

Zeitschrift: Museum Helveticum : schweizerische Zeitschrift für klassische Altertumswissenschaft = Revue suisse pour l'étude de l'antiquité classique = Rivista svizzera di filologia classica

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Vereinigung für Altertumswissenschaft

Band: 48 (1991)

Heft: 3

Artikel: Isocrates XII 266-272 : a note on the composition of the Panathenaicus

Autor: Natoli, A.F.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-37700>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 22.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Isocrates XII 266–272

A note on the composition of the Panathenaicus

By A. F. Natoli, The University of New South Wales

It has generally been believed that there was a lengthy break in the composition of the Panathenaicus between 342, in which year Isocrates began writing, and 339 when he completed and published the discourse¹. This belief is based in Isocrates' own statement in the epilogue to the Panathenaicus, in which he discussed the composition of the work. It is the aim of the present paper to suggest that the generally accepted view of the composition of the Panathenaicus is based on a misreading of the text. I argue that a careful reading of paragraphs 266–272 leads to the inescapable conclusion that there was no break in composition; that, on the contrary, Isocrates took pains to impress his readers with his determination, throughout the long period of his illness, to continue with the work and bring it to completion.

The argument of paragraphs 266–272 may be divided into a number of interdependent parts: the aggregate of the parts producing the final form of the argument. The first stage of the argument is contained in the words ἐγὼ γὰρ ἐνεστησάμην μὲν αὐτὸν ἔτη γεγονῶς ὅσα περ ἐν ἀρχῇ προεῖπον (266), which reintroduce the question of the author's age from the prologue, where it is a dominant theme². Why, one may ask, did he place so much emphasis on age?

* The following case was originally argued in less detail in my M.A. thesis, *An Historical Commentary on the 'Panathenaicus' of Isocrates* (The University of Sydney 1988). I wish to express my thanks to Dr. J. L. O'Neil for his comments on a draft of this paper.

1 See A. Schaefer, *Demosthenes und seine Zeit*, 2nd rev. ed. (Leipzig 1887) vol. 3, 6 n. 1: "Dann ward er (der Panathenaikos) durch eine dreijährige Krankheit unterbrochen ...". Cf. F. Blass, *Die attische Beredsamkeit*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig 1892) vol. 2, 319–320; J. Mesk, *Der Panathenaikos des Isokrates*, 31. Jb. des k.k. II Deutschen Staatsgymnasiums Brünn (1902) 3; E. Drerup, *Isocratis opera omnia* (Leipzig 1906) CLVIII; P. Wendland, *Beiträge zu athenischer Politik und Publicistik des vierten Jahrhunderts*, Gött. Nachr. (1910) 138. 162; A. Rostagni, *Isocrate e Filippo*, in: *Entaphia in memoria di Emilio Pozzi* (Torino 1913) 145; K. Münscher, *Isokrates*, RE 9, 2 (1916) 2217; G. Norlin, *Isocrates*, vol. 2 (London/Cambridge, Mass. 1929) 368; A. Momigliano, *Filippo il Macedone* (Firenze 1934) 190–191; F. Zucker, *Isokrates' Panathenaikos*, Ber. Sächs. Ak. Wiss. 101, 7 (1954) 13. 20; G. Mathieu, *Les idées politiques d'Isocrate* (Paris 1966) 168. É. Brémond in his edition of the *Panathenaicus* (Paris 1962, 63. 68. 71) followed E. Buchner (*Gnomon* 28, 1956, 350–351) who in reviewing F. Zucker, *op. cit.*, argued that it was not possible to assign a chronology to the various sections of the *Panathenaicus* due to the three-year break in composition. G. Kennedy, *The art of persuasion in Greece* (Princeton 1963) 195; C. Schäublin, *Selbstinterpretation im 'Panathenaikos' des Isokrates?*, Mus. Helv. 39 (1982) 165. C. Eucken, *Leitende Gedanken im isokratischen Panathenaikos* (Mus. Helv. 39, 1982, 50) accepts the break in composition but argues that it did not affect the overall plan of the discourse.

