

Nontraditional Pathways in Roman Education: Outsiders or Role Models?
– Late learners, Autodidacts, and Disabled Students –

My paper analyzes what literary evidence of special pathways in Roman education reveals to us about the social norms of the intellectual community in the late Roman Empire. Specifically, I investigate how intellectuals framed late learners, autodidacts, and disabled students. My literary analysis suggests that even celebrated intellectuals from nontraditional paths were presented as outsiders and a threat to established traditions of authority. This framing thus reinforced the power structures defined by intellectuals from traditional elite background. My paper continues prior scholarship on how orations and school texts communicated gender expectations (see Gleason 1995, Whitmarsh 2001: 109-116) and reinforced social inequalities of power and wealth (see Connolly 2012). This paper analyzes how intellectuals framed those studying and teaching in nontraditional ways and through biographical anecdotes reinforced structures of inequality.

Prior scholarship shows that “being a late learner” (ὄψιμαθής) was originally a neutral description for someone who was learning later than their peers but from Hellenistic times onwards was used pejoratively by the educated elite to marginalize educational parvenus from the lower classes and reinforce their own status and power as educated elite (see Schmitz 1997: 146-156). My paper analyzes the designation ὄψιμαθής after the second century C.E. and observes that intellectuals in the later Roman Empire are more interested in the educational biographies of late learners and even acknowledge positive effects of overcoming educational challenges. Damascius, for example, acknowledges the late learner Superianus as “hard-working and zealous” (ἐπίπονος καὶ σπουδαῖος). In contrast to earlier authors, Damascius assesses late learners by the same parameters of success as traditional learners and identifies even famous

members of the intellectual community as “late learners”. My paper suggests that the more nuanced response to late learners in the late Roman Empire is connected to the progressive institutionalization of education and the increasing importance of credentials.

By comparison, I suggest that the evaluation of the term “autodidact” (αὐτοδίδακτος) was informed by a long tradition of scolding human hubris in respect of the divine, going back all the way to the Homeric bards, and reiterated by intellectuals from the late second century C.E. onwards, including the pagan author Maximus and the theologian Tatian. In late antiquity, intellectuals still autodidacts portrayed in a positive light when they were self-teaching by divine guidance, such as Aelius Aristides (*or.* 2.16-19) and denounced self-teaching without as evil, such as John Chrysostom (see *PG* 49:140) and Synesius (see *De providentia* 2.5). My paper suggests that autodidacts threatened structures of power and authority in Greco-Roman culture generally and the educated elite specifically by sidestepping the elite networks of education and the gatekeeping of the intellectual community.

The last section of my paper illustrates that disabled teachers such as Didymus “the Blind” could attain high ranks among intellectuals but nonetheless were sought as an attraction rather than a colleague. In addition, they were singled out by Christians as a “miracle” (e.g., Jerome *Vir.* 109) and as people of special skills who can see the biblical truth and meaning behind the scripture. Finally, the late learner Lachares who was temporarily blind illustrates that each scholar suffering from visual or learning disabilities or disadvantaged by their background was unique as they were learning in a different environment and might have experienced one or several disadvantages at different stages in their education and for different periods of time.

The framing of late learners, autodidacts, and disabled students in late antiquity suggests that the social norms of the Roman intellectual community were modeled on the educated elite

from traditional backgrounds. Late learners, autodidacts, and disabled students – despite being recognized for their perseverance and achievement – were marked as outsiders as soon as they left the recognized pathways of elite schooling. My paper investigates how the power of elite narrative reinforced social inequality in antiquity and still can today: For example, identifying students as “underserved” or “underprepared” illustrates that even today the perspectives of intellectuals mostly from traditional pathways of education shape our educational norms, policies, and finally the level of inclusion in our community.

My paper will appeal to scholars interested in the intellectual and non-elite history of the Roman Empire, ancient education, imperial Greek literature, Christian historiography, and late antiquity.

Bibliography

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