the poem does not tell us much about Claudian's view of Christians in general: 'all it proves is that Claudian viewed Iacobus with disfavour and was prepared to be flippant about his misplaced piety'.²¹ Undoubtedly Iacobus is the main target, and Claudian's ire is mainly personal rather than philosophical – the poem is principally a rejoinder in a literary rather than theological dispute. Nonetheless, it is striking he chose to retort on religious grounds, and treats the cult of saints, so important to Christians, not least in the Milanese church, as a subject for levity.²² It was clearly a 'safe' form of criticism, and the poem's inclusion in Claudian's collection suggests that at least some Christians at court enjoyed the joke at Iacobus' expense. Such polite if cutting satire of a Christian critic and his misplaced piety seems likely to be closer to Claudian's own view than the reverence of *De Salvatore*, which seems very likely a court commission.

Claudian was, of course, raised not in Italy but Egypt, and Cameron has argued that this meant that his paganism was different from the paganism of Rome which fills his poetry, the paganism of the westerners who made up his audience in Italy (and, therefore, that Claudian's references to Roman deities should not be read as having real religious significance).²³ There are two points to make in regard to this: firstly, the religious milieu of Claudian's youth was most likely that of the Hellenised intellectual elite in Alexandria, who had an ambivalent relationship with local Egyptian cult.²⁴ As I argued in Part I, this Hellenisation brought unity to the diversity of traditional religions, and the rise of Christianity brought about a greater cohesion of pagan religious identity.²⁵ The

¹⁹ Claud., *Carm. min.* 50.

²⁰ Claud., *Carm. min.* 50.5. Iacobus is elsewhere known for assisting in the transfer of relics; Vanderspoel (1986), 248.

²¹ Cameron (1970), 225.

²² The selection of saints' names does not appear to be random, but includes some who were venerated in Milan, Consolino (2004), 168. The poem also seems to have had been part of a wider controversy about the battle of Pollentia (which occurred on Easter Sunday 402); see Vanderspoel (1986); Consolino (2004). On the other hand, the claim of Ratti (2010), 282 that the poem shows that Claudian was a 'militant' pagan considerably overstates the case.

²³ Cameron (1970), 199-202.

²⁴ On the relationship between Hellenism and Egyptian religion, see Frankfurter (2000), particularly 184-192 on Alexandrian intellectual circles; see also Haas (2004). I am unconvinced by the dichotomy posed by Bowersock (1996), 266-267, supported by Haas (2004), 228-229, that 'genuine' paganism was to be found in traditional Egyptian form of religion, while classical Greek forms represented an 'aesthetic', cultural paganism. As I have argued throughout, that something is open to aestheticised interpretations does not mean that these are the only possible interpretations. Frankfurter (1998), his major monograph on Egyptian religion, deliberately says little on the subject of 'intellectual paganism'.

²⁵ See pp. 4-6.

aristocratic pagans of Rome were religiously eclectic, worshipping gods and participating in cults with their origins in the eastern Mediterranean. In a few places, Claudian draws on his knowledge of Egyptian religion and culture, most notably in *IV Cons.*, where he depicts a religious procession taking place in Memphis.²⁶ This shows that Claudian did not consider it inappropriate to mix ‘Roman’ and ‘Egyptian’ imagery, they were both cut from the same patchwork of religion and myth. The second point is that, as with Themistius, Claudian’s ‘personal’ religious sentiments or quotidian practice are not really at issue. We are dealing with the presentation of religious identity in the public sphere. Perhaps he did worship at the temple of Serapis but not of Capitoline Jupiter; even if so, I shall argue, he seeks to present through his rhetoric the religious identity of the Roman elite.

Claudian’s *Carmina maiora* as Epic and Epideictic

The question of Claudian’s genre has occupied considerable scholarly attention. Such matters can perhaps draw excessive focus – genre is a flexible and fluid description, not a rigid taxonomy, and late Antiquity was a period of generic experimentation.²⁷ Nonetheless, it cannot be entirely ignored – if we are fully to understand Claudian’s works, we must know what he thought he was writing. As a starting point, we should note that the *Carmina maiora* are not themselves homogeneous, and Claudian demarcates, through titles, distinctions between historical epics, invective and consular panegyrics. Summarising Claudian’s generic intentions has proved difficult mainly, though, because he draws, in an original if not unprecedented way, on two different literary traditions: that of epic poetry and that of prose panegyric.²⁸ There had been Latin verse panegyrics before Claudian, but none on this scale before, and none in the same formal political context.²⁹

One way of solving this dichotomy is to apply the label ‘epic panegyric’.³⁰ Ware argues that this label is inappropriate for two reasons: firstly, it would have been meaningless to Claudian himself, and, in a sense, the epic genre is itself sufficient as a descriptor of Claudian’s works – epic always

²⁶ Claud., *IV Cons.* 568-576. Other examples of Egyptian imagery might include the *ouroboros* which appears at the end of *Stil.* 2; Coombe (2018), 84. The figure of deified Time who is also describes in this passage might be Aion, who derives from the Hermetic corpus; Cameron (1970), 206

²⁷ Long (1996), 17.

²⁸ There are comparable passages which suggest Claudian had knowledge of the *Panegyrici Latini*, particularly Pacatus. See, for example, Claud., *IV Cons.* 132-137 and *Pan. Lat.* II(12).4.5 for similar descriptions of the birth of Honorius and Theodosius; Barr (1981), 73; or the accounts of Theodosius’ sojourn in Rome at *Pan. Lat.* II(12).47.3 and Claud., *VI Cons.* 53-64; Dewar (1996), 104. See, more generally, Rees (2016). Ware (2013) argues that Claudian was also influenced by the orations of Pliny and Dio Chrysostom. Claudian’s borrowings from Virgil and the other poets of the epic tradition are innumerable, see Ware (2012). For Claudian’s Greek sources, see Funke (1986); Gualandri (2004).

²⁹ For example, Statius’ *Silviae* and the *Panegyricus Messallae*; Dewar (1996), xxii-xxiii. Jul., *Or.* 1.2A-B compares himself favourably to poets who have praised his cousin Constantius II. See also Wheeler (2007), 99-100.

³⁰ See, for example, Gillett (2012).

having had an association with praise.³¹ We are perhaps best served by not being overly prescriptive. We cannot read Claudian without reference to the epic tradition to which he and his contemporaries clearly considered him the heir.³² But the context in which his poems were performed was very different to that of Virgil; he was a part of the great drama of late-antique imperial ceremonial.³³ And this makes him an epideictic rhetorician as well. How much Claudian owes to the panegyric formulae of Menander is a disputed question (he is clearly aware of Menander's recommended structures and themes, while in no sense being limited by them) but the fact that his poems were performed in political ceremonies such as consular processions demands that they carried out the function of an epideictic – to praise the emperor in such a way as to unite the audience in a ritual of communion and consent.³⁴

The epic medium means that Claudian makes extensive use of mythology. Claudian does not simply praise Honorius or Stilicho by comparing them to the gods, he sets them in a narrative world in which the two move side-by-side, and are transformed into mythic heroes. The use of mythology in Claudian's *Carmina maiora* is significantly more extensive than it is, for example, in his immediate predecessors in epideictic in the West, the authors of the *Panegyrici Latini*, or in Themistius.³⁵ The use of verse meant that a different set of literary resonances and literary forms were open to Claudian than to a prose panegyrist. Poetry in Antiquity was a highly allusive form, and like all the other poets of his age, Claudian's work resounds with references and echoes of previous poetry, borrowed phrases or half-lines from Virgil and many others. Prose, lacking the same precision with regard to metre, cannot be used in this way with the same facility. Writing in epic meant that Claudian could create a sustained mythological narrative in which to place his heroes and villains.

Reading Claudian's rhetoric therefore presents different challenges to those of reading Themistius, especially when we are trying to discern religious significance. Clearly, when Claudian depicts mythological characters, or a scene in which classical deities interact directly with contemporary

³¹ Ware (2012), 18-20, 27-31. See also Hardie (2019), 75-76.

³² Ware (2012), 1-5.

³³ There is, of course, a significant difference between the ceremonial contexts of, say, the consular panegyrics, the historical epics, and especially the invectives (*Ruf.* and *Eut.*). They were, however, despite their generic differences, collected for publication together, suggesting they were seen by contemporaries as fulfilling a similar, political purpose, as opposed to the *Carmina minora*; see the comment of Kelly (2013), 175. The preface to *Ruf.* 1 describes the 'sacred band' who have assembled to hear the poem (*Ruf.* 1.pr.15-16), surely indicating a court audience, which might be reasonably extrapolated to *Eut.*; Long (1996), 196-197. As Flower (2013), 56-59 shows, Claudian's invective is a mirror image of his panegyric technique – both can be productively studied as epideictic. See above, p. 21 n. 88 for discussion of invective.

³⁴ On Claudian and Menander, see Cameron (1970), 253-255; Barr (1981), 20-24; Dewar (1996), xxv-xxviii; Wheeler (2016), 201-205.

³⁵ Ware (2004c), 182. Though there are overlaps in technique; see, for example, Hardie (2019), 210 on the use of allegory and exempla.

mortals, such as that in which the goddess Aurora appears to Stilicho, he is not speaking literally, and both the poet and his audience were entirely aware of this.³⁶ It is simply part of the epic narrative in which Stilicho becomes a character.³⁷ There is doubtless a difference with Themistius and his pose as a truth-telling philosopher. But the fact that Claudian's religious references occur within a mythological story-world should not be taken to mean that they were 'quarantined', any more than Themistius' use of Homer 'quarantined' his discussion of the pagan court.³⁸ As I argued in Part I, mythology could be religious even though it was not intended to be 'believed', belief being a question largely irrelevant to pagan religion.³⁹ Claudian's use of mythology functions, not as a guide to pagan beliefs – Claudian often appears to be 'inventing' mythology to suit his narrative, and at one point, discussed below, even borrows the 'genealogy' of the goddess Roma from Prudentius.⁴⁰ Claudian uses mythology to signify pagan identity, and invite its activation from pagan members of the audience.

As I argued in Part I, I am dissatisfied with the label of 'propagandist' that has attached itself to Claudian.⁴¹ His epideictic rhetoric was used not to win converts, but to perform a ritual of unity within a political community. While I do not wish to dismiss the potency of Claudian's relentlessly positive portrayal, this is not fundamentally what epideictic was intended to do. Stilicho would be content with the ritual acceptance of his authority implied by attendance at a panegyric. Re-examining a classic example of Claudian's representation of Stilicho helps to make this point. In *III Cons.* Claudian provides a description of the scene that forms the basis of Stilicho's claim to authority in both the West and the East of the Empire, Theodosius' deathbed bestowal of the duty and honour of guardianship over Honorius and Arcadius:

When they came to the dwelling place, the commander ordered all to depart from the room, and, without being asked, addressed his son-in-law thus: "Stilicho, mighty in battle, whose hardiness under arms, and faithfulness in peace have been tested: what conflict has been waged without you? What triumph have I won without your toil?... Therefore, come, the heavenly kingdom calls me, receive my cares, you alone must cherish my children; by your right hand protect both my two sons."⁴²

³⁶ Claud., *Eut.* 2.526-602.

³⁷ Coombe (2018), 27-30 and *passim* on Claudian's construction of his mythological narratives.

³⁸ See above, pp. 66-67 for a discussion of the alleged 'quarantining' of mythological references in Themistius.

³⁹ See above, pp. 33-34.

⁴⁰ On Claudian's creativity in mythology, see Coombe (2018), 24-27, 84-89. As Scheid (2003), 180-181 comments, such novelty does not diminish the 'value' of myth; see also Scheid (1992), 123.

⁴¹ See above, pp. 23-24.

⁴² Claud., *III Cons.* 142-153.

This passage sets out the cornerstone of Stilicho's power in what appear to be deeply unconvincing terms. Cameron's reading of this passage was that it represents Claudian 'making the best of' the inconvenient fact that no one save Stilicho had heard this politically momentous statement from Theodosius.⁴³ This seems to strain credibility. Claudian does not try to conceal or justify it, he states it openly: 'the commander ordered all to depart...', emphasising that no independent corroboration existed. If the object of this passage is a persuasive one then it is an abject failure. Claudian is ignoring the most basic tenet of the propagandist, which is that inconvenient facts should be rewritten, or, if this is considered unfeasible, simply ignored. The passage makes much more sense if we read it not as propaganda, but as epideictic. It is of little use in attempting to win over the sceptical, but provides a touching portrayal of intimacy between Stilicho and the departed emperor. It is designed to facilitate the ritual acceptance of Stilicho's rule by an audience who by their very presence were already acknowledging their approval of it.

Claudian delivered his orations in two locations – the court of Milan and the city of Rome. Despite certain scholarly assertions to the contrary, I wish to argue that these represented two different constituencies, socially, politically, and, most importantly for my purpose, religiously.⁴⁴ Milan was dominated by the 'service aristocracy', members of the imperial bureaucracy who earned their advancement at the discretion of the imperial regime. Rome, of course, was home to grand and ancient houses of the senatorial aristocracy, families of independent wealth and a different social and cultural outlook.⁴⁵ These 'Romans of Rome', the *pars melior generis humani*, in Symmachus' famous phrase, saw themselves as socially and culturally distinct from the less distinguished administrators who were granted senatorial status, even if they depended on the emperor for honour and advancement in much the same way.⁴⁶ Hence Gillett's statement that: 'The senatorial aristocracy of Rome was the "target audience" of his works, those delivered at the imperial court in Milan as much as those performed at Rome itself', is not particularly satisfactory.⁴⁷ This is technically true, in that many bureaucratic positions granted membership of the Roman Senate, but it is important to distinguish between the different socio-political strands that make up this 'senatorial aristocracy'. Of course, the two groups were not unconnected. Claudian himself had gained senatorial status through his position as *tribunus et notarius*, and therefore could at one level regard himself as speaking to his peers when he addressed the senators of Rome, as could many of

⁴³ Cameron (1970), 42-43. See also O'Flynn (1983), 49; Ware (2012), 86-87.

⁴⁴ Long (1996), 195-196 argues that Claudian's audiences were essentially homogeneous.

⁴⁵ On this distinction, see Salzman (2002), esp. 39-43 and Cameron (2011), 11-12.

⁴⁶ Symm., *Ep.* 1.52; see with Brown (2012), 93-101. On the relationship between the emperor and the senatorial elite, see Weisweiler (2015).

⁴⁷ Gillett (2012), 269.

the members of the imperial court as they attended, for example, the celebrations for Honorius' fourth consulate in Rome.⁴⁸ Travelling in the opposite direction, Symmachus' son-in-law, Nicomachus Flavianus, the scion of a great Roman dynasty, was invited to attend the consular celebrations of Manlius Theodorus, and Symmachus himself would attend Stilicho's in 400. The relative proximity of Milan to Rome, compared to previous imperial capitals, entailed a certain degree of political traffic between the two.⁴⁹

Nonetheless there was a difference between the two environments, and this is most obviously observed in their respective religious make-ups, with probably a higher number of pagans in Rome than in Milan.⁵⁰ The mythological content is just as present in Milan as it in Rome, but I will point out below several moments in the Roman orations in which Claudian seems to be making a rather pointed allusion designed to appeal to the pagan Roman senators. On the whole, Claudian's mythological references in the Roman orations seem to have a greater edge to them, a more unmistakably religious significance, and this can be attributed to the greater proportion of pagans to whom they are addressed – there would be more cause to invite the activation of pagan identity if there were a more significant pagan contingent.⁵¹ This is not to say that in these orations that Claudian is 'representing the interests' of the pagan senatorial aristocracy, as opposed to Stilicho or the Christian regime, an argument satisfactorily refuted by Cameron.⁵² But it is entirely reasonable

⁴⁸ Many of the imperial bureaucracy will have been required to move with the emperor at this time when the western court was still semi-peripatetic.

⁴⁹ Symm., *Ep.* 6.30, 35-36 for Nicomachus, *Ep.* 4.12 for Symmachus and Stilicho. Matthews (1975), 265-267.

⁵⁰ Milan, it is generally agreed, was a great Christian stronghold; see Cameron (1970), 228; Krautheimer (1983), 69-92, esp. 69; Humphries (1999), 196-215. See McLynn (1994), 220-251; Cracco Ruggini (2009); Brown (2012), 120-126 on Ambrose's Christian Milan; Williams (2017) studies the nature of religious identity and community in the Milanese churches, arguing against an emphasis on sectarian divisions between Nicenes and Homoians. It is worth remembering, however, that there would doubtless have been some pagan members of the court there. The pace of the conversion in Rome has been particularly controversial. See Salzman (2002) making the case for a slow process, with the critiques of Mathisen (2003) and (2007) and Barnes (2002), responses in Salzman (2005) and (2016), 24-35, and the comments of Cameron (2011), 184-187. See now, on senatorial pagans at the end of the fourth century, Brown (2012), 101-109; Gassman (2020a), esp. 94-106, 140-142. The fact that a majority could be found to provide a mandate for Symmachus *Rel.* 3 suggests a vocal group of pagans, despite (indeed, perhaps reinforced by), Ambrose's dark hints of suppression at *Ep.* 72.11. Ambrose's claims of a Christian majority at *Ep.* 73.31 suggest – at the very least – that this point needed to be asserted; see with Cracco Ruggini (2009), 8-11. Cf. also Cameron (2011), 184; Gassman (2020a), 123, 134-135. In the 390s, the account of Theodosius' conversion of the Roman aristocracy at Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.412-631, however fantastical, implies that there was an aristocracy to be converted.

⁵¹ Gualandri (1989), 46-47 similarly notes that the most pointed mythological references occur in the Roman orations. I am not inclined to agree with her suggestion that 'l'ambiente romano' allows Claudian to take 'toni più liberi'; Stilicho, Honorius, and the largely Christian court (not to mention Christian senators) were still a vital part of Claudian's audience in Rome as in Milan. It is, to my mind, not so much a question of Claudian being, or feeling, freer, as having the opportunity to engage with a more substantial pagan audience.

⁵² See, in particular, Cameron (1970), 235-236.

to suppose that Claudian would have included more pagan material when he knew he had a more receptive audience for it.

As an epideictic rhetorician, Claudian was faced with the same problem as Themistius – namely, how to unite an audience ritually that was divided along religious lines. His solution is different from that of Themistius, though it has the same effect. His use of classical mythology could be heard simply as aesthetic by the Christians in his audience, who would no doubt appreciate his masterful use of the epic form. It would appeal to the pagan listeners in a different way, as an opportunity to give salience to their religious identity. In both cases, the ultimate purpose of the speech – to resound to the praise of the dedicatee – is being fulfilled. Claudian uses mythology in much the same way that Themistius uses philosophy, as something that could be understood in different ways by different members of his audience, while simultaneously reflecting the pagan identity of the author. Prose and poetry required different techniques, but could both be used to the same effect within the context of the political sphere of the Theodosian courts.

