

THE "THEMISTIUS COLLECTION" OF COMMENTARIES ON PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

JOHN VANDERSPOEL

IN HIS BRIEF TREATMENT OF THEMISTIUS, Photius (*Bibl. Cod.* 74) mentions what seem to be commentaries on all the works of Aristotle, Themistius' *Paraphrases*¹ of Aristotle's *Analytica*, *De anima*, *Physica*, and others, as well as exegetical works on Plato:

τούτου τοῦ Θεμιστίου εἰς πάντα τὰ Ἀριστοτελικά φέρονται ὑπομνήματα, οὐ μόνον δέ, ἀλλὰ καὶ μεταφράσεις αὐτοῦ εἶδομεν εἰς τὸ χρήσιμον ἐπιτετημένους τῶν τε ἀναλυτικῶν καὶ τῶν περὶ ψυχῆς βιβλίων καὶ τῶν τῆς φυσικῆς ἀκροάσεως καὶ ἐτέρων τοιούτων. εἰσι δὲ καὶ εἰς τὰ Πλατωνικά αὐτοῦ ἐξηγητικοὶ πόνοι.

The passage has caused grave difficulties for many years. While *Paraphrases* of the *Analytica*, *De anima*, *Physica* (all in Greek), *De caelo*, and Book 12 of the *Metaphysica* (both in Hebrew) are extant, and others such as the *Categoriae* are known,² the evidence in general favours the view that Themistius did not write commentaries on Aristotle.³ There is no evidence at all to support the composition of works on Plato, and the reference perhaps reflects Themistius' familiarity with Plato in his speeches (so Dagron 16). In any case, Photius does not actually state that he had seen the commentaries on Aristotle or the exegetical works on Plato. He only mentions their existence.⁴

It would be easy to find fault with Photius' knowledge and his account. Nevertheless, a possible reason for his mistake can be found. By 357, the emperor Constantius had provided funds for the expansion of the library at Constantinople, including the copying of manuscripts, and had appointed a director for the project (*Them. Or.* 4.60a: καὶ τάττει μὲν ἄρχοντα ἐπὶ τῷ

¹Photius' μεταφράσεις is simply another name for the *Paraphrases*.

²For a brief account, cf. G. Dagron, "L'Empire romain d'orient au IV^e siècle et les traditions politiques de l'hellénisme. Le témoignage de Thémistios," *Travaux et Memoires* 3 (1968) 1-242, at 14-16 (hereafter cited by author's name alone). The *Suda*, s.v. Θεμιστίος, mentions only the *Paraphrases*.

³So H. J. Blumenthal, "Photius on Themistius (Cod. 74): Did Themistius Write Commentaries on Aristotle?," *Hermes* 107 (1979) 168-182, replying to the attempt of C. Steel, "Des Commentaires d'Aristote par Themistius?," *Rev. Phil. de Louvain* 71 (1973) 669-680, to establish a commentary (as well as the *Paraphrase*) on the *De anima*. W. Stegemann, "Themistios," *RE* 5A.2 (1934) 1642-80, at 1651-52, initially fails to make the distinction between *Paraphrases* and ὑπομνήματα, then later does so, regarding the ὑπομνήματα as lost.

⁴As Blumenthal, *op. cit.* 181, correctly points out.

ἔργῳ).⁵ This is known, if not necessarily common knowledge, to students of late imperial history.⁶ To this library Themistius donated a copy of his own works (*Or.* 4.61c-d: *ἔτι οὖν ἀχθέσεται βασιλεύς, εἰ καὶ ἐγὼ τοὺς ἐμούς λόγους ὑμῖν πρὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἐπιδιδοίην καὶ οὐ πρόσθεν ἐξάγοιμι τείχους, . . .*). By this he means a copy of the speeches he had delivered to this point in his career and probably also the *Paraphrases*.⁷ Themistius himself refers to the latter as a work of his youth (*Or.* 23.294d) and is normally thought to have completed them by the time of his adlection to the Senate at Constantinople in 355.⁸ It is not clear whether Themistius played any major role in the expansion of the library.⁹ Nevertheless, he did play an important part in the betterment of intellectual life in the capital of the East during this period. A letter of Libanius, written to Themistius in early 368, indicates that Themistius had convinced a sophist named Harpocration to come to the capital to teach rhetoric (*Ep.* 368.1: *τὴν Ἀρποκρατίωνος ἡμῶς ἀφελόμενος γλῶττιαν ἔδωκας τοῖς οὐδὲν δεομένοις, and 368.3: μεταπέμποιο σοφιστάς*).¹⁰ This, together with other bits of evidence, might reasonably indicate that Themistius had been put in charge of academic appointments at Constantinople, possibly because he was now *princeps Senatus* or in conjunction with his commission to expand the Senate. Some connection with the new library facilities and holdings is an equally reasonable, if unprovable, assumption.

In *Oration* 4, delivered on 1 January 357, Themistius praises Constantius for dispensing these funds, noting that the wisdom of the ancients would be preserved and that Constantinople would become a centre of learning (60a-b). Included in that praise is a list of ancient writers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Isocrates, Thucydides, Chrysippus, Cleanthes, Zeno, interpreters of Homer, followers of Hesiod, χορούς τε ὅλους ἐκ Λυκίου καὶ Ἀκαδημίας (60c), whose works would soon be housed and available in the library. In other words, the library was to contain texts of all the

⁵The evidence is Them. *Or.* 4.59d-61d. On this, cf. J. Vanderspoel, *Themistius and the Imperial Court* (diss. University of Toronto, 1989) chapter 3.

⁶Cf., e.g., L. Philippart, "À propos d'un prétendu discours perdu de Thémistius," *Serta Leodiensia. Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liège*, Fasc. 44 (1930) 273-274; Dagron 59, n. 148, 227-228; A. Piganiol, *L'Empire Chrétien*² (Paris 1972) 116.

⁷For discussion, cf. Dagron 17, 218; also H. Bouchery, *Themistius in Libanius' Brieven* (Antwerp and Paris 1936) 110-111.

⁸Cf. Dagron 7, with n. 21.

⁹Cf., on this and the other public duties of Themistius during this period, Vanderspoel (above, n. 5) chapter 3. The comments of a referee induced me to reconsider what I had written on this point in an earlier draft.

¹⁰Cf. O. Seeck, *Die Briefe des Libanius* (Leipzig 1906) 298; and esp. Bouchery (above, n. 7) 107-109, on Themistius' role in luring academics to the capital. Seeck too sees Themistius as a leader in the intellectual life at the capital: "Trotz seiner heidnischen Religion hatte er im litterarischen Leben Constantinopels die Führung gewonnen."

important writers of old, as well as commentaries on their works, especially those on Plato and Aristotle. Themistius may have been actively involved in the acquisition of these works for the library. It is not difficult to imagine that the collection of commentaries on Plato and Aristotle somehow took on his name, perhaps because of a donation or his diligence in seeking them out.¹¹ Libraries, one may note, have a fondness for special collections, and it is easy to believe that Photius, perhaps through the medium of some other source, misunderstood the meaning of the "Themistius Collection" of commentaries on Plato and Aristotle.

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
CALGARY, ALBERTA T2N 1N4

¹¹One might note his family tradition (father and grandfather) of philosophy, with his father Eugenius particularly concerned to harmonise Plato with Aristotle (*Or.* 20.235c-d). Presumably, the family possessed a library, and Eugenius died in 355. Cf. Vanderspoel (above, n. 5) chapters 2 and 3 on the family tradition and the date of Eugenius' death.