

REVIEW

THE WORLD OF LIBANIUS

Lieve Van Hoof, ed., *Libanius: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xvi + 387. Hardback, £75.00/\$120.00. ISBN 978-1-107-01377-3.

In the last twenty years or so we have seen increased scholarly interest in the late antique sophist Libanius. Any reader of this volume will soon understand why. Libanius stands, as Van Hoof states (p. 316), ‘at the crossroads between Antiquity and Byzantium’. He has one foot in the Greek tradition, and the other in contemporary late Roman culture. He is the spider in the web of a huge network of late antique Greek intellectuals. He seems to personally have known almost each and every prominent cultural and political figure of the fourth century. And when one also realizes how huge, and yet how little studied, the preserved Libanian textual corpus is, there is no wonder that scholars have now begun to pay attention to the works of this author. The texts are not only historically important and exciting: they also promise the coming of groundbreaking studies, within a multitude of branches of learning. But it is also a fact that much of the basic groundwork remains to be done. When it comes to, for example, the question of translations into modern languages there are gaps. And although great achievements have been made by Donald A. Russell (*Libanius. Imaginary Speeches* (1996)), Craig Gibson (*Libanius’s Progyrnasmata. Model Exercises in Greek Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (2008)), Raffaella Cribiore (*Between City and School. Selected Orations of Libanius* (2015)), and others, there are still many of Libanius’ texts that remain untranslated, not least when it comes to the often neglected declamations. Van Hoof (2) states that ‘more than half of all Libanius’ works have been translated in various modern languages’. That still leaves quite an amount for the future.

The volume consists of a short introduction by the editor (Van Hoof) followed by three larger separate parts. Part one, ‘Reading Libanius’, consists of three chapters. Van Hoof (‘Libanius’ *Life and Life*, 7–38) discusses the *Autobiography* and the problems any reader who tries to reconstruct Libanius’ life from it has to tackle. She stresses that the text is biased and apologetic, and that it should be read with caution. Throughout the *Autobiography* Libanius ‘constructs’ his own ‘life with hindsight’. Edward Watts (‘The Historical Context: The Rhetoric of Suffering in Libanius’ Monodies, Letters, and Autobiography’, 39–58) continues by showing how Libanius’ own tragic experiences become important and useful rhetorical components of his orations and letters

(Libanius suffered from various illnesses and saw many of those nearest to him die tragically). Raffaella Cribiore ('The Rhetorical Context: Traditions and Opportunities', 59–78) offers a general outline of late antiquity's system of higher education and rhetorical culture. These three articles argue caution in using Libanius' letters and orations as truth-telling historical sources.

Part two, 'Libanius' Texts: Rhetoric, Self-Presentation, and Reception', contains valuable overviews of the Libanian corpus. Pierre-Louis Malosse (†2013) treats the orations (81–106), Robert Penella the declamations (107–27), Craig A. Gibson the *progymnasmata* (128–43), and Bernadette Cabouret the letters (144–59). Penella's discussion on how to understand Libanius' declamations (122–7) touches upon the interesting (but insoluble) question of whether there lies any deeper purpose behind the declamations. Are they to be seen as just rhetorical mumbo-jumbo? Or did the declaimer actually want to say something important? And if he did, what? What we can conclude about the declamations is that they were, as Penella writes, pieces of literature. And probably, at least within some parts of the Greek community, they were important for creating or maintaining a Greek cultural identity. And perhaps, then, we could occasionally also take the fictitious characters of the declamations and their often dim manifestos as the *vores scriptorum*. What is also interesting in Penella's chapter is the suggestion that some declamations or themes could have served as moral pointers. 'That declamations could have played a role in the psycho-social maturation of young men' is, as Penella puts it, 'attractive' (126). There are many of the preserved declamations, not only in the Libanian corpus, that seem to deal with moral issues. The conflicts between good and evil, right and wrong, law and nature are all popular themes.