Claudian and the Fourth-Century Christian Tradition

Much of Claudian's poetry, I will argue, was written in more or less explicit contrast with contemporary Christian authors, in particular the poet Prudentius. Prudentius looms large in the following chapter; the other great epic poet of Latin late Antiquity, the Christian mirror-image of Claudian's mythological genius. Prudentius and Claudian were clearly aware of one another's works, and scholars have traced numerous allusions between them.⁵³ Prudentius was born in 348, a couple of decades older than Claudian, an intriguing reversal of the familiar image of the older pagan generation baffled and dismayed by young Christian zealots. His was a fairly conventional career of rhetorical studies, legal practice, and provincial governorships.⁵⁴ At a relatively late stage, he was elevated by a 'pious prince (*pietas principis*)' to a position at the imperial court.⁵⁵ The dating is uncertain, but recent scholarship has considered Honorius the most likely candidate (which would make Prudentius another Stilichonian recruit).⁵⁶ Prudentius will have held a significant role, certainly one granting senatorial status, and it is entirely possible that he met Claudian, or at least was in the room for some of Claudian's orations.⁵⁷ Prudentius' movements in these years are again unknown, though he made a visit to Rome shortly after the turn of the century, and may well have

⁵³ For an extensive, but not, I think, exhaustive, catalogue, see Dorfbauer (2012).

⁵⁴ Prud., *Pragfatio* 7-18.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 19-21.

⁵⁶ Coşkun (2008); O'Daly (2012), 4; Pelttari (2019), 4.

⁵⁷ The most likely position is thought to be *comes primi ordinis*; see Coşkun (2008), 305; O'Daly (2012), 4-5.

retired to Spain.⁵⁸ His poetry spans the last decade of the fourth century and the first of the fifth.⁵⁹ Claudian and Prudentius were not rival court poets, but they moved in the same elevated imperial circles, and encountered each other's verse whether in person or on paper.

Summing up his poetic project in the *Praefatio*, Prudentius writes:

And yet, at the end, finally let my sinful soul cast off foolishness, instead, with voice let her praise God if she cannot with worthy deeds. Let her join days with hymns, and not let any night pass without singing of her Lord; let her fight against heresies, discuss the Catholic faith, strike down the holy things of the nations, topple and throw down your idols, Rome; let her devote poetry to the martyrs, let her praise the Apostles.⁶⁰

Prudentius, like his Alexandrian contemporary, was deeply rooted in the classical tradition, particularly the poetry of Virgil, but in strong contrast with Claudian, was determined to turn this tradition to a new purpose: the praise of Christ.⁶¹ Setting Claudian and Prudentius side-by-side, as I shall do frequently in my analysis, sharpens our view of each, showing that neither wrote in splendid isolation, but with acute awareness of the other's poetry, which has important consequences for our understanding of their place in the religious landscape of the late fourth century. My approach in this respect is similar to that of Philip Hardie's recent monograph, which reads in parallel the 'Christian' and 'classical' poetic traditions of late Antiquity (including Prudentius and Claudian themselves).⁶² With Hardie, I note how these two great poets address many of the same themes and motifs (the divine figures of Roma, Victoria, and the Muses), and draw on the same literary tradition, but turn them to very different ends, on one hand Christian, on the other, pagan.⁶³

Of course, to write, in Hardie's terminology, 'classical' poetry, on secular themes and making use of mythology and traditional religious imagery, is not in itself indicative of a pagan religious identity. An obvious comparison would be Sidonius Apollinaris, poet, panegyrist, and bishop of Clermont in the second half of the fifth century, whose poetry is similarly full of pagan mythological imagery,

⁵⁸ Coşkun (2008), 314-316; Pelttari (2019), 4-5.

⁵⁹ Dating of Prudentius' works is generally quite uncertain, but *C. Symm.* 1 can be dated to 394 (see p. 123 n. 99) and *Psych.* perhaps to as late as 409; Pelttari (2019), 24. The fact that he is not mentioned in Jerome's *De viris illustribus* of 392/393 suggests that his poetic renown came rather late in life; O'Daly (2012), 9-10.

⁶⁰ Prud., *Praefatio* 34-42.

⁶¹ On Prudentius' relationship with Virgil, see, for example, Witke (2004), 135; Mastrangelo (2008), 14-15; Mastrangelo (2009), 325; Pelttari (2014), 131-160; Pelttari (2019), 15-16; Hardie (2019), 208. See also discussions below on the Muses and the Golden Age in Prudentius.

⁶² Hardie (2019); see discussion above, pp. 30-31.

⁶³ See also on the relationship of Christian poetry to the classical tradition, Roberts (1989a), 122-124.

and almost entirely devoid of allusion to Christianity.⁶⁴ Sidonius wrote three panegyric epics in the 450s and 460s, clearly inspired in part by Claudian himself, and saw classical and Christian culture as ‘two sides of the same coin’, as one scholar has put it.⁶⁵ Even so, Sidonius, in contrast to Claudian is careful in his panegyrics to keep the mythological world separated from his temporal political narrative.⁶⁶ As Humphries and Gwynn observe, Sidonius was sensitive to literary context and audience in his deployment of pagan and Christian imagery.⁶⁷ In his poem to his mentor, Faustus, bishop of Ruiz, he explicitly lays aside the Muses, and classical imagery more generally, which are such a feature of the rest of his poetry.⁶⁸ Sidonius occupied a different world to Claudian, however; another fifty years of Christianisation lay between him and his Alexandrian predecessor, a half-century more for the aestheticisation of classical culture and exclusion of paganism from the political sphere to take hold. I would argue that there was a significant difference between the use of the classical tradition by Sidonius and Claudian simply because of the contexts in which they used them.

Much closer to Claudian’s own context, and indeed an influence on him, is Ausonius.⁶⁹ Along with Prudentius and Claudian the most significant poet of the fourth century, Ausonius wrote everything from pious reflections on the Christian life to a positively bawdy epithalamium in the form of a Virgilian cento.⁷⁰ Ausonius is now generally accepted to be a Christian, though often thought of as a ‘moderate’, one of Alan Cameron’s ‘centre-Christians’.⁷¹ As will be discussed further below, he was rebuked by his ascetically inclined friend and former pupil, Paulinus of Nola, for his failure to turn to Christ rather than the Muses as the source of his inspiration.⁷² He was undoubtedly a Christian who did not see a love of classical culture as contradictory to his faith.⁷³ In parallel with the case of

⁶⁴ On Sidonius’ religious identity and role as bishop, see Bailey (2020). Sidonius makes reference to Christianity in only one of his poems, *Carm.* 16; see Grzywaczewski & Knox (2017), 204-205. As Watson (1998), 180 comments, ‘if [his classicising poems] were our sole evidence, his Christianity might be in doubt’.

⁶⁵ Bailey (2020), 266. See also Harries (1994), 3, 110-113, though noting that Sidonius’ mainly sees his classical learning as a buttress to Christian truth. On Claudian’s influence on Sidonius, see Gillett (2012), 271-280; Kelly (2013); Stoechr-Monjou (2020), 319; though see the comments on the differences between the two in Watson (1998), 181-182.

⁶⁶ Stoechr-Monjou (2020), 329.

⁶⁷ Humphries & Gwynn (2010), 500; see also Lepelley (2010), 484-486.

⁶⁸ *Sid. Ap.*, *Carm.* 16.1-10. See with Watson (1998), 180; Grzywaczewski & Knox (2017), 204-205. Below pp. 132-135 of on the significance of the Muses.

⁶⁹ Green (1991), xxxii for Ausonius’ influence on Claudian.

⁷⁰ For the primacy of these three poets, see Peltari (2014), 2 and *passim*.

⁷¹ Ausonius has been confidently identified as a Christian in recent scholarship; see Witke (1971), 6; Green (1991), xxviii-xxviii; Cameron (2011), 176-177; Nicholson (2014), 237; Hardie (2019), 8; *contra* Kahlos (2007), 41-42, who classifies him as an *incertus*. Note the personal and rich accounts of Christian life and faith in for example *Ephemeris* 2 & 3. The fact that Kahlos’ model of religious identity cannot distinguish between the very varied examples of Ausonius, Claudian, and Nonnus is an indication of its limitations.

⁷² See below, pp. 132-133.

⁷³ Witke (1971), 47.

Themistius, however, I would caution against regarding this as indicative of a somehow weaker religious identity. It is more productive instead to think of him as not giving salience to his religious identity while composing his classicising poetry.⁷⁴ It should also be noted that, despite his evident respect and deep knowledge of the poets of the pagan past, Ausonius' reception of them is hardly reverential or uncritical; turning the elevated epic of Virgil to rather less elevated purposes shows an irreverent and ludic attitude.⁷⁵

Writing in a 'classical' style is therefore clearly not in itself an act in which religious identity need be salient. Christians could do it as easily as pagans. What I shall show, however, in my analysis of the *Carmina maiora*, is that Claudian wrote his poetry consciously in opposition to Prudentius and other fourth-century Christian literature (most particularly poets, but also prose authors such as Ambrose). He does not simply ignore Christian authors, he writes on various themes in such a way that demonstrates his awareness of, and rejection of, their concepts and techniques. Moreover, in doing so, he writes to promote pagan ideas and religious identity. Through this analysis, I aim to demonstrate that the 'literary' approach of Hardie in comparing the 'classical' and the 'Christian', can be brought into the more 'historical' world of religious identity and its place in politics and society.

⁷⁴ Cf. the comments of Rebillard (2020), 26-27.

⁷⁵ Williams (2010), 101-103. On Ausonius' *Cento nuptialis*, see Peltari (2014), 104-107; Pollmann (2017), 103-111.

Religion in Claudian's *Carmina maiora*

Claudian and the Gods

The pagan gods are an overwhelming presence in Claudian's *Carmina maiora*. The general scholarly consensus is that their presence is a matter of aesthetics and it makes very little difference that they were written by a pagan rather than a Christian. Claudian, I will argue, knew that for the Christians in his audience, the pagan gods would be entirely acceptable as aesthetic symbols, but for himself and his pagan listeners, they represented a living religious tradition, a tradition the mention of which by a pagan orator would provide the opportunity for a moment of pagan 'groupness'. Claudian's rhetoric relies on this ambivalence. I shall seek to show how he presents the gods in such a way as to appeal both to those who saw them as deities, and to those who wished to see them stripped of religious significance. It is impossible to review every appearance of the divine in Claudian's orations; in what follows, therefore, I will explore a few thematic examples. I will seek to show how a non-religious reading of Claudian's orations is insufficient to explain the role of the gods in his poetry – that we need to allow for these figures to have a numinous power that could invoke a religious response in some members of the audience.

Roma

In this section and the one that follows, I will consider the role of personification deities in Claudian. It is certainly true that Claudian makes frequent use of these figures, often giving them significant narrative roles.⁷⁶ Dewar observes that, 'Claudian tends to avoid the traditional Graeco-Roman pantheon and prefers instead more abstract and less offensive personifications, such as Roma.'⁷⁷ This assertion is based on the idea that Claudian's personifications were not Roman deities in the sense or degree that Jupiter or Minerva were, that they were not truly 'religious'. But it is, I argue, mistaken to see these personifications as fundamentally different to the traditional pantheon: both, after all, could be understood as symbols by a Christian audience – Venus of romantic love, for example, or Mars for war. Moreover, two of the personifications which play the largest role in Claudian's orations are used as part of a polemic against contemporary Christian authors, in particular Prudentius. Roma and Victoria, I shall seek to demonstrate, were chosen by Claudian to allow him to contest aspects of Christian ideology promoted by his rival poet. I argue that these personification deities were religiously contested figures and, that by referring to them, Claudian is entering into these debates, creating the potential for religious identity to be made salient.

⁷⁶ The traditional pantheon, it should be noted, is hardly absent from Claudian's orations: for instance, the role of Venus in *Epith.* or Mars in *Ruf.* 1.332-353.

⁷⁷ Dewar (1996), xx. Cf. Ware (2012), 50-51.

First, a brief discussion of the nature and significance of ‘personification deities’ in Roman religion.⁷⁸ If the exact nature and status of these figures often seems elusive to us moderns, this is because they were equivocal also for contemporaries. Feeney writes helpfully on these distinctions:

From a modern point of view, the problem of abstracts seems to be compounded by the Romans’ lack of a distinction between majuscule and minuscule letters. Thinking about the difference between *Pax* and *pax* is not easy, but it would appear to be a good deal easier than thinking about the difference between *PAX* and *PAX*. The clarity enforced by modern printing conventions, however, may obscure the advantages accruing to a mentality that did not rigidly impose demarcations between words, qualities, and instantiations, and that could fruitfully mobilise this indeterminacy in an improvisational spirit.⁷⁹

These ambiguities caused debate even at the time: Augustine argued with his congregation over the divine nature of the Genius of Carthage.⁸⁰ Even if personification deities did not have the status of the ‘core’ pantheon, we should not dismiss them as ‘mere’ abstractions.⁸¹ One crucial point is that both Roma and Victoria received official cult in Rome; an awareness of which influenced the way in which both Claudian and his rivals wrote about them.⁸² The principal task, then, is not to determine a precise or inherent value for the religious significance of Roma and Victoria, but to examine closely the way in which Claudian and his contemporaries used them.

Roma plays a major role in Claudian’s works, appearing at length in *P&O*, *Gild.*, *Eut.*, *Stil.* and *VI Cons.*⁸³ In this respect, he is reflecting a contemporary trend – personified Rome also appears in the prose works of Symmachus and Ammianus Marcellinus, as well as the poetry of Rutilius

⁷⁸ A distinction may of course be drawn between a personified city goddess such as Roma, and a personified ‘quality’, Victoria. I place them together here, because they have received much the same treatment from readers of Claudian, who downplay their religious significance. On divine qualities, see Clark (2007), 1-28.

⁷⁹ Feeney (1998), 88.

⁸⁰ Aug., *Serm.* 62.10. See now on this passage, Gassman (2020b), esp. 210 on the status of the Genius; though I take slight issue with his statement that the Christians of Carthage were ‘wrong’ to reject its divinity; it is, I think, preferable to see this as an ambiguous issue, the divine nature of the Genius could be asserted by Augustine (and, of course, by pagans), while being downplayed by Christians who wished to attend its celebratory feasts. A suggestion of this tension might be seen in Gassman’s intriguing suggestion (205) that the exceptional use of the neuter *genium* reflects the congregation’s attempts to play down the ‘personality’ of the Genius.

⁸¹ Clark (2007), 26-27, see also 24-25 for how some members of the ‘core’ pantheon emerged first as ‘qualities’; Isaac (2008), 577.

⁸² Feeney (1998), 89-90; Clark (2007), 13-14, 16-17. See also the comments of Rüpke (2010), 185-186 on the importance of the visual element in the conception of personification deities.

⁸³ Claud., *P&O* 124-173, *Gild.* 17-130, *Eut.* 1.371-513, *Stil.* 2.269-339; *VI Cons.* 356-425. It is interesting to note that this list includes orations delivered in Milan as well as Rome.

Namatianus, and, as I will discuss below, in the works of Ambrose and Prudentius.⁸⁴ Roma is clearly a figure Claudian found dramatically useful, and Alan Cameron's analysis of her role in these poems focuses on that literary value:

She appears so frequently in Claudian, not because he was obsessed with her or worshipped her, but rather because she was dramatically the most appropriate figure to exhort Stilicho to save the East from Eutropius or Africa from Gildo or (above all) to officiate in a consular panegyric... To think differently is... to be misled by the splendour and frequency of Roma's appearance in Claudian's poems into ignoring the insignificance of the actual role she plays therein. She is for Claudian the personification of the city of Rome, no more and no less.⁸⁵

It is certainly true that the choice of Roma is influenced chiefly by her utility to the rhetoric of the poem. But this does not of itself exclude a religious reading. Venus, as mother of Aeneas, appears in the *Aeneid* as a dramatic device. This does not mean that Venus was not a Roman goddess whose name would have had religious resonances for its contemporary audience.

By late Antiquity, the cult of Roma was a long-established tradition in the city of Rome. Hadrian had founded his Temple of Venus and Roma in the 120s, and while the personification goddess was linked with a more traditional member of the pantheon, she does not appear to have been a mere adjunct.⁸⁶ Claudian calls her in his poetry *numen*, *diva* and *dea*, and situates her in the same mythic realm as Jupiter and the Council of the Gods.⁸⁷ But the argument against reading her as a figure with religious significance rests on the notion that the Christian members of Claudian's audience will have understood that she was not 'really' supposed to represent a pagan goddess, but is simply a literary representation of the city of Rome. The key evidence of this is adduced from the use of Roma in contemporary Christian literature. The figure of personified Rome appears in two Christian authors from this period: Ambrose and Prudentius. Therefore, goes the argument, by the 380s, Roma was an entirely literary figure with no religious associations.⁸⁸ Neither Ambrose nor Prudentius describe her in divine terms, though the latter applies the epithets *fida parens* and *regina*.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Symm., *Rel.* 3.9; Amm., 14.6.3-6; Rut. Nam., *de red. suo*, 1.115-120; Amb., *Ep.* 73.7; Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.649-768. Personifications of Roma had a long literary tradition in Latin literature; Salzman (1989), 351. Claudian's use of Roma would later be highly influential on the Christian poet, Sidonius Apollinaris; Kelly (2013), 178-182; Grzywaczewski & Knox (2017), 205-206.

⁸⁵ Cameron (1970), 364-365.

⁸⁶ Mellor (1981), 1021-1023. See also MacCormack (1975), 140 on Roma's unique significance compared to other city *tychai*.

⁸⁷ *numen* at *P&O* 124-126; *diva* at *P&O* 165; *dea* at *VI Cons.* 428; Roma before the Council of the Gods *Gild.* 26-133.

⁸⁸ Roberts (2001), 537-538.

⁸⁹ Prud., *C. Symm.* 1.416, 430; Roberts (2001), 538.

