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Friendship and Rivalry: Local Relations and Cultural Environment in Constantinople and Nicomedia in the Light of Libanius' Orations and Letters

Dostluk ve Rekabet: Libanius'un Söylev ve Mektupları Işığında Constantinopolis ve Nikomedia'da Yerel İlişkiler ve Kültürel Çevre

Onur Sadık Karakuş[1]

[1]Istanbul University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Ancient History, Istanbul, Turkiye

ORCID ID: O.S.K. 0000-0001-6169-266X

Sorumlu yazar/Corresponding author:
Onur Sadık Karakuş,
İstanbul Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Eskiçağ Tarihi Anabilimdalı, Beyazıd/Vezneciler, İstanbul, Türkiye
E-mail: onurskarakus@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Nicomedia and Constantinople, the two largest cities of the Roman Empire on the Marmara coast, drew attention as very rich and developed metropoleis in the 3rd and 4th centuries. These two cities, which were successor capitals, also attracted the aristocrats, scholars, orators and statesmen of the period with their cultural environment. The sophist Libanius of Antioch, who lived in both these cities, gives very valuable information about these cities. Orations and letters of Libanius provide quite detailed information on remarkably interesting topics such as friendship relations, local rivalries and factions, schools, educators, social networks and the local policies of the emperors in these two great cities. By putting Libanius in the center, this study aims to show the local relations in Constantinople and Nicomedia in the 4th century, as well as the socio-cultural environment and the differences between these cities. In addition, the contributing factors of the cultural environment that allowed Nicomedia to compete with Constantinople, the new residence of the emperors, until the devastating earthquakes in Nicomedia, were also discussed.
Keywords: Libanius, Constantinople, Nicomedia, Roman Empire, Sophists

ÖZ

Roma İmparatorluğu'nun Marmara kıyısındaki iki büyük kenti olan Nikomedia ve Constantinopolis, 3. ve 4. yüzyıllarda oldukça zengin ve gelişmiş metropolisler olarak dikkat çeker. Ardıl başkentler olan bu iki kent aynı zamanda kültürel ortamıyla da döneminin aristokratlarını, eğitmenlerini, hatiplerini ve devlet adamlarını da cezbetmiştir. Her iki kentte de yaşamış olan Antakyalı sofist Libanius, bu kentlere dair çok kıymetli bilgiler vermektedir. Libanius'un söylev ve mektupları bu iki büyük kentteki dostluk ilişkileri, yerel rekabetler ve hizipler, okullar, eğitmenler, sosyal ağlar ve İmparatorların yerel politikaları gibi oldukça ilgi çekici konulara ışık tutmaktadır. Bu çalışma da Libanius'u merkeze alarak, 4.yüzyılda Constantinopolis ve Nikomedia

kentlerindeki yerel ilişkiler ve sosyokültürel ortamı ve kentler arasındaki farklılıkları göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca Nikomedia'da meydana gelen oldukça yıkıcı depremlere kadar Nikomedia'nın İmparatorların yeni ikametgahı olan Constantinopolis'le rekabet edebilmesine olanak veren kültürel ortamın sağlayıcı etkenleri de tartışılmıştır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Libanius, Constantinopolis, Nikomedia, Roma İmparatorluğu, Sofistler

Introduction

The 4th century is very remarkable as a century in which many transformations took place, where some cities developed while others declined and harsh religious debates and cultural changes were experienced. During this period, Christianity gradually became one of the stronger and major religions of the Roman Empire with political dominance and cultural acceptance beyond being ignored and punished (Liebeschuetz, 2006, pp.472 ff; Nesselrath, 2013, pp.3-7). Eventually, the changes and transformations experienced by the Roman Empire at the beginning of the 4th century marked the beginning of a new era (Macmullen, 2003, pp.465-495). Despite the ambiguous situation of the western cities in the 4th century, a significant part of the eastern cities preserved their vitality. Moreover, during this period, Constantinople and Nicomedia were ahead of the others due to their political importance. Under favor of events such as the fact that Nicomedia became the *de facto* imperial residence during the reign of Diocletian, the refoundation of Byzantium under the name of Constantinople during the reign of Constantine I, and its declaration as to the new imperial residence in 330 (Dagron, 1974, pp.32-33), this region became one of the most important social and economic centers of the 4th century.[1]

From the middle of the 3rd century to the early 4th century, the Roman Empire struggled with many problems (*i.e.,* civil wars, Gothic and barbarian invasions, economic crises, religious conflicts, etc.) and experienced various permanent changes. On the other hand, the orators in this period retained their former importance and, moreover, drew attention to themselves as important actors in urban life. Since the principal component of rhetorical education is known to have been based on classical Graeco-Roman culture and literature, teachers of rhetoric also had a key role as transmitters of *paideia* and traditional culture (Cameron, 1993, p.154).

During the reign of Emperor Diocletian, the famous names of those times, Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius and the *grammaticus* Fabius, were invited to Nicomedia to give instruction in rhetoric and in Latin (Foss, 1996, p.5). After Emperor Constantine I made the city of Byzantion the new imperial residence, with the name of Constantinople, this city became a small representation of the Roman Empire. In this regard, since the first quarter

1 Constantinople became the near-permanent residence for emperors near the death of Emperor Thedosius I. See, Seeck, 1964, pp.251 ff.; Dagron, 1974, pp.78-86.

of the 4th century, the recognition of these two cities on the shores of the Sea of Marmara as economic and administrative centers throughout the Empire provided a motivation for many famous scholars and politicians to live in these cities.