2 Isocrates was in fact ninety-four years old at the time he commenced the work (3). References to age in the prologue are found in paragraphs 1, 3, 8, 16, 23, 34, 36, 37, 38. See also later references at 55, 88.

The appeal to age can be a rhetorical device to gain an audience's sympathy, as is particularly the case in forensic oratory. However in the present instance, as the other stages in the argument will confirm, it serves rather to magnify the effort required to create a work as ambitious as the *Panathenaicus*. Certainly this is the impression that Isocrates conveyed in the prologue where he wrote: οὐκ ἄγνοῶ δ' ἡλίκος ὢν ὅσον ἔργον ἐνίσταμαι τὸ μέγεθος (36). This, then, is the first stage in the argument wherein Isocrates recalled to the reader's mind the extraordinary effort required of a ninety-four year old in good health to undertake a work as formidable as the *Panathenaicus*.

The second stage in the argument (267–268) is designated by the μὲν ... δέ construction in ἐγὼ γὰρ ἐνεστησάμην μὲν ... ἤδη δέ ... Here Isocrates introduced the subject of his illness by which he sought to emphasize the difficulty he experienced in completing the work. He tells us that he became ill when the discourse was approximately half written (cf. ἤδη δὲ τῶν ἡμισέων γεγραμμένων 262), probably towards the end of 342, the year in which he began writing³. Despite his illness, Isocrates refused to put the work aside and persevered with its composition, much to the amazement and admiration of his acquaintances (267–268). Isocrates stated in these paragraphs that he did not stop working on the *Panathenaicus* during the period of his illness and emphasized the point by means of a figure of speech in which he personified his illness as a formidable adversary whom he overcame. The statement in question is that contained in the words οὕτω φιλοπόνως ἐκάστην τὴν ἡμέραν διάγων (267). Isocrates here declared that he spent each day of his illness working away industriously, and the context makes it certain that he was working on the *Panathenaicus*. His rate of progress slowed appreciably due to his ill health, as the fact that it took him three years to complete the second half of the discourse testifies, but there can be no doubt that he intended his reader to understand that the work of composition continued throughout the period of his illness⁴.

Having said that he continued to work each day on the *Panathenaicus*, Isocrates then emphasized the point through his use of language. He described the illness as 'attacking' him (cf. ἐπιγενομένου μοι νοσήματος 267) and himself as 'fighting' against it (cf. τούτῳ διατελῶ τρί' ἔτη μαχόμενος 267). The strug-

³ It is necessary to assume this date for the onset of the illness because we are told that it lasted approximately three years (267) and that Isocrates completed the *Panathenaicus* in his ninety-seventh year (270), that is, in 339. Presumably Isocrates originally intended to publish it towards the end of 341. The evidence for the date of Isocrates' birth has been discussed by F. Blass, *op. cit. supra* n. 1, vol. 2, 9–10, 319–320, and L. F. Smith, *The genuineness of the ninth and third letters of Isocrates* (Diss. Columbia 1940) 22–30.

⁴ In retrospect Isocrates may have been well pleased with the four years that it took him to complete the *Panathenaicus*; it was said that he spent ten years (or was it fifteen?) in composing the *Panegyricus*. See [Plut.], *Mor.* 837F, cf. *Mor.* 350E; Quintil., *Inst.* 10, 4, 4. See also F. Blass (*op. cit. supra* n. 1, vol. 2, 254–255) who opted for the lesser number on the presupposition that Isocrates was influenced in his choice of composition by Gorgias' Olympic oration of 392; however, the date of Gorgias' oration is uncertain and may be earlier.

gle, he implied, was an unequal one given his advanced age, for the disease was one well able to kill many men in the prime of life to say nothing of the elderly. The seemingly gratuitous information that the disease can kill ‘in three or four days’ (267) becomes meaningful when contrasted with the three years during which Isocrates endured its assaults. The language is clearly the language of struggle, in which Isocrates portrayed himself as the staunch defender of the work he was determined to complete in the face of overwhelming odds.

