



# AABNER

ADVANCES IN ANCIENT BIBLICAL  
AND NEAR EASTERN RESEARCH

*Thematic Issue:  
Global and Local  
Cultures in the  
Roman East*



EBERHARD KARLS  
UNIVERSITÄT  
TÜBINGEN



UNIVERSITÄTS-  
BIBLIOTHEK



**AABNER**

ADVANCES IN ANCIENT BIBLICAL  
AND NEAR EASTERN RESEARCH

**FROM BAD BARBARIANS INTO GOOD  
ROMANS? THEMISTIUS AND THE CASE  
OF GOTHS IN THE FOURTH CENTURY**

*Maijastina Kahlos*

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research*  
3, no. 3 (December, 2023): 221–252

URL to this article: DOI: [10.35068/aabner.v3i3.1106](https://doi.org/10.35068/aabner.v3i3.1106)

Keywords: accommodation, Goths, imperial propaganda, Late  
Roman Empire, panegyric, recruitment, Themistius

(c) 2024, Maijastina Kahlos, via a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

## Abstract

In this article, I examine the Constantinopolitan rhetorician and philosopher Themistius and his speeches in the context of changing Romano-Gothic relations from the 360s to the 380s—from the policies of Valens (364–378) to those of Theodosius I (379–395). The changes in Themistius’s rhetoric and imagery of barbarians illustrate the fluctuating policies of the Roman government before and after the infamous Battle of Hadrianople in 378. I show that the concept of ‘the barbarian’ was versatile and could be modified in varying ways for different purposes. Themistius’s orations reflect not only tensions in the Roman attitudes toward barbarians—which ranged from fear to arrogance to benevolence—but also simply what was thought of as useful strategies at various specific times. I also analyze recruitment and accommodation policies in the preceding centuries and compare them with the arguments and *exempla* that Themistius uses to advocate the settlement of barbarians. I contextualize Themistius’s rhetoric within earlier imperial policy on the utility of moving people into the Empire.



Dans cet article, j'étudie les discours du rhétoricien et philosophe constantinopolitain Thémistios dans le contexte de l'évolution des relations romano-gothiques entre les années 360 et 380—de la politique de Valens (364–378) à celle de Théodose I<sup>er</sup> (379–395). Les changements dans la rhétorique et dans l'imagerie des barbares chez Thémistios illustrent les politiques fluctuantes du gouvernement romain avant et après la tristement célèbre bataille d'Andrinople en 378. Je montre que le concept de « barbare » était polyvalent et pouvait être modifié de diverses manières à des fins différentes. Les oraisons de Thémistios reflètent non seulement les tensions dans les attitudes romaines à l'égard des barbares—qui allaient de la peur à l'arrogance en passant par la bienveillance—mais aussi ce que l'on considérait comme des stratégies utiles à différents moments. J'analyse également les politiques de recrutement et d'accommodation des siècles précédents et les compare aux arguments et aux exemples que Thémistios utilise pour préconiser l'organisation des habitations des barbares. Je replace la rhétorique de Thémistios dans le contexte de la politique impériale antérieure quant à l'utilité de déplacer des peuples dans l'Empire.



Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research*  
3, no. 3 (December, 2023): 221–252

# FROM BAD BARBARIANS INTO GOOD ROMANS? THEMISTIUS AND THE CASE OF GOTHS IN THE FOURTH CENTURY

*Maijastina Kahlos*



“So will we see the Scythians do likewise within a short time. For now their clashes with us are still recent, but in fact we shall soon receive them to share our offerings, our tables, our military ventures, and public duties.”

— Them. *Or.* 16.211d

## Introduction

The Constantinopolitan philosopher and senator Themistius assures his audience that the Goths can and will be integrated into Roman society.<sup>1</sup> The Goths, whom Themistius calls “Scythians” (*Skythoi*) in his

---

<sup>1</sup> My thanks go out to Raimo Hakola, Nina Nikki, Jarkko Vikman, and the anonymous reviewers of AABNER, whose comments have greatly improved my article. I am also grateful to the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies,

speech, according to Greek literary conventions, had been settled in Thrace after the Romano-Gothic War ended with a peace treaty in 382.

This war had its origins in the 370s when a Gothic group, the Tervingi, arrived at the Danube border as refugees and requested permission to cross the river and settle in the Roman Empire. In 376, Emperor Valens (364–378), ruling the eastern part of the Empire, gave the Goths permission to cross the Danube. However, as a result of famine, black-marketing, the slave trade, and the misconduct of a few Roman officers, the Tervingi started rebelling, and soon they were at war with the Romans. The conflict culminated with the defeat of the Romans at the Battle of Hadrianople in 378, in which thousands of Roman soldiers, Emperor Valens among them, were killed.<sup>2</sup> Theodosius I (379–395), who succeeded Valens on the throne in the East, continued the war against the Goths and was finally able to conclude a compromise peace with them.



It was at the beginning of the following year that Themistius gave his speech to compliment Theodosius's peace. Themistius had a challenging job ahead, for, as we saw above, the Romans had some history with the Tervingi. He had to convince his listeners that Theodosius's policy of peace was commendable and to demonstrate that the emperor both victoriously chastised and mercifully spared the Goths at the time. Furthermore, Themistius had to show them that all this was profitable

---

Clare Hall Cambridge, the Osk. Huttunen Foundation, and the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies for making my research possible. Translations are my own unless otherwise mentioned.

<sup>2</sup> See Amm. Marc. 31.4.6; 31.3.9–11 on the corruption of the army; Jer. *Chron. sub anno* 377: “per avaritiam Maximi ducis fame ad rebellandum coacti sunt [Gothi]”; Oros. 7.33.11: “propter intolerabilem avaritiam Maximi ducis fame et iniuriis adacti in arma surgentes.” For the slave trade as the most important commerce in the frontier regions, see Harper 2011, 79–83; Kahlos 2022a. For the Romano-Gothic War, see Heather 1991, 142–56; Lenski 1997, 161; Lenski 2002, 325–41. Here, it is important to stress that the group of Tervingi allowed to cross the border was only one of many groups of Goths in the Danube region.

to the whole society, as the barbarians could become useful—and even Romans.<sup>3</sup>

Themistius was probably the right person to carry out this propagandistic task. He was an experienced orator at the Constantinopolitan court and in several instances had worked as the mouthpiece of the ever-changing imperial politics of three emperors: Constantius II, Valens, and Theodosius I.<sup>4</sup> He had promoted Valens's policies with the Goths in his previous speeches; therefore, he definitely knew how to approach the topic at hand.

The encounters between the Romans and other peoples, and their movements both within and outside the Empire, have been examined from different perspectives, inspired by various theories. Modern scholars have tackled the complexities of the confrontations and symbiotic life in the frontier regions. In these encounters, the identities of groups or individuals never remained fixed but were multivariate and constantly under transformation and negotiation. Likewise, what being Roman meant was in constant change, and the transformations of Romanness have also been intensely analyzed in recent scholarship. The ideas of being Roman were intermingled with the notions of non-Romans, the versatile concept of “the barbarian.”<sup>5</sup> In this article, I examine Themistius's argumentation concerning Goths in his speeches in the context of changing Romano-Gothic relations from the 360s to the 380s—from the policies of Valens to those of Theodosius I.<sup>6</sup> The changes in Themistius's rhetoric and imagery of barbarians illustrate the fluctuating policies of the Roman government. I show that the concept of “the barbarian” was malleable and could be modified (as Themistius does) in varying ways for different purposes. First, he



---

<sup>3</sup> *Barbarians* here is the term used by Greek and Roman writers to depict non-Greeks and non-Romans and is therefore an emic term, that is, used within the ancient context, and is used by modern researchers only in this manner.

<sup>4</sup> For Themistius's career and speeches, see Dagron 1968, 5–16; Daly 1972, 351–79; Vanderspoel 1995; Leppin and Portmann 1998, 1–26; Penella 2000, 1–5.

<sup>5</sup> For surveys of the research, see Woolf 1998, 4–6, and Dench 2013, 258 (Republican Rome); Ando 2000, and Shumate 2006, 15 (Imperial Rome); and Halsall 2007, 38–41, Conant 2012, 7, and Pohl et al. 2018 (Late Antique Rome).

<sup>6</sup> I focus on Themistius's Orations 8, 10, 14, 15, and 16 (Schenkl et al. 1965).

depicts barbarians as a dangerous enemy and threat that must be kept under control. Punishing the bad barbarians is the task of the victorious emperor. However, the emperor does not always destroy barbarians altogether, and here we come to the second notion, that of good barbarians. They can at times be useful because they can become allies, and even Romans!

