

Libanius' Biography: New Perspectives on Roman Education

The fourth-century teacher Libanius was widely acknowledged as a successful intellectual but did not conform with the image of intellectuals portrayed by biographers such as Eunapius. On the contrary, Libanius prided himself in growing up with his mother, being his own guardian and overcoming educational challenges abroad. This paper argues that Libanius took an alternative educational pathway that defined himself as a teacher and challenged the social norms of Roman higher education.

Prior scholarship discussed whether Libanius was a flatterer (see Penella 2012) and moved from analyzing the historical to the literary value of his autobiography (see van Hoof 2014). This paper, by contrast, calls attention to the value of Libanius as a witness to the social norms and diverse experiences in Roman higher education.

Libanius reflects his educational pathway and studies abroad as no other ancient author does in the first part of his autobiography (*or.* 1.1–155). Taking advantage of his insider view, my paper analyzes how Libanius presents his family background and educational pathway and in which ways his autobiography deviates from the account of his *life* written by the contemporary biographer Eunapius. This literary analysis will shed light on the tropes used in ancient educational biographies of successful intellectuals. In addition, Libanius publicly shared his own pathway (see van Hoof 2014) and thus informs us about the role that he himself played in shaping the culture of Roman higher education.

While Criore 2014: 62 suggests that “Libanius, like many other students of the upper class, (...) moved to Athens to study rhetoric”, his own narrative emphasizes the hardships that distinguished him from other more privileged students: including traveling the more difficult

path, being deceived by fellow students in Athens, developing coping strategies and suffering from ‘impostor-syndrome’ when first entering the job market. These labors (πόντοι) are related to his family background: Libanius declares himself to be “his own guardian” while studying abroad. To understand how he got into this position, this paper takes a closer look at his family situation.

The *communis opinio* in Classical scholarship is that Libanius came from a “well-off” family (see, e.g., Maxwell 2020: 92). This label, however, ignores Libanius’ orphan status and the socioeconomic situation of his immediate family, to which he himself attributes much weight (*or.* 1.6). Libanius’ is convinced that his life would have been different if his father had lived longer. His educational and family background also shaped Libanius as a teacher and his voice in the intellectual community of late antiquity. This paper illustrates how he was committed in his letters to support orphans and financially insecure students in his school. In addition, he motivates his autobiography as a corrective to public opinions (*or.* 1.1). Different from traditional biographies that cast philosophers or sophists in the best possible light, he seeks a balanced account of successes and losses in an area, ancient academia, in which members typically thrived on extreme positions, claims to ‘the’ one truth and sharp criticism against opponents. Therefore, this paper argues that Libanius redefines what intellectual biographies looked like and who belonged to the educational elite by proudly sharing his own alternative pathway. It adds that, despite this presentation, he used the traditional language of wealth, patriotism, and philanthropy to legitimize his own place among the intellectual elite (*or.* 1.2).

Finally, while Libanius interprets his pathway as strength, the biographer Eunapius interprets it as deficiency that allegedly manifested in Libanius’ weak rhetorical style (*vit.* 495). Despite this criticism, Eunapius acknowledges Libanius’ preeminence and characterizes him as

brimming with confidence and ambition, contrary to Libanius himself. From this case sample we can see how Roman social norms informed the orthodox views of educational biographers and their social prejudice against those who did not comply with the canonical pathway into higher education. Libanius is a fascinating example because he presents a heterodox view of his own educational and family background and thus challenged established social structures and narratives: While Libanius was in the real center of Roman higher education, Eunapius pushed him to the margins of its symbolic center.

This paper should interest scholars of Roman education, ancient biography, late antiquity, Greek rhetoric and the Second Sophistic.

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