Finally, exhausted by infirmity and old age, he was on the point of abandoning the project when it was nearly complete (cf. ἡμιτελῇ μηδ’ ἀδιέργαστον 268), and it was only the earnest encouragement of well-wishers that persuaded him to finish it in 339 at the age of ninety-seven (268–270). This is the third stage in the argument. The ‘stumble with the finish line in view’, as it were, serves to impress upon the reader in a dramatic manner the author’s determination to complete the discourse.

There can be no doubt that the discourse was close to completion, and not at a half-finished stage, when Isocrates reached the point of exhaustion at which he felt he could no longer continue. This follows logically, for the praise he received because of his industry and fortitude (cf. καρτερία 267) would be meaningless if he had achieved nothing in the period between the onset of the illness and the point at which he felt he must abandon it. We have also Isocrates’ own statement that he allowed himself to be persuaded to press on with the work at a time when he was three years short of having lived a century (270), that is in 339 the year in which he did in fact complete the work. If I am correct in arguing that Isocrates fell ill towards the end of 342 and in view of his three-year struggle with illness, he could not have been far short of his ninety-eighth birthday when he reached the point of exhaustion and had to be importuned to bring the work to completion. There may, however, be some confusion on this point due to the apparent repetition of ἡμισυς (267) and ἡμιτελής (268), which could give the impression that Isocrates arrived at the point of abandoning the discourse when it was only half finished. The illness, it is true, struck Isocrates when he had completed approximately half (ἡμισυς) the discourse which he had planned to write, but the meaning of ἡμιτελῇ μηδ’ ἀδιέργαστον is non-specific referring to a period three years later and is typical of Isocrates’ verbosity, as Brémond realized in translating ‘inachevé ni imparfait’⁵. In addition to this there is the advice of his friends, which suggests that

5 Op. cit. supra n. 1. For the meaning of ἡμιτελής in the sense of ‘incomplete’ compare Isocrates’ contemporary Xenophon: τῶν δ’ ἐπιταχθέντων οὐδὲν ἡμιτελὲς κατελείπομεν (*Cyr.* 8, 1, 3; cf. *Thuc.* 3, 3, 5). We may also note Xenophon’s use of ἡμιτελής in a moral sense to denote the incomplete man (ἀνὴρ ἡμιτελής): the man who has not attained perfection in a particular area, in contrast to the complete man (ἀνὴρ τέλειος) (*Cyr.* 3, 3, 38); cf. *Panath.* 32, 242, *Dion. Hal., Dem.* 23. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Thuc.* 9) used ἡμιτελής and ἀτελής interchangeably in criticising Thucydides for his practice of leaving one subject incomplete and jumping to another: ἀφείς δὲ καὶ ταύτην ἀτελῇ ... ἀφείς δὲ καὶ ταῦτα ἡμιτελῇ ... ἀτελεῖς δὲ καὶ τοὺς ἡπειρωτικούς πολέμους καταλιπὼν ...

he had completed the major part of the Panathenaicus before he faltered: ἀλλὰ πονῆσαι μικρὸν χρόνον ... (268).

The words ἤδη δ' ἀπειρηκότος (268) have also caused some misunderstanding. The translations of both Norlin and Brémond, for example, suggest that Isocrates actually ceased work on the discourse for a period of time: “When, however, I had at length given up my work”, and “Déjà la maladie et l'âge m'avaient contraint de renoncer à mon projet”. The sense should properly be rendered ‘Having reached the point of exhaustion due to illness and old age’, the exhaustion, of course, signifying that he no longer felt able to continue his exemplary efforts⁶. There is no suggestion here that Isocrates actually abandoned the work at any stage.

