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Introduction: Libanius at the margins

Lieve Van Hoof

Late Antiquity and rhetoric, especially of the Second Sophistic, have been two burgeoning fields of research within Classics and Ancient History over the last few decades. As one of the most talented, prolific and well-conserved rhetoricians of Late Antiquity, Libanius (AD 314–393) is a crucial author for any scholar studying either of these fields. Nevertheless, Libanius does not figure prominently in publications on rhetoric or Late Antiquity. Studies on rhetoric tend to present Libanius as the 'last of the Mohicans' – if at all, for most studies of imperial rhetoric stop at around AD 250. Studies on Late Antiquity, on the other hand, almost invariably refer to Libanius, but in most cases merely in order to back up prosopographical data, document specific facts, or provide parallel passages for other sources. Several decades ago, the works of Libanius lay, in fact, at the basis of some of the most important and influential studies in the field, such as Jones' magisterial *The Later Roman Empire 284–602*, Liebeschuetz's still standard *Antioch: City and Imperial Administration in the Later Roman Empire*, and the first volume of the indispensable *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* (*PLRE*), edited by Jones, Martindale and Morris.[1] These studies, like many others, quarry Libanius' letters and orations as one of their main sources of information on the later Roman Empire. But whilst several works of Libanius are thus often used or mentioned, the author and his oeuvre themselves largely remain at the margins of broader scholarly interest.

The principal reason why Libanius has mainly been used as a static piece of evidence is that he left behind an exceptionally large and rich oeuvre, the basic instruments for exploring which were long lacking. Since Bernard Schouler's 1984 two-volume *La tradition hellénique chez Libanios*, however, an exponentially increasing number of highly specialized studies have laid the groundwork upon which further studies can now be built: a detailed

[1] Jones (1964), Liebeschuetz (1972), Jones, Martindale and Morris (1971). On Jones, see the collection edited by Gwynn (2008); on Liebeschuetz (as well as Brown and Matthews), see Wiemer (2013).

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biography of the author, albeit in German, has been composed by Jorit Wintjes; well more than half of all Libanius' works have been translated in various modern languages; concordances cover his letters and orations; commentaries and studies are available on some of the most important texts in the corpus; and a brief, German introduction to the author has recently been published by Heinz-Günther Nesselrath.[2] A useful survey of publications on Libanius from 1990 to 2007 has been composed by Pierre-Louis Malosse.[3] In the same article, Malosse also presents the *Centre Libanios*, to which many scholars working on the author are, in some way or other, attached. The *Centre* has been instrumental in bringing together Libanius scholars from across the globe and in offering them, and anybody who is interested, free access to a range of useful resources. Yet like all 'centres' or 'international societies' dedicated to the study of one particular author, it also entails the risk of enclosing the author within a small circle of scholars. Indeed, with few exceptions – most recently Raffaella Cribiore's 2013 *Libanius the Sophist*, but also her 2007 study on *The School of Libanius in Late Antique Antioch* as well as Isabella Sandwell's 2007 *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity* and Hans-Ulrich Wiemer's 1994 *Libanios und Julian* – most of the publications discussed by Malosse have not fundamentally affected broader scholarship on, say, ancient rhetoric or Late Antiquity.

Given the recent publication of a number of preliminary studies, it now seems time to catapult Libanius from the relatively small world of the *Centre Libanios* onto the reading desks of scholars working on ancient rhetoric and Late Antiquity, but also on epistolography, social history, (auto)biography, intertextuality and reception studies. This volume wishes to offer a three-step run-up to this quantum leap. First, it argues that Libanius deserves and needs a much more sophisticated approach than he usually gets: the systematic mining of his oeuvre as a source of information, often based on superficial readings and literal interpretations of selected texts, not only misrepresents the author and his views, but also fails to realize the potential of these extraordinarily rich texts. The three chapters that compose Part I of this volume introduce the reader to Libanius, to his usual activities and exceptional events, to his setbacks and successes. But above all, they demonstrate what is to be gained by a careful literary as well as historical analysis of the ways in which Libanius constructs his life (Chapter 1) and

[2] Biography: Wintjes (2005); Concordances: Fatouros, Krischer and Najock (1987a), (1987b), (1989a), (1989b) and (1989c), Najock (1996), (2000a) and (2000b); General introduction: Nesselrath (2012). For a list of translations of Libanius' works, see the Appendices.