In the 4th century, there were dozens of important intellectuals, such as Himerius of Prusias, Decimus Ausonius, Themistius, Ammianus Marcellinus, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nazianzus etc., and in this respect, there was a diverse religious and intellectual spectrum. In this period, the Greek sophist Libanius of Syrian Antioch also attracted attention as a very famous and talented sophist and spent a good part of his life in the new capital city of Constantinople and Nicomedia. His autobiography- *βίος ἢ περὶ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ τύχης* (*Or*.1) – offers very valuable information about the cultural structure and friendship networks in the region (Festugière, 1965, pp.623-634).

Libanius, who was born in Antioch on the Orontes in 314 as a member of a local noble family, left his homeland after receiving a decent rhetorical training from various sophists, specifically Ulpianus from Ascalon. At the age of 24, he went to Athens, where there were famous rhetors such as Prohaeresius, Diophantus the Arab, and Epiphanius and continued his education there until 340 (Eunap. 16.1; Weißenberger, 1999, pp.130-132; Bradbury, 2004, pp.3-6)[2]. He left Athens in 340 and began teaching in Constantinople for two years, and it is known that he began his work in this city without any plans. According to Libanius, his first experience in Constantinople was as happy as his experience in Athens. While still based in Athens, Libanius, made a trip to visit his friend Crispinus in Heraclea Pontica and thus came to Constantinople, where he was greeted with praise by many famous scholars from all over the Empire who had migrated to Constantinople; in this sense, his first contact with the city began quite positively (Lib. *Or*. 1. 30). Libanius reports that after his arrival in Constantinople he crossed the Bosphorus to visit Crispinus of Heraclea, passing through Chalcedon, Astacus, and a third city, which seemed small compared to its former size.[3] After being well hosted by Crispinus' father-in-law in this small city, Libanius and his companions (his slave and secretaries) went to Heraclea, met with Crispinus, and then returned to the

2 Before Libanius came to Athens, the sophists who taught in various schools there made a nominal agreement to divide the pupils among themselves to avoid a dispute caused by them. According to this "unofficial" agreement, pupils from the cities of Asia Minor would attend Prohaeresius' school, while pupils from Arabia and Syria would remain under Diophantus' rule. Libanius wanted to be student of Epiphanius, who was the most prestigious sophist in Athens, but he had to join Diophantus' school because of the pressure of senior students of Diophantus. See, Lieu and Montserrat, 1996, pp.155-156.

3 Lib. *Or*. 1. 30: "…διαβάντες δὲ τοῦ Πόντου τὸν αὐχένα, καθ' ὃν πάλαι ποτὲ τὴν Ἰὼ λόγος ἐν εἴδει βοός, ἐλθόντες τε διὰ Χαλκηδόνος διά τε Ἀστακίας τρίτης τε ἑτέρας πόλεως μικρᾶς μὲν ἐκ μεγάλης τῆς πρίν, ἐχούσης δέ τι παντὸς μεγέθους μεῖζον..."; Considering the road followed by Libanius and the close distance of the unnamed city to Heraclea Pontica, the settlement defined as the "third city" should have been the city of Prusias ad Hypium. Norman, 1992, p.155.

port of Constantinople to return to Athens (Lib. *Or*. 1. 30). Nicocles of Lacedaemon[4], the grammar teacher whom he met in the port of Constantinople, offered Libanius to stay in Constantinople and to be the master of the children of wealthy aristocratic families. Moreover, he strongly suggested that he should take responsibility for himself instead of being under the authority of someone else thanks to the forty pupils and a classroom he would find for him (Lib. *Or*. 1. 31). According to Libanius, the main purpose of Nicocles' offer was the desire to counter the success of a sophist from Cyzicus by collaborating with Libanius. The sophist from Cyzicus allegedly became a citizen of Constantinople with the considerable support of Nicocles and later became a rival to Nicocles (Lib. *Or*. 1. 31). Eventually, Libanius began teaching in Constantinople, following this suggestion, and opened his school there with the support of an upper-classman, Dionysius of Sicily (Lib. *Or*. 1. 32-36).[5] Constantly growing, Constantinople was an attractive city that could provide huge advancements in the career of teachers of rhetoric and offered more opportunities for remuneration.

As is evident from Libanius' autobiography, many aristocratic and wealthy families also started to reside in Constantinople during these years, so there was a great need for good schools and qualified teachers for their children (Lib. *Or*. 1. 26-30). The refoundation of Constantinople undoubtedly attracted a new mass of bureaucrats, traders, scholars, and their families to this city. As a result of this, hundreds of wealthy Roman families must have come to Constantinople and surrounding settlements. It is understood that Libanius taught more than eighty pupils in Constantinople and was quite popular, and it is possible to say that a significant number of these children belonged to aristocratic families who had just arrived in Constantinople. It is also known that the expenses of school of Libanius were covered by the registration fees given by the families of the pupils (Wiemer, 2014, p.190).