As in Claudian, Roma is given a long speech in *Contra Symmachum*, but in Prudentius and in Ambrose, she is extolling the Empire's new Christian order, and condemning the pagan past.⁹⁰

But Claudian's references to the divinity of Roma, and his presentation of her in a highly traditional, classicising form, need to be read directly against these new, Christianising depictions. Claudian's Roma is part of that most classical of scenes, the Council of the Gods in *Gild.* In *P&O*, she takes the form of Minerva (*imitata Minervae*), bearing (again a classically Roman image) a shield forged by Vulcan, depicting Romulus and Remus, with their father Mars.⁹¹ If Roma can in some sense be said to be the representation, the soul even, not just of the city, but of the Empire as a whole, then in Claudian's depiction that soul is profoundly classical, traditional, pagan. Claudian concedes absolutely nothing to the Christian view of Rome that appears in Ambrose and Prudentius. There is no acknowledgement that Roma might be anything other than her classical self, no hint of Roma the Christian convert.⁹² This silence is unremarkable when taken in isolation, but against this Christian literary background, and the wider Christianisation of the Roman polity, becomes telling. The depiction of this incarnation of Rome in purely classicising terms was surely an issue in which pagan religious identity could become salient. Rather than buttressing an argument to see Roma as a neutral literary figure, this contrast should encourage us to observe the ways in which she is religiously contested.

Moreover, the uses of Roma by Ambrose and Prudentius are not independent of Claudian, nor even part of the same broad literary milieu. All three authors are responding to the same issue, the 'Altar of Victory' controversy.⁹³ Their uses of Roma can all be traced back to Symmachus' *Relatio* 3 of 384, in which the pagan senator gives Roma a speaking role to defend traditional Roman

⁹⁰ Amb., *Ep.* 73.7; Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.649-778. As Kahlos (2009), 101-105 notes, it is key to both Ambrose's and Prudentius' purposes to emphasise the connection between Rome and the Christian faith, they are making the case that Christianity is Roman.

⁹¹ Claud., *P&O* 84, 95-99. On Roma's shield, and its debt in particular to Virgil, see Wheeler (2007), 110-113.

⁹² Even more so, arguably, than in Symm. *Rel.* 3.9, in which Roma must plead for her ancestral customs.

⁹³ The 'Altar of Victory' controversy has attracted a substantial bibliography, in particular, Symmachus' third *relatio*, and Ambrose's two 'responses', *Ep.* 72 and 73 to Valentinian II. The dispute ranged much more widely than simply the matter of the altar in the *curia*, encompassing the broader question of the traditional cults' financial maintenance and relationship to the Roman state; see Kahlos (2009), 96 with n. 57; Cameron (2011), 39-51; Lizzi Testa (2015). Recent scholarship has also emphasised that the elegant literary 'debate' of *Rel.* 3 and Ambrose's letters masks a blunter political reality: *Ep.* 73 was composed by Ambrose after the matter was already settled and the collation of these texts represents Ambrose's own fashioning of the incident, a presentation reinforced by Prudentius; see McLynn (1994), 166-167, 264; Cameron (2011), 35-39; Brown (2012), 104-107; Chenault (2016), 46; though see now Gassman (2020a), 107-128 also interrogating Symmachus' text and its presentation of the affair. As Sogno (2006), 45-50 argues, political considerations regarding the prestige and authority of the Senate may have been at play alongside religious concerns. The historiographical interest the incident has attracted is probably out of proportion to its importance to contemporaries – it is not mentioned in other late-antique texts either pagan or Christian, contemporary or later; Liebeschuetz (2005), 70; Chenault (2016), 61.

religion.⁹⁴ It is against this usage that Ambrose reacts in *Ep.* 73, where he makes Roma plead the opposite case. Ambrose is content to imitate Symmachus' device, but these passages demonstrate that personified Rome is a contested figure, claimed in the polemic of both pagans and Christians.

This is the literary context in which 'the next generation' – Claudian and Prudentius – were writing, a context to which Prudentius' poem directly appeals.⁹⁵ They, as it were, resume the contest, transferred from prose into poetry, in the 390s and early 400s. Whether Cameron is right to suppose that Claudian was directly inspired with the idea of an aged Roma he uses in *Gild.* by *Rel.* 3 is uncertain, but he was no doubt aware of the debate – and, just as importantly, knew his audience was aware of it – and appears keen to resume it with Prudentius.⁹⁶ In the first book of his *Contra Symmachum*, Prudentius writes in condemnation of the cult of Roma:

The laurelled attendants standing by the god's temples, and the Sacred Way resounding with lowing before the temple of Roma (for she is worshipped with blood and the same customs as a goddess, the name of the place is held to be a divinity, and the temples of both the city and Venus herself rise equally, together the twin goddesses are worshipped with incense).⁹⁷

He writes critically about those who call Roma *semidea*, and claim that her parents are Mars and Venus.⁹⁸ The dating of this book is uncertain, so we do not know in which order the debate runs, but the two poets are clearly engaged in polemic against each other.⁹⁹ One passage in Claudian can be adduced as an allusion, which comes in *Gild.* after Roma's speech to the Council of the Gods. The narrative continues: 'Thus having spoken, she fell silent, tears pouring forth. Her mother, Cytherean Venus, and her father, Mars, wept.'¹⁰⁰ This reference to Mars and Venus as the parents

⁹⁴ Symm. *Rel.* 3.9.

⁹⁵ On the relationship between *C. Symm.* and *Rel.* 3, see Kahlos (2009), 102-105; Cameron (2011), 337-340.

⁹⁶ Cameron (1970), 365.

⁹⁷ Prud., *C. Symm.* 1.217-222. *urbis Venerisque... templa* presumably refers to the double temple built by Hadrian; Garuti (1996), 154-155; Tränkle (2008), 122 n. 52.

⁹⁸ Prud., *C. Symm.* 1.164-168: 'And now, Rome, to touch briefly on your parents from the throne of heaven, on account of your descent from these ancestors, they boast that you are half-divine: Mars and Venus – he violated a priestess, she succumbed to a married Phrygian (atque ut, Roma, tuos caelesti ex sede parentes, / quis te semideam iactant auctoribus ortam, praestringam breviter, Gradivum vel Cytheream, / ille sacerdotem violat, contra illa marito / subcumbit Phrygio.)'

⁹⁹ *Contra Symmachum* was regarded as one coherent composition, dated by its references to Pollentia to 402/403; see Barnes (1976). This has been questioned, and at least parts of the first book are now dated to the immediate aftermath of the Battle of the River Frigidus in 394; Harries (1984); Shanzer (1989); see the discussion in Cameron (2011), 337-349.

¹⁰⁰ 'Sic fata refusus / obtinuit lacrimis. mater Cytherea parensque / flet Mavors...', Claud., *Gild.* 127-129. Platnauer (1922) translates this, 'So spake she, and upwelling tears choked her voice. Venus, mother of Aeneas, wept, and Mars, father of Romulus and Minerva', supplying mythological elaboration that is not present in the text, missing the point that it is *Roma* of whom Venus and Mars are the parents. Olechowska (1978), 'Sur ces mots ses larmes débordèrent et elle se tut. Sa mère Cythérée et son père Mars pleurent...' is more accurate.

of Roma is striking. The linguistic parallels between the respective passages in Claudian and Prudentius are slight, though they both call Venus ‘Cytherea’. But it seems to be a rather rare tradition, possibly unique to Prudentius and Claudian, and it is no stretch at all to connect the two passages.¹⁰¹ If Claudian follows Prudentius, he is rather audaciously taking up the mantle of those pagans whom the Christian poet criticises, if *vice versa*, Prudentius’ words in *C. Symm.* 1 can be taken as a stinging rebuke.

In his second book of the *Contra Symmachum*, published probably in the early years of the fifth century, Prudentius resumes the debate. He continues his attack on the divinity of Roma: ‘For Rome, having submitted herself to Christ, serves God, hating her former labours. When I say Rome, I mean men, whom we believe to be the spirit of the city, not the genius, of whom in error an image has been made.’¹⁰² She is also granted a speech of her own, in which she delivers Prudentius’ argument, following the pattern of Symmachus and Ambrose. Here the aged Roma has been rejuvenated by Christianity:

With everything renewed, I have put aside old age, and have seen my grey hair turn back to gold. For great antiquity diminishes everything mortal, long days flower again for me into another age, by living long, I have learned to despise ends. Now, now just reverence is granted to my years, now I have been consecrated with merit as venerable and head of the world. When I shake my helmet with the red crest beneath an olive branch and cover my fierce girdle with interwoven greenery and, having been armed, without criminal slaughter, I worship God.¹⁰³

Clearly, as Roberts argues, Symmachus is the principal target here, but there are more direct allusions to Claudian: Roma’s grey hair, *canitiem*, echoes the *canitiem* she has at the start of *Gild.*¹⁰⁴ It moreover directly parallels a passage in *Gild.* in which Roma’s youth is renewed by Jupiter:

He spoke, and breathed on Roma with beautiful youth. Immediately vigour returned and the colour of old age in her hair was changed. With her crest rising again, she lifted up her strengthened helmet, and her shield gleamed white once more, smooth and round, and rust having been shaken off, her horn shone.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ As far as I am aware, no scholar has linked the two passages.

¹⁰² Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.441-444.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 2.655-665.

¹⁰⁴ Roberts (2001), 538-539. See also Hardie (2019), 57. Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.658; Claud., *Gild.* 25.

¹⁰⁵ Claud., *Gild.* 208-212.

There are direct linguistic echoes between the passages, with references in both to Roma's helmet.¹⁰⁶ For Prudentius, Roma is not rejuvenated by the fiat of Jove, for 'savage Jupiter convinced me to sin', but rather the fact of worshipping the Christian God.¹⁰⁷ This parallel demonstrates clearly that Prudentius has Claudian in his sights at least as much as Symmachus. Claudian responds in *VI Cons.*, delivered in 404, in which Roma is given another lengthy speech. He declines here once again to make any concessions to a Christian interpretation of Roma – she talks about a procession prepared in Honorius' honour, watched by Tarpeian Jove, perhaps a reference to the multiple condemnations of Jupiter in Rome's speech in *C. Symm.*¹⁰⁸ Honorius' reply hails her – *o dea* – lending imperial authority to the pagan belief in Roma's divinity that Prudentius had criticised.¹⁰⁹ That this speech occurs in the city in which a temple to Roma stood emphasises this point further.¹¹⁰

Roma, therefore, is not a religiously uncontested figure.¹¹¹ First Symmachus and Ambrose, then Claudian and Prudentius battle over her – whether the personified Roma is a goddess in her own right, or the passive recipient of the liberating power of Christ. Both the broad portrayal and specific intertexts show us that, far from simply selecting Roma as a convenient literary device, Claudian was setting himself in opposition to a Christian poet. This does not mean that Roma does not function as a dramatic figure independently of a religious context. These passages still fulfil their epideictic function, endorsing Honorius and Stilicho as the defenders and renewers of Rome. However, Claudian refuses to allow Roma to be defined by the new Christian vision of Prudentius and Ambrose. He offers the chance for those pagans in his audience who recognised her as a goddess, and who disliked the Christianising image of Rome a chance to activate their religious identity, to experience a moment of pagan 'groupness' in response.

Victoria

Victoria plays a rather smaller role in Claudian's poetry than Roma. Once again, however, comparison with contemporary literature, and especially with the works of Prudentius, suggests that Claudian was referring to a religious debate. Deified Victoria appears twice in the *Carmina maiora*, firstly in *Stil.* 3:

¹⁰⁶ Compare 'cum **galeam** sub fronde oleae **cristasque** rubentes' (Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.663) and 'solidatam **crista** resurgens / erexit **galeam**' (Claud., *Gild.* 210-211)

¹⁰⁷ Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.666-667, 665.

¹⁰⁸ Claud., *VI Cons.* 375.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 428. Cf. also 362, Roma's description of herself to Honorius as *vestra parens*, with the *fida parens* of Prud., *C. Symm.* 1.416; Dewar (1996), 270.

¹¹⁰ See further MacCormack (1975), 140-143 on the significance of the pairing of Roma with the reigning Augustus.

¹¹¹ *Contra* Cameron (1970), 365: 'Yet Roma herself is (so to speak) religiously neutral.'

What truly were the voices of the nobles, how great was their certain joy, when, rising aloft with such great wings, Victoria threw open her sacred temple to the commander. O maiden, rejoicing with green palms, friend to trophies and guardian of empire, you alone heal our wounds and teach us to think nothing of labour... be perpetually present in Latium, and approve the offerings of your Senate, goddess. Let Stilicho often adorn your threshold, and bear you back when he returns to camp. Accompany him and favour him in war, restore to him the toga in the council.¹¹²

And secondly in *VI Cons.*:

Winged Victoria herself was in her temple, guardian of Roman peace, she who with rich wings cherishes the assembly of the fathers in the sacred shrine, unwearied protectress of your camps, now at last she delights in your offerings, and promises in eternity that you shall guard Rome, and she, you.¹¹³

Again, we should note the classicising portrayal of a goddess with profound links to the identity of the Roman state. Roman victory will be achieved through the propitiation of a traditional goddess, the *diva* who ‘approve[s] the offerings of the Senate’.¹¹⁴ Moreover, in both these passages, Claudian is explicitly referring to the statue of Victory that stood in the Roman *curia*.¹¹⁵ This once again points us immediately to the religious controversy of the ‘Altar of Victory’ debate.

Cameron has argued against reading these references as support for the position of the pagan senators who had appealed for the restoration of the altar of Victory in 384.¹¹⁶ This is in part based on the premise that Claudian was Stilicho’s propagandist, and thus cannot represent any view other than Stilicho’s. More specifically however, Cameron draws a distinction between the *altar* of Victory and *statue* of Victory:

¹¹² Claud., *Stil.* 3.202-216.

¹¹³ Claud., *VI Cons.* 597-602.

¹¹⁴ Claud., *Stil.* 3.212-213: ‘votisque senatus / adnue, diva’; Cf. *VI Cons.* 601: ‘fruitur votis’, though I note the alternate reading ‘fruitur iunctis’ suggested by Dewar (1996), 397; see with Cameron (2011), 341 n. 75.

¹¹⁵ The statue was of considerable antiquity, having been set up in the *curia* by Augustus, who had taken it from Tarentum; see Cass. Dio 51.22.1-2. It has been a matter of some dispute as to whether the statue of Victory was removed at the same time as the altar. Dewar (1996), 392-395; Liebeschuetz (2005), 80; Cameron (2011), 342; Gassman (2020a), 122 represent the majority of scholars who believe it was left in place at least until the time of Claudian; though there are still dissenting voices, see D’Annoville (2016), 352. Claudian’s evidence is proof enough that the statue stood in place at the start of the fifth century.

¹¹⁶ Cameron (1970), 237-241. See also Dewar (1996), 393-394 who argues that Claudian is conciliatory towards both pagan and Christian opinion.

But it is a *statue* Claudian is talking about this time, not an altar. And it was an altar, not a statue, that all the fuss was about. This is not an equivocation. Naturally it was the altar, fuming with incense, that offended Christians, not the statue it stood in front of.¹¹⁷

The statue of Victory, runs the argument, was an entirely separate issue. Victoria, stripped of any cultic trappings, became a symbol that was entirely acceptable to Christians as well as pagans; as Cameron points out, Victoria remained a staple of imperial imagery, including coinage, down to the seventh century.¹¹⁸ I do not think all, or even most, Christians, would have been concerned or offended by the statue's presence or Claudian's reference to it: though one might question whether it was that easy to erase the memory of the cultic devotion the statue had received.¹¹⁹ The attitude of Christian senators is only one side of the issue, however. Just as in the case of the Muses, the religious significance of a statue of a divinity such as Victoria is not a stable quantity, but existed in the eye of the beholder. For pagans, it could still be a statue of numinous power, whose reduced status, after the battles of the previous decades, continued to rankle.

It is significant that both of these references occur in orations that were delivered in Rome, to senators who were well aware of the controversy and the religious issues at stake.¹²⁰ It is certainly possible that Symmachus himself was in the audience for the third of Stilicho's consular orations. By referring to Victoria in these terms, Claudian is clearly not going so far as to petition Honorius and Stilicho for the restoration of the altar. But in referencing the statue he cannot help but allude to this debate. And Claudian does not write like an orator who is attempting to avoid doing so. In his panegyric to Stilicho delivered in Rome he describes her dwelling place as a *sacras... aedes*, in language reminiscent of that of Themistius about the senate-house of Constantinople which contained the Muses.¹²¹ He calls her *diva*, and asks her to answer the prayers of the Senate, recalling, perhaps, the prayers that would have accompanied the sacrifices on the altar.¹²² This continues in *VI Cons.* His description of Victoria as Rome's guardian recalls Symmachus' statement in *Rel. 3* that she is the protectress of Rome.¹²³ The Senate is once again a *templum* and *reverenda...*

¹¹⁷ Cameron (1970), 239. Italics are Cameron's. This view is restated in Cameron (2011), 342. See also Gassman (2020a), 121-122 arguing that Ambrose and Symmachus were themselves concerned with the altar and its attendant cult, not the statue.

¹¹⁸ Gualandri (1989), 33; Cameron (2011), 342; Lavan (2011), 445-449. Brown (2012), 107-108 on the role of Victoria as the companion and protector of the emperor in the iconography of the fourth century. On the relationship of Claudian's description of Victoria to contemporary depictions, see Doyle (2015), 157, 166.

¹¹⁹ On the importance of cult worship of statuary, see Caseau (2011), 479-480. See Lavan (2011), 445 on the cult offered to Victoria. Symm., *Rel. 3.5* discusses the *praesentia numinis*; Kristensen (2013), 52.

¹²⁰ Gualandri (1989), 33, observing that the controversy was a very recent memory.

¹²¹ Claud., *Stil. 3.204*.

¹²² Ibid., 3.212-213.

¹²³ Claud., *VI Cons.* 598; Symm., *Rel. 3.3*.

sacraria.¹²⁴ These all seem to be linked explicitly with the former cult statue, its reinterpretation as a religiously neutral representation of the concept of victory rejected in favour of a reassertion of its sacred resonances.