[3] Malosse (2009a). An important study that was omitted from this survey but in which Libanius is cited more often than any other author is Brown's brilliant 1992 *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*.

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self-image in negative (Chapter 2) as well as positive (Chapter 3) circumstances. If this first step hopes to convince the reader that Libanius has much more to offer than is usually assumed, Part II wishes to help especially those who are not specialized in Libanius to navigate his oeuvre. Indeed, given the wide range of texts that have been conserved, Libanius is not easy to access. Whilst a list of available translations can be found in the Appendices, Part II of the volume offers a detailed introduction to the different genres represented in the Libanian text corpus: orations (Chapter 4), declamations (Chapter 5), *progymnasmata* (Chapter 6) and letters (Chapter 7).[4] At the same time, these chapters also offer a survey of research that has already been done on each of these genres in the Libanian text corpus, and suggest avenues for future research. Throughout his oeuvre, Libanius was greatly concerned about his self-presentation, and left some important clues as to the publication of his texts. As will be shown, he 'wrote with posterity in mind'. The final chapter of Part II therefore brings together the threads woven in Parts I and II in a study of Libanius' reception (Chapter 8). Part III, finally, presents a number of key themes and topics that recur throughout Libanius' works in order to show how Libanius offers an unusually, indeed a uniquely, good opportunity to examine important issues such as interactions with and perceptions of emperors (Chapter 9), social networks (Chapter 10), intertextuality with literature ranging from Homer to Libanius' own days (Chapter 11), constructions of cultural identity (Chapter 12), and religion in Late Antiquity (Chapter 13). Indeed, in a world that was changing fast – with Christianity challenging 'paganism', Latin expanding at the expense of Greek, law studies offering an alternative education to rhetoric, and the imperial centres pulling powers away from individual cities such as Antioch – Libanius, a pagan professor of Greek rhetoric hailing from an influential Antiochene family, was a privileged witness as well as an engaged advocate.

[4] In addition, Libanius also composed summaries (*hypotheses*) of the speeches of Demosthenes. For this part of the Libanian output, see Gibson (1999) and www.stoa.org/projects/demos/article_libanius?page=1.

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PART I

Reading Libanius

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CHAPTER 1

Libanius' Life *and life*

Lieve Van Hoof

1.1 Introduction: Libanius' life and *Lives* of Libanius

Libanius' life is well-known.[1] He was born in Antioch, one of the largest and most important cities of the Roman Empire, in 314. Hailing from a curial and influential, yet somewhat impoverished family, he enjoyed a good education and decided to dedicate himself to rhetoric in his mid-teens. After thoroughly familiarizing himself with classical rhetoric and pursuing his studies with Diophantus in Athens from 336 to 340, he embarked upon a sophistic career. Active at first in Constantinople, where he enjoyed great success, he left the new capital after a few years for Nicaea. From there, he soon went on to Nicomedia. Although the future emperor Julian, also in Nicomedia at the time, never attended Libanius' classes, the two men probably got to know each other at least indirectly. In 349, Libanius returned to Constantinople, where he was honoured by several governors, the senate and the emperor Constantius II, and once more became a celebrated professor of Greek rhetoric. After spending the summer of 353 in Antioch, however, he decided, against the wishes of the emperor, to return to his home city for good. From 354 until his death, he taught rhetoric there, first as a private teacher, but soon as the city's official sophist. By speaking and writing to emperors (Julian, but also Valens and Theodosius), governors, city councillors and other people, he also took an active part in public life, although he probably never held any official position in the imperial administration. Libanius lived together with a

Most of the work on this chapter was done during my time as a Senior Postdoctoral Researcher based at Bonn University, and funded by the Humboldt Foundation. I thank both institutions, as well as my colleagues in Bonn, esp. Thomas Schmitz and Owen Hodkinson, for their discussions.

[1] The division of the events listed here over the different paragraphs of Libanius' *Autobiography* can be found in Table 1 (Section 1.2), which gives a survey of the text's contents. The fullest recent biography of Libanius is Wintjes (2005). A more succinct overview of his life and works can be found in Jones, Martindale and Morris (1971), 505–7, Liebeschuetz (1972), 1–39 and Nesselrath (2012), 11–36.