According to Eunapius of Sardes, Libanius decided to leave at the end of his second year in Constantinople, after a result of a scandalous accusation by Ulpius Limenius, who was appointed as *proconsul (provinciae Europae)* instead of Alexander (Wintjes, 2005, p.89).[6] So how does Libanius elaborate and try to elucidate this accusation in his autobiography? As we can read from that oration, while Bemarchius was not in Constantinople, his students voluntarily joined Libanius' school, and this caused tensions between Bemarchius, his sophist supporters and Libanius. Bemarchius and his supporters (and Limenius, who believed him) finally slandered Libanius of witchcraft and tried to discredit him (*PLRE* I, Bemarchius; Cribiore, 2013, pp.47-48; Becker, 2013, p.503). After this slander, of which Libanius was

4 *PLRE* I, Nicocles; As it is known, Emperor Julian was also a student of Nicocles, who invited Libanius to the city. See Cribiore, 2007, p.61.

5 Dionysius of Sicily was *patronus* of Libanius, in other words, he supported him financially by taking him under his financial protection. However, the details of their relationship are not clear. See for a comprehensive commentary on patronage relationships in which Libanius is also directly or indirectly included, Doukellis, 1995, pp.207-222.

6 Libanius uses the word ἄρχων for *proconsul*- (*PLRE* I, Alexander 3, and Limenius 2).

acquitted, he was arrested, being accused also of supporting the rebellion caused by Nicene faction and Arian Christians in Constantinople in 342/343. It is thought that it was Bemarchius and his followers who had Libanius arrested on false testimony since one of these witnesses was the Cretan *grammateus* of Bemarchius (Nesselrath, 2012, p.15)[7].

The main reason for Bemarchius' harsh attitude towards Libanius is undoubtedly his fear of losing his tenure of the rhetorical chair in Constantinople and the income he earned in this way (Lib.*Or*.1.31). According to Libanius, the people of Constantinople, who had just been interested in chariot races or theater performances until then, became interested in rhetoric after Libanius, and a decree was prepared by Emperor Constantius II that ordered him to stay in Constantinople (Lib. *Or*. 1. 38). Considering such developments, the opposition of sophist Bemarchius to Libanius is much better understood. Van Hoof claims that this view is open to criticism. According to her, pederasty and witchcraft are the "scandalous accusations" implied by Eunapius in his work regarding Libanius and thought to have caused Libanius to leave Constantinople. She considers that Eunapius underplays the possibility that such an accusation could also be a false allegation of rival sophists in Constantinople since he did not prepare an impartial work. The fact that Libanius was not prosecuted and went to teach in another city shows that this claim is far from reality (Van Hoof, 2014, pp.29-31). As a result, Libanius left Constantinople because of the accusations of Bemarchius and the governor Limenius and the events that took place, but he also increased his prestige thanks to the fact that he was victorious in the rhetorical duel with Bemarchius (Nesselrath, 2012, p.15).

Journey to Bithynia and starting a new career

Libanius moved to Bithynia in 342/343, upon the wearisome effect of all these unpleasant events, and at the invitation of the council of city, reached Nicaea, where he taught for a year (Lib. *Or*. 1.48; Nesselrath, 2012, p.16). After Nicaea, Libanius came to Nicomedia, where he stayed for 5 years between 344-349 that he defined as "the spring of my life" and continued his grammar and rhetoric teaching there (Lib. *Or*. 1. 51; Eunap. 16.1.521; Cribiore, 2015, pp.27-28; Wintjies, 2005, p.90). It was understood that an offer was made by the city council of Nicomedia to Libanius before Nicaea's invitation, but he rejected it; however, after the rumor spread that he wanted to leave Constantinople in the following months, he responded positively to the invitation from Nicaea (Lib. *Or*. 1.48; Wintjes, 2005, p.89). Libanius narrates this process as follows:

7 According to Libanius, *proconsul* Alexander escaped wounded but secured the walls of Perinthos (Heraclea), while the organizers of the rebellion and supporters such as Bemarchius took advantage of the rebellion in their own way. After the rebellion was taken under control, those who participated in the rebellion started to blame each other in panic, and the control of Constantinople was taken from the proconsul Alexander by the decision of Emperor Constantius II and given to Ulpius Limenius. Lib. *Or*. 1. 44-45; Lieu and Montserrat, 1996, p.157; Woods, 2006, pp.428-430.

> *"... I had also received an invitation to change my position for the better, at Nicomedia, and to exchange a city that was full of self-tolerance for one which the nurse of eloquence. Through his dispatches he (Ulpius Limenius) tried to bar me from there too, but he did not succeed entirely. I got there by way of Nicaea, the city of Dionysos. The inhabitants of Nicaea found out that I had left the capital, and sent envoys to invite me there, with all kinds of complimentary references in their decrees; so I paid my respects to Dionysos and went with them, and I was once more engaged with my pupils and my studies when, by another decree, I was invited to the city of Demeter, Nicomedia, the governor of Bithynia having graciously acceded to their request…* (Lib. *Or*. 1. 48; Translated by Norman, 1992)*"*