By looking at Themistius's rhetoric, I aim to show how his orations reflect not only tensions in the Roman attitudes toward barbarians—which ranged from fear to arrogance to benevolence—but also simply what was thought of as useful strategy at various specific times. I contextualize Themistius's rhetoric within earlier imperial policy on the utility of moving people into the Empire and making them Romans, discussing the Roman “migration and accommodation policies” from the viewpoint of how they were depicted in imperial literature. My purpose here is not to make claims about how and to what extent the movement of groups was carried out and how it influenced the life in provinces in everyday reality but rather to examine how it was advertised in imperial propaganda. I also analyze recruitment and accommodation policies in the preceding centuries and compare them with the arguments and *exempla* that Themistius uses to advocate the settlement of barbarians.



## Confrontations and Symbiosis between Romans and Goths

Romano-Gothic affairs have never been simple, and they did not merely consist of wars. Instead, we could speak of symbiotic relations in which military interventions alternated with peace agreements and alliances.<sup>7</sup> In the struggle for power between Emperors Constantine and Licinius

<sup>7</sup> Heather and Matthews (1991, 19–20) distinguish three phases in Romano-Gothic relations in the fourth century before the arrival of the Huns, which changed the established order on the northern side of the Danube: first, the confrontation and peace during Constantine's reign in the 320s and 330s; second, disturbances in the late 340s during the reign of Constantius II, who resolved the conflict with negotiations; and third, in the 360s in connection with another civil war, namely,

in the 320s, the latter recruited Goths to fight for him. Consequently, after defeating Licinius and consolidating his supremacy Constantine made a punitive campaign against these Goths and celebrated an illustrious victory with a column and annual games in 332. According to the praises of Constantine, the peace he concluded with these Goths was made after he subdued them and made them his “slaves.”<sup>8</sup> Be that as it may, after that peace these Goths fought as Constantine’s and his family’s allies. Furthermore, here we already find the literary *topos* of the triumphant emperor at work.

A similar pattern occurred in the 360s in connection with the civil war between Emperor Valens and the pretender to the throne, Procopius, who recruited Goths to fight for him. Procopius’s coup ended disastrously in 366, and Valens sent Roman troops to chastise these Goths in 367–369. It was in this context of frontier war that Themistius addressed a speech (Oration 8) to Valens in 368 in Marcianople, from where the emperor led his military operations. The Roman troops were preparing for the second season of warfare.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the emperor was aiming to end the war that had not been very successful. Themistius was in charge of working on public opinion in favor of peace. Showing it as a compromise peace was not an option: the Roman emperor had to be portrayed as eternally victorious. At the same time, his enemies needed to be depicted as threatening and palpable. Consequently, Themistius argues that ending the war will lighten the burden of taxes for Romans. The reduction of taxes had always functioned as a persuasive argument. Themistius even succeeds in styling the situation as a true victory over both Goths and tax collectors (*Or.* 8.172/114–115).<sup>10</sup> Valens is not only a triumphant general, but also a beneficent ruler to his subjects. A



---

that between Valens and Procopius in which some Gothic groups fought on Procopius’s side.

<sup>8</sup> Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 4.5 and *Lib. Or.* 59.89; Heather and Matthews 1991, 21.

<sup>9</sup> *Them. Or.* 8 (March 28, 368); see *Or.* 8.174/116 on the preparations. For the date and occasion, see Heather and Matthews 1991, 14.

<sup>10</sup> While wars on the frontiers (the Eastern, Danube, and Rhine frontiers) benefited people in the border regions, tax reduction was to the “advantage of all” (Heather and Matthews 1991, 25, 29 n. 47).



good emperor like Valens makes people within the Empire rejoice but people outside it despair (*Or.* 8.173–174/115).<sup>11</sup> Themistius also assures his audience that the resources spent on the army are worthwhile (*Or.* 8.174–175/115–116).<sup>12</sup> However ominous the enemies at the Eastern, Rhine, and Danube frontiers are, the emperors both in the East and in the West keep them at bay. Themistius depicts the Goths at the Danube as “looming threateningly” and as a greater menace than the enemies on the Eastern and Rhine frontiers (*Or.* 8.179/119).

## Bad Barbarians and the Triumphant Emperor



Emperor Valens concluded his frontier war with a compromise peace, which was ceremonially confirmed in a meeting on a ship in the middle of the Danube. The arrangement was probably a carefully planned concession of symbolic equality to Athanaric, the leader of the Goths (*Amm. Marc.* 31.4.13).<sup>13</sup> In the speech (*Oration* 10, “On the Peace”) addressed to Valens in 370, Themistius does his best to represent the occasion as favorable to the emperor and the Romans (*Them. Or.* 10; January or February 370).<sup>14</sup> As an eyewitness, he depicts the Goths on the other

<sup>11</sup> Themistius compares Valens favourably with preceding traditionally well-reputed emperors Augustus, Trajan, and Marcus Aurelius, who (Themistius claims) certainly were “hard on barbarians” but not so nice to their subjects.

<sup>12</sup> The Roman army is disciplined and trained, and the emperor, inspiring every soldier to fulfill his own task, is responsible for their success.

<sup>13</sup> According to Ammianus, Athanaric surmised that the show in making the peace agreement might have made Valens angry and just in case withdrew his troops from the immediate surroundings of the Danube. While Themistius makes everything look favorable to Valens, Ammianus systematically portrays the emperor in a negative manner. The Goths were as eager as the Romans to end the war and sent several embassies to Valens before the peace was made (*Amm. Marc.* 27.5.8–9; see also *Them. Or.* 10.201–202/132–133). This implies that the Romans to some extent had the upper hand in the war (Heather 1991, 118–19; Heather and Matthews 1991, 14, 19–26, 40).

<sup>14</sup> Themistius (*Or.* 10.201–202/132–133) compares Valens with the Persian king Xerxes—Valens’s boat for peace is of course superior to Xerxes’s bridge made of rafts to make war in Greece. See Herod. *Hist.* 7.21ff.

side of the Danube in confusion—they were a “congregation of fear” and an “assembly of panic” while the Romans dictated terms of peace to the Gothic leaders. Themistius stresses that he had not heard “the barbarian war shout but . . . their keening, their wailing, their entreaties [were] utterances more appropriate to prisoners than peacemakers, by which one harder than adamant would be moved to tears.” The contrast with the Romans is even greater when Themistius compares the two armies on the two banks of the Danube: the one was “glittering with soldiers who are in good order” and in “tranquil pride,” and the other was “a disordered rabble of suppliants cast down upon the earth” (*Or.* 10.201–203/132–133).<sup>15</sup> Thus, in Themistius’s rhetoric, the Goths have become pitiful rather than frightening. In the panegyrics to the emperors, the enemies have to be represented as submissive suppliants, and here this imagery functions to hide the fact that in the warfare with the Goths the Romans had not been particularly successful and that Valens had to make a compromise peace.

As a skillful panegyrist, Themistius makes a virtue of necessity and camouflages the compromise peace as Valens’s mercy to the downtrodden Goths. The emperor could have destroyed the Goths but decides not to do so: Themistius justifies Valens’s decision by appealing to the Platonic teaching of the rational and irrational parts of the human soul. With this metaphor, Themistius construes Romans as the rational element and Goths as the irrational one:

There is in each of us a barbarian tribe (*barbaron phylon*), extremely overbearing and intractable—I mean the temper and the insatiate desires, which stand opposed to the rational elements as the Scythians and Germans do to the Romans. (*Or.* 10.199–200/131)<sup>16</sup>

The metaphor of the human soul makes it possible for Themistius to argue for the uselessness of entirely wiping out barbarians in the Roman world. It would be impossible and even disadvantageous to eliminate

---

<sup>15</sup> Greek and Roman writers conventionally depicted the troops of barbarians before battles as being in confusion and chaos—as contrasted to the disciplined order of the Roman army.

