

Since the fifth century BC, Athens has served as a rhetorical topos for something more than just a historical society and city-state or a geographical locale. Over time, it came to denote a larger ideal, whether as a symbol for Greek culture as a whole, the glorious (and now-lost) classical past of Greece, a free democratic society, or a set of classical texts. “Athens” was always in flux, serving to symbolize different ideas to different authors. This particular issue of “Athens,” found in ancient rhetorical works by Perikles (quoted by Thucydides), Isokrates, Aelius Aristeides, and Menander Rhetor, among others, continued to be discussed and debated in the Christian empire of the fourth century AD. Now, though, a new axis of tension was added to the ideal of Athens, that between Christians and pagans. After all, it is in a treatise of the third-century AD Christian writer Tertullian that we find one of the clearest articulations of Athens-as-idea, when he rhetorically asks, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Tertullian is not asking about the historical cities of Athens and Jerusalem but rather is setting up a polarity of “Athens” (symbolizing pagan Hellenic culture) vs. “Jerusalem” (symbolizing proper Christian ways of thinking). In late antiquity, we see the renegotiation of an old theme (the ideal Athens) for a new world, and the meaning of “Athens” changes again, just as it changed throughout classical antiquity. This paper focuses on how two late antique rhetoricians, Gregory of Nazianzen (a Christian) and Libanios (a pagan) approach this renegotiation of the symbol “Athens” in their rhetorical works. When examining the portions of Gregory’s *Or. 43* (his funeral oration for his friend Basil of Caesarea) that deal with their student days in Athens and comparing them to Libanios’ comments on Athens in his autobiographical oration (*Or. 1*), one is struck by a paradox. Athens, the ancient home of pagan philosophy and rhetoric, is viewed more positively by Gregory, the Christian, than by Libanios, the pagan. This paper argues that the paradox occurs because of the differing views of Hellenism espoused by the two authors. Gregory and Libanios are both reacting to the long-standing tradition of rhetors like Isokrates and Aelius Aristeides making Athens the center of Hellenic culture. Gregory responds by glorifying his days as a student of rhetoric in Athens, attempting to show to his Christian audience that “Athens” and Hellenic culture can be safe for Christians, when approached cautiously. Libanios’ views of Athens, on the other hand, are an outgrowth of his rejection of an Athenocentric model of Hellenism in favor of a multi-locational one, a feeling exhibited by the fact that Libanios taught in his native Antioch for the last forty years of his life, rather than in Constantinople or Athens. Other scholars have written on the ideal of Athens in late antiquity. Van Dam (2002) has briefly discussed Gregory of Nazianzen and Julian’s argument over the meaning of “Athens.” Breitenbach (2003) has written on the symbolism of Athens for the Church Fathers. Yet no one, strangely, has provided an analysis of the dynamic tensions inherent in the ideal Athens in late antiquity. This paper hopes to provide a starting point for one aspect of such an analysis.