After the four chapters on the corpus, we find a substantial paper by Heinz-Günther Nesselrath and Van Hoof on the reception of Libanius (160–83). The authors show that, even though few (or none) of the works of Libanius ever counted as public property, there have been times in history when Libanius was less forgotten (or more known). Libanius was read and imitated. In the fifteenth century, for example, the demand for texts attributed to Libanius seems to have been so strong within certain intellectual circles that forgers found it worth their while to forge manuscripts under his name (172). Finally (and most welcome), a light is shed also on modern scholars (from Förster to the present).

Part three, 'Contexts: Identity, Society, Tradition', deals with Libanius as a man of his age. Hans-Ulrich Wiemer ('Emperors and Empire in Libanius', 187–219) discusses Libanius' relations with Roman imperial power. A great deal of the chapter (naturally) focuses on Libanius and the emperor Julian, but Wiemer also reminds us of the professionalism of Libanius (and other pagans) when it comes to composing, for example, *encomia* to Christian emperors. Libanius may have greatly admired Julian, but he was able to respect also the subsequent Christian emperors in his orations. Also in this chapter caution in

using Libanius as a reliable historical source is stressed. That Libanius does not show any nostalgia for a lost ancient Greek world and that he ‘shows no anti-Roman bias’ (212) are probably in all essentials true. But here one might perhaps have problematized the question whether or not, for example, the historical declamations manifest both nostalgia for the past and criticism of Rome. (For example, declaimers deliberately omit themes from Roman history.) Would it even have been possible for Libanius to expressly dissociate himself from Rome?

Scott Bradbury (‘Libanius’ Networks’, 220–40) describes the wide-embracing personal networks of Libanius based on the surviving letters. Libanius had connections far and wide within the empire. Heinz-Günther Nesselrath (‘Libanius and the Literary Tradition’, 241–67) gives a historical overview of how scholars traditionally have argued about Libanius’ familiarity with earlier and contemporary Greek literature (beginning with Förster, via Norman, to Schouler and Martin). Bradbury also analyzes the literary reminiscences in two of Libanius’ orations (*Or.* 5 and *Or.* 17). The conclusion drawn from this chapter seems to be that the number of literary references in an oration, as well as which ones were used, is dependent both on who the recipient was and on the aim of the oration. New to me is that Libanius, besides referring to a large number of Classical texts and genres, to a certain extent also seems to have appreciated contemporary literature (254–5). However, I cannot help but wonder whether a broader analysis also of the literary tradition within the declamations would have made the conclusions drawn in this chapter more complete. Now focus lies on the letters and the orations. Part three ends with two interesting and well-written chapters by Jan R. Stenger (‘Libanius and the ‘Game’ of Hellenism’, 268–92) and Peter Van Nuffelen (‘Not the Least Pagan: Libanius between Elite Rhetoric and Religion’, 293–314).

The volume offers valuable appendices with neatly arranged tables of the works of Libanius and available translations (even some into Swedish and Danish!). These will be of great help to students and researchers. The tables also show the need for more translations of many central texts. (The publication of my translations of *Declamations* 17–23 lies a couple of years in the future.)

Throughout the book much focus is given to the orations and the letters. I would not claim that this is a strange or incorrect *modus operandi*, since the other texts (the declamations and the *progymnasmata*) have their obvious limits as to what kind of information one can extract from them. But concerning certain specific matters (literary tradition, the question of Hellenism, etc.) discussed in the volume, the declamations and the (authentic) *progymnasmata* need including in the discussion if we are fully to understand Libanius as a central cultural figure of the fourth century.

The short epilogue by the editor (315–16) could, in my view, partly be read as an apology for why this book deserved to be published at all. But Van Hoof

has nothing to apologize for. *Libanius: A Critical Introduction* is an altogether important book about an important (and nowadays among scholars not quite so forgotten) late antique Greek author.

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