These passages take on an even greater significance because of their relationship to Prudentius' *Contra Symmachum*. Cameron notes the parallels between *Contra Symmachum*'s: 'aurea quamvis / marmoreo in **templo** rutilas Victoria **pinna**s / explicet' and the similar description in Claudian's *VI Cons.*: 'Victoria **templis** / Romanae tutela togae: quae divite **penna**...' ¹²⁵ This makes Claudian's claim that Victoria will be the guardian of Honorius and of Rome all the more pointed. In the opening section of the second book of *Contra Symmachum*, Prudentius rehearses Symmachus' argument that Victoria defends the Empire from barbarian enemies, and then has Honorius and Arcadius reply that victory is not won through the aid of a goddess, but through the labour of soldiers and the providence of the *Deus omnipotens* of the Christians.¹²⁶ Prudentius condemns explicitly the worship of idols:

Either the hands of painters have taught you to construct divinity from evil portents which have been represented by the licence of the poets, or else fine pictures have taken from your shrine that which has been imitated by various marks and liquid wax and shaped into a form, and, embellished in alliance with the art of poetry, dared to deceive with coloured paints.¹²⁷

This suggests that the statue of Victory was still very much a concern for Prudentius at least – with or without the altar.¹²⁸ It may also not be too fanciful to read into the 'licence of the poets' a disparaging reference to Claudian, who certainly imbues the statue with divinity in *Stil.* 3, and who asserts that Roman victory comes through a 'maiden' goddess.¹²⁹ Claudian, responding in *VI Cons.*, reaffirms that the statue in the *curia* is no empty idol, but Rome's guardian, and closely bound to Honorius: 'you shall guard Rome, and she, you'. Not only are Prudentius and Claudian debating Victoria's role in defending Rome, but they both trying to adduce imperial support for their position. Claudian's references to Victoria then, do not stand in isolation, but are part of an ongoing controversy with Prudentius, one that echoes and continues the debate between Symmachus and Ambrose two decades earlier.

¹²⁴ Claud., *VI Cons.* 597, 599; Dewar (1996), 395.

¹²⁵ Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.27-29; Claud., *VI Cons.* 597-598. Cameron (2011), 341. It is likely that Book 2 of *C. Symm.* predates *VI Cons.* (pace Dewar (1996), 395). Once again, it is the fact of the allusion that matters, not the issue of priority.

¹²⁶ Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.31-36.

¹²⁷ Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.39-44.

¹²⁸ See Roueché (2002), 542; Kristensen (2013), 21.

¹²⁹ Cf. *virgo* at *Stil.* 3.206 with *C. Symm.*'s *puellam* (2.33) and *virago* (2.36).

Claudian uses the personified Roma and Victoria, not as neutral figures devoid of the connotations of pagan cult, but as the very opposite, claiming them for paganism and arguing against those Christians who wished to turn them into symbols without religious significance. Once again, against the background of Christian literature, Claudian's emphasis on a traditional portrayal of Victoria, her role in Rome's defence, and the corresponding failure to acknowledge the potential role of the Christian God in the success and survival of the Empire are striking. Even more explicitly than with Roma, in his references to Victoria he evokes contemporary religious debates, positioning himself on the side of Symmachus and those senators who attributed to Victoria a vital role in the defence of the Empire, and in creating an aura of sanctity in the Roman *curia*. His epideictic purpose is still accomplished by his assertion that Victoria will be at the side of Honorius and Stilicho, and such references need not have been explicitly controversial – apart from anything else, it seems that many senatorial Christians regarded the question as something of a non-issue.¹³⁰ But Claudian is able to thus inspire collective feeling, a moment of groupness, among those pagans who regarded it as an important religious matter.

Apollo, the Muses, and Divine Inspiration

I now turn to Claudian's use of Apollo and the Muses, and the ideas of poetry, oracular prophecy, and divine inspiration with which they were linked in classical literature. The Muses, as I discussed in relation to Themistius, were symbols of culture and learning, and, in particular, poetic inspiration. Apollo was god of poetry, and of course prophecy. As Shorrock observes: 'Both poetic inspiration and oracular utterance involve communication with the world of the divine. Apollo is the god associated with both of these routes to divine knowledge – the one controlled by poets, the other by priests. The difference between poetic and oracular inspiration is itself frequently elided within the literary tradition.'¹³¹ Both notions were the subject of religious controversy in the fourth century, and by examining Claudian's portrayal of Apollo and the Muses, I will show how he positioned himself, making this an issue for which religious identity became salient.

¹³⁰ There is, in fact, evidence to suggest that some Christians may have supported (or at least, not have obstructed) the efforts to have the altar restored: Amb., *Ep.* 72.8 refers to 'aliqui nomine christiani' who might support a decree to this effect, and later in Amb., *de ob. Val. Jun.* 19, he refers to members of the consistory, 'christiani pariter atque gentiles' who encouraged Valentinian to consent to the restoration. See McLynn (1994), 166; Liebeschuetz (2005), 65 n. 4. On the wider Christian context to the 'Altar of Victory' controversy, see Chenault (2016). The motives of these Christians may have included a respect for the arguments from tradition so carefully marshalled by Symmachus, and a desire to assert senatorial independence, as Sogno (2006), 50 comments. I also think it prudent to consider that many Christian senators may not have had strong feelings either way; nor should we suppose that they thought and acted as a single group.

¹³¹ Shorrock (2011), 33.

When celebrating Honorius return to Rome in *VI Cons.*, Claudian turns to Apollo as an appropriate mythological parallel:

When beautiful Apollo brightens the far northern altars, leaving Delphi unattended, then in no way are the Castalian streams unlike common waters, nor do the laurels differ from worthless trees, and the caves are silent, lying gloomy and unconsulted. But if Phoebus is there, and turns away from the North Pole, returning from the Rhiphaean mountains to the tripods with his yoked griffins, then the woods, then the caves will speak, then the fountains live, then the sacred trembling and the water in the most holy places and the wise and clearer echo will flow forth, and the prophesying rocks will breath. Behold, reverence has been decreed to the Palatine Hill, and it exults in the dwelling of its god, and sends forth far and wide to suppliant peoples oracles better than Delphi, and commands its own laurels to grow green again for the standards of Rome.¹³²

The comparison of the emperor with Apollo is a natural one – Apollo had been associated with the imperial office since the time of Augustus, and continued to be into the Constantinian era.¹³³ Pagan oracles, most famously Delphi, as I have discussed, were a controversial subject for Christians. It was a popular theme among apologetic writers that Christ's advent had broken their power and rendered them speechless.¹³⁴ Prudentius himself cites as evidence of the power of Christ that since his nativity, the pagan oracles had not produced any further prophecy: 'the Delphic caves have fallen silent, the oracles condemned. The tripod does not direct from the cauldron.'¹³⁵ It is therefore striking that Claudian's comparison of Apollo with Honorius implicitly contradicts this tradition.¹³⁶ Apollo returns to Delphi, and the prophetic tradition is restored. The mention of the cave and tripod make it plausible that Claudian intended this passage as a rebuttal of Prudentius.¹³⁷ The comparison of Honorius with Delphic Apollo is of course entirely metaphorical, but is nonetheless open to a religious interpretation. A still more definitive reference to prophetic power appears in *IV Cons.*:

For you horned Ammon and Delphi, who were formerly quiet, have broken their silence;
the Magi of Persia sing of you; Etruscan augurs consider you and, having inspected the

¹³² Claud., *VI Cons.* 25-38.

¹³³ Bardill (2012), 56-57, 88, 144; Ware (2018), 121-130.

¹³⁴ See discussion above, p. 70.

¹³⁵ Prud., *Apoth.* 438-439; Dewar (1996), 81-82; Gualandri (2015), 30. Cf. Proba, *Cento Virgilianus de laudibus Christi*, 15-16. The same notion (though, naturally, without the Christian triumphalism), is found in Jul., *C. Gal.* 198C, who attempts to provide an alternative explanation. On Julian's attempts to restore the Delphic oracle, see p. 70 n. 134.

¹³⁶ Gualandri (2015), 30-31

¹³⁷ Claud., *VI Cons.* 31 '**tripodas** repetens'; Prud., *Apoth.* 439: 'non **tripodas** cortina regit'. Claud., *VI Cons.* 32: 'tunc **antra** loqui'; Prud., *Apoth.* 438: 'Delphica... **antra**'. We do not know the date of composition of *Apoth.*

stars, the Babylonians tremble in wonder, the Chaldeans are stupefied, the old rock of Cumae, temple of the raving Sybil, once again resounds.¹³⁸

Here not only Delphi bursts into life, but oracles and seers throughout the Roman world and beyond, a syncretic panoply of divinely inspired prophets proclaiming the future glory of Honorius.

The Sibyls, the last in Claudian's array of prophets, appear frequently in his orations. In *Gild.*, Roma's speech begins: 'If my walls deserve to rise according to the prophecies, Jupiter, if they will stand immovable according to the Sibylline verses, if you will not reject the Tarpeian hills, I come as a suppliant.'¹³⁹ Rome 'had been fortified by the Sibylline oracles', as Claudian says in Stilicho's consular panegyric.¹⁴⁰ Claudian's portrayal of the Sibylline prophecies is therefore positive, and, more particularly, Roman.¹⁴¹ The attitude of fourth-century Christian authors, on the other hand, to the Sibyls was ambivalent. A collection of oracles attributed to them, probably of partly Christian origin, and certainly used for Christian apologetic purposes, were well-known, finding a notable proponent in Constantine.¹⁴² On the other hand, it is alleged by Rutilius Namatianus that Stilicho burned the Sibylline Books, which had been held in the temple of Palatine Apollo since the days of Augustus.¹⁴³ Cameron is at pains to demonstrate that this was not an 'anti-pagan' act, but rather a response to the panic caused by a moment of crisis; the destruction of texts that seemed to bode ill for Rome and for Stilicho's rule.¹⁴⁴ It may well be that these were the circumstances; nonetheless this does not rule out a religious dimension. At the very least, Stilicho would have needed to condemn the destroyed texts as 'false prophecies'. Other Christians certainly associated the Sibyls with paganism; Prudentius is once again foremost, writing in his *Apotheosis* that, after Christ's nativity, 'the panting, raving oracle does not spew forth prophecies taken from Sibylline Books' and elsewhere that the Sibyls are demonically inspired.¹⁴⁵ The last known official consultation of the books by a

¹³⁸ Claud., *IV Cons.* 143-148.

¹³⁹ Claud., *Gild.* 28-31.

¹⁴⁰ Claud., *Stil.* 3.166. See the comments of Gualandri (1989), 42. See also Claud., *Eut.* 1.11-14.

¹⁴¹ Claud., *Eut.* 2.*pr.*38 describes Eutropius as 'blind Sibyl'; but this is a mocking reference to the eunuch's inability to foretell his own downfall. In *Get.* 231-232, Claudian describes the panic induced by the Gothic invasion, which prompted people to ask, 'What might the Sibylline books demand which with prophetic verses are the Roman's guardians in eternity?' Cameron (1970), 220-221 (cf. Cameron (2011), 216-217) points out that all the omens of doom are later falsified as a result of Stilicho's victory. But Gnilka (1973), 150 argues Claudian is criticising the panic of the people, not the contents of the Sibylline Books themselves.

¹⁴² Constantine, *Oratio ad sanctorum coetum* 18. Cf. Aug., *Civ. Dei.* 18.23; Lactant., *Div. Inst.* cites them in numerous places, see generally 1.6.6-16.

¹⁴³ Rut. Nam., *de red. suo* 2.52. Cameron (1970), 220. For their origin, see Suet., *Aug.* 31. On the history of Rome's Sibylline Books, see Scheid (2003), 121-123.

¹⁴⁴ Cameron (2011), 213-217.

¹⁴⁵ Prud., *Apoth.* 439-440 (following on directly from the lines on Delphi quoted above); *C. Symm.* 2.889-893.

Roman emperor was, tellingly, by Julian.¹⁴⁶ In citing the Sibyls, attaching them strongly to Rome and her destiny, Claudian is at the very least addressing a subject of potential religious controversy. Certainly, Roman pagans would have recognised these as elements of their religious heritage.

It was common for poets in the classical world to claim inspiration from Apollo and the Muses; indeed it was a commonplace that true poetry was the result of divine intervention, the poet the recipient of heavenly insight.¹⁴⁷ Claudian presents his own poetry very much in these traditional terms. He invokes the Muses frequently in his orations as the source of his inspiration.¹⁴⁸ But invoking the Muses in the fourth century was a very different matter to doing so in earlier periods.¹⁴⁹ Christian writers had begun to take issue with the Muses and Apollo as the source of poetic inspiration. In the early 390s, Paulinus of Nola wrote to his former teacher, Ausonius:

Why, father, do you admonish me to return to my care the Muses whom I have banished? Hearts consecrated to Christ reject Camena and do not lie open to Apollo. There was once concord between you and I, equals, if not in achievement then at least in enthusiasm, to bring forth insensible Phoebus from the Delphic cave, to call the Muses divinities, and singing to seek the favour of the god as a gift from groves and hills. Now however, another force set my mind in motion, a greater God...¹⁵⁰

Whether or not this exchange represents a genuine breakdown in their relationship, such reference to the divinity of the Muses and their role in inspiring poetry is clearly a key point of contention, drawing a sharp rebuke from the younger, ascetically inclined Paulinus.¹⁵¹ Paulinus presents a strong binary opposition between the Christ, and the Muses, the Christian and the classical, the new and the old.¹⁵² It illustrates the importance of divine inspiration in the late-antique conception of poetic creation (note also the allusion to the Delphic oracle), and Paulinus' view that this ought to come

¹⁴⁶ Amm., 23.1.7. Cameron (2011), 214 claims that this does not show any 'pagan bias' since the prophecy was 'hostile' to a pagan emperor. The point is surely that Julian considered the Sibyls' opinion worth seeking, in contrast to his Christian counterparts.

¹⁴⁷ Shorrock (2011), 14-15; Pollmann (2013), 310-311. On the role of Muses in the classical tradition, see Wheeler (2002); Murray (2014). See Wheeler (2007), 102 on how Claudian's invocation of the Muses harks back to his epic predecessors.

¹⁴⁸ For example, Claud., *P&O* 71-72; *Ruf.* 1.*pr.*12-14; *Ruf.* 2.*pr.*1-2; *Get.* 598-600; *III Cons. pr.*15-16; *VI Cons. pr.*11-12. See also *Carm. min.* 3. Urania, the Muse of astronomy, is given a speech in *Theod.* calling on her sisters to attend Theodorus' consular celebrations; *Theod.* 270-340. At *IV Cons.* 396 the spirit of Theodosius instructs Honorius to 'cultivate the Muses'. Cf. also his self-fashioning as Apollo in, for example, *Epith. pr.*17-22, with Peltari (2014), 57-58.

¹⁴⁹ Shorrock (2011), 38; Pollmann (2013).

¹⁵⁰ Paul., *Carm.* 10.19-31. For full accounts of this exchange, see Witke (1971), 3-74 and now Hardie (2019), 6-43.

¹⁵¹ Williams (2010), 91-92. On what this exchange means for the relationship between Ausonius and Paulinus, see Ebbeler (2007), 303-315, showing that Paulinus retains epistolographic tropes of *amicitia*, such as the language of filial respect; see also Trout (1999), 83, 87-89. For a less positive reading, see Conybeare (2000), 151-157.

¹⁵² Trout (1999), 79-80.

from the Christian God, and resound to the praises of Christ, rather than from a pagan source.¹⁵³ It is important to emphasise that, when Paulinus refers to the Muses here, he is not simply using them as symbols, personifications of a classical culture that ought to be rejected (Paulinus' letter is itself in polished verse not shorn of classical allusions).¹⁵⁴ It is specifically their claims to divinity against which he warns his former teacher, his fellow Christian.¹⁵⁵ As Williams notes, Paulinus seems to have taken particular exception to Ausonius' reference to the Muses as *numina*.¹⁵⁶ Paulinus repeatedly picks up this terminology, and portrays Ausonius as praying 'non ad divina'.¹⁵⁷ Ausonius, of course, did not intend to invoke a religious understanding of the Muses.¹⁵⁸ For him, they are surely only the conventional symbols of poetic creation, a natural and familiar literary trope as old as classical literature; he can refer to them without worrying what it means for him as a Christian.¹⁵⁹ This no doubt reflects the attitude of many educated Christians of the later fourth century. My point is not that Christians and pagans alike would *necessarily* have regarded the Muses as divine, reacting with rejection or acceptance in accordance with their religious identity. But Paulinus' rebuke and warning to Ausonius indicates that this was a live and contested issue.

A number of poets of this period rejected the inspiration of Apollo and the Muses, and claimed the Christian God spoke through them instead. Juvenecus, writing in the time of Constantine, prefaces his rendition of the Gospels in epic verse with the invocation, 'Therefore, move, sanctifying Spirit, author of my poem, be near to me, and sweet Jordan, water my mind with your pure streams as I sing, so that we may speak worthily of Christ.'¹⁶⁰ Proba, in her Virgilian cento on the Gospels, declares that, 'I do not wish to lead the Muses from the Aonian mountain' and instead calls on the Christian God to be present.¹⁶¹ Claudian's contemporary and rival, Prudentius, commands his Muse to turn to the service of God: 'Spurn, Muse, the trifling ivy with which you were previously

¹⁵³ Paulinus' reference to 'insensible (*surdum*) Phoebus' itself recalls the 'silence of the oracles' trope; see Hardie (2019), 18 with n. 36.

¹⁵⁴ On Paulinus' classical allusions, see Witke (1971), 59-64; Chin (2008), 152-155; Fielding (2017), 34-43; Hardie (2019), 18-21, 26-27, 31-38.

¹⁵⁵ Witke (1971), 45-46.

¹⁵⁶ This reference comes at Ausonius, *Ep.* 21.73-4; Williams (2010), 90.

¹⁵⁷ Paul., *Carm.* 10.111-112.

¹⁵⁸ Witke (1971), 45; Fielding (2017), 34.

¹⁵⁹ Witke (1971), 45 is wrong, I think to suggest that, 'If Paulinus really felt that Apollo and the Muses were divine, he is probably the first person so to think in centuries.' It is certainly true that, already in pre-Christian classical literature, the divine status of the Muses had been complicated and questioned; see Spentzou (2002); Schlappbach (2014), 33. Some Hellenistic poets rejected the notion of Musaïc inspiration, or used it ironically; see Wheeler (2002), 44-47. This makes Claudian's respectful emphasis on them as his source of inspiration seem, if anything, even more of a reaction to contemporary developments in Christian poetry.

¹⁶⁰ Juvenecus, *Evangeliorum libri quattuor pr.* 25-27. Line 27 *ut Christo digna loquamur* is reminiscent of Verg., *Aen.* 6.662, *pui vates et Phoëbo digna locuti*, see Roberts (2004), 48; Green (2006), 21-23; Pollmann (2013), 318-319; Schlappbach (2014), 51-54.