<sup>16</sup> With the reference to Pl. *Leg.* 628E. Trans. Heather and Matthews 1991, 38.



the irrational passions when they attack the better elements in the human soul. In the same way, the Roman emperors do not root out barbarians completely but rather restrain them in order to “safeguard and protect them as an integral part of the Empire.” The emperor is merciful (*pheidetai*) even when he is the triumphant conqueror (*kratei*) (*Or.* 10.199–200/131). Thus, in Themistius’s argumentation, barbarians are not to be annihilated; they are only to be kept under control and even protected as an essential part of the Roman commonwealth. Themistius returns to the same idea later in his speech, now using a parallel with animals and stating that they spare barbarians in the same way as the emperor now spares the Goths “we spare the most savage beasts from which we are separated not by the Ister [Danube] or Rhine but by nature herself so that their species might survive and endure.” Acting as a sort of conservationist of nature, Themistius lists elephants in Libya, lions in Thessaly, and hippopotami in the Nile whose disappearance is a tragedy. Similarly, in the case of humankind, the emperor decides not to wipe out but to spare the Goths, whom Themistius depicts as “impoverished, downtrodden and consenting to submit to our rule” (*Or.* 10.212/139–140).<sup>17</sup> He is clearly using the rhetoric of superiority; Themistius is even at pains to stress that what keeps Goths separate from Romans is not any river, lagoon, or fortification but *fear*, which is an insurmountable obstacle once the enemy is “convinced that he is inferior” (*Or.* 10.210–211/138).<sup>18</sup> In any case, the barbarians are to be kept under control: the emperor knows that barbarians’ nature cannot be changed and that they cannot be trusted (*Or.* 10.206/135).



## The Role of Barbarians in the Mental Geography of the Romans

Themistius’s rhetoric of superiority derived from the long-standing tradition in which Greek and Roman writers represented their own culture as intellectually and morally superior in comparison with those of the

<sup>17</sup> Trans. Heather and Matthews 1991, 48.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

peoples outside of their world. Barbarians were depicted as lacking the qualities that Greeks and Romans had: they did not possess rationality, moderation, proper government, laws, correct religion, or even religion completely—or, as we saw in Themistius’s portrayal, the Gothic troops lacked discipline, tottering in muddy confusion while the Roman army shone bright as the epitome of order. Consequently, barbarians did not have an independent role to play in these depictions; rather, they were harnessed to the varying agendas of the writers. The “barbarian” was a malleable figure that functioned as a positive or negative contrast to the Romans (or “Romans”).<sup>19</sup>

Themistius appealed to this traditional thought pattern in which the emperor had a crucial role in chastising and disciplining barbarians. In imperial propaganda, the triumphant emperor and bad but beaten barbarians went hand in hand.<sup>20</sup> In the mental geography of Greek and Roman writers, the *imperium* and the entire Mediterranean *oikoumene* stood at the center of the world and was surrounded by barbarians. It was the task of Romans to maintain order and restrain chaos.<sup>21</sup>

Themistius was well in line with early imperial writers such as the Greek rhetorician Ailius Aristeides (Aelius Aristides), who in the mid-second century praised the Romans for keeping the barbarians at



---

<sup>19</sup> A good example is Orosius, whose “barbarians” have shifting roles (good and bad characters) in his narrative, depending on his agenda. On Orosius, see Van Nuffelen 2012, 171, 176–78.

<sup>20</sup> Michael McCormick (1986, 59–60) found “a correlation between severe and widely perceived blows to imperial prestige and intensification in the rhythm of imperial victory celebrations.” Alan Cameron and Jacqueline Long (1993, 330), while criticizing McCormick’s statistical argument, admit that in imperial propaganda “more was made of every success.” As Ralph Mathisen (2006a, 1026) remarks: “The empire needed its violent, threatening barbarians to justify massive expenditures on the Roman military and to provide emperors with a validation of their very existence”; see also Mathisen 2006b, 27–33.

<sup>21</sup> The Roman self-understanding as the rulers of the world was famously condensed in Vergil’s *Aeneid* (6.853) as the task of the Romans to “*parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*” (“to show mercy to the conquered and to subdue the proud”). Similarly, Cicero (*Rep.* 3.35) argued that the Roman subordination was for the good of the inhabitants of the provinces.

bay. He proclaimed that “beyond the outermost circle of the inhabited world (*oikoumene*), indeed like a second line of defence in the fortification of a city, you [Romans] have drawn another circle” and that “just as a trench encircles an army camp, all this can be called the circuit and perimeter of the walls” that protected the inhabited world (*Or.* 26.81–82).<sup>22</sup> According to this worldview, the further peoples lived from the center, the Mediterranean—on “the edges of the earth,” that is, in the lands simply beyond Greco-Roman knowledge—the wilder and more outlandish they were.<sup>23</sup> The anonymous fourth-century writer of the treatise on military issues, *De rebus bellicis*, demarcated anything on the other side of Roman frontier forts as barbarian and anything within the boundary they formed as Roman (*De reb. bell.* 6.20). The writer’s words convey an image in which the Roman Empire was “surrounded by the madness of peoples (‘nationum ... insania’) and treacherous barbarity (*dolosa barbaries*).” For the writer of *De rebus bellicis*, the fortification of clear frontier lines was an example of sound imperial administration and effective foreign policy.<sup>24</sup>



Likewise, in Oration 10, addressed to Emperor Valens, Themistius also speaks of a wall “as hard as adamantium” (*teichos adamantinon*)—namely, a heavily defended frontier—that would protect the Empire on the Danube. In Themistius’s comparison of the Romans and barbarians with the superior and inferior parts of the human soul, the latter appear as an immutable but necessary element in the Greco-Roman world (*Them. Or.* 10.206/136c). However, the bad, changeless barbarians were not the only kind of barbarians in imperial propaganda. Next, we will

<sup>22</sup> “To Rome,” Trans. Behr 1981, 90.

<sup>23</sup> The idea already appears in Herodotus and is later repeated by many authors, for example Pliny the Elder, *HN* 7.1–2: odd customs and manners “of people living more remote from the sea.” For the mental and political geography, see Halsall 2007, 46; Gillett 2009, 402. The idea is also seen in Tacitus’s *Germania*, in which the people remotest from the Mediterranean are the *Fenni*, the most outlandish people of all.

<sup>24</sup> *De reb. bell.* 6.1: “In primis sciendum est quod imperium Romanum circumlatrantium ubique nationum perstringat insania et omne latus limitum tecta naturalibus locis appetat dolosa barbaries.” See Elton 1996, 126.

turn to the imagery of barbarians who can be reformed into allies and even made into Romans.

## **Suppliant Barbarians and the Merciful Emperor**

In addition to the reports of continuous attacks by hostile barbarians and equally frequent Roman victories, imperial panegyrists publicized the emperors' ability to change bad barbarians into good ones. With the same stroke, they brought a labor force into the Empire, creating barbarians settlers and taxpayers. Both in laudatory speeches and monumental images, emperors appeared as benefactors who graciously granted land to barbarian migrants and thereby integrated them into Greco-Roman civilization.<sup>25</sup> In Oration 10, Themistius already depicted Valens as a merciful victor who refrained from annihilating the Goths entirely and instead spared them as a kind of essential part of the animal kingdom.

In the speeches (Orations 15 and 16) addressed to Emperor Theodosius I, Themistius represents him as letting Goths stay on Roman soil and making it possible for hostile Goths to become good imperial subjects. The circumstances had dramatically changed between Themistius's speeches to the two emperors. In 370, Themistius celebrated the peace that Valens had concluded after a somewhat successful war and the Goths were left beyond the Danube frontier. As we already saw in the introduction to this article, after 376 Goths and Romans ended up in years of warfare in Thrace, within the boundaries of the Empire. The new emperor, Theodosius I, carried on with the war after Valens's death with varying degrees of success and finally concluded a peace in 382. The Tervingi were granted land in Thrace.