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woman of socially inferior standing, by whom he had an illegitimate son called Cimon. The latter's death preceded his own, which occurred in 393.

To reconstruct these and other elements of Libanius' life, several literary sources are available. On the one hand, scholars can draw on Libanius' own preserved output: his *Autobiography*, more than 1500 letters, and, to a lesser extent, his orations and rhetorical exercises. On the other hand, Libanius' life is described in Eunapius' *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* (16.1–2, 495–6 Giangrande (1956), 81–5), as well as in Photius' *Library* (codex 90, 67b11–21) and the tenth- or eleventh-century lexicon *Suda* (esp. Λ 486 Adler). Of the two most elaborate ancient biographies of Libanius, that by the author himself and that by Eunapius, the latter presents Libanius as an extremely ambitious rhetorician and a versatile or even opportunistic flatterer, and suggests that Libanius was accused of pederasty. Eunapius' account of Libanius' life was written shortly after the latter's death[2] and precedes Libanius' works in most codices at least since Lacapenus (fl. 1300) as well as in Richard Foerster's standard edition of the text.[3] Yet usually, it is dismissed in modern studies of Libanius for being too biased. Eunapius' self-interested admiration for his teacher Prohaeresius, it is true, did not play out to Libanius' advantage. His account is therefore to be treated with great care. As a result, scholars have turned to one text above all others for reconstructing Libanius' life: his *Autobiography*, transmitted as *Oration* 1 in the manuscripts of Libanius' works and entitled[4] *Life, or: On His Own Fortune* (henceforth: *Life*). It is this text that lies at the basis of modern accounts of Libanius' life, such as Gottlob Reinhold Sievers' 1868 *Das Leben des Libanius* and Jorit Wintjes' 2005 homonymous study.[5] In moving from Libanius' *Life* to his life, these and other scholars have largely taken the former at face value, as an objective reconstruction of the latter[6]. Where it can be compared with the other available sources, Libanius' *Life* indeed avoids any blatant lies about his life.[7]

[2] For the dating of Eunapius' *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* between 396 and 399, see Civiletti (2007), 13, with further bibliography.
[3] Foerster (1903a), 1–3.
[4] As this title does not occur in all the manuscripts, it is unlikely that it stems from Libanius himself. It does, however, capture well the importance of *Tychē* in the text, as shown in Section 1.6.
[5] A survey of biographical work on Libanius can be found in Wintjes (2005), 12–16, to which Foerster and Münscher (1925) and Nesselrath (2012) should be added. Letters confirming various events recounted in the *Autobiography* can be found in *PLRE*, 505–7.
[6] Cf. Nesselrath (2012), 34: 'die neuere Forschung <ist> mehrheitlich geneigt, Libanios' Selbstaussagen in erheblichem Umfang Glauben zu schenken'.
[7] Cribiore (2013), 38–49 compares the *Autobiography* to the *Letters*, and concludes that '[t]he letters reveal the use of some creative license in the Bios, but on the whole they confirm the integrity of its main historical fabric'.

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As this chapter will show, however, the relationship between Libanius' life and his *Life* is not simply mimetic – a fact taken for granted in studies on most other (auto)biographies, but thus far not explored for Libanius. Whilst we have no ancient theoretical discussions of autobiography as a genre,[8] Cicero and Tacitus, in their famous comments on it, consider the writing of an autobiography 'necessarily an exercise in self-praise',[9] and at least some ancient autobiographers consciously played on their readers' expectations of bias.[10] Judging by the opening passage of his *Life*, Libanius too seems to have counted with expectations of bias:

> Some people labour under a misapprehension in the opinions they entertain about my fortune. There are some who, as a result of this applause which greets my oratory, assert that I am the happiest of men; there are, on the other hand, those who, considering my incessant perils and pains, would have it that I am the wretchedest man alive. Now each of these verdicts is far removed from the truth, and I must endeavour to correct them by a narration of my past and present circumstances, so that all may know that heaven has granted me a mixture of fortunes, and that I am neither the happiest nor the unhappiest of men. (§1; transl. Norman (1992a), 53 modified)