¹⁶¹ Proba, *Cento Virgilianus de laudibus Christi* 14, 22 with Pollmann (2013), 313-314; Schottenius Cullhed (2015), 124.

wreathed, and, having been taught to weave mystical garlands, tie them with a band of dactyls, and garland your hair with the praise of God.’¹⁶² In the first lines of his great epic *Psychomachia* he invokes, not Apollo and the Muses, but Christ: ‘Christe, graves hominum semper miserate labores’; a clear allusion to *Aeneid* 6.56, Aeneas’ prayer to Apollo in the Sybil’s cave: ‘Phoebe, gravis Troiae semper miserate labores’, reinforcing Christ’s displacement of Apollo.¹⁶³

It does not seem likely that Claudian had read Juvenecus or Proba in Alexandria, or even Paulinus’ verse epistles to Ausonius, written in the years immediately preceding his arrival in Italy. But he most certainly was aware of Prudentius, and of the more general trend of poets rejecting the Muses and turning classical forms to Christian purposes. It is in this context that we must read Claudian’s continuing references to the Muses and Apollo as his source of inspiration. Claudian was writing in an increasingly Christian world, towards the end of a century of Christian engagement with classical texts. Juvenecus wrote his gospel epic during the reign of Constantine, more than three generations before Claudian stepped onto the Roman scenes.¹⁶⁴ Claudian’s appeals to the Muses, ignoring the developments in Christian poetics may even have looked rather retrograde, at least from the perspective of a Christian audience in the 390s. It is perhaps tempting to try to read Claudian as isolated from this literary tradition. But this does not reflect the reality of late Roman society. While Claudian was born and educated in Egypt, he entered the world of the western Roman elite – the same society that produced Juvenecus, Proba and Prudentius, as well as Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola and Augustine.¹⁶⁵

Claudian stands out then, resisting this trend, continuing to call upon Apollo and the Muses. He opens Book 2 of *Ruf.* with an image of the peace that Stilicho has wrought through the defeat of Rufinus.

Throw open now protected Helicon, sister Muses, where you will return. It is now permitted for you to go once again in chorus. No one forbids song with the mean bellowing of hostile trumpets throughout the Aonian fields. You, Delian Apollo, untroubled now that fear has been banished from Delphi, crown your avenger with flowers. No one drinks the Castalian waters or the prophetic streams of the oracle with polluting barbarian lips.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Prud., *Liber Cathemerinon* 3.26-30. Shorrock (2011), 29-30. See also Prud., *Psych.* 1-5, which calls on Christ rather than the Muses, with Mastrangelo (2008), 15-16, 18-20; Pollmann (2017), 53-55; Pelttari (2019), 93.

¹⁶³ Mastrangelo (2008), 15-16; Pollmann (2013), 319; Pelttari (2014), 155-157; Pelttari (2019), 15, 91; Hardie (2020), 135.

¹⁶⁴ On dating, see Green (2006), 3-7.

¹⁶⁵ See now Hardie (2019), who convincingly portrays Claudian as operating in the same poetic and cultural tradition as his Christian rival. On Augustine’s concern to distance himself from the Muses as divine figures, see Schlappach (2014), 45-46. Cf. also Sidonius Apollinaris’ (a poet much influenced by Claudian) rejection of the Muses in *Carm.* 16.1-10.

¹⁶⁶ Claud., *Ruf.* 2.*pr.* 1-8.

The image of restoration, both for the poetry-inspiring Muses and for the prophetic powers of the Delphic oracle, are striking. It is a world returned to its classical glory. It is hard to divorce from the new Christian context, in which Delphi had fallen silent and the Muses were increasingly rejected by poets.¹⁶⁷ It is of course not a literal statement that Stilicho had restored the oracles, or even a plea for him to do so. It is an epideictic celebration of the general's rule. By Christians it could be understood as a metaphor for Stilicho's victory over the forces of darkness and barbarism represented by Rufinus. But it is a powerful image nonetheless, and one that associates Claudian's *carmina* with the power of the Muses and the divine revelation of the Delphic Apollo.¹⁶⁸ Ambivalent though the imagery is, it represents Claudian's perception of his entire poetic project; indeed the nature of poetry itself. Claudian's steadfast, even slightly stubborn, reliance on the traditional culture admitted a religious interpretation that could be activated by pagan members of the audience, who were as aware as the speaker of the thoughts of certain Christians on this subject.

Christian Triumph? Debating the Battle of the River Frigidus and the Golden Age

The Battle of the River Frigidus was one of the most significant events of the last decades of the fourth century, not only in terms of its political impact but also, it has been claimed, as a turning point in the religious history of the Roman world.¹⁶⁹ Claudian may have arrived in Italy in the immediate aftermath of the battle, and certainly all of his orations were delivered after it. I will examine Claudian's account of the battle, and the way that it interacted with Christian views. I here argue that Claudian was offering, by attributing victory to the pagan gods, a pagan interpretation of the victory that stood at odds with the firmly Christian version we find in contemporary authors.

Claudian's one detailed reference to the Frigidus occurs in *III Cons.*, delivered in January 396 in Milan, where he recounts the battle, giving credit to Honorius, under whose consular fasces it was won:

Because of you the Alps could be easily entered, nor was it profitable for our enemy, on their guard, to hold fast in fortified places. Their hope in their entrenchments fell to naught, and their fortresses were laid open, their rocks having been torn away. Because of you, Aquilo struck down the enemy battle lines from the mountain with icy storms, and turned back javelins on the throwers, and with a whirlwind repelled their lances. O one who is beloved by

¹⁶⁷ Shorrock (2011), 38-39.

¹⁶⁸ The *carmina* of line 4 refers surely to poetry as much as to song.

¹⁶⁹ See discussion above, pp. 14-15, 106.

the god beyond all measure, on whose behalf Aeolus poured forth from the caves armed storms, for whom the very sky wages war and to whose clarion call the winds come united.¹⁷⁰

The passage describes what would become the central trope of later accounts of the Frigidus, the miraculous wind which turns back the weapons of the rebel troops upon them, and gives Theodosius the victory. Claudian did not invent this story; it appears as early as a sermon given by Ambrose in March 395.¹⁷¹ But Claudian elaborates it, and reworks it into an epic tale reminiscent of Virgil and Silius.¹⁷² The result is very much a pagan account of the battle. The intervention of the winds is attributed to the gods Aeolus and Aquilo, familiar figures from similar passages in Claudian's epic predecessors.¹⁷³

For Cameron, the pagan trappings of this account matter very little: 'The fact that Claudian introduced a superficial touch of pagan imagery cannot obscure his adhesion to the official Christian line.'¹⁷⁴ However, we ought to take note of Augustine's account of the battle, in which he refers to Claudian's description in *III Cons.*:

Soldiers who were present related to us that all the javelins were wrenched from their hands as they cast them, when a strong wind blew from Theodosius' side into the enemies... From which the poet Claudian, very much a stranger to the name of the Christ, nonetheless in Theodosius' praise wrote, 'O one who is beloved of God, for whom the very sky wages war, and to whose clarion call the winds come united.'¹⁷⁵

This appears to quote directly from *III Cons.*, but in fact, as has been often noted, it only paraphrases.¹⁷⁶ Augustine gives 'O nimium dilecte deo, cui militat aether / et coniurati veniunt ad classica venti'; compare the original 'o nimium dilecte deo **cui fundit ab antris / Aeolus armatas hiemes**, cui militat aether / et coniurati veniunt ad classica venti.' This may appear a minor elision, but it is crucial for Augustine's rhetorical purposes. The bishop of Hippo is attempting to demonstrate the efficacy of the divine providence of the Christian God in blessing Theodosius' reign, granting victories that, he claims, even the pagans admit are of heavenly origin.

¹⁷⁰ Claud., *III Cons.* 89-98. Claudian also makes generic allusion to Theodosius' victory a year earlier, *P&O* 100-123.

¹⁷¹ Amb., *Expl. Psalm* 36.15; Cameron (2011), 114.

¹⁷² For the influence of the Flavian epicist Silius Italicus on Claudian, see Ware (2012), 144-153. Silius' *Punica*, as a Roman historical epic making extensive use of divine machinery, is perhaps a natural influence on Claudian; on this, see Feeney (1991), 250-269, 301-312; Wilson (1993), 219-222.

¹⁷³ Ware (2004a), 168-170. Ware points to the similar account at Verg., *Aen.* 1.81-5, 90 and Sil., *Pun.* 9.491-510. Compare also the appearance of Boreas at *Pun.* 9.493 with Aquilo in *III Cons.* 93.

¹⁷⁴ Cameron (1970), 217. Reiterated in Cameron (2011), 115.

¹⁷⁵ Aug., *Civ. Dei* 5.26.

¹⁷⁶ Levy (1958), 346; Charlet (2013), 257; Hardie (2019), 88.

He interprets *o nimium dilecte deo* as referring to his God.¹⁷⁷ It is plausible that Claudian intended the line as an ambiguous allusion to generic monotheism, though this is not something he does often, and it seems equally naturally read as referring to Aeolus, who is named in the next line. In any case, by omitting that middle line-and-a-half, Augustine changes the meaning of the passage. Gone is Aeolus, and gone is paganism. For Augustine, at least, these elements are not bland classicisms, but religious statements with the power to undermine his point. Cameron notes that, ‘Augustine and Orosius at any rate were certainly of the opinion that Claudian, for all his paganism, did accept the Christian miracle.’¹⁷⁸ I would argue, on the contrary, Augustine knew that he did not, and redacted his poetry to make it appear otherwise. He is not paraphrasing from memory; this is a deliberate excision; he is aware of the potential religious significance of this passage. Claudian’s references to the role of pagan deities in the victory at the Frigidus are not simply empty classicisms, but raise the issue of religious identity.

The other point at which Claudian references the Battle of the River Frigidus comes a year later in *IV Cons.* Claudian describes Theodosius’ victories over the two western usurpers, Maximus and Eugenius. He does not elaborate on either battle in detail; there is no epic mythological narrative, nor reference here to the miraculous intervention of the wind. However he concludes that: ‘Those triumphs established justice, and proved that the gods are near at hand.’¹⁷⁹ No monotheistic equivocations here, in the second line, Claudian reaches for the polytheistic *praesentes docuere deos*. Insofar as Christian accounts of the battle claimed Theodosius’ victory as due to the providence and intervention of their God, Claudian contradicts them – Theodosius’ reign had been secured by the plural gods of paganism. That this description of the battle was inherently pagan is accepted by Ware, who nonetheless rejects the idea that the passages had any religious significance:

Part of Claudian’s technique was to employ the iconography of *imperium*... The ancient divinities and their mythology were part of Roman literature, architecture, ritual and art. They were part of the essence of Rome and signified *Romanitas* rather than paganism... the emperor’s religion is unstated because to the poet it is irrelevant: what matters is the emperor’s relationship with Rome.¹⁸⁰

The modelling of Claudian’s account on the epics of Virgil and Silius is, for Ware, part of this process, in that it associates Theodosius, Honorius, and Stilicho with the great figures of the Roman

¹⁷⁷ This is not Augustine’s only misrepresentation; he also applies these words to Theodosius rather than Honorius (which, of course, is more historically accurate, but a distortion of the passage). Nonetheless, the accuracy of the quotation strongly suggests that he had a copy of Claudian’s work to hand.

¹⁷⁸ Cameron (1970), 217.

¹⁷⁹ Claud., *IV Cons.* 98-99.

¹⁸⁰ Ware (2004a), 157.

past – which is undoubtedly part of Claudian’s intention.¹⁸¹ But I do not see why one has to choose between the two. For Claudian and his fellow pagans there was surely no greater sign of *Romanitas* than to receive aid from the Roman gods. For some Christians in the audience, they may have only ‘signified *Romanitas*’, but for the pagans they remained *praesentes deos*. Again, this linking of Roman tradition with pagan deities was a point at which religious identity could become salient, an opportunity for pagan groupness.¹⁸² These passages are reminiscent of the polemical strategies of Symmachus, or even Libanius, in which the victories won by Rome under the auspices of the old gods are recounted.¹⁸³ It is not the only meaning available, but one that could pagan audiences could elect to find in Claudian’s words, and to derive from it an instantiation of pagan ‘groupness’.

If the Battle of the Frigidus represented, for Christian authors, a specific instance of the divine favour dispensed by the Christian God on the Theodosian Empire, they also made a broader rhetorical claim that the triumph of Christianity had brought temporal blessings to the Roman state. In poetry, the classical theme of the ‘return of the Golden Age’ was co-opted to new, Christian purposes. This theme of a glorious state of peace and abundance can be traced back principally to Virgil, who famously attached it to the reign of Augustus in *Eclogue* 4 and *Aeneid* 6.¹⁸⁴ Virgil’s poem was declared to be a Messianic prophecy, which cryptically foretold the birth of Christ – by, among others, no less a figure than Constantine.¹⁸⁵ Proba chooses lines from this poem to retell the birth of Christ.¹⁸⁶ Prudentius harks back to it in his hymn on the Nativity: ‘**iam** mella de scopulis fluunt, / **iam** stillat ilex arido / sudans amomum stipite, / **iam** sunt myricis balsama’ echoes the repeated *iam* of *Eclogue* 4, as does the pattern of abundance emerging from unexpected sources – honey from crags, balsam from the humble tamarisks.¹⁸⁷ The broader theme of the Golden Age in Christian writing now referred to Rome’s Christian destiny and place within salvation history.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 157-158.

¹⁸² Cf. Claudian’s reference to the rain miracle of Marcus Aurelius in the campaign against the Quadi at *VI Cons.* 347-350 (Themistius’ reference to this event was discussed above, p. 71). Like Themistius, Claudian opposes the Christian version of this story, attributing the miracle to (*quod reor*, a rare intrusion of explicit authorial judgement) ‘all the indulgence of the thunderer (omne Tonatis obsequium).’ There may even have been a deliberate comparison between this battle and the Frigidus.

¹⁸³ Symm., *Rel.* 3.9-10; Lib., *Or.* 30.5, 31.

¹⁸⁴ Verg., *Ecl.* 4; *Aen.* 6.791-807. Charlet (2005), 197; Ware (2012), 173-175 on the basis of the ‘golden age’ motif.

¹⁸⁵ Constantine, *Oratio ad sanctorum coetum* 19-20, also Aug., *Civ. Dei* 10.27. Lactantius interprets it slightly differently at *Div. Inst.* 7.24.11, linking it to the ultimate eschatological fulfilment of God’s kingdom; MacCormack (1998), 24-28. See also Lactantius’ discussion of the Golden Age at *Div. Inst.* 5.5-7 with Gassman (2020a), 37-39.

¹⁸⁶ Proba, *Cento Virgilianus de laudibus Christi* 377-379, with Pollmann (2004), 89.

¹⁸⁷ Prud., *Liber Cathemerinon* 11.73-76. See with MacCormack (1998), 27; O’Daly (2012), 331-350 for a detailed reading of this poem.

¹⁸⁸ Palmer (1989), 123-125; Ware (2012), 171; Hardie (2019), 45-46, 54-59.

Claudian also frequently uses the Golden Age motif. This is, of course, unsurprising – proclaiming the reign of the emperor as a time of paradisaical joy and fecundity is a rich panegyric theme. *Eclogue* 4 is a major source of inspiration for the opening to *P&O* – the panegyric by which Claudian introduced himself to a Roman audience. The ‘redeuntia saecula’ of line 2 carries with it an echo of ‘iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna’, the notion of the return of a previous age, while line 6 ‘iam nova... vestigia’ echoes ‘iam nova progenies’.¹⁸⁹ He casts the audience’s gaze to Honorius in *VI Cons.* with ‘hic est ille puer’, reminiscent of the ‘hic vir, hic est’ by which Augustus and his Golden Age are introduced in the *Aeneid*.¹⁹⁰ In *Ruf.*, Justice prophesies the coming of Honorius, whose victory will usher in an age of plenty, when, ‘Nor shall fees be sought for fleeces died purple, but, of their own accord, the flocks shall grow red, astonishing shepherds’, echoing similar lines in *Eclogue* 4.¹⁹¹ In *Stil.*, Sol visits the ‘cave of Time’, and selects a ‘golden year’, *aureus annus* which Stilicho’s consulship will mark.¹⁹² Claudian portrays the natural abundance that results from the reign of Honorius and the rule of Stilicho.¹⁹³

Claudian’s traditional application of the Golden Age theme is cast into sharp relief by its Christian reinterpretation.¹⁹⁴ As in the case of the Muses, Claudian (and his audience) was surely aware of the new Christian purposes to which this motif had been put, at least from Prudentius. His use of this theme is of course, in one sense, very conventional, traditional, Virgilian. But in using it at the end of the fourth century, Claudian is consciously rejecting the Christian understanding, and reasserting its application to the emperor and the imperial household, opposing a classical *Romanitas* to Christianisation. Herein lies another useful example of Claudian’s ability simultaneously to praise the emperor in universally comprehensible and acceptable terms (the Golden Age is certainly an apposite theme for epideictic), and to present a pagan point of view, to bring pagan religious identity into the realm of politics.

¹⁸⁹ Claud. *P&O* 2, Verg., *Ecl.* 4.6; *P&O* 6, *Ecl.* 4.7. Later in the poem, cf. 250 with *Ecl.* 4.30. See Wheeler (2007), 108-110; 115; Hardie (2019), 51-52.

¹⁹⁰ Claud., *VI Cons.* 587; Verg., *Aen.* 6.791. Dewar (1996), 386. Cf. also *hic est, hic Stilicho* at *Epith.* 319.

¹⁹¹ Claud., *Ruf.* 1.384-386. Cf. Verg., *Ecl.* 4.42-45.

¹⁹² Claud., *Stil.* 2.411-476. Coombe (2018), 128. For a full account of Claudian’s use of the ‘Golden Age’, see Ware (2012), 171-230.

¹⁹³ See, for example, *Fesc.* 2; *Stil.* 1.84-88

¹⁹⁴ Wheeler (2007), 110, describes Claudian’s use of *Ecl.* 4 in *P&O* as ‘reviv[ing] the poem’s secular meaning’, while acknowledging its potentially Christian readings (117-118), a useful example of the ambiguous purposes to which the Golden Age could be put. One author who does apply *Ecl.* 4 and the Golden Age to a contemporary emperor is Symm., *Or.* 3.9 and 4.15.

The lack of direct Christian allusions and language in his rhetoric is one of the major points of difference between Claudian and Themistius.¹⁹⁵ Claudian displays his knowledge of Christianity in the *Carmina minora*, making it clear that this was a deliberate choice, not simply a product of ignorance. Just as I argued before that Themistius' willingness to engage with Christianity should not be taken as unequivocal evidence of a positive attitude towards the new faith, neither need Claudian's silence on the matter be regarded as proof of hostility. In one sense, the lack of Christian references removes Claudian's rhetoric from the contemporary religious context, imbuing it with a timelessness which makes it easier for a Christian to cope with, the ambiguity of his religious themes is maintained more completely. Claudian's creation of a non-Christian mythic world in which to set his poems is neither either an entirely positive or negative move, but rather one that allows for different interpretations – both a respectful distance from matters of religion, and an affirmation of a non-Christian image of Rome and her rulers; a traditionalism that would appeal to pagan members of the audience and provide the opportunity for the activation of religious identity. His engagement with narratives of the Battle of the River Frigidus and the return of the Golden Age, however, is evidence of his knowledge and rejection of the Christian triumphalism displayed by contemporary authors, such as Ambrose and Prudentius. This rejection could demonstrate to pagan members of the audience that traditional ideologies of the Roman state could still be expressed.