The years of Libanius in Nicomedia started very productively, and during the visit of his close friend Crispinus of Heraclea, he received a library containing very large and important works as a gift. He expanded his social network considerably in Nicomedia, met Aristaenetus of Nicaea, and had a very good friendship with him (Wintjies, 2005, p.92). Libanius trained some of the well-known names of this century in Nicomedia: one of these names, the Bishop Basil of Caesarea, who was a supporter of the Nicene Creed and one of the "church fathers of Cappadocia," encouraged the students in his homeland to join the school of his old teacher Libanius after he returned to Cappadocia (Lib. *Or*. 1.53).[8] It seems that when Libanius came to Nicomedia, he encountered a prosperous city not only economically but also culturally and had the opportunity to work in a comfortable and friendly environment as opposed to harsh competition and tension as in Constantinople. In addition, interest and curiosity in the city were so great that he gave lectures in many places, including the baths; almost the whole Nicomedia became his school, and almost every Nicomedian could memorize a few sentences from his prologues (Lib. *Or*. 1.55). In his own words, he defined the five-year period he spent in Nicomedia under Demeter's supervision as superior to all his other experiences in terms of both physical health and mental tranquility (Lib. *Or*. 1.51). During the reign of Diocletian, intensive public works and educational opportunities were increased to make the city the capital of the Roman Empire. However, when a new imperial residence was determined during the reign of Constantine I, Nicomedia lost the political status it had acquired during the time of Diocletian. However, thanks to this seemingly unfavorable situation, Nicomedia became as fascinating and wealthy as a capital city and, unlike a capital city, far from a bureaucratic and political environment. Lactantius, in his famous apologetical work *de mortibus persecutorum*, provides valuable information about the building-construction activities of the city in the period of Diocletian. During the reign of Emperor Diocletian, Nicomedia was desired to be made the most magnificent city not only of Asia Minor but also of the Roman Empire. He tried to make it the new administrative, economic, and cultural center, equivalent to the "Eternal City" Rome and for this reason, built many spectacular

8 Gregory of Nazianzus, another famous church father of the 4th century, praised and supported the Christian sophist Prohaeresius and the pagan philosopher Themistius. See for detailed information, McGuckin, 2001, pp.60-61; Heather and Moncur, 2001, p.5.

buildings there, such as public halls, a circus, a mint, a military workshop, and palaces for the Empress and her daughter.[9]

However, the years of Libanius in Nicomedia were not completely flawless, and there was a period when the people of Nicomedia turned their back on him for a while, especially because Libanius was also slandered in a deadly incident in the city and only with various gifts could entice the students back to the school. The accusation of Libanius for the death of a professor's wife in Nicomedia must have been a slander created by a rival. Presumably, this name was Nicomedia's previous teacher of rhetoric, whose wife died (See, Lib. *Or*. 1. 62-67; Lieu and Montserrat, 1996, p.158). Apart from this incident, Libanius did not have any other trouble in Nicomedia, and he made a very remarkable comment on the comparison of the prosperity of Nicomedia and Constantinople. According to him, "*Prosperity is revealed in the pleasures of the performing arts in Constantinople and in the fruits of learning in Nicomedia; The Nicomedians knew how to get what they didn't have, while those in Constantinople weren't intelligent enough to keep what they had*" (Lib. *Or*. 1. 52). The urban development that Libanius saw in Constantinople, unlike the classical type of urbanization, also mostly centered Christianity.[10] The relatively conventional or classical urban structure of the Bithynia region must have been another reason why Libanius found Nicomedia pleasant. The former provincial capital Nicomedia, which received the title of *neokoros* three times, was a place where Pagan cults and Emperor worship were strong. Also, there were many temples belonging to other gods/goddesses (Marek, 2003, p.71; Burrell, 2004, pp.147-165; Bekker-Nielsen, 2008, p.83). Archaeological research in Nicomedia reveals that Emperor worship and agonistic games were also very popular during the Tetrarchs (Şare-Ağtürk, 2020, pp.112-113). However, it should not be overlooked that Libanius, a religious Pagan, made an assessment based on his own experiences. In this respect, it is obvious that above words of Libanius have an emotional basis because the Bithynian part of his autobiography is almost a description of a non-Christian region.

Another pagan philosopher and orator Themistius of Paphlagonia describes Nicomedia and its people as attractive in every way. In his oration to the Nicomedians, dated to the 340s, he stated that the city was surrounded by baths, theatres, race grounds, and numerous attractions. Probably all these structures were very lively and attractive in the middle of the 4th century. For Themistius, on the other hand, the attractiveness of Nicomedia was not the

9 "… Huuc accedebat infinita quaedam cupiditas aedificandi, non minor prouinciarum exactio in exhibendis operariis et artificibus et plaustris omnibusque quaecumque sint fabricandis operibus necessaria. hic basilicae, hic circus, hic moneta, hic armorum fabrica, hic uxori domus, hic filiae…" See Lactant. 7.8-9; The research results of the *Çukurbağ Archeology Project* have also revealed some building complexes, unique reliefs, sculptures and important works of art in the city dating to the Diocletian and Tetrarchic period. Şare-Ağtürk, 2018, pp.415-424; Şare-Ağtürk, 2020, pp.107-116.

10 On the status of active or abandoned pagan temples, sacred grounds, and the Christian friendly practices of the Empire see Lenski, 2016, pp.170-196.

fascinating structures but the noble and inherited attraction of Nicomedians (Them. *Or*. 24. 306; Vanderspoel, 1995, p.47). In this respect, what made Nicomedia attractive for Libanius, just like Themistius, was the people of Nicomedia. It is clear that the Nicomedians were always interested in *paideia*.

Back in Constantinople: a new beginning or a repeat of the past?