Isocrates could not have emphasized more strongly the importance he attached to the Panathenaicus than by the account in the epilogue in which he recalled the extraordinary circumstances under which he worked to complete the discourse. That is to say, he wished his readers to appreciate that the effort he put into completing the Panathenaicus was in direct proportion to the value he placed on it. It is with this in mind that we may best interpret the explanatory statement (271–272) with which the discourse concludes, this being the fourth and final stage in the argument. Here Isocrates declared that his account of the composition of the Panathenaicus should not be seen as an apology. Rather he intended that it should commend the judgment of those among his audience who approved both the present discourse and similar discourses dealing with serious topics; that is, discourses which have truth as their aim and which seek to instruct and advise. The Panathenaicus, Isocrates implied, was worth the extraordinary effort which he put into its production through three years of debilitating illness because it was such a discourse.

The argument of paragraphs 266–272 is constructed, therefore, in such a way as to emphasize Isocrates' fortitude in persevering with the composition of the Panathenaicus against all odds throughout the period of his illness. The argument as always is paramount when interpreting any Isocratean work. There was no break in composition, as has generally been assumed. Indeed, as I have attempted to prove, Isocrates was intent on arguing the very opposite position to this. It is a curious fact that the literal meaning of Isocrates' words has been disregarded by the majority of commentators on the Panathenaicus at least since Schaefer's time and that the misunderstanding has been so readily and uncritically accepted and perpetuated. To my knowledge R. C. Jebb is the exception among those who have written on the question of the composition of the Panathenaicus to have accepted Isocrates' words at face value. “The Panathenaicus”, Jebb wrote, “was begun in 342. It was about half-finished when he was attacked by a disease against which – when he finished the discourse in 339

⁶ See LSJ s.v. ἀπείπων IV 3 (noted as most common meaning), and compare παντάπασιν ἣν ἀπειρηκώς in *Ep.* 3, 4, written at approximately the same time.

– he had been fighting for three years. But he was still working hard every day.”⁷

The belief in a three-year break in composition has been a crucial element in most interpretations of the *Panathenaicus* at least since 1910, when Paul Wendland published his landmark paper⁸. Wendland argued that the *Panathenaicus* was intended to be a reiteration of the political programme which Isocrates had urged upon Philip in the *Philippus*. When, however, Isocrates came to resume the discourse in 339 after his three-year illness, Athens was openly at war with Macedon and the original plan had to be abandoned. This, argued Wendland, accounted for the lack of thematic unity in the *Panathenaicus*, for the theme of the second half of the discourse (beginning at paragraph 108) became the merely academic one of comparing the Athenian and Spartan constitutions.

The trend begun by Wendland to interpret the *Panathenaicus* in terms of specific contemporary political events and to relate these to the supposed lengthy break in composition has been followed in one form or another by K. Münscher, F. Zucker, A. Momigliano and E. N. Tigerstedt⁹. To the extent that the interpretations of these influential commentators amongst others rely on the evidence of the epilogue to the *Panathenaicus* for a three-year break in composition they must now be considered doubtful.

The result of the present investigation has, of course, no direct bearing on the question of the thematic unity of the *Panathenaicus*, indisputably the most enigmatic of Isocrates’ writings. The answer to the vexed question of unity can only be found through analysis of the discourse’s rhetorical structure¹⁰.

⁷ *The Attic Orators* (London 1893) vol. 2, 11–12. See also 121.

⁸ Op. cit. supra n. 1.

⁹ See works cited supra n. 1 and E. N. Tigerstedt, *The legend of Sparta in classical antiquity* (Stockholm 1965).

¹⁰ C. Schäublin and C. Eucken (op. cit. supra n. 1) have led a reaction to the critical tradition by arguing for the unity of the *Panathenaicus* on the basis of internal evidence. My own view, as argued in my Masters thesis, is that Isocrates set out to summarise the essential elements of his φιλοσοφία especially his panhellenism, by means of contrasting paradigms of right and wrong political morality, as represented by his depiction of Athens and Sparta, and through his use of λόγοι ἀμφίβολοι.