As one can imagine, settling the Tervingi in the regions that they had just harassed in the preceding war raised strong sentiments among the Romans. It is against this grain that Themistius had to go in Orations 15



---

<sup>25</sup> For representations of magnanimous emperors in images and literature, see Mathisen 2006a, 1028.

and 16, before and after the peace was made.<sup>26</sup> In Oration 15, addressed to Theodosius and dated to January 381, Themistius builds up the portrait of an emperor who not only is capable of defeating the Goths but also of making peace. Themistius deliberately transforms Theodosius, who was a renowned general before being raised to the throne, from a military hero into a civilian emperor. Therefore, he stresses the role of the civilian ruler with the metaphor of a shepherd and characterizes the emperor as ruling with the law (*nomos*) that has descended from heaven for the salvation of humankind (*soterian anthropon*; *Or.* 15.186d–187a).<sup>27</sup> Themistius justifies the forthcoming peace agreement by explaining that the emperor subdues his enemies by mildness rather than by arms (*Or.* 15.190c–d).<sup>28</sup>



To avoid sounding (perhaps) too irenic in front of his audience, Themistius ends his speech with a martial theme and repeats the binary oppositions that he had used in his earlier speech (Oration 10). Goths are still the enemy, “the ill-omened and lawless tribe (*tou dysonymou kai athemitou phylou*).” The barbarians have not been victorious over Romans, because order (*taxis*) is stronger than disorder (*ataxia*), arrangement (*kosmos*) stronger than chaos (*akosmia*), valor (*tharraleotes*) stronger than credulity (*thambos*), and discipline (*eupeithes*) stronger

<sup>26</sup> We can also follow the change in tone in Themistius’s speeches to Theodosius from *Or.* 14 to *Or.* 15 and 16. In *Or.* 14, dated to late spring or early summer of 379, Themistius still celebrates Theodosius as the victorious war leader (e.g., using the Homeric epithet *artipous* characteristic of the god of war, Ares, 14.180d) and calls up the suffering that the “damned villains,” the Goths, will face through the emperor’s maneuvers (14.181c) while the focus in *Or.* 15 and 16 is on the peaceful solution. Peter Heather and David Moncur (2001, 222–24) interpret Themistius’s *Or.* 15 as reflecting Theodosius’s changing needs after his military setbacks in the Romano-Gothic War in 380.

<sup>27</sup> The authority of (Roman) law extended even to the frontiers of the Empire. In *Or.* 16.212d, Themistius even calls the emperor *nomos empsychos*, the “ensouled law.” For the tradition of the emperor as the *nomos empsychos*, see Aalders 1969, 315–29; Ramelli 2006, esp. 89–110; Swain 2013, 35–36.

<sup>28</sup> No one needs to approach the imperial palace with fear. Theodosius even allows the leader of the Goths, Athanaric, to arrive in Constantinople as a suppliant (Heather and Moncur 2001, 243 n. 113).

than insubordination (*dysekoon*). Themistius declares: “These are the weapons with which men conquer other men,” expecting the audience to presuppose that Romans have these qualities (*Or.* 15.197a–b).<sup>29</sup> At the very end of his speech, Themistius takes an aggressive stand and reminds his listeners of the Goths’ deceitfulness. He uses Homeric references (*Iliad* 13.99–102) to the Trojans who “come against our cities” (only the Homeric “ships” are changed into “cities”) and parallels (again with Homeric verses [*Iliad* 3.353–354]) Goths to the Trojan Paris whom Menelaus received “with friendship” and who nonetheless “did ill” to his host. It was clear to the audience that Themistius’s Homeric citations were referring to the Goths who were received as refugees into the Empire in 376 and who nonetheless rose up against their Roman hosts (*Or.* 15.198c–199b).<sup>30</sup>

## Good Barbarians and the Philanthropic Emperor



After the peace with the Goths in October 382, Themistius advocated the imperial policy of accommodation in Oration 16. The peace was a compromise after a protracted and not-so-successful war. The Goths were given permission to settle in Thrace—on what terms is still debated in modern research. The mentions in late antique sources are far from precise or neutral. A number of scholars argue for the Goths’ semi-autonomous position both in the army and the Empire, while others maintain that they were treated according to traditional forms of *deditio*, unconditional surrender, as *dediticii* who were then settled in Roman areas in due course. *Dediticii* was the technical term for those who surrendered voluntarily and were settled in the Empire.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Trans. Heather and Moncur 2001, 252.

<sup>30</sup> Goths are an infection that is persistent and deep-rooted, and dies hard. Trans. Heather and Moncur 2001, 254.

<sup>31</sup> Oration 16 was made on January 1, 383, to celebrate the consulship of the *magister militum* Saturninus. For the context of this speech and modern debates thereon, see Lenski 1997, 143–44; Garnsey and Humfress 2001, 101.



Let us look at how (and for what reasons) Themistius represents the peace and subsequent settlement.<sup>32</sup> It is impossible to make any specific conclusions from Themistius's skillful balancing: on the one hand, there is the triumphant emperor and subjugated Goths; on the other hand, there is the aim to persuade his listeners that it is beneficial for the Empire that Goths be integrated. Therefore, Themistius needs to follow several *topoi* supporting the Greco-Roman worldview and demonstrate Roman superiority. The Goths are not “destroyed completely” because of the rationality and philanthropy of the Romans. Instead, the Goths are spared, and they are made better, it is implied, because they are made into Romans—that is, by being welcomed into the Empire (*Or.* 16). This is the grandeur of the Romans: their power (*dynamis*) “did not now lie in weapons, nor in breastplates, spears and unnumbered manpower.” This power, as Theodosius has understood, in a rule in accordance with the will of God, “comes silently from that source which subdues all nations,” “turns savagery to mildness,” and wins over Scythians (Goths), Alans, and Massagetes (Huns) (*Or.* 16.207c).<sup>33</sup>



To reinforce his argument for the integration of the Goths, Themistius appeals to the famous Aesopian tale about Persuasion (Peitho) and Force (Bias) in which it becomes clear that more is achieved by the former than by the latter. Forgiveness (*syngnome*) even toward wrongdoers is better than sheer eagerness to fight (*philoneikia*) to the very end. The emperor's “heavenly armor was patience (*anexikakia*), gentleness (*praotes*), and love of humankind (*philanthropia*),” and with these the emperor and his general Saturninus (who negotiated the peace) put an end to the arrogance of the Goths (*Or.* 16.208a–209a).<sup>34</sup> In what follows, Themistius builds an image of barbarians who are tamed and charmed like beasts after having heard Orpheus's sweet sound—the enchantment

<sup>32</sup> *Or.* 16.199c states very generally that Goths gave up “their weapons voluntarily.”

<sup>33</sup> Trans. Heather and Moncur 2001, 275. Themistius (*Or.* 16.206b) declares that God has summoned Theodosius to leadership.

<sup>34</sup> For Persuasion and Force as divinities and their use in argumentation, see Marcos 2019, 111–18.

is the emperor's *philanthropia*.<sup>35</sup> Greco-Roman writers such as Pliny the Elder asserted that Roman power and Greco-Roman culture tempered barbarian rudeness and cruelty, and the metaphor of Orpheus was sometimes employed in these accounts.<sup>36</sup> The result of this softening, in Themistius's vision, is a series of happy corrections: the Goths' spirit is humbled, they show respect to the land they had just sacked, they respect the deceased, and so forth (*Or.* 16.209a–b). The emperor stands out for his love of humankind (*philanthropia*) in accommodating the Goths: with a series of binary oppositions, Themistius shows the excellence of the imperial policy of making Goths useful—it is better to have Goths as farmers than corpses, to fill the land with living humans than tombs, to go through cultivated fields than wilderness, and so forth (*Or.* 16.211b).

To justify the settlement of Goths in the present, Themistius introduces successful parallels from the past. People who had done wrong had found forgiveness (*syngnome*) and thereafter had turned out to be useful (*en chreia*) to those whom they had just wronged. One of those peoples was the Galatians who had harassed Hellenistic Asia Minor and then settled in the region that was named after them, Galatia. “And now no one would ever refer to the Galatians as barbarian but as thoroughly Roman,” Themistius exclaims (*Or.* 16.211c).<sup>37</sup> What makes them Romans becomes clear from Themistius's subsequent characterization: their life is akin (*symphylos*) to the Roman way of life, since they pay taxes, they enlist in the army, they abide by the government's policies, and they obey the laws. It is the four issues that unite all Roman subjects: taxes, military service, government, and laws. Optimistically, Themistius states that the same will happen to the Goths very soon, and



---

<sup>35</sup> Themistius uses the terms *epaeido* (“to sing as an incantation”) and *keleo* (“to bewitch”), which are strongly connected with magical practices.

<sup>36</sup> Pliny the Elder, *HN* 3.39.93; for an example of the use of Orpheus, see Cassiodorus, *Var.* 2.40.