Having had quite productive and peaceful years in Nicaea and especially in Nicomedia, Libanius returned to Constantinople in 349 to occupy the chair of rhetoric. In the capital, he was honored by various officials and governors, including the Emperor Constantius II and members of the imperial bureaucracy, and worked there until the summer of 353 or the first months of 354 (Van Hoof, 2014, pp.18-20; Bradbury, 2004, p.7). In this period, Constantinople was surrounded by many elements in which the cultural and religious transformations in the Empire were closely felt and had turned into a settlement that differed from the classical Roman cities in various aspects. It is known that famous philosophers and orators such as Themistius were in the capital during this period (*PLRE* I, Themistius 1; Heather and Moncur, 2001, pp.43-44; Cribiore, 2007, p.62). During the period from 324 to 330, many structures that already existed in Constantinople, especially built in Severan period, were restored, expanded, or rebuilt. This policy was followed exactly after the death of Constantine I. Hippodrome, bath, forum, palace, basilica etc. are some of the structures that were expanded, completed, or newly built during this period (Malalas, 319-320; Dagron, 1974, pp.88-89; Bassett, 2004, pp.22-33). In addition to the building-construction activities, Constantinople was put forth to be an attractive city for artists, intellectuals, philosophers and educators and many artists, well-educated aristocrats, and orators to come to the city. Despite all this development in Constantinople, it is understood that the liveliness and cultural environment that Libanius experienced during the years in Bithynia had not yet formed in Constantinople or were not reflected in Libanius' observations. In fact, the period of the Constantine dynasty was also the beginning of a great development process for Constantinople to become the capital because many famous churches, palaces, forums, cisterns, city walls and many other monumental buildings had not been built yet.

Libanius' second teaching experience in Constantinople had significant differences from the first. Contrary to his first experience, Libanius was invited to Constantinople not to be an ordinary orator but to be appointed to one of the two chairs of rhetoric, with all expenses being paid by the fiscus (Wiemer, 2014, p.191). During this period, Constantius II also established a new senate in Constantinople due to incompatibilities and administrative problems with the senate in Rome (Dagron, 1974, pp.119-146; Moser, 2018, p.189)[11]. However, it is known that even during the heading of the rhetoric chair in Constantinople, Libanius spent his summers in

11 The election of new senators and the activation of the senate accelerated after 357. See Dagron, 1974, pp.127-130.

Bithynia, especially in Nicomedia and its environs (Lib. *Or*. 1.77)[12]. We know that Libanius did not want to leave Nicomedia in 349; he was afraid that he would be deprived of the placid environment there but had to go to Constantinople on the order of the emperor. Although Libanius was happy in Nicomedia, according to him, the three largest cities of his time were: 1. Rome, 2. Constantinople, and 3. Antioch (Wiemer, 2014, p.213). It is understood that Constantinople became the heart of one of the most important trade networks in this period, and the Black Sea-Aegean connection, which had been centered on Nicomedia during the reign of Diocletian, had shifted to Constantinople. Himerius, a contemporary of Libanius, describes the commercial position of the city as follows:

> *"You alone have outdone the city of Romulus in the wonder you instill; you have combined such beauty with your size that the inhabitants of [Rome] have nothing to match with your beauty. Merchantmen sail to you from everywhere and from all harbors, in need of no Tiber to get to your fortifications; they put in immediately from the sea and tie their cables right to your walls …* (Him.*Or*.62.5; Translated by Panella, 2007, p.47)."

Gregory of Nazianzus also defined Constantinople as the first among the cities (Dagron, 1974, p.56). Although Constantinople started to become a very attractive and developed city in many ways during the Constantine dynasty, Nicomedia continued to preserve its cultural prosperity to a large extent. For example, Emperor Constantine I spent the last days of his life in the palace in Nicomedia (*Origo Const*. 35). Julian also lived in Nicomedia, where he was educated by the Mardonius and Christian sophist Hecebolius, in the years 338 or 339 and 344-345 or 348/349 before he became emperor.[13] It is also known that he attended lessons of Neoplatonist philosopher and *thaumaturgist* Maximus of Ephesus in these years (Eunap. 7.1; *PLRE* I, Maximus 21; Foss, 1996, p.5; Nesselrath, 2013, p.22). According to Libanius, there were also some local schools of sophist Alcimus and Basileus of Nicomedia (Lib. *Epist*. B113; *PLRE* I, Alcimus)[14]. In addition to these names, there were many students coming to Bithynia from cities of Asia Minor, especially pupils from Antioch due to Libanius (Lib. *Epist*. B126). It is also known that some Bithynians went to other sophistic centers from the cities of Bithynia (Panella, 2007, pp.1-2,11).

Libanius, who spent very active years in both Nicomedia and Constantinople, left Constantinople when he heard the news of some events in Athens in 353 and the torture of an Egyptian teacher by three Paphlagonian bandits, who had been hired by someone (possibly Strategius Musonianus) (*PLRE* I, Diophantus 2?) in the city, forcing him to leave the city

12 According to Watts, Libanius spent the summer months of 350 and 351 in Nicomedia. See Watts, 2014, p.41.

13 There Julian first remained under the tutorship of Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia, then went with him to Constantinople. Matthews, 1989, pp.106-107; Nesselrath, 2013, p.18.

14 On the cultural and intellectual background in Roman Bithynia. See Bowie, 2022, passim.

(Lib. *Or*.1. 84-85; Norman, 2000, p.xii)[15]. Libanius eventually returned to his homeland of Antioch and continued his teaching there until the end of his life. After Libanius, the philosopher Themistius incrementally excelled in the city life of Constantinople, both with his teaching and oratory talent. After returning to his homeland in Antioch, Libanius maintained his current positive relationship with Themistius, the head of the philosophy chair of Constantinople, and continued to correspond with him (Heather and Moncur, 2001, pp.11-14; Cribiore, 2007, p.62). Libanius' correspondence with Themistius shows that he also followed the developments in Constantinople and supported Themistius.[16] Libanius kept his relations with officials, such as Honoratus and Modestus, and scholars, such as Silanus etc., from Constantinople and other neighboring regions of the empire through letters[17].