Claudian and the Ideology of Imperial Rule

I now turn to a discussion of Claudian's depiction of imperial figures in his rhetoric. Honorius, as the reigning emperor in all of Claudian's panegyrics after *P&O*, is the main focus, but I will also examine the depiction of Theodosius, who makes posthumous appearances, and of Stilicho, never an emperor, but a powerful figure nonetheless, whose portrayal is useful in considering the emperor's religious role. As I argued in my chapter on Themistius, the question of imperial divinity is a complex and nuanced one, for which definitive patterns and categories are hard to establish. It is not an issue that follows in any simple way the contemporary religious divisions, though that does not mean it is unrelated to religion. The persistence of the imperial cult into the early years of the fifth century offers helpful context, but the rhetoric of the emperor's divinity had always been a somewhat separate matter.¹⁹⁶ In order to shed light on Claudian's approach, I will compare his

¹⁹⁵ One potential Christian allusion has been noted – Claudian's reference to the potential childbearing of Honorius' wife Maria at *Stil.* 2.341-343. The phrase *sacri Mariae partus* might be thought to connect the empress with Mary, mother of Christ. The connection is developed no further, however, and the rest of the scene is thoroughly classical; see Cameron (1970), 219. Other attempts to find Christian imagery, such as the suggestion of James (1998), 168 that *Ruf.* 1.270-272 portrays Stilicho as the Empire's Petrine Rock, are unconvincing; *Saxa* (in any case a plural form), *scopuli* and *montem* are the words used, not *petra* which would have signalled such an allusion and there is nothing else in the passage that would prompt the audience to seek a Christian significance.

¹⁹⁶ Feeney (1998), 114 on the historic importance of poets in the construction of imperial divinity.

rhetoric with that of his contemporaries and predecessors in the Latin West. I will discuss three aspects of Claudian's presentation of imperial figures: the fundamental question of imperial divinity; the depiction of the posthumous apotheosis of Theodosius; and finally some more general points about Claudian's image of Honorius and his reign.

Imperial Divinity

Barbara Saylor Rogers has argued that allusions to imperial divinity become less frequent over time in the *Pan. Lat.*, running from the last decades of the third century to the reign of Theodosius.¹⁹⁷ This is not a trend that continues in Claudian. The emperor in his panegyrics is frequently referred to as *numen*: for example, at *III Cons.* 20 and *IV Cons.* 136. The precise connotations of this term are difficult to pin down.¹⁹⁸ We are therefore probably safest in discerning its meaning from usage in Claudian's own work. It is used to refer to the divine pantheon several times: for example, in Claudian's vision of Jupiter's heavenly court in the preface to *VI Cons.* 'The divinities (*numina*)... and the sacred choral ring who crowded around', and in *Ruf.*, Stilicho is portrayed raising a cry to 'Divinities (*numina*) who have not yet been satisfied with Roman ruin.'¹⁹⁹ Perhaps the most interesting and revealing usage is when the term is applied to both Honorius and Roma together: 'This year, promised before all by its wondrous origin, happy due to the twin divinity of the city and the Emperor (*urbis et Augusti geminato numine Felix*).'²⁰⁰ *Numen*, then, is a term Claudian is comfortable in applying both to the gods of the Roman pantheon, and to his emperor, and there is no good reason for thinking there to be any distinction in meaning intended.

Equally definitive is Claudian's use of the term *deus*. Themistius, I noted, stops short of describing Theodosius as θεός. It is intriguing that Claudian feels no such restraint.²⁰¹ In *IV Cons.* he writes: 'But greater than Delos, more famous than Crete is that land which gave this divinity; the narrow shores did not suffice our god (*non litora nostro / sufficerent angusta deo*).'²⁰² Of Honorius' arrival in Rome, he writes: 'Behold, reverence has been decreed to the Palatine Hill, and it exults in the dwelling of its god (*ecce Palatino crevit reverentia monti / exultatque habitante deo*).'²⁰³ I have

¹⁹⁷ Saylor Rogers (1986), 73-75.

¹⁹⁸ *Numen* is commonly applied to the emperor in the *Pan. Lat.*, though perhaps decreasingly so over time. It is also applied to the gods. See Saylor Rogers (1986), 72 with table on 104. It also appears frequently in the imperial cult, see Gradel (2002), 234-250.

¹⁹⁹ Claud., *VI Cons. pr.* 15-16; *Ruf.* 2.206. See also *IV Cons.* 354, 570-576.

²⁰⁰ Claud., *VI Cons.* 16-17; Dewar (1996), 73.

²⁰¹ *Deus* and θεός are not necessarily directly interchangeable, and there are no doubt cultural, literary, and philosophical nuances specific to the Latin and Greek traditions. Price (1984b), 85 touches on some of the issues. A crucial point in the late-antique context is that these were the terms that Christians applied to their God.

²⁰² Claud., *IV Cons.* 135-137.

²⁰³ Claud., *VI Cons.* 35-36. See also *III Cons. pr.* 16; more indirectly *IV Cons.* 565-585.

noted before the subtle distinctions that late-antique orators make with regard to the language of imperial divinity, and we should assume that Claudian is similarly precise and deliberate in his choice of language.²⁰⁴ Noteworthy also is the passage in which Claudian compares Honorius to an effigy of an Egyptian deity, being paraded in Memphis, a *siderium onus*, and once again uses the term *deus* in regard to the emperor.²⁰⁵ Claudian's portrayal of the emperor in his traditional role as a member of the pagan pantheon on earth naturally raises questions of religion for the audience, and opens the door for the activation of pagan identity.

Further evidence for Claudian's considered approach can be adduced from his terminology as regards Stilicho. Stilicho is often the most powerful and significant figure in Claudian's orations, but is not described as *numen* or *deus*. Rather, in the third of his consular orations, he is described as *proxime dis consul*.²⁰⁶ A high honour, certainly, but stopping short of the language applied to Honorius. Stilicho is also said to have explicitly rejected cult: 'What inaccessible corner or region is there which would not worship your kindly countenance as divine, had you not always rejected such an honour. (pro numine vultus dilectos coleret, talem ni semper honorem respueres)?'²⁰⁷ In *VI Cons.*, Stilicho is said to have a *divinum pectus*, which Dewar translates as 'prescient mind', understanding *divinum* here to carry the sense of 'prophetic' or 'inspired'.²⁰⁸ This is a reasonable interpretation, though we should not underestimate the numinous connotations such a word carried. Claudian grants Stilicho an elevated, superhuman status, but circumscribes this tightly in comparison with that of Honorius; evidence that this was a delicate issue to which the orator needed to give due consideration.

A useful comparison can be drawn with the panegyric of Pacatus Drepanius for Theodosius, delivered in Rome in 389.²⁰⁹ Several passages in Claudian's works suggest that he was familiar with this panegyric.²¹⁰ In particular, the passage of *IV Cons.*, quoted above, on the superiority of Claudian's birthplace to Delos and Crete seems to draw on Pacatus' oration: 'Let the land of Crete, glorified as Jupiter's cradle, yield equality to this land [Spain, birthplace of Theodosius], also Delos where the divine twins crawled, and renowned Thebes where Hercules was nourished. We do not know whether to accept what we have heard, but Spain has given us a god whom we can see (deum

²⁰⁴ Pace Gualandri (1989), 35-36, who sees this language as conventional.

²⁰⁵ Claud., *IV Cons.* 565-585; see with Gualandri (1989), 35-37.

²⁰⁶ Claud., *Stil.* 3.130. Cf. also *Theod.* 227.

²⁰⁷ Claud., *Stil.* 2.178-181.

²⁰⁸ Claud., *VI Cons.* 233-234. Claudian may be alluding to Ennius' account of the prophetic powers of Anchises. See Dewar (1996), 211. Cf. also *divinae parentis* applied to Serena at *Epith.* 230.

²⁰⁹ *Pan. Lat.* II(12).

²¹⁰ See above, p. 110 n. 28.

dedit Hispania quem videmus).²¹¹ This last remark has been regarded as a curiosity by scholars, an apparently strikingly forthright statement of imperial divinity.²¹² Like much of the religious content of the panegyric, its significance is elusive.²¹³ Pacatus' own religious identity has been the subject of discussion: Turcan-Verkerk identified him as the author of an Easter hymn, *De cereo Paschale*, and reconstructs other details of his life tipping the balance in favour of Christianity.²¹⁴ Cameron, in response to this, focuses on the 'deum... quem videmus' passage as part of his wider attack on the notion that Christians avoided 'classicising' language: 'Would even the most liberal Christian have followed classicising conventions that far? In this case the answer is yes.'²¹⁵

What does this mean for our understanding of the rhetoric of imperial divinity in the Theodosian era? It is important to note that Pacatus' language is not as definitive as it first appears. *Deum dedit* appears to pun on a Latin translation of Theodosius' name; it may be as much a pleasing play on words as a statement of political ideology (not that these are necessarily mutually exclusive).²¹⁶ It does not render it meaningless, but cautions us not to press it too hard for significance. Claudian's derivative passage differs in some important respects: there is no note of doubt introduced with regards to the pagan deities' infancy stories, and the 'Theodosius' word-play does not transfer to Honorius, who is simply *nostro... deo*; the changes alter the force of the passage somewhat. Pacatus also describes Theodosius as *numen*.²¹⁷ We no doubt should conclude that not all Christians were offended by such ideas. The language of imperial divinity was as much open to ambiguity and ambivalence as that concerning the pagan gods. The very mention of the emperor's traditional divine status need not have forced questions of religion onto the audience; that does not mean however that Claudian's use of the concept did not invite the activation of pagan identity.

Pacatus aside, the language of imperial divinity had softened in the second half of the fourth century. In the panegyrics of Ausonius and Symmachus the emperor was now *deo proximus*, or *deo similis*.²¹⁸ Ambrose goes further still: the emperor is a mere Christian, a mortal stripped even of the

²¹¹ *Pan. Lat.* II.(12).4.5.

²¹² Saylor Rogers (1986), 93-94; Nixon & Saylor Rogers (1994), 453 n. 17.

²¹³ Rees (2018b), 305-306.

²¹⁴ Turcan-Verkerk (2003), an argument well-received by Green (2005); Nixon (2006); Cameron (2011), 228-229. Writing a 'Christian' poem, as the case of Claudian warns us, did not itself require that the author was a Christian, but Turcan-Verkerk also places Pacatus in the context of the Priscillianist controversy in Spain, and connects him with Paulinus of Nola.

²¹⁵ Cameron (2011), 228.

²¹⁶ Saylor Rogers (1986), 93-94; Rees (2018b), 306 n. 40.

²¹⁷ *Pan. Lat.* II(12).21.2.

²¹⁸ *Deo proximus*: Ausonius, *Gratiatum Actio* 5; Symm., *Or.* 2.18. *Deo similis*: Symm., *Or.* 1.1. See Saylor Rogers (1986), 74-75.

divine charisma bestowed on him by Ambrose's episcopal predecessor, Eusebius.²¹⁹ Also worth noting is the attitude of Prudentius, who writes in his litany of Rome's religious errors:

Following the ancient custom, in an easily taught age, posterity worshipped the emperor with a month in his honour, temples and priests and altars, appeased him with a calf and lamb, threw themselves prostrate before his divine seat, and requested oracular responses. As inscriptions bear witness, they put forth senatorial decrees establishing a temple to Caesar like that of Jupiter.²²⁰

While it is the case that the rhetoric of imperial divinity and the imperial cult are not directly correlated, Prudentius clearly frowns on the elevation of mortals to the status of gods. His own claim on behalf of the emperor is that: 'ruler of the world, you shall be made partner with Christ in eternity (*regnator mundi Christo sociabere in aevum*)'; a high dignity indeed, reminiscent of Eusebius' claims that Constantine acts in parallel with God's *Logos*, but like that a distinctly Christian reinterpretation of the notion of divine kingship.²²¹ In this context, Claudian's rhetoric represents a return to a more traditional, pagan understanding. It did not have to be read in such a way, and could easily be understood by Christians as a pleasing epic fiction, but once again, he offers the opportunity for pagan members of his audience to activate their religious identity and create a pagan 'groupness'.

Apotheosis

It is not just the living emperor with whom Claudian had to reckon in his panegyrics. Honorius' father Theodosius continues to play a significant posthumous role in these speeches. Unsurprisingly, Theodosius' divine status is asserted: he is called *optimus divorum* and *praesens numen*.²²² Of particular interest is the extended apotheosis narrative which Claudian inserts in *III Cons.*, delivered just months after Theodosius' death.

Nothing more was spoken, just as he was, he marked a clear path into the clouds and entered the globe of Moon, and, crossing the threshold, flew towards Mercury and the gentle airs of Venus. Then he, having traversed Phoebus' path, and Mars' harmful fires, and placid Jupiter, stands on the uppermost vault, freezing in that icy region, Saturn's realm. The frame of heaven extends and the ruddy doors of their own will open wide. Boötes makes ready the northern skies, girdled Orion opens the southern gates, and they invite the new star, and are both uncertain which part he will choose to follow, in which he will deign

²¹⁹ Amb., *de ob. Val. Jun.* 48; Lunn-Rockcliffe (2008), 192-193. Cf. the reassessment of Eusebius' political theology by Rufinus, Socrates, and Sozomen; Van Dam (2007), 329-342.

²²⁰ Prud., *C. Symm.* 1.245-250.

²²¹ Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.758.

²²² Claud., *VI Cons.* 55-56; *Gild.* 308.

to be a companion of the stars, or in which region to remain. O splendour of the heavens as you were once glory of the earth...²²³

Claudian portrays Theodosius' ascent into the heavens in classical terms, in a tradition of Roman rulers going back to Julius Caesar.²²⁴ MacCormack comments that:

Claudian thus expounded an aspect of the old pagan view of the universe revolving around the figure of the emperor. But at the same time, it should be noted that Theodosius... resided in heaven alone, without the company of the gods. This was one of the ways in which Claudian avoided any direct, and thereby political, reference to paganism. In short, imagery was for Claudian an imagery of art, of culture, not, as for Julian, and, in different terms, for Christianity, an imagery of cult, of religious worship. Therefore Claudian's verse would have been pagan to those pagans and Christians who still refused to make a distinction between culture and worship.²²⁵

I cannot see that it can be maintained that Claudian seeks to avoid reference to the pagan gods, given the litany of deities, in sidereal form, whom he names. It is certainly appropriate to read this passage as open to ambivalent interpretations, but to argue that this simply the 'paganism of art' is to propound precisely the sort of aestheticised readings against which I have been arguing, and which ignore the numinous quality of this passage. Rather, we should see this description in terms of its capacity to invite the activation of pagan religious identity.

Claudian's apotheosis narrative takes on a greater significance, however, when we recall that he was not the only orator pronouncing on the fate of Theodosius' soul in Milan in these months. Ambrose in his funeral oration for the emperor does not provide an apotheosis narrative, but makes several comments about Theodosius' afterlife. Like Claudian, he describes Theodosius' departure from the terrestrial sphere, but in Christian terms: 'the pious soul departed from Earth, and having been filled with the Holy Spirit, when he was rising to the exalted and celestial place, said as if to those asking, who came to meet him: I have loved.'²²⁶ Theodosius is not a divine spirit ruling over the earth, but a Christian soul, rejoicing to be reunited with the faithful departed, his family, and predecessors, in the kingdom of heaven: 'Now Theodosius, of august memory, understands what it is to reign, since he is in the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, and beholds his temple. Now he is a king indeed, when he receives even now his son Gratian, and Pulcheria, his most beloved children, whom he lost here, when Flacilla, a soul faithful to God, cleaves to him, when he rejoices over his father, restored to

²²³ Claud., *III Cons.* 162-175.

²²⁴ MacCormack (1981), 140; Hardie (2019), 82.

²²⁵ MacCormack (1981), 140.

²²⁶ Amb. *de Ob. Theod.* 18.

him, when he cleaves to Constantine.²²⁷ Ambrose preached forty days after Theodosius' death in January 395, less than a year before Claudian delivered *III Cons.* The audience, members of the Milanese court, would have been much the same; it would be no surprise, even, if Claudian and Ambrose each heard the other's oration. There is no reason to suppose that the poet is seeking to 'correct' the bishop; no linguistic echoes with which to make such a connection. But the mere existence of two alternative accounts of Theodosius' afterlife presented to the imperial court are in striking contrast – they are entirely opposed.²²⁸ They need not be understood to be in conflict – Claudian's verses could be regarded as a pleasant poetic fiction, but the opportunity to consider it a matter of religious identity is there.

The Image of the Emperor

Claudian, naturally enough, is not as interested as Themistius in presenting a coherent political ideology. Themistius puts forward arguments about the nature of imperial power, founded in Plato, Aristotle, and a 'philosophical' understanding of Homer. To what extent these actually amount to a thoroughgoing political philosophy is a matter for debate, but Themistius, as a philosopher, certainly wishes his audience to see them as such. Claudian has no such ambitions. His object is rather to create an impression of the majesty of imperial rule, through epic narrative and *ekphraseis*. These techniques are of course more natural for the poet than philosophical argumentation, though this tendency can also be observed in the prose rhetoric of the *Pan. Lat.* Claudian certainly weaves into his panegyrics many imperial values, such as military victory, virtue and piety, but he has no ambitions to present a philosophical understanding of the emperor's rule. This does not mean, however, that we cannot ask what type of emperor he portrays, as long as we accept that the answer consists of a number of descriptive, but not always consistent, images.²²⁹

There are clear differences between the portrayal of Honorius' rule offered by Claudian, and that which we find in other contemporary, often Christian texts. Some of these are illustrated neatly by the events surrounding Honorius' *adventus* into Rome in late 403, and subsequent consular celebrations in 404, for which Claudian provided a panegyric. We learn from a sermon of Augustine that Honorius, on his arrival, went to the Vatican, where he would build his mausoleum,

²²⁷ Amb. *de Ob. Theod.* 40.

²²⁸ MacCormack (1981), 138.