<sup>37</sup> Galatians were Celts who attacked the Hellenistic kingdoms and were defeated by several Hellenistic rulers. The Galatians settled in the region that became named after them, Galatia. Another example from the past is North Africa led by Masinissa, who first resisted the spread of Roman power during the Second Punic War but eventually became Roman (see Livy, *Ab urbe cond.* 24–30).

his appeal culminates in the passage about sharing offerings (*homospondous*), tables (*homotrapezous*), military ventures (*homou strateuomenous*), and public duties (*homou leitourgountas*), which was quoted above as the epigraph to this article. Themistius highlights shared religion, guest friendship, the army, taxes, and other duties—all essential for being Roman (*Or.* 16.211d).<sup>38</sup>

A similar notion is found in another panegyric to Theodosius in which the emperor does not spurn the beaten arrogantly but rather orders them to “become Roman” (“*iussisti esse Romanam*”). In yet another laudatory speech, the orator Claudian praises the general Stilicho, under whose command Rome “summoned as citizens those whom she [Rome] had just defeated and drew them together from afar with a bond of affection” (“*civesque vocavit / quos domuit nexuque pio longinqua revinxit*”).<sup>39</sup> In the expectations of the Greco-Roman elite, the only remedy for being barbarian was to become Roman. One manifestation of these expectations is seen in the need of Nicene bishops such as John Chrysostom to convert Goths from Homoian (“Arian”) Christianity to Nicene Christianity. By the end of the fourth century, being a proper Roman and loyal imperial subject was increasingly identified with being a Nicene Christian.<sup>40</sup>



## Moving People, Getting Settlers

Themistius appealed to the usefulness of defeated Goths becoming settlers and taxpayers. In this, he was very much in line with contemporary

<sup>38</sup> Themistius returns to the same theme of the merciful emperor and similar expressions in Oration 34, dates to late 384 or early 385, where he speaks of Goths sharing with Romans their roofs, libations, and even the celebrations of their victory over themselves (Heather and Moncur 2001, 304, 328).

<sup>39</sup> Claud. *Pan. Lat.* 2(12).36.4 in 389; Claud. *Cons. Stil.* 3.152–153. See the discussion in Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 503; Mathisen 2006a, 1023.

<sup>40</sup> As Chris de Wet (2012) points out, for Greco-Roman writers such as Themistius and John Chrysostom it was impossible to “think outside the dichotomy between Roman and barbarian.” For the attitudes of ecclesiastical writers on the “Arianism” of the Goths, see Kahlos 2021.

and earlier writers, especially panegyrists who argued for the utility of moving people. For centuries, Romans recruited labor in various ways from outside the Empire in the form of settlers, slaves, and soldiers. In what follows, I discuss Themistius's rhetoric in the context of earlier imperial policy on the utility of moving people into the Empire. I look at the Roman migration and accommodation policies from the viewpoint of how they were advertised in imperial propaganda.

During the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, Roman writers and administrators thought about migrant groups (to the Empire from outside its borders) according to the contributions these groups would make to the Empire's economy and military forces. Roman historians report of transfers of ethnic groups into the Empire, usually after defeating and subduing them.<sup>41</sup> For example, in 8 BCE, in the frontier warfare during the reign of Augustus, the latter's adoptive son Tiberius defeated groups of Suebi and Sugambri (Sigambri) on the other side of the Rhine, the border, and transported them into the Empire to Gaul. The historian Suetonius mentions that the Suebi and Sugambri "submitted to him [Augustus] and were taken into Gaul and settled in lands near the Rhine" ("ex quibus Suebos et Sigambros dedentis se traduxit in Galliam atque in proximis Rheno agris conlocavit"). Suetonius also mentions that in the "Germanic" war Tiberius "brought 40,000 prisoners of war over into Gaul and assigned them homes near the bank of the Rhine" ("Germanico quadraginta milia dediticiorum traiecit in Galliam iuxtaque ripam Rheni sedibus adsignatis conlocavit"). Thus, the Suebi and Sugambri had been defeated, they had surrendered, and, as surrendered people, *dediticii*, in the Roman system, they were settled in new regions in Gaul.<sup>42</sup>



---

<sup>41</sup> Ando 2000, 277–335; Mathisen 2006a, 1024. See Ando 2008, 42–43, on how ethnic groups incorporated through conquest and reception were conceived of as associated with each other. For Roman diplomacy and networks of shifting alliances, see Mattern 2013, 220–24.

<sup>42</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 21; *Tib.* 9. How this process of transfer and settlement was done is not clear. One can also wonder how credible the number 40,000 is. In any case, the number was immense, and the operation must have been massive. See Barbero 2006, 14–15.

In the early first century, according to the Greek geographer Strabo, a Roman general settled 50,000 “Getes” (*Getai*)—probably Dacians—in the same region south of the Danube that later became the province of Moesia. Strabo tells us the following about the operation: “Even in our own times, Aelius Catus transplanted from the country on the far side of the Ister [Danube] into Thrace 50,000 persons from among the *Getai*, a tribe with the same tongue as the Thracians.”<sup>43</sup> Another example from the first century CE is a funerary inscription of a Roman officer Ti. Plautius Silvanus, in which it is mentioned that this officer brought across the Danube “more than 100,000 of the Transdanubians [that is, people from the other side of the river Danube], along with their wives, children, chieftains, and kings, to become tribute-paying subjects.”<sup>44</sup> Even though one can question the numbers given in these accounts, the core message here is that the number of relocated people was immense. In Plautius Silvanus’s inscription, it is specifically pointed out that these came as “tribute-paying subjects.”<sup>45</sup> During the imperial period, these accounts and declarations highlighted the need for soldiers and settlers for areas that had, for one reason or other, become desolate and above all, the need for taxpayers.

In the second century, the warfare engaged in by Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161–180) shows the same patterns of surrenders and transfers of defeated groups as had obtained in the first century. The historian Cassius Dio (*Hist. Rom.* 72.11) tells us that after Marcus Aurelius had defeated the Quadi, many from the populations (*gene* and *ethne*),



<sup>43</sup> Strabo *Geog.* 7.3.10. *Getai* was a classicizing term probably referring to Dacians. See Woolf 2017, 37, on ad hoc decisions made by generals on the spot.

<sup>44</sup> *CIL* XIV 3608 = Dessau *ILS* 986: “... legat. pro praet. Moesiae, in qua plura quam centum mill. ex numero Transdanubianor. ad praestanda tributa cum coniugib. ac liberis et principibus aut regibus suis transduxit.” The region was later formed into the province of Moesia. See Conole and Milns 1983, 183–200.

<sup>45</sup> It has been suggested that Plautius Silvanus transferred to his province of Moesia a group of refugees who had been harassed by nomadic Sarmatians; therefore, the transportation was part of military operations. Another suggestion is that the governor Plautius Silvanus wanted to draw a zone of defence and form an empty no-man’s land on the other side of the Danube. Similar policies had been carried out on the Rhine frontier. Barbero 2006, 14–15.

even if not all, in the regions transferred to the service of the emperor and that they were sent on military campaigns elsewhere. Others, as Dio writes, “received land in Dacia, Pannonia, Moesia, the province of Germania, and in Italy itself.” Furthermore, Dio mentions that some of the people, “who settled at Ravenna, made an uprising and even went so far as to take possession of the city,” thus implying that not all who were settled were entirely content with this arrangement.<sup>46</sup> From this account, we can deduce that not all transfers were forced but that there were also other factors—the (real or alleged) threat from neighboring groups such as the Marcomanni in the case of the Quadi. However, the differences are not always clear. It is difficult to distinguish between war captives and those who had surrendered “voluntarily” (*dediticii*).

Themistius’s laudatory speeches resemble other fourth-century panegyrics addressed to the “invincible” and “divine” emperors. In these praises, warfare against barbarians is represented in triumphalist terms and barbarians are seen as a labor force and military resource. For example, in 297 an anonymous orator (*Pan. Lat.* 8) congratulates Constantius Chlorus, who has just reconquered Britannia from a usurper.<sup>47</sup> The orator praises the Tetrarchic emperors. First Diocletian and Maximian,<sup>48</sup> and then Constantius repopulated several regions of



---

<sup>46</sup> Trans. Cary and Foster 1914–1927. The consequence was that the emperor again transported all those who were settled in Italy elsewhere and thereafter did not allow others to be settled in Italy. See also *SHA Marc.* 22.2: “Magno igitur labore etiam suo gentes asperrimas vicit militibus sese imitantibus, ducentibus etiam exercitum legatis et praefectis praetorio, accepitque in deditionem Marcomannos plurimis in Italiam traductis” (Barbero 2006, 32–33).

<sup>47</sup> The speech was probably delivered in Trier, which was Constantius’s imperial capital. It gives much information about the conditions in Gaul and alludes many times to the devastation and depopulation in Gaul in the earlier decades (the 260s and 270s). See Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 106. Lukas de Blois (2017, 52–53) connects the deportations, forced migration on a large scale, with military logistics (e.g., on the Danube frontier, with a shortening of defensive lines and a restoration of the frontier).