Relations with Himerius of Prusias

The sophist Himerius from Prusias in Bithynia, who is known to have lived in the 4th century, was also one of the key intellectuals of Roman Empire (Becker, 2013, p.496). According to the information in Souda, Himerius, who was the son of rhetor Ameinias and under the patronage of Emperor Julian, spent his childhood and education in Prusias, then taught in Athens, where he rivaled Prohaeresius, the Christian orator and scholar who was exceedingly popular in Athens during the reign of Emperor Constans (337-350) (Souda. s.v. Ἰμέριος; Sozom. 6.17; *PLRE* I, Himerius 2; Völker, 2003, pp.3-4; Panella, 2007, p.1). According to Eunapios, the main reason Himerius was opposed to Prohaeresius was that this person was opposed to the pagan Emperor Julian (Eunap.14.1). This information suggests that the Himerius-Julian relationship shows a great similarity with the classical sense of the relationship between the patron and the intellectual environment. It is stated in Souda that Julian praised Libanius with admiration, also with the effect of his opposition to Prohaeresius, but it is understood that Libanius did not have an attitude like Himerius, was generally apolitical, and had a tolerance towards Christians (See for Himerius, Panella, 2007, p.2).[18] Himerius taught in Constantinople between 343-352, left Bithynia after Julian's death, and visited other cities.[19] During his teaching in Constantinople, he went to Nicomedia at the

15 According to Eunapius, Libanius did not leave either Constantinople or Nicomedia voluntarily, but he was exiled from both cities due to accusations of witchcraft. See Eunap. 16.1.521.

16 Libanius and Themistius have been in a close friendship relationship since 350, and that there were various meetings in Constantinople where the physician Olympius and the philosopher Themistocles accompanied them. See Cribiore, 2007, p.63.

17 See for letters to Honoratus (*PLRE* I, Honoratus 2), Lib. *Epist*. B65-68; for Modestus (*PLRE* I, Modestus 2), Lib. *Epist*. B68-75; for law teacher Silanus (*PLRE* I, Silanus 1), Lib. *Epist*. B162.

18 Souda s.v. Λιβάνιος; Scholl, 1994, p.110; Although Libanius was known for his tolerance towards Christians in these years, it is understood that he became a zealous pagan in his old age in Antioch. See *PLRE* I, Libanius 1, p. 506; Prohaeresius was also educated by Ulpianus of Ascalon in Antioch, and it is possible that Libanius also met (at least he was aware of him) Prohaeresius during his youth in Antioch, Panella, 1990, pp.84-85.

19 Barnes, 1987, p.212; After the death of Julian, Christian groups have also attacked Nicocles of Lacedaemon due to his loyalty to Julian. In this sense, after Julian, the city of Constantinople started to be a dangerous city for pagans. See Lib. *Epist*. B151.

invitation of Pompeianus, the governor of Bithynia, and met Libanius there (Barnes, 1987, p.212). He returned to Athens after the death of Prohaeresius (Panella, 1990, p.98).

Libanius and Himerius were contemporaries and had similar careers in many ways (Barnes, 1987, p.210). When the careers of these two names are examined, it is seen that the journey from Athens to Constantinople proceed similarly (Wintjes, 2006, pp.231-241). Both were in Athens and Constantinople in almost the same years, and they came together in a rhetorical contest organized by the governor Pompeianus[20] in Nicomedia (Wintjes, 2006, p.232). However, when the letter numbered 742 of Libanius is examined, it is noteworthy that he was not very friendly towards his colleague Himerius, and he had some criticisms against him (Cribiore, 2014, p.64; Rihle, 1989, p.451; Wintjes, 2006, pp.236-237). As Becker emphasizes, there is a difference in literary style between the two: Himerius has a more modern and newer style than Libanius, who maintains the traditional style (Becker, 2013, p.497). The fact that Himerius started to work in the cities where Libanius left after a while suggests that there may be an indirect and "invisible" rivalry between these two names.

Relations with Aristaenetus of Nicaea and the Earthquakes in Nicomedia

Libanius' orations and letters also provide valuable information about various names that recall the socio-cultural structure of the region, but whose names are not known enough. For example, Nicocles of Lacedaemon and Dionysius of Sicily, who supported Libanius in his first days in Constantinople, or the arch-rival sophist Bemarchius, and the philosopher Themistius in the second period of Libanius in Constantinople can be shown among these names. In the Bithynia region, the best known of these names is undoubtedly Aristaenetus (*PLRE* I, Aristaenetus 1). Aristaenetus of Nicaea, who ruled the *Pietatis dioceses* (*i.e.,* Pontica) as *vicarius* in 358, conducted some activities concerning the Bithynia region (Amm. Marc. 17.7.6; Watts, 2014, p.42). The mention of spectacles organized and supported by Aristaenetus in the letters of Libanius shows that a part of the pagan tradition was kept alive in Bithynia after a long time. Libanius met Aristaenetus during his studies in Nicomedia and, in his own words, this friendship surpassed all other friendships in the city[21]. It can be said that Aristaenetus also supported the pagan sophists in the region and tried to keep the traditional Graeco-Roman culture alive in the Bithynian cities.