In an almost topical way, Libanius claims to correct (ἐπανορθῶσαι) other visions of his life: as opposed to positively or negatively biased presentations that focus either on his successes or on his setbacks and that therefore see him as either the happiest or the unhappiest of men, he contends to present the true (cf. τῆς ἀλήθειας) account of his life by narrating (διηγήσει) his past and present circumstances. The narration of historical events, however, involves much more than merely 'setting the record straight': as Hayden White has stressed, events are being emplotted, and different historical narratives emplot the same events in different ways.[11] In line with this,

[8] For modern discussions of ancient autobiography, see Misch (1907), Courcelle (1957), Momigliano (1971), 57–62, Most (1989), 122–30, Lewis (1993), Reichel (2005) and various essays in McGing and Mossman (2007), Marincola (2007), Smith and Powell (2008) and Feldherr (2009) and (2011). Vessey (2005), 249, in discussing Apuleius' speech in Carthage, talks about the '*genus semonstrativum*' and 'autodeictic' oratory.

[9] Riggsby (2007), 267. The passages in question are Cicero's *Letters to Friends* 5.12.8 and Tacitus' *Agricola* 1.3.

[10] As Pelling (2009) has demonstrated, the emperor Augustus, when composing his (now lost) *Autobiography*, was very much aware of the biased nature of the genre, and turned the reader's *obvious* expectations of bias to his own advantage: by being rather more objective in passages where readers would expect bias, he gained credibility in other passages where he did present a biased image.

[11] White (1974), 193 defined emplotment as 'the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures, in precisely the way that Frye has suggested is the case with "fictions" in general'.

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recent research on autobiography considers 'narrativity as a vital factor in the construction of identity',[12] and emphasizes, moreover, that autobiographical emplotments tend to be influenced by concerns at the time of writing rather than by past experience.[13] As such, then, historical and autobiographical narratives share important characteristics with narrative fiction, and can be examined through the lens of narratology. A careful narratological examination does not only point out shared characteristics, though. On the contrary: as Dorrit Cohn[14] and others have emphasized in reaction to Hayden White, non-fictional texts such as histories or autobiographies are narratologically distinct from fictional texts, for example through the identity of author, narrator, and character, and through the constraints placed on possible emplotments by the extra-textual level, especially if they have to count with cognizant readers, readers, that is, who are 'consciously or half-consciously comparing the textual world with the extratextual reality (which he or she may have knowledge about or have been a witness to)'.[15]

As an autobiography, then, Libanius' *Life* is not the straightforward text it has often been taken to be: careful literary analysis is necessary before historical data can be derived from it. Indeed, Bernard Schouler has noted that the *Autobiography* 'n'est pas témoignage vécu, journal, mémoires, réflexions à bâtons rompus. Le moi ne s'y exprime jamais dans sa spontanéité. Elle ne prétend aucunement à la sincérité'.[16] Taking this not as the end point but instead as the starting point of analysis, the following pages read Libanius' *Life* as a narrative text against the background of his life as well as against competing narratives of that life, especially Eunapius' *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*. Doing so will help us to see how Libanius' *Life* functions as a literary text, what the relationship is between his *Life* and his life, and what all this means for our understanding of the author and his life. Starting from previous analyses of the *Autobiography*, Section 1.2 pleads for a functional rather than a genetic approach to the text. The next three sections offer analyses of particular passages of the text: whilst Section 1.3 argues that the *Autobiography* constructs Libanius' life, rather than merely *re*constructing it, Section 1.4 explains how this construction was influenced

[12] Löschnigg (2010), 256. Cf. also below, Section 1.3.
[13] Cf. Olney (1972), 44. Cf. also below, Section 1.4.
[14] Cohn (1990). For a succinct account of the mixture of truth and fiction in autobiography, see e.g. Eakin (1985), 3–16.
[15] Shen and Xu (2007), 48. Whilst I agree with Shen and Xu (2007), 48 that cognizant readers 'may be totally unsought by, and unwelcome to, the autobiographer', I disagree with Most (1989), 122 and n. 32, who defines autobiography as 'an extended first-person narrative *told to strangers*' (my italics, LVH): as will become clear below, Libanius heavily counts with cognizant readers.
[16] Schouler (1993), 322–3.

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