<sup>48</sup> The circumstances of the transfer ordered by Diocletian from Asia to Thrace are unknown (Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 141 n. 75). It is possible that these people had been taken as captives during the campaigns against Persia in the Mesopotamian

the Empire—not only Gaul, but also Thrace—that had become desolate: “So now through your victories, Constantius, invincible Caesar, whatever land remained abandoned in the territory of the Ambiani, Bellovaci, Tricasses, and Lingones turns green again under cultivation by the barbarian (‘barbaro cultore’)” (8[4].21.1).<sup>49</sup> The orator depicts Constantius’s campaigns against the Franks in the frontier regions in triumphalist terms—in panegyrics, the emperors’ wars could only be victorious. For example, “so many victories have been won by your courage, so many barbarian nations wiped out on all sides, so many farmers settled in the Roman countryside, so many frontiers pushed forward, so many provinces restored” (8[4].1.4)<sup>50</sup> The transferred and settled farmers formed an essential part of the imperial victory.<sup>51</sup> The orator rejoices that the barbarians “crossed over to lands long since deserted in order to restore to cultivation through their servitude (*servi-endo*)” and highlights that these same barbarians restored to cultivation exactly the same lands that “they themselves, perhaps, had once devastated by their plundering” (8[4].8.4)<sup>52</sup> There is nonetheless no evidence that these “same” persons “once perhaps” (“*fortasse ipsi quondam*”) had been plundering the lands they now settled. In any case, what mattered



frontier regions. Mass deportations were made on a regular basis by both armies. The transferred people were probably captives taken by Galerius’s troops after the victory over Persia in 297/298.

<sup>49</sup> “*ita nunc per victorias tuas, Constanti Caesar invicte, quidquid infrequens Ambiano et Bellovaco et Tricassino solo Lingonico restabat, barbaro cultore revirescit.*” Trans. Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 141–44. Barbarians earlier settled the deserted lands of the Arvii (modern Armorica), Treveri (Trier), now also the lands of the Ambiani (Amiens), Bellovaci (Beauvois), Tricasses (Troyes) and Lingones (Langres).

<sup>50</sup> “*tot ... partae victoriae, tot excisae undique barbarae nationes, tot translati dint in rura Romana cultores, <tot> prolati limites, tot provinciae restitutae.*” Trans. Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 109–10.

<sup>51</sup> The emperor fought for victory not only over the barbarians but also over the treacherous places of the region (here referring to the Rhine delta area)—the Romans came to control both the barbarians and the region (*Pan. Lat.* 8[4].8.4).

<sup>52</sup> “*quae fortasse ipsi quondam depredando vastaverant, culta redderent servi-endo.*” Trans. Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 121 (modified); Barbero 2006, 74.

for the Roman audience was that the barbarians were crushed and compelled to surrender, and they were settled as a working force in Roman territory. The orator depicts the humiliation of the bands of barbarians (“*captiva agmina barbarorum*”) taken captive and transferred into servitude for the benefit of the Romans:

In all the porticoes of our cities sit the captive bands of barbarians, the men trembling, their savagery utterly confounded, old women and wives contemplating the indolence of their sons and husbands, youths and girls fettered together whispering soothing endearments, and all these distributed to the inhabitants of your provinces for service. (*Pan. Lat* 8[4].9.1)<sup>53</sup>

The orator exults over the consequences of the servitude, as now “the Chamavian and Frisian plows, and that vagabond, that pillager, toils at the cultivation of the neglected countryside and frequents my markets with beasts for sale, and the barbarian farmer lowers the price of food” (8[4].9.3).<sup>54</sup> In addition to the added workforce and the consequences thereof for prices, barbarians also make Romans happy because they are submitted to taxation, to discipline, to the lash, and to the military (8[4].9.4).<sup>55</sup> The taxes, the labor markets (slave or free), and the army functioned as an established argument for imperial policies, and, as we saw above, a similar list was mentioned by Themistius.

Another panegyric (*Pan. Lat.* 6) in honor of Emperor Constantine by another anonymous orator celebrates the emperor for defeating diverse



<sup>53</sup> “*totis porticibus civitatum sedere captiva agmina barbarorum, viros attonita feritate trepidantes, respicientes anus ignaviam filiorum nuptas maritorum, vinculis copulatos pueros ac puellas familiari murmure blandientes, atque hos omnes provincialibus vestris ad obsequium distributos.*” Trans. Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 121 (modified).

<sup>54</sup> “*arat ergo nunc mihi Chamavus et Frisius et ille vagus, ille praedator exercitio squalidi ruris operatur et frequentat nundinas meas pecore venali et cultor barbarus laxat annonam.*” Trans. Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 121–22.

<sup>55</sup> “*quin etiam si ad dilectum vocetur accurrit et obsequis teritur et tergo coercetur et servire se militiae nomine gratulatur.*” Trans. Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 122.



groups of Franks:<sup>56</sup> Constantine, “not content with having conquered [them], transported the peoples themselves amongst the Roman peoples (‘in Romanas transtulit nationes’), so that they were compelled to put aside, not only their weapons, but their ferocity as well” (6[7].5).<sup>57</sup> Constantine has settled them “in the deserted regions of Gaul” and now they are useful to Romans: they “promote the peace of the Roman Empire (‘pacem Romani imperii ... iuvent’) by cultivating the soil and by being recruited to Roman arms” (6[7].6).<sup>58</sup> The orator highlights the usefulness of the barbarians: the Franks have been conquered, and their ferocity has been tamed; they have been transferred to the Empire, and in the regions that had earlier been deserted they support the Romans with their labor.



## Common Laws and Mixed Blood

We saw above how Themistius had to argue for a peaceful solution in Orations 15 and 16, both before and after the peace with the Goths was made. In Oration 16, he stressed that in the future Goths would share religion, guest friendship, the army, and taxes and other duties with Romans—all of which are fundamental aspects of being Roman. In Oration 15, he highlights Theodosius’s role as a civilian ruler with the metaphor of the shepherd; furthermore, the emperor rules with the law (*nomos*) that had originated from heaven (*Or.* 15.186d–187a). The shepherd as a metaphor for a ruler was used both in classical and Christian literature. Interestingly, Synesius of Cyrene (c. 370–413) employs the imagery of the shepherd, dogs, and wolves in his *On Kingship*

<sup>56</sup> The oration was delivered (probably) in Trier in 310 for the anniversary of the city’s foundation. It also celebrates the suppression of Maximian’s revolt and Constantine’s vision of Apollo (Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 212–14).

<sup>57</sup> “nec contentus vicisse ipsas in Romanas transtulit nationes, ut non solum arma sed etiam feritatem ponere cogentur.” Trans. Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 224 (modified).

<sup>58</sup> “ut in desertis Galliae regionibus conlocatae et pacem Romani imperii cultu iuvent et arma dilectu.” Trans. Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 224, modified.

(*Peri basileias*) in 398 when criticizing the emperors for the growing influence of Goths in the army and at the Constantinopolitan court. He warns that “the shepherd must not mix wolves with his dogs, even if caught as whelps they may seem to be tamed.” Likewise, the Goths (in Synesius, “Scythians”) can never be trusted—even if they seem to be “tamed” and accepting of Roman law and customs.

According to Synesius, the legislator (*nomothetes*) ought not to provide with arms those who are not born and brought up under the Roman laws. Synesius is set against any notion of Goths becoming Romans, which he compares with mixing “alien portions” (*tōn allotriōn*) that “are incapable of mingling in a healthy state of harmony (*eis harmonian hygieinen*)” into the human body. This will only cause inflammation of the body. With this association, Synesius insists upon separating the alien parts (*tallotriōn*) in the cities as in the body. Synesius’s conclusion is that no fellowship (*koinonia*) can be allowed with anything barbarian (*to barbaron*).<sup>59</sup> Synesius may have alluded to Themistius’s speeches in making his own use of the metaphor of the shepherd, or he may have simply referred to ongoing debates on the use of Goths in the military and other offices.<sup>60</sup> In any case, almost twenty years after Themistius’s orations—again in a different political situation—Synesius rejects the option of Goths becoming Romans.