In one of the letters of Libanius, it is known that Libanius was aware of the animal fights-shows organized by Aristaenetus in Bithynia, and because his *Syriarch* cousin wanted to organize a similar event in Antioch, he asked Aristaenetus for a bear from the mountains of

20 Our information about governor Pompeianus is also limited, and it is thought that he was the governor of Bithynia between 343-348. See *PLRE* I, Pompeianus 3.

21 Libanius' friends in Nicomedia were usually local or regional administrators, while in Constantinople they were mostly philosophers, and scholars.

Bithynia to be sent to Antioch (Lib. *Epist*. B176, 1-4.). In the summer of 358, Aristaenetus also sent horses gifted by the empire to Antioch for chariot racing (Lib. *Epist*. B178, 1-5). Aristaenetus intensely supported some public events both in Bithynia and in some other cities in Asia Minor. However, a great earthquake that occurred on August 28, 358 affected Bithynia deeply (Guidoboni – Comastri – Traina, 1994, pp.255-259). [22] Many Nicomedians died because of this earthquake, including Cecropius, bishop of Nicomedia (Barnes, 2011, p.140). According to Libanius, Aristaenetus also suffered the same fate. We also know that Aristaenetus was taken to his homeland Nicaea after his death and buried there (Lib. *Epist*. B114). Libanius summarizes and praises Aristaenetus' work in Bithynia as follows:

> *…So set aside, at last, your [Aristaenetus] grief for your wife and consort with remarkable man. You need not advise him to govern, since he has practice in governance (more indeed than anyone I know) and he employs his grasp of oratory for the salvation of the cities. When you see the ways by which he straightens out civic affairs, see to it that you praise him and make all Bithynia in a single chorus of men hymning what they have experienced* (Lib. *Epist*. B114.2 Translated by Bradbury, 2004).

The damage of the earthquake was not only limited to these deaths; it almost destroyed the entirety of Nicomedia. It is highly probable that the administrative capital of the *Pietatis dioceses* was Nicomedia until the earthquake of 358, but because of the earthquake, Nicomedia also lost this title. When Libanius saw Nicomedia in ruins, he wrote Μονωδία επὶ Νικομηδεία, a monody for the city (Lib. *Or*. 61). In this monody, which is a very long oration, the following lines about the destroyed buildings of the city of Nicomedia are quite remarkable:

> *"Oh the most beautiful city [Nicomedia]… Where are the streets? Where are the stoas? Where are the avenues? Where are the fountains? Where are the agoras? Where are the schools of Rhetoric-Philosophy [Mouseia]? Where is the temenos? Where is that wealth? Where are the young people? Where are the elders? Where is the largest of the baths where the Charites and Nymphs bathed, named after the emperor who completed it [Diocletian] and equivalent to an entire city? Where is the People's Assembly [Demos] now? Where is the City Council [Boule]? Where are the women? Where are the children? Where is the Palace [Basileion]? Where is the hippodrome stronger than the walls of Babylonia? Nothing stood, nothing survived. All mixed into one wreck ...* (Lib. *Or*. 61. 17-18; Author's translation)*"*

Μονωδία επὶ Νικομηδεία, written in a pathetic and very impressive style, shows that Nicomedia became a ruin where many people lost their lives during the earthquake and where all the structures were destroyed or severely damaged. According to M. Whitby, "after the earthquake of 358, Nicomedia never recovered its former prosperity as its need

22 As Belke points out, this earthquake struck Nicomedia in particular, Nicaea was affected little or not at all. See. Belke, 2020, p.802.

for new population and buildings coincided with major developments in the new imperial residence, Constantinople" (Whitby, 2006, p.456). Possibly, the continued construction of Constantinople may have had an indirect effect on the inability to rebuild or restoration of Nicomedia. Both the fear of earthquakes and the inability to rebuild the city caused it to not attract new population. A *synod* meeting was planned for the same year in Nicomedia, but due to the risk of earthquake, it was thought to be dangerous to host a religious meeting (Belke, 2020, p.803; Kaçar, 2015, p.104). On December 11, 359, Constantius II assigned a *praefectus urbi* for the first time in Constantinople, taking a further decision affecting Bithynia because the appellate jurisdiction of *praefectus urbi* of Constantinople encompassed the three closest provinces of Europe (Europa, Rhodope, and Haemimontus) as well as six provinces of Western Asia Minor (including Bithynia) (Dagron, 1974, pp.226 ff.; Moser, 2018, p.214).

The earthquakes that occurred in these years continued to cause heavy damage to the cities of Bithynia. After a very devastating earthquake in 358, Bithynia suffered again a great destruction. Libanius describes this situation in the sentence: "…*Nicaea the lovely is laid low, and our loveliest of cities [Nicomedia] is shaken and can have no confidence for the future* (Lib. *Or*.18.293, Translated by Norman, 1992; Also see Matthews, 1989, p.392; Guidoboni – Comastri – Traina, 1994, p.262; Van Nuffelen, 2006, pp.657-661). Julian, the last member of Constantine dynasty, helped the city of Nicomedia due to earthquake (on December 2, 362) that struck Bithynia shortly after he became emperor. Ammianus Marcellinus argued that when Emperor Julian arrived in Nicomedia, once considered the equivalent of the eternal city [Rome], he burst into tears and witnessed the pathetic condition of the city (Amm. Marc. 22, 9, 3-5).

The fate of Nicomedia was not the same as before. It is certain that Nicomedia, which lost almost all its political importance, cultural environment, educated population, and monumental structures due to the earthquakes that occurred a few years apart, became a city completely under the city of Constantinople in the late 4th century.