²²⁹ I note the argument of Cameron (1970), 382-383 that Claudian portrays the emperor differently in his Milanese orations to those delivered in Rome, where he is turned from an autocratic *dominus* to a modest and respectful *princeps*. The argument is an appealing one; the change in ritual and manner the charisma of Rome demanded from late-antique emperors is a well-known phenomenon. It ought not to be pushed too far however: *VI Cons.*, delivered before the Senate, includes some of the strongest statements of imperial divinity in Claudian's work.

to pay homage at the shrine of St. Peter, kneeling and removing his crown – clearly a potent and inventive piece of imperial display, demonstrative of the increasing Christianisation of imperial power.²³⁰ This event, however, is omitted by Claudian, who presents a classical image of Honorius' triumphal accession into Rome.²³¹ Honorius, travelling from Ravenna, visits Clitumnus, the traditional source for victims at a triumphal sacrifice; pours a libation to the Tiber; he himself is compared to Bacchus, while the cavalry with him appear to have been forged by Vulcan, bearing Juno's crests; he meets with the Senate under the protection of the statue of Victory; the emperor travels along the *Via Sacra*; and receives the acclamation of the people gathered in the circus.²³² Honorius is portrayed at the last enthroned on the Palatine, garbed in Brutus' consular robe, and bearing the sceptre of Romulus.²³³ Honorius' Rome is the *Urbs Aeterna* of the pagan past, its hills still shining with temples, protected by its ancient gods:

No other, certainly, was fit to be the home to the rulers of the world, on no other hill does power so completely judge its worth, and discern the highest summits of justice. The royal palace, elevated to the apex over the rostra, sees so many temples of so many gods, circled around, keeping watch. It delights to see beneath the abode of the Thunderer, hung by the Giants from the Tarpeian rock, and the engraved gates, and the statues flying in the midst of the clouds, and the crowded sky crammed with temples, and the air planted with columns, topped with many ships' prows, and dwelling places resting on vast hilltops, nature increased by human hands, and innumerable arches gleaming with spoils. Sight is stupefied by the lustre of metal, and made dull, trembling at the surrounding gold.²³⁴

As Isabella Gualandri remarks, this is an image, 'ambiguamente in bilico fra la celebrazione estetica e la nostalgia religiosa'.²³⁵ It could scarcely be further from the idea of Rome as an apostolic see, the heart of a now Christian Empire, that other texts want to construct around Honorius' *adventus*.

Claudian portrays his emperor throughout as a great classical and, above all, Roman hero. In *IV Cons.*, Honorius is compared to Ascanius, their destinies both confirmed by spectacular displays of light, placing the young emperor in the line of the great figures of Roman history. He is instructed

²³⁰ Augustine, *Sermo cum pagani ingrederentur* 26. See with Wienand (2015), 172-173; McEvoy (2013b), 130; Kelly (2016), 339.

²³¹ The evocation of a classical triumph itself appears to be anachronistic; Gualandri (2015), 27.

²³² Claud., *VI Cons.* 506-508 (Clitumnus), 520-522 (Tiber), 560-577 (Honorius and his troops), 587-602 (the Senate). 603-604 (*Via Sacra*), 611-639 (circus). On Honorius' libations at the Tiber, see Dewar (1996), 348-349. For the chronology of the visit, see now Kelly (2016).

²³³ Claud., *VI Cons.* 640-642. Cf. also 388-391, placing a call for secular games in the mouth of Roma with Dewar (1996), 281-282; Charlet (2005), 206-208.

²³⁴ Claud., *VI Cons.* 39-52.

²³⁵ Gualandri (1989), 46; 'ambiguously poised between aesthetic celebration and religious nostalgia'. See Roberts (2001), 554; Charlet (2013), 266-268; Gualandri (2015), 28, 31.

by the spirit of his father to study the examples of the Roman past.²³⁶ Stilicho, too, whenever he is Claudian's focus, is portrayed as model of *Romanitas*.²³⁷ Claudian admits no Christian intrusions such as a visit to Vatican into his narrative, and his emphasis on the emperor's power and authority contrasts with the pious humility projected by that event. What Claudian does not say is in some respects as important as what he does; his silence on the more Christian aspects of the Honorius' sojourn in Rome illustrates neatly the way in which he is excluding an entire aspect of the emperor's self-representation and ideology. Reading Claudian alone, one would be entirely oblivious to the fact that emperor was not a pagan, let alone a Christian who had paid public homage to the *princeps apostolorum*. This seems precisely calculated to appeal to the religious sensibilities of senatorial pagans, who could give salience to their religious identity in response to this highly traditional image of emperorship.

We can also compare with contemporary literary sources. In Prudentius' work, Honorius is *Christopotens iuuenis*; who trusts victory to Almighty God and his own right hand.²³⁸ Theodosius is foreseen in one of the poet's martyrdom narratives as an emperor who will be *servus Dei*.²³⁹ Prudentius does not repudiate Roman identity or history, but links both firmly to Christianity.²⁴⁰ In Ambrose's funeral oration for Theodosius, Honorius is portrayed as Joseph to his father's Jacob, his rule confirmed and sanctioned by God.²⁴¹ The models and typologies for the bishop of Milan's emperors are the heroes of the biblical, not the Roman past.²⁴² In the visual arts, the most famous image of Honorius, on the consular diptych of Probus, portrays the emperor, in military attire, holding a banner bearing the legend *IN NOMINE XPI VINCAS SEMPER* – a new, Christian imagery of Roman victory.²⁴³

This is not to say that Claudian's 'version' of Honorius, is 'wrong', or 'less true' than those of these Christian interpreters. Claudian's rhetoric, as epideictic, was 'authorised' by Honorius' regime; it is not the case, as has been occasionally suggested, that he is propounding a traditionalist ideology

²³⁶ The Ascanius allusion is Claud., *IV Cons.* 192-196, referencing *Aen.* 2.682-684. On the Honorius-Ascanius parallel throughout *IV Cons.*, see Ware (2012), 94-97; Ware (2013), 328-329. For the list of Roman exempla, see *IV Cons.* 396-418. See also Charlet (2013) on the essential Roman-ness of Claudian's political vision.

²³⁷ Ware (2012), 7, 47; Flower (2013), 57-58; Sanchez-Ostiz (2018). See also McEvoy (2013a), 166-167 on Stilicho's fulfilment of traditional imperial virtues in Claudian.

²³⁸ Prud., *C. Symm.* 2.710; 35-36

²³⁹ Prud., *Peristephanon* 2.474

²⁴⁰ Mastrangelo (2008), 41-46.

²⁴¹ Amb., *de Ob. Theod.* 54-55.

²⁴² Lunn-Rockliffe (2008), 200-207; Tommasi Moreschini (2016), 194-195.

²⁴³ MacCormack (1981), 221; Harries (1984), 77; Cameron (2007b); McEvoy (2013b), 128.

against the wishes of a Christian emperor and his circle.²⁴⁴ But this does not mean that it has to accord with other depictions of the emperor. One of the advantages of ceasing to read Claudian as a propagandist is that we no longer have to try to fit his rhetoric into a wider ideological scheme, a coherent self-presentation disseminated by the Stilichonian government. Claudian's presentation of an Honorius who is both a divine lord and a model of *Romanitas* is equally as useful to the imperial regime as the Christian model of kingly piety, his rule in service of, and supported by, Christ, with which it is in tension. There was no single imperial image to be dictated and transmitted, both a 'Roman' and a 'Christian' view would have had a positive effect on the audiences, who were Romans as much as they were Christians. The more problematic elements of Claudian's imperial ideology – chiefly the notion of imperial divinity, and its dependence on the pagan gods – could easily be understood by Christians as the necessary adornments to a classical portrait of a Roman emperor. A pagan, however, could understand Claudian as presenting the imperial office in full-blooded, traditional fashion. Such religious ambiguity, with its ability to speak to both sides, was, in itself, useful to the imperial regime, more useful, perhaps, than a purely Christian panegyric would have been.

Conclusion

Literary scholarship has shown the advantages of placing Claudian in the wider context of late-antique poetry, and particularly in parallel with his great contemporary, Prudentius. As Hardie has recently argued, there is much to be gained by observing the similarities and divergences between Claudian and the emerging Christian poetic traditions. These Christian poets dealt with many of the same themes, and were certainly deeply rooted in the same Latin literary tradition as the pagan from Alexandria, but were determined to turn them to 'speak worthily of Christ'.²⁴⁵ What I have attempted to demonstrate over the course of these chapters is that this approach has profound consequences for our understanding not only of literature but also of political and religious history. Through this approach, Alan Cameron's rigorously argued thesis (robust enough to withstand half a century of scholarly progress largely unchallenged, at least in the Anglophone world) – that Claudian was a propagandist for the Stilichonian regime, and that concerns of religion troubled neither the poet nor his audience – can be challenged. The Claudian who emerges is himself a curiously ambivalent figure: an orator engaged in the tough business of politics at the late Roman court, but with more than a foot in the somewhat more sedate world of literary rivalry and competition; an ally and client of a firmly Christian ruling family, who was nonetheless able to use even the most closely stage-managed ceremonial occasions to present a minority view, and find

²⁴⁴ As has been suggested by Charlet (2013); see above p. 23 n. 100.

²⁴⁵ Juvenius, *Evangeliorum libri quattuor* pr.25-27.

moments of religious community with members of the elite whose support for his patrons was doubtful. It is a testament to Claudian's skill as both poet and political actor that his rhetoric can contain these tensions and contradictions.

It is, moreover, evidence of the complexity of the relationship between religion, literature, and politics at the end of the fourth century and the start of the fifth. While the old view that all mythological literature in the late fourth century represents a cultural and political pagan backlash has been rightly disposed of, more recent assessments that classical culture had been entirely divorced from religion by the Theodosian period is, at best, an oversimplification. The evidence of Claudian's poetry shows how the use of mythology still had a relevance to pagan religious identity, and that the classical tradition could still be a site of religious contest. Moreover, these dynamics could play out in the political sphere. Claudian presented the Roman court, bureaucracy, and Senate, with a vision of *Romanitas* very deliberately traditional, constructed in implicit opposition to the new, Christian versions; in which deified Victory still stood in the *curia*, the city was still defended by its traditional gods, and the emperor was the divine companion of Roma. Claudian performed a subtle balancing act, writing epideictic orations that performed their essential function of uniting the political community in celebration of its rulers, while also demonstrating that it was possible to do so in pagan terms. This he did with great success. That there was still a place for such an orator at the court of the Theodosians even into the early years of the fifth century should invite us to consider whether the narrative of a rapid expansion of zealous Christian intolerance in these decades is sustainable.

Claudian's most famous panegyric, that for Honorius' sixth consulate in 404, was also his last; thereafter, he is nowhere attested. So sudden is this disappearance that it has generally been attributed to his premature death. Stilicho's regime, with which he was so closely associated, survived a further four years, and indeed Stilicho is the most likely instigator of the publication of Claudian's poetry.²⁴⁶ Claudian, then, may have been the last of the great classical poets writing in Latin, but there is no evidence that he was unceremoniously expelled from a political world that could no longer tolerate a pagan panegyrist.²⁴⁷ For nearly a decade, he had been the Empire's most significant literary figure, with a voice in the highest political circles. He used this position, I have

²⁴⁶ Cameron (1970), 415-418.

²⁴⁷ Though some scholars have seen a fall from grace caused, allegedly, by overly bold political and religious material in *VI Cons.*; see above p. 23 n. 100. This is unlikely both on the *a priori* grounds that an experienced orator such as Claudian can hardly be thought to have produced an offensive and tactless offering for such an important occasion; moreover, *VI Cons.* was published with the other *Carmina maiora*, surely before Stilicho's fall in 408, either by the general or someone in his circle. Had the speech been considered embarrassing, it would surely not have been included.

argued, to provide a rhetoric of praise for Honorius and Stilicho, that looked, uncompromisingly, to the pagan past rather than to the Christian future.

Conclusions: Religion and the Roman World in the Fourth Century

Themistius' and Claudian's careers in public life spanned fifty years, from the 350s into the first decade of the fifth century. They moved in the Empire's highest circles, and were not only present for, but key participants in, the grandest spectacles of imperial government. Over the preceding chapters, I have submitted the texts that they prepared for these events to close scrutiny, examining the precise implications of a particular form of terminology or turn of phrase, arguing that these subtleties bear witness to the realities of living and working as a pagan at a Christian court. To conclude, I now wish to turn these observations outwards, and discuss how they affect our understanding of some of the themes and narratives which have exercised historians of the fourth century. I begin by returning to the subject of religious identity and its relationship with rhetoric and other forms of literature in this period. I then move onto the debates about the intersection of religion and politics in the late Empire, including the ever-vexed question of tolerance. I finish with a discussion of the 'Theodosian age' and its place in narratives of Christianisation.

Rhetoric, Literature, and Religious Identity

Paganism existed. This bald statement may seem somewhat trivial, but, in the light of some recent scholarship, it is perhaps worth reasserting. As I discussed in my introductory chapters, historians, in response to the earlier narrative of a great late-antique cultural war between pagans and Christians, have emphasised the very loose nature of Graeco-Roman paganism, and the extent to which its boundaries were defined by Christian polemicists.¹ The 'pagans' on this view become simply the raw material on which Christian thinkers impose an illusory order. There are certainly advantages to this approach in reminding us of the unsystematic nature of pagan religion, and the role rhetoric can play in constructing false binaries and dichotomies. But it is also in serious danger, ironically, of rendering the pagans themselves mute, of still viewing them through a Christian lens.²

My object has been to study pagans such as Themistius and Claudian on their own terms. And one of the conclusions I draw from this is the existence, at least by the late fourth century of a genuine pagan religious identity – an identity that was, no doubt, defined against Christianity (as Christianity was defined against paganism), but was not, crucially, a Christian mirage. Themistius and Claudian demonstrate this point acutely, since they both were in their own way 'unconventional' (Themistius

¹ For example Kahlos (2007), 18. See above pp. 3-4.

² Cf. Gassman (2020a), 6, who emphasises that Christian apologists were embedded in Roman culture, in dialogue with pagans.

with his enthusiasm for Aristotelian philosophy, Claudian as an Egyptian ‘outsider’ in Italy), but both can be seen appealing to a mainstream of elite paganism. It is also notable that, given the weight placed by some historians on the reign of Julian as a turning point in the development of pagan identity, neither are ‘Julianists’: Themistius, of course, had significant disagreements with the emperor, while Claudian was probably born a decade after Julian’s death in Persia, and betrays no hint of that Iamblichaeian zeal.³ This suggests that the diversity of opinions and practices within paganism was not so great a bar to the development of a collective identity that it is sometimes supposed to be – between, say, Themistius, Julian, Libanius, Symmachus, Claudian, and Ammianus, there was great variation, and yet, as I have argued, they recognised one another as co-religionists. In this, my conclusions have much in common with the recently published work of Mattias Gassman, who argues powerfully that we should accept both the diversity within, and the overall coherence of, (Roman senatorial) paganism.⁴ Gassman’s study of fourth-century polemic, both pagan and Christian, demonstrates the way in which pagan religion was constructed in opposition to Christianity, not just as a figment of its enemies’ rhetoric. He also shows how pagans such as Symmachus and Praetextatus defended their religion and its place in Roman society, while avoiding a return to the notion of a ‘faction’ or ‘resistance’ that dominated earlier scholarship, again a conclusion which my study echoes.⁵

Pagan identity in general has been greatly underserved. The recent growth in the study of late-antique religious identity has almost exclusively focused on Christians; Bella Sandwell’s study of Libanius in Antioch is a significant and welcome exception.⁶ This study has attempted to address that balance somewhat, while building on the theoretical work that has already been done. I have found in Themistius and Claudian further evidence of the flexibility of religious identity.⁷ Both arranged their identities ‘laterally’, not privileging religious identity, not giving it salience in all situations. Indeed, their reliance on religious ambiguity adds yet another layer of flexibility, in that even when they were ‘activating’ their pagan identity, it need not necessarily have been read as such by Christians in their audience. In contrast to Sandwell’s reading of Libanius, however, I do not see their use of religious identity as ‘ludic’, used for strategic advantage in the ‘game’ of late Roman society.⁸ No social gain can be discerned in Themistius’ and Claudian’s activation of pagan identity

³ See discussion above, p. 6 on the role of Julian.

⁴ Gassman (2020a).

⁵ One point of difference is that I have found more of use than Gassman in the recent work on religious identity of Sandwell, Rebillard and others: Rebillard appears only briefly in Gassman (2020a) as an interlocutor on the theme of secularity (12-13), Sandwell’s 2007 monograph is cited twice in the footnotes.

⁶ Sandwell (2007a). Compare with the exclusively Christian focus of Rebillard (2012); noted by Gassman (2020a), 12-13.

⁷ Cf. Sandwell (2007a), 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 100-111, 114-119.

in their oratory. Rather, it was a political tool, even a matter of principle, to maintain the presence of paganism in the public sphere, against those Christians who wished to exclude it. Sandwell writes that:

Most members of fourth-century imperial society were working within a framework of expectations in which religion was always political: religion was always about ‘getting things done’ not about fulfilling ideals. While these people might well have had strong personal feelings about which religion they favoured, they knew that in fourth-century imperial society it was often appropriate to play these down.⁹

My study of Claudian and Themistius suggests that we should be more open to a less strategic, more idealistic, use of religious identity, even from those who regarded it as flexible, and who were not hostile towards their religious opponents.

Éric Rebillard’s work on Christian communities in early fifth-century Africa has shown the advantages of the concept of ‘groupness’ when applied to late-antique religious identity; the idea that the common bonds of identity were not a constant reality, but were instantiated in particular circumstances.¹⁰ I have demonstrated that this notion can also be applied to late-antique pagans. The particular value of this approach is that it allows us to see elite pagans as having held a common religious identity which occasionally united them, without returning to the idea of a ‘pagan faction’ that acted as a permanent or coherent social and political party. It may well be productive to consider further in what other contexts pagan identity was activated; an obvious example would be during traditional religious rituals and celebrations, but, as I have shown, it could occur outside such obviously religious contexts. This is a broader question that my study raises: how did religious groupness, whether pagan or Christian, function in more ‘secular’ contexts, in a religiously mixed population? I have argued that moments of pagan groupness occurred during the ceremonies of a Roman political elite that was majority Christian. What was it like to be a pagan attending, say, the funerals of Valentinian or Theodosius, or a Christian at a traditional, ‘religious’ feast, such as the one in celebration of the ‘Genius of Carthage’ that Augustine reproves his congregation over in *Serm.* 62?¹¹ I cannot consider the question in detail here, but my arguments suggest that religious ‘groupness’ was not something confined to churches or temples.