Thus, there were divergent views on the possibilities of becoming Roman. In addition to Themistius, a few other late antique writers such as Prudentius and Orosius voiced optimistic visions of the spread of Romanness—in a manner similar to early imperial writers and fourth-century panegyrists. Prudentius sees the Roman law as the uniting force: “A common law made them equals and bound them by a single name, bringing them by conquest into bonds of brotherhood.” The Romans lived in parts of the Empire that were most diverse but as fellow citizens whom the native city embraces in its single walls and

---

<sup>59</sup> *De reg.* 14 (Garzya 1989, 426–28). Trans. Fitzgerald 1930, 134. For the speech and date, see Heather 1988; Cameron and Long 1993, 127–42; Gärtner 1993, 105–21; Lenski 1997, 148–49.

<sup>60</sup> Synesius (*De reg.* 15 [Garzya 1989, 343]) alludes to Theodosius I, who “considered the Goths worthy of citizenship.”



whom the ancestral home unites.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the city of Rome with its history and mythology formed a common heritage for all citizens. Prudentius stresses the mingling as a positive factor of Romanness: this is achieved by the traditional right of marriage (*ius conubii*) with Romans given to foreign peoples, and consequently “from the mixed blood of two different peoples (*gentibus*), a single offspring is created.”<sup>62</sup> Prudentius nonetheless sees Romans and barbarians in dichotomous terms, perceiving them as two *gentes* and lumping all the variety of non-Roman ethnic groups into the category of barbarians. It is obvious that the process of mingling with and subsequent turning into fellow citizens happens on Roman terms.

The historian Orosius was also optimistic about making barbarians into civilized, in his view, Christian, Romans. That is why he wants to present the sack of Rome by the Goths in 410 as a relatively moderate calamity and thereby to demonstrate how Christianity had tamed the brutal Goths and thus benefited the whole world by mitigating barbarian assaults. For Orosius, Christianity was the marker of the moral progress of barbarians and their becoming Roman.<sup>63</sup> To enhance his narrative of the civilizing impact of Christianity, Orosius refers to the marriage between the Roman princess Galla Placidia and the Gothic warlord Athaulf. The Goths led by Alaric had taken Galla Placidia, the



<sup>61</sup> Prudent. *C. Symm.* 2.608–610: “Ius fecit commune pares et nomine eodem / nexuit et domitos fraterna in vincla redegit. / Vivitur omnigenis in partibus haud secus ac si / cives congenitos concludat moenibus unis / urbs patria atque omnes lare conciliemur avito.” Trans. Thomson 1949 (modified). Moreover, Prudentius (v. 2.615) highlights that the regions separated by the sea come together in the shared culture of law courts, trade, and crafts (“forum, commercia, artes”).

<sup>62</sup> Prudent. *C. Symm.* 2.617: “ius conubii”; 2.617–618: “nam sanguine mixto / textitur alternis ex gentibus una propago.”

<sup>63</sup> See Oros. *Hist. adv. pag.* 7.37.8–9 on the sack of Rome. Examples of the image of moral progress of barbarians: Paulinus *Vit. Ambr.* 36; Rufinus *Hist. eccl.* 10.9–11; 11.6; Prudent. *C. Symm.* 1.458–460; 2.578–618; Victor of Vita *Hist. persec. Afr. prov.* 1.36–37. Orosius construed the dichotomy as between Romanness identified with Christianity and barbarity identified with paganism. Cf. Ambrose (*Ep.* 18.7 = *Ep.* 72, CSEL 82.3), who underlined that what pagan Rome had in common with barbarians was idolatry; both were ignorant of the one true God.

daughter of Theodosius I and the sister of Emperors Honorius and Arcadius, captive during the sack of Rome in 410. After Alaric's death, the succeeding leader of the Goths, Athaulf, married her. Orosius states that Athaulf was a fierce enemy who was first determined to "obliterate the name of Rome and make the Romans' land the Goths' empire in both word and deed." However, he changed his mind as soon as he realized that the unruly barbarity of the Goths ("propter effrenatam barbariem") would need the Roman state and laws and then became the author of Rome's renewal (*Hist.* 7.43.5–6).<sup>64</sup> In this way, Orosius, like the other Greco-Roman writers, eventually stresses the role of Roman law as the significant, maybe even the most important, factor of Romanness.

## Conclusion

As we saw above, Themistius reminded his audience of the Galatians, who had tormented the regions in Asia Minor and were now peaceful subjects of the Empire, and of the fact that no one would any longer refer to them as anything but Romans (*Or.* 16.211c). Similarly, Augustine of Hippo asked his listeners in his sermon in 416 who would now know which peoples in the Roman Empire had been what, or when "all had become Romans" and "all are called Romans."<sup>65</sup> Several other late antique writers kept on telling the Roman success story of assimilating conquered peoples into the imperial commonwealth. The rhetorician Libanius states that Romans conquered peoples and then granted a better life to the conquered, "removing their fears and allowing them a share" in the Roman state or civic life (*politeia*).<sup>66</sup> And in the early



---

<sup>64</sup> Orosius (*Hist.* 7.43.7) portrays Athaulf as persuaded by Galla Placidia, a woman truly virtuous in religion ("religione satis probae"). For a discussion on Orosius's argumentative use of barbarians in his *Historiae adversus paganos*, see Kahlos 2022b.

<sup>65</sup> August. *Enarrat. Ps.* 58.1.21. Trans. Conant 2012, 1 (modified).

<sup>66</sup> Lib. *Or.* 30.5. Trans. Norman, LCL, (modified). *Politeia* can be translated as, e.g., "state," "civic life," or "citizenship." Libanius's account of Roman conquest and the spread of civic life forms part of his appeal for the preservation of polytheistic temples.

fifth century, the aristocratic poet Rutilius Namatianus claimed that the Roman Empire had made “one homeland from many different peoples” (“fecisti patriam diversis gentibus unam”) (*De reditu suo* 1.63). Again, there was a long tradition of singing the praises of Rome: for example, the above-mentioned mid-second-century Greek orator Aelius Aristides celebrated a Rome that “has never refused anyone. But just as the earth’s ground supports all humans, so it too receives people from every land, just as the sea receives the rivers.” Rome had become a common home to all its subjects.<sup>67</sup> On the level of ideals at least, for Rome the flexible policy of providing citizenship had been a means of extending its power. Rome had absorbed its enemies as the leaders of the conquered peoples were embraced into the Roman system and thus made loyal.<sup>68</sup>



These kinds of accounts of the incorporation and acculturation of peoples into the Empire were an intrinsic part of Roman self-understanding. Therefore, when Greco-Roman writers discussed barbarians—good or bad—and their being integrated or not into Roman society, they were trying to understand their own Romanness rather than defining who barbarians were. Barbarians, in these cases usually Goths, mirrored Roman writers’ values and notions about how things should be, what Romans should be like, what the emperors should be like and how the government and army should be organized in the late Roman Empire. As we saw in the case of Themistius, the “weather vane of imperial policy,”<sup>69</sup> his argumentation shifted according to the day-to-day politics of his time. Even though his argumentation was situational, always attached to the specific circumstances he found himself in, Roman law and customs nonetheless remained as the criteria for membership in the

<sup>67</sup> Aristid. *Or.* 26.62 Keil (= *Or.* 14.347 Dindorf). Trans. Behr 1981, 8 (modified). Likewise, Pliny the Elder (*HN.* 3.39.93) claimed that Rome had become the one homeland of all peoples throughout the world (“una cunctarum gentium in toto orbe patria”). For the tradition of the praise of the Empire (*laus imperii*), see Inglebert 2002, 248; Dench 2004, 95; Ando 2008, 43. For the variety of integration in the Empire, see Hingley 2013, 265–70.

<sup>68</sup> Erskine 2010, 4, 14, 61; Kahlos 2022c, 290–304.

<sup>69</sup> The term used by Peter Garnsey and Caroline Humfress (2001, 101).

Roman commonwealth. Themistius deployed his arguments and imagery, following the earlier tradition of imperial propaganda—whether forming the enemy image in which barbarians are brutish and inferior to the cultured and disciplined Romans or arguing for the integration of barbarians who are capable of becoming useful taxpayers and soldiers—in strictly Roman terms.