Here, the following question can be asked: Was Nicomedia a city where Christianity was not dominant and all intellectual groups worked in harmony as Libanius implied? Bithynia had an extraordinary place throughout the history of Christianity and, moreover, a very dense Christian population. When Diocletian chose Nicomedia as the imperial residence, the city was already the episcopal center of Bithynia. There were both cultic associations and many Christians in the city, and it was also a metropolis in the 1st Council of Nicaea. (Schneider, 1954, pp.419-420). Christians in Nicomedia were known since the letters of Pliny the Younger (Plin. *Epist*. x. 96-97). They became quite visible in the mid-4th century as well, but Pagans were still at the forefront in public affairs and political life of Nicomedia. The Christian elites and intellectuals had not yet existed (or they were weak) in Nicomedia. There was a Christian mass led by local bishops, such as Eusebius and Cecropius. Also, Eusbeius of

Caesarea, the Church Historian, implicitly refers to the fact that the Christians of Nicomedia were not a majority (Eus. *HE*, 9. 9. 18). In this sense, it is difficult to say that Christians were dominant in Nicomedia.

The speech of the philosopher Themistius, a contemporary of Libanius, to the Nicomedians gives quite exceptional information about competition in the city. According to Themistius, there were three groups in the city that tried to influence the people of Nicomedia: some of them fascinated the people in the local language, and others with songs – sentences – brought from Syria and Lebanon. According to Panella, this passage shows that there were Pagan, Christian, and Iamblichan Neoplatonist sophists in Nicomedia and shows the competition between them (Panella, 2000, pp.128-129, fn.1). It is also noteworthy that there was a third group other than Pagans and Christians. Indeed, it is known that the philosopher named Maximus, who was known to have educated Julian in Nicomedia, was a Neoplatonist and thaumaturgist (Eunap. 7.1; Souda s.v. Μάξιμος). Also, in the 300s, some other Neoplatonist philosophers and their pupils were in Nicomedia (Lactantius, *Div. inst*. 5.2.3-4; Vanderspoel, 1995, p.33, fn.13). It is clear from this that there was also (not hostile) rivalry between religious and intellectual groups in Nicomedia, but it was certainly not as fierce competition as in Constantinople.

Conclusion

Although the adoption and support of Christianity by the emperors caused pagan beliefs to lose their former popularity and influence, it can be said that there was still an almost balanced situation between these two religions in the middle of the 4th century. The fact that Christianity was based on pagan culture in many ways and that there were still many pagan intellectuals and aristocrats prevented a sharp break. We know that even the Christian priests in Bithynia had not been separated from the *paideia* tradition, and many of them even started their careers as a part of this culture.

The most important detail in Libanius' orations and letters is that Pagan sophists and Christian bishops found a comfortable working environment in Bithynia. The intense bureaucratic environment of Constantinople, where Christianity was strong, and, of course, the problems he had with other sophists and officials caused Libanius to choose to give education in the cities of Bithynia. The fact that Constantinople, as the new imperial residence and the host of many wealthy families, had made the city a very attractive place for philosophers, sophists, and other scholars who "don't want to share the wealth" as well as attracting important Christian clergy. This attraction also created a great polarization and "sophistic" disarray in Constantinople. The polarization among the pagan sophists peaked in Athens and Constantinople. However, the rivalry between the Christian and pagan sophists had not yet intensified (or was just a professional rivalry) in the intellectual world of the mid-

4th century. This kind of polarization exploded afterward because of Julian's pagan-friendly policies. In any case, in the 4th century, Constantinople became a cultural center as well. Libanius' pagan friends Nicocles, Dionysius, and Themistius (and rivals such as Bemarchius and Himerius) were only a few of those who contributed to the intellectual developments and pagan-classical culture in Constantinople.

Nicomedia, on the other side of the Sea of Marmara, was a city where competition and polarization were much less during this period. It was also a popular destination for the urban elite due to its proximity to Constantinople and offered a very productive working environment thanks to its deep-rooted cultural and urban wealth. The letters and orations of Libanius (and Himerius) show that the governor Pompeianus and *vicarius* Aristaenetus were pagans and continued the old traditions. Undoubtedly, these names and the people of Nicomedia were the providers of a free and productive environment in and around Nicomedia. It is possible to say that Aristaenetus, a close friend of Libanius, was a pagan and of Bithynian origin and was a supporter of secular institutions and education when Christian bishops were gaining power.

Since Diocletian's period, the city where the imperial residence was located was also the city most affected by the religious policies of the emperor. It can be said that the Christian persecution, which started during the reign of Diocletian and continued until the end of the reign of Galerius, partially preserved the Pagan culture in Nicomedia. The attitudes and references of both Emperor Julian and Themistius and Libanius to Nicomedia clearly show that there was an environment that attracted pagans in this city. Also, letters of Libanius show that there was a wide network of friendships, mainly with pagan rulers and scholars, and they kept each other informed of many events and developments through letters.

As a result, during the mid-4th century, the existence of two big cities on the shores of the Sea of Marmara, Constantinople, a Christian city with pagan elements, and Nicomedia, where pagan culture was still dominant, drew attention to both their similarities and differences. Nicomedia, which still preserved its old importance and intellectual environment during the years of Libanius in Bithynia, was heavily damaged by the earthquakes between 358-368, causing it to lose its former importance and vitality. From the end of the 4th century, Nicomedia gradually became a settlement in the eastern hinterland of Constantinople.

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