My study has further demonstrated that more attention ought to be paid to the role of classical culture in constructing and displaying pagan religious identity. Recent scholarship, led by Alan

⁹ Ibid., 115.

¹⁰ Rebillard (2012) and (2015).

¹¹ See above, p. 120 n. 80.

Cameron, has argued, correctly, that an enthusiasm for classical culture was not limited to pagans, but was the common inheritance of the Roman elite. There are dangers in such an approach, however, in that it tends, as McLynn argued, to ignore the numinous potential of the religious elements of the classical tradition.¹² It promotes one (Christian) perspective, that aestheticised the pagan gods and stripped them of religious significance. Students of fourth-century literature could learn much from art historians, who are extremely comfortable with the notion that the mythological statuary of this period could have a variety of meanings and significances dependent on the viewer. The idea of a cultural and religious *koiné* which has been popular in the scholarship of recent decades is very useful in overcoming the notion that pagans and Christians lived in social silos; but it can mislead us into thinking that pagans and Christians *interpreted* the things they shared in the same way.

By reading Themistius and Claudian in this way, I am not returning to the idea of a ‘pagan revival’, or that any reference to the old gods must be understood as pagan. What I argue is that such a meaning should not be ruled out, and that such references could be used to invite the activation of pagan identity. A focus on the Christian attitude towards the past, the aestheticisation of pagan concepts and imagery, causes us to forget the deep link fourth-century pagans felt between their culture and their religion. Themistius saw Homer and Plato, as great literary masters, certainly – but also as sources of divine wisdom. Claudian saw himself as part of a long line of poets who channelled the spirit of the Muses. What my study suggests then is that a re-examination of the writings of fourth-century pagans might be productive. It allows us to move beyond the arguments about a ‘pagan resistance’, while also remaining sensitive to the potential religious significance in this literature, and the role of classical culture in pagan identity. The literature of this period might look different if read with an awareness of the way authors can use subtle devices to invite the activation of religious identity, and the way in which careful use of ambiguity can make a text appear very different to different audiences. Above all, we must keep hold of the idea that Roman literature could be profoundly religious.¹³

Religion and the Roman State

Themistius and Claudian were not private citizens. If they had passed these decades in quiet obscurity, they would be only of mild interest to historians. But they performed on the grandest imperial stage of all. This has significant implications for our understanding of their paganism. The religious dissent of the private intellectual is one thing. But the argument of this thesis has been that

¹² McLynn (2009), 585.

¹³ Feeney (1998); Sandwell (2007a), 24.

Themistius and Claudian displayed their religious identity, their loyalty to the old gods, in the most public of all arenas. This conclusion inevitably raises the question of the relationship between politics and religion in the Theodosian Empire, the distinction between political and religious dissent, and demands a return to the theme of religious tolerance.

Histories of tolerance in the fourth century have tended to focus on the course of imperial legislation as recorded in the Theodosian Code. Even Maijastina Kahlos' study, which aims to deal more with rhetoric than with policy, devotes considerable time to the discussion of various laws.¹⁴ The dangers of this are clear: the Code is a complex source. Its compilers picked selectively from the canon of fourth-century law, as well as individual sections of the texts themselves. As has been discussed in relation to the *cunctos populos* text of 381, historians continue to use such laws as simple statements of policy despite the close readings that have demonstrated the tight limits of applicability that were deliberately built in.¹⁵ The intention and context of each law is often lost to us, and may not even have been clear during the 430s. The Code can be useful, but should not be deemed the final word on imperial intolerance.

Furthermore, what is striking about the fourth century is how little in the way of state-sponsored violence against pagans there was. Mass conversions enforced by the emperor are the fantastical inventions of poets. It is certainly difficult to find pagan martyrs. This may seem a low bar to us, but it is cast into sharp relief when one places it beside that other great period of religious change, the sixteenth century. One thinks of the martyrs on both sides of the English Reformation, executed for crimes which were simultaneously religious and political, who have no obvious parallel in the fourth century.¹⁶ To the extent that there was violent coercion in this period, it was organised, impromptu, by bishops and monks; sometimes it simply spilled over among crowds of ordinary believers; it had at most a tenuous relationship with imperial authority.¹⁷ It was far more usually targeted at the

¹⁴ Kahlos (2009), 1-8 for this methodology, but see 89-92 for a fairly conventional reading of Theodosian legislation.

¹⁵ See above, p. 48 n. 9.

¹⁶ Reformation England executed more than two hundred Catholics, not for heresy but for treason committed in practising and promoting their faith (they were, naturally, regarded as martyrs by their co-religionists); see Coffey (2000), 90-93; 102-103; Dillon (2002), 3, 10-16; Kaplan (2007), 123; Collinson (2009), 83-85. See below, p. 158 n. 26, on the crucial link between political and religious dissent in early Modern Europe.

¹⁷ Drake (2000), 400-401, 409-418. Salzman (2006) argues, *contra* MacMullen (1984) and MacMullen (1997), for the minor role that violence and compulsion played in the Christianisation of the Empire's populace. On the role of the holy man in religious violence, see Frankfurter (1998), 26-27; Gaddis (2005), 151-207; though Hahn (2015), 389 strikes a note of caution. Shaw (2011), 222-226 argues that imperial edicts on the elimination of pagan worship encouraged Christian communities to take matters into their own hands, but acknowledges such acts of violence were not intended by the imperial government; see also the argument of Hahn (2015), 383-384 on the relationship between the rhetoric of legislation and outbreaks of violence. Nor was the violence necessarily one-sided; Salzman (2006), 273-274; Shaw (2011), 244-259.

physical symbols of pagan worship than pagans themselves.¹⁸ This is of course a significant theme in the history of religious tensions, but has minimal significance when considering the tolerance or intolerance of the Roman state.

As I discussed in Part I, much modern historiography is sceptical of the attribution of tolerance to late Antiquity.¹⁹ That there are major disparities between how modern secular society and the later Roman Empire deal with religious difference is undeniable. But they are perhaps not so wide as they are sometimes thought. Hal Drake tells us that, ‘indifference does not constitute toleration’, and Peter Garnsey that, ‘toleration is not synonymous with inclusiveness’.²⁰ They are no doubt correct. But indifference to religious identity – the failure to give religious identity ‘salience’ in most public and social contexts – is precisely what characterises the modern secular mindset. Much the same attitude seems to have prevailed in late Antiquity. The Romans lacked, for the most part, a developed principle of tolerance such as those which emerged during the Enlightenment. But such theories are hardly necessary for a practice of tolerance – even in modern society, quotidian experience rarely encounters the need for a principle of tolerance. We, like the Romans, are indifferent and inclusive rather than, on Garnsey’s rigorous definition, tolerant.

Such semantic niceties, then, are not necessarily helpful in analysing the attitude of the Roman state. The approach suggested by this thesis is to focus on what Peter Brown once described as the ‘limits of intolerance’, the pragmatic boundaries of religious possibility.²¹ Themistius and Claudian rarely approach what could be termed active religious dissent – condemning the emperor’s religious policy – which would have been an unsuitable approach in the context of epideictic. They do both on occasion move closer to this than has previously been appreciated: Themistius, for example, in his reference to, and contradiction of, the emperor’s attitude towards mythological statuary; Claudian in his allusion to the debates concerning Victoria and the religious status of the Roman Senate. Nonetheless, as I have argued throughout, their reliance on ambiguity and ambivalence allows them to present a pagan worldview, and to create moments of pagan ‘groupness’ during the most public occasions at court. That the emperors were willing to allow this, tacitly to endorse it, and to continue to rely on Themistius and Claudian, is testament to a high degree of pragmatic tolerance.

¹⁸ Salzman (2006), 283; Shaw (2011), 234-235.

¹⁹ See p. 11.

²⁰ Drake (2000), 419; Garnsey (1984), 24.

²¹ Brown (1995), 27-54.

Historians have tended to look on the arguments for tolerance in Themistius, Symmachus and Libanius as oases in a desert of sectarian hatred.²² But none of these writers gives the impression that they are putting forward radical ideas that they will have to fight to justify. Themistius, in particular, presents the argument in the context of a panegyric for Jovian, responding, as Heather and Moncur have demonstrated, to the emperor's enactments in favour of religious tolerance.²³ It suits the rhetorical purposes of Symmachus and Libanius better also to present arguments that they thought stood a chance of being accepted, rather than novelties. Moreover, one of the key tenets they put forward, that religious commitment could not and should not be compelled, is also found in contemporary Christian authors.²⁴ The idea that religious freedom was to be defended was, I suggest, entirely commonplace in the fourth century. When a theory of religious coercion was developed in response to the Donatist schism in the early fifth century by Augustine, he gives the impression of having to work hard to justify it, rather than articulating a generally agreed-upon attitude.²⁵ My study of Themistius and Claudian supports this conclusion, in demonstrating at least a tacit belief among the imperial elite that religious plurality even in the political sphere was entirely acceptable; a general inclination both in individuals and in the government corporately towards religious tolerance. This invites us to think more deeply about the relationship between religion and politics in the Theodosian Empire. This apparently deeply engrained belief that religious and political dissent were not to be confused demands explanation. Comparison with the sixteenth century is instructive: for Protestant England, denial of the monarch's supremacy over the Church was treasonous, as was the recognition of a higher power overseas in the form of the Papacy.²⁶ Why did fourth-century Rome not struggle with a similar dynamic?

In thinking about religion and Roman politics, we must acknowledge first of all that the Romans did not have a concept of religion equivalent to our own. The dichotomy of 'Church and State' is itself

²² Them., *Or.* 5; Symm., *Rel.* 3; Lib. *Or.* 30. See with Kahlos (2009), 92-99. Though cf. the recent argument of Gassman (2020a), 118-128 that sees *Rel.* 3 more as an argument for a pagan *status quo* than a defence of tolerance.

²³ Heather & Moncur (2001), 154-158, see also Errington (2000), 873-878.

²⁴ Cf. Them., *Or.* 5.67b-c; Lib., *Or.* 30.28-29 with Greg. Naz., *vit. sua.* 1292-1304 (see comments of McLynn (2010), 215-216); even Amb., *Ep.* 72.7 treats it as axiomatic that, 'You [Valentinian II] do not compel a reluctant person to worship what they will not (Inuitum non cogitis colere, quod nolit).' See generally Drake (2000), 406-407.

²⁵ Brown (1964); Drake (2000), 401-402; 417-418. As Shaw (2011), 782-784 points out, Augustine resorted to entirely secular arguments about the threats posed by his opponents to public order.

²⁶ On the belief that religious dissenters were potential or actual traitors in Reformation Europe, see Questier (2005), 69-72; Kaplan (2007), 115; Frijhoff (2009), 6. Particularly catalysed in Elizabethan England by the arrival of a Catholic claimant, Mary, Queen of Scots in 1568, and the publication in 1570 of the papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, which excommunicated Elizabeth and declared her a usurper, presenting Catholics with a direct conflict between their faith and their loyalty to the Queen; Coffey (2000), 85-86; Muller (2020), 115-116. Compare the framing of Ambrose and Symmachus in the 'Altar of Victory' controversy: both were concerned about the possibility of disaster if their religion was neglected, but neither attempted to portray the other as a real or potential 'enemy of the state'.

a product of centuries of Christian intellectual discourse, the faintest outlines of which can be seen in the fourth century.²⁷ In late Antiquity the dominant model was still that of the Graeco-Roman past, in which ‘religion’, the *pax deorum*, was, along with defence and expansion of empire, the central task of the state. It was entirely natural for Constantine and his successors to legislate on religious matters, the fact that their allegiance was to the Christian God made little difference to this fundamental responsibility. If anything, the Christian tradition confirmed this obligation through the examples of the great Old Testament theocratic monarchs. The Roman state and Roman politics would never be ‘secular’ in the post-Enlightenment sense – religion was intensely political, and politics inherently religious.²⁸

These observations make the problem all the more intractable. How was it that Themistius and Claudian were not only allowed to be pagans, but to display their religious identity in the most political of arenas? It is one thing to tolerate a private pagan ‘recusancy’, quite another to allow the encouragement of paganism on state occasions. It is not that Themistius and Claudian avoided activating their religious identity in the public sphere – this is precisely what I have argued that they did.²⁹ A pragmatic argument that emperors needed the support of the pagan aristocracy will only get us so far. Plenty of rulers throughout history have sacrificed pragmatism for religious principle. Moreover, by the Theodosian period, even an ‘optimistic’ reading of the survival of paganism among the elites will concede that numbers were dwindling. Had Theodosius been minded in the early 390s to command at least outward conformity to Nicene Christianity (which, despite some readings of his legislation, he clearly did not do), he would surely have suffered little backlash.

One attractive way forward has been offered by Peter Brown, who emphasises the extraordinary power of classical culture, of *paideia*, to unite the Roman elite.³⁰ To follow the logic of the emperor’s religious responsibility and enforce conformity was simply ‘not done’:

Like a miraculous calm spreading across the face of a choppy ocean, the ‘serenity’ associated with the vast notional omnipotence of the emperor was mediated, throughout the imperial system, by a succession of representatives and collaborators, by means of innumerable interchanges in which courtesy, self-control and quiet confidence – the marks of innate

²⁷ Gradel (2002), 4-5. See now the discussion of tentative definitions of ‘religion’ in Gassman (2020a), 8-12.

²⁸ A useful summary in Armstrong (1984), 2-4; see also Drake (2015), 300, 304. There may be senses in which Roman society can be considered secular, addressed most thoroughly by Markus (1990); Markus (2006). Such terminology can be treacherous, however, and the Roman state was never what we would think of as ‘secular’.

²⁹ That is, they did not need to be protected by an ‘ideology of silence’ that Brown (1992), 131-133 represents elite pagans of the fifth and sixth centuries as living under.

³⁰ Brown (1995), esp. 38-41.

superiority – were believed to have prevailed. As a result, among the elites, the issue of toleration was swallowed up in a specifically late Roman emphasis on civility. *Paideia*, not philosophy, set the limits to intolerance.³¹

Induction into the classical tradition, rather than sectarian loyalty, united the Roman elite and provided the highest ‘guarantee of behaviour’. It also no doubt helped that religious minorities were not suspected of being under the sway of a foreign power. The great dilemma of the Reformation era, that religion secured social and political relationships does not seem to have held in fourth-century Rome. In that era, the inhabitants of a fracturing Christendom,

drew an equation between civic and sacral community on the national or territorial level...

They presumed that a shared religion was a crucial cement holding states together, and that religious divisions undermined social and political unity. The French put this common wisdom into the form of an adage: “Une foi, une loi, un roi”—one faith, one law, one king.³²

In the Theodosian Empire, however, it was *paideia* that held together the social and political fabric. For Themistius and Claudian, it was their mastery of the classical tradition that provided their passport to the corridors of power and, relying on its ambiguity and flexibility, they could bring their religion with them – in doing so both benefiting from, and helping to reinforce, the distinction between religious and political dissent.

Christianisation in the Theodosian Age

I began this thesis with Christianisation, and it is to Christianisation I now return in drawing it to a close. The reign of the Theodosian dynasty, in particular the first half of that period, from the accession of Theodosius in 379 to the death of Arcadius in 408 has, as I have explained, dominated narratives of Christianisation. It is in these years, allegedly, that Christianity truly became ascendent, both in terms of its numerical domination of the elite, and of the political levers of the Roman world. These were, after all, the years of the ‘Altar of Victory’ controversy, of the religious legislation of Theodosius and his heirs, of the depredations of monks against ancient temples lamented by Libanius, the destruction of the Serapaeum, Ambrose’s assertion of episcopal authority over imperial power, and innumerable smaller attacks on the influence of traditional religion and its proponents. It is the end of Ed Watts’ ‘final pagan generation’, and, perhaps even more strikingly, the moment of crisis for Alan Cameron’s ‘last pagans’. The power of the ‘Theodosian age’

³¹ Ibid., 40.

³² Kaplan (2007), 114; see also the wider discussion, 99-124. See also the observations of Collinson (2009), esp. 74-77 on Elizabethan England.

continues to underlie Cameron's assumptions, even as he demolishes some of the myths concerning it.³³

The age of Theodosius and his heirs was certainly a period of change, in which the outlines of future patterns start to become clear. Some of the most important developments had little to do with religion: the consolidation of Constantinople as an imperial capital shifted the gravity of Mediterranean geopolitics, a move which would continue to resonate for the next millennium and beyond. In the Theodosians' vision of the palaces, public squares and arenas of New Rome as a stage for the ceremonies and pageantry of monarchy, we begin to glimpse Justinian, and beyond him the centuries of Byzantine civilisation. No doubt as well, in the destruction of the Serapaeum, we see a Mediterranean world in which ancient temples were replaced by churches, and in which charismatic monks and clerics were key power-brokers. Certainly in Ambrose, we have the model for episcopal intervention with the great and the good (and not so good) of the political world, a central feature of medieval Christendom. But we should not assume that such foreshadowings made subsequent developments inevitable.

Instead, I have attempted through this thesis to see the Theodosian period through pagan eyes. It would have no doubt been clear that paganism was in retreat – especially to the significantly older Themistius, who, as Watts describes, could recall a world in which it had been the normative religion.³⁴ It was surely not clear even to Claudian at the beginning of the fifth century that traditional religion was doomed. To paraphrase Brown, fourth-century persons did not have the benefit of modern historians' work to spell out for them 'the writing on the wall for a whole, non-Christian way of life and worship'.³⁵ The 'last pagans' did not know that this is what they were. Why should another, perhaps wiser and more successful, Julian, not be around the corner?

Neither should we underestimate the importance of the fact that Themistius and Claudian not only existed as pagan intellectuals, but did so at the commanding heights of Roman political life. Historians of paganism's demise have perhaps been too keen to identify the moments at which paganism became illegal or extinct. We should pay more attention, rather, to the moment at which it becomes *unmentionable*, at which one's worship of the old gods becomes something which, while not forbidden, was by social and political necessity kept, not secret, but private; to use the terminology

³³ See discussion at p. 15.

³⁴ Watts (2015), 17-36.

³⁵ Brown (1995), 32.

of identity, when pagan identity could no longer be activated and given salience in the public sphere.

The task that faced Themistius and Claudian was simply to keep the old world alive, and make sure that the political elite were not allowed to forget that the Roman Empire was the Empire of Zeus and Apollo, of Homer, Plato, and Virgil; to hold back the tide of Christianisation which, while strong, need not have felt inexorable. It was a task that had changed little in the short years between Themistius' first oration for Theodosius in 379, and Claudian's disappearance from the stage in 404. There were perhaps fewer pagans to acknowledge the old gods, and a society more hostile to them, but these were questions of degree – not (yet) a radical new world.

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