## Bibliography

- Aalders, G. J. D. 1969. “Nomos Empsychos.” In *Politeia und Res publica: Beiträge zum Verständnis von Politik, Recht und Staat in der Antike, den Andenken Rudolf Starks gewidmet*, edited by Peter Steinmetz, 315–29. Wiesbaden: Steiner.
- Ando, Clifford. 2000. *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ando, Clifford. 2008. “Decline, Fall, and Transformation.” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1, no. 1: 31–60. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jla.0.0005>.
- Barbero, Alessandro. 2006. *Barbari: Immigrati, profughi, deportati nell'impero Romano*. Rome: Laterza.
- Behr, Charles Allison. 1981. *P. Aelius Aristides, The Complete Works: Vol. 2, Orations 17–53*. Leiden: Brill.
- Blois, Lukas de. 2017. “Invasions, Deportations, and Repopulation: Mobility and Migration in Thrace, Moesia Inferior, and Dacia in the Third Quarter of the Third Century AD.” In *The Impact of Mobility and Migration in the Roman Empire*, edited by Elio Lo Cascio and Laurens E. Tacoma, with Miriam J. Groen-Vallinga, 42–54. Leiden: Brill.
- Cameron, Alan and Jacqueline Long (with a contribution by Lee Sherry). 1993. *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cary, Earnest and Herbert B. Foster, trans. 1914–1927. *Dio's Roman History*. 8 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Conant, Jonathan. 2012. *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439–700*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Conole, P. and R. D. Milns. 1983. “Neronian Frontier Policy in the Balkans: The Career of Ti. Plautius Silvanus.” *Historia* 32, no. 2: 183–200. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4435843>.
- Dagron, Gilbert. 1968. *L'empire romaine d'Orient au IVe siècle et les traditions politiques de l'hellénisme: le témoignage de Thémistios*. Paris: E. de Boccard.



- Daly, Lawrence J. 1972. "The Mandarin and the Barbarian: The Response of Themistius to the Gothic Challenge." *Historia* 21, no. 2: 351–79. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4435269>.
- Dench, Emma. 2004. *Romulus' Asylum: Roman Identities from the Age of Alexander to the Age of Hadrian*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dench, Emma. 2013. "The Scope of Ancient Ethnography." In *Ancient Ethnography: New Approaches*, edited by Eran Almagor and Joseph Skinner, 257–67. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Elton, Hugh. 1996. "Defining Romans, Barbarians, and the Roman Frontier." In *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, edited by Ralph W. Mathisen and Hagith S. Sivan, 126–35. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Erskine, Andrew. 2010. *Roman Imperialism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Fitzgerald, Augustine. 1930. *The Essays and Hymns of Synesius of Cyrene Including the Address to the Emperor Arcadius and the Political Speeches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Garnsey, Peter and Caroline Humfress. 2001. *The Evolution of the Late Antique World*. Cambridge: Orchard Academic.
- Garzya, Antonio, ed. 1989. *Synesii Cyrenensis Epistolae*. Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato.
- Gärtner, Hans Armin. 1993. "Des Synesios Rede über das Königtum: Tradition und Aktualität." In *Philanthropia kai Eusebeia: Festschrift für Albrecht Dihle*, edited by Glenn A. Most, Hubert Petersmann, and Adolf Ritter, 105–21. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Gillett, Andrew. 2009. "The Mirror of Jordanes: Concepts of the Barbarian, Then and Now." In *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, edited by Philip Rousseau, 392–408. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Halsall, Guy. 2007. *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harper, Kyle. 2011. *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heather, Peter. 1988. "The Anti-Scythian Tirade of Synesius' 'De Regno.'" *Phoenix* 42, no. 2: 152–72. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1088231>.
- Heather, Peter. 1991. *Goths and Romans, 332–489*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Heather, Peter and John Matthews. 1991. *The Goths in the Fourth Century*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Heather, Peter and David Moncur. 2001. *Politics, Philosophy, and Empire in the Fourth Century: Select Orations of Themistius*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.



- Hingley, Richard. 2013. "Exploitation and Assimilation: The Western Roman Empire from Augustus to Trajan." In *A Companion to Roman Imperialism*, edited by Dexter B. Hoyos, 265–76. Boston: Brill.
- Inglebert, Hervé. 2002. "Citoyenneté romaine, romanités et identités romaines sous l'empire." In *Idéologies et valeurs civiques dans le Monde Romain: Hommage à Claude Lepelley*, edited by Hervé Inglebert, 241–60. Paris: Picard.
- Lenski, Noel. 1997. "Initium mali Romano imperio: Contemporary Reactions to the Battle of Adrianople." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 127: 129–68. <https://doi.org/10.2307/284390>.
- Lenski, Noel. 2002. *Failure of Empire: Valens and the Roman State in the Fourth Century AD*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Leppin, Hartmut and Werner Portmann. 1998. *Themistius: Staatsreden*. Stuttgart: Hiersemann.
- Kahlos, Maijastina. 2021. "Heresy Test and the Barbarian Other." In *Dealing with Difference: Patterns of Response to Religious Rivalry in Late Antiquity*, edited by Geoffrey D. Dunn and Christine Shepardson, 41–55. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Kahlos, Maijastina. 2022a. "Late Roman Ideas of Ethnicity and Enslavement." In *Slavery in the Late Antique World, 150–700 CE*, edited by Chris de Wet, Maijastina Kahlos, and Ville Vuolanto, 87–104. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kahlos, Maijastina. 2022b. "Orosius, Barbarians, and the Christian Success Story." In *Writing History in Late Antique Iberia: Historiographical Praxis in Hispania from the 4th to the 7th Century*, edited by Purificación Ubric Rabaneda, 85–99. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Kahlos, Maijastina. 2022c. "Citizens and the Criteria for Recognition in the Roman Empire." In *Recognition: Its Theory and Practice*, edited by Heikki J. Koskinen and Onni Hirvonen, 290–304. London: Routledge.
- Marcos, Mar. 2019. "Recognition through Persuasion: An Aspect of Late Antique Religious Controversy." In *Recognition and Religion: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, edited by Maijastina Kahlos, Heikki J. Koskinen, and Ritva Palmén, 109–26. London: Routledge.
- Mathisen, Ralph W. 2006a. "Peregrini, Barbari, and Cives Romani: Concepts of Citizenship and the Legal Identity of Barbarians in the Later Roman Empire." *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 4: 1011–40. <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.111.4.1011>.
- Mathisen, Ralph W. 2006b. "Violent Behavior and the Construction of Barbarian Identity in Late Antiquity." In *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices*, edited by H. A. Drake, 27–35. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.





- Mattern, Susan. 2013. "Barbarian Friends and Foes: Hegemony beyond Rhine and Danube, AD 14–98." In *A Companion to Roman Imperialism*, edited by Dexter B. Hoyos, 213–24. Boston: Brill.
- McCormick, Michael. 1986. *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nixon, C. E. V. and Barbara Saylor Rodgers. 1994. *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Norman, A. F. 1992. *Libanius: Autobiography and Selected Letters*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Penella, Robert J. 2000. *The Private Orations of Themistius*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Pohl, Walter, Clemens Gantner, Cinzia Grifoni, and Marianne Pollheimer, eds. 2018. *Transformations of Romanness: Early Medieval Regions and Identities*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Ramelli, Ilaria. 2006. *Il basileus come nomos empsychos tra diritto naturale e diritto divino: Spunti platonici del concetto e sviluppi di età imperiale e tardo-antica*. Naples: Bibliopolis.
- Schenkl, Heinrich, Glanville Downey, and Albert Francis Norman, eds. 1965–1974. *Themistii orationes quae supersunt*. 3 vols. Leipzig: Teubner.
- Shumate, Nancy. 2006. *Nation, Empire, Decline: Studies in Rhetorical Continuity from the Romans to the Modern Era*. London: Duckworth.
- Swain, Simon. 2013. *Themistius, Julian, and Greek Political Theory under Rome: Texts, Translations and Studies of Four Key Works*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomson, Henry J., trans. 1949. *Prudentius*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vanderspoel, John. 1995. *Themistius and the Imperial Court: Oratory, Civic Duty, and Paideia from Constantius to Theodosius*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Van Nuffelen, Peter. 2012. *Orosius and the Rhetoric of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wet, Chris L. de 2012. "John Chrysostom and the Mission to the Goths: Rhetorical and Ethical Perspectives." *HTS Theologies Studies / Theological Studies* 68, no. 1. <https://hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/1220/2314>.
- Wolf, Greg. 1998. *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wolf, Greg. 2017. "Moving Peoples in the Early Roman Empire." In *The Impact of Mobility and Migration in the Roman Empire*, edited by Elio Lo Cascio and Laurens E. Tacoma, with Miriam J. Groen-Vallinga, 25–41. Leiden: Brill.

