CHAPTER 11

A War of Words: Sermons and Social Status in Constantinople under the Theodosian Dynasty

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1 Introduction

Sermons were social events. Addressing an important share of the local Christian population, they offered the bishop or presbyter a unique opportunity for moral and spiritual instruction. Notwithstanding repeated explicit rejections of classical rhetoric,¹ all preachers drew, to a greater or smaller degree, on the means of persuasion taught in the schools of rhetoric.² Research into the audience and its relationship with the preacher has helped us to understand the social and institutional context of late ancient preaching, notably demonstrating how specific sermons were targeted to a particular audience and

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1 See, e.g., Augustine, De doctrina christiana 4.3.

how they could contribute to the construction of identity.\(^3\) Less attention has gone to rhetoric as a means of gaining social status in a Christian context, that is, to the social context of the preacher (rather than that of the audience), in particular in the big cities of the empire.\(^4\) Yet such a question deserves to be asked. In scholarship on the Second Sophistic, rhetoric is seen as the crucial means of social promotion: orators competed for public and imperial favour, and a political career without rhetorical prowess seemed improper at best.\(^5\) Such perspectives have, so far, hardly been applied to Late Antiquity. It is still common to think that the social prestige of rhetoric declined in the fourth century and that orators withdrew into the school room to practise what had become a fossilized art.\(^6\) The patristic emphasis on the virtue of humility,

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\(^4\) Much attention has gone to preaching as a means to inculcate values and shape public opinion: see Kinzig, “Writers,” pp. 653–655 for further references, and most recently B. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge, 2011). P. Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, 1992), which importantly emphasizes the central role played by shared *paideia* in Late Antiquity, focuses more on rhetoric as a means to stabilize power for groups rather than the way it is used for social promotion by individuals.


\(^6\) An important step is J. Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity: John Chrysostom and his Congregation in Antioch* (Cambridge, 2006), who however focuses more on the use of “Second Sophistic skills” (41) than on the nexus of rhetoric, social status, patronage and material benefits. L. Van Hoof, “Greek Rhetoric and the Later Roman Empire.