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# Libanios, le premier humaniste

## Études en hommage à Bernard Schouler

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# Libanius and the EU presidency. Career moves in the *Autobiography*

The *Autobiography* is one of Libanius' works most often referred to : few are the publications on the author that do not make use of it, especially in order to supply biographical data. At the same time, however, the *Autobiography* is one of Libanius' works least often studied in recent decades : apart from the text editions by Norman and Martin - Petit, only three of articles focus on *Oration 1*, and they do so from the perspective of either the origins of autobiography as a genre, or the role of rhetoric in the opposition between Christianity and « paganism »<sup>1</sup>.

Three facts have been established in these studies. First, the composition of the text : the first part of the text, probably up to §155, was written in 374, as Libanius explicitly indicates (cf. §51) ; the remainder, dealing with events up to 393, clearly after 374, and possibly in multiple stages<sup>2</sup>. The focus of this article will be on the former part. This part of the text – and this is the second established fact – is aimed at a select target audience of friends and students<sup>3</sup> : the first part of the *Autobiography* is not a private diary, but a speech addressed to an audience, yet in *Oration 2*, 12-16, delivered a few years later, Libanius asserts never to have publicly boasted about his probity, his rhetorical labours and successes, the fact that Strategius invited him to Athens, his victories over other teachers – exactly the issues discussed at length in the *Autobiography*. As a result, the *Autobiography* seems to have been delivered for a restricted public, probably one quite positively disposed towards the author, as is clear from *Oration 2*, 13, as well as from the tone of the *Autobiography* itself<sup>4</sup>. The third established fact, finally, is that Libanius' narration of his own life is not always factually correct : in comparison to the *Letters* and other sources, the *Autobiography* omits certain events, inverts the order of others (e.g. §117), and brings together distant ones so as to generate more effect<sup>5</sup>.

In themselves, these so-called inaccuracies suffice to point out the danger inherent in the situation described above, whereby the *Autobiography* is often used as a source of information without having been studied properly. Libanius himself almost warns against such a literal, fact-searching reading by clearly highlighting the specific aim he had in mind when writing the *Autobiography* :

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<sup>1</sup> Text editions : NORMAN 1965, MARTIN - PETIT 1979, NORMAN 1992. Studies : LÓPEZ EIRE 1992, SCHOULER 1993, LIEBESCHUETZ 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. NORMAN 1965, xiii-xv, MARTIN - PETIT 1979, 3-7, NORMAN 1992, 8-9, LIEBESCHUETZ 2006, 265.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. NORMAN 1965, xvii, MARTIN - PETIT 1979, 30-6, LÓPEZ EIRE 1992, 95-6, NORMAN 1992, 9-10. PETIT 1956, 488-9, on the other hand, thought that none of Libanius' *Autobiography* was ever delivered.

<sup>4</sup> In *Oration 2*, 13, Libanius says to have repeated his rhetorical successes often to his students. More generally, at least the first part of the *Autobiography* has none of sharp tone found in some of Libanius' invectives.

<sup>5</sup> The inverted chronological order of §§117-118, for example, was noted by NORMAN 1965, 180 and 1992, 182-3 n. a, and MARTIN - PETIT 1979, 145, supplementary note (p. 238).

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. (*Oration 1*, 1, translation modified<sup>6</sup>).

The *Autobiography*, then, will contain a narration of Libanius' life, yet this narration is intended, and will therefore be shaped, to counter prevailing images of his life, which see it either too positively or too negatively : facts are not so much there for their own sake or for the sake of narrating Libanius' entire life, but will be used, or, for that matter, omitted, in order to make a specific point. The *Autobiography* is, in other words, a rhetorical work with an aim of its own, and therefore needs and merits to be studied in its own right before it can be used for other purposes.

This article offers a contribution to such a study by focusing on Libanius' account of his career moves. In general, Libanius is often linked to Antioch above all other places : the « great sophist of Antioch », as he is often labeled, is taken to have chosen to live in his native city because he hated Constantinople and the imperial powers vested there<sup>7</sup>. This image of Libanius, as we shall see, closely follows the author's self-presentation in the *Autobiography*, especially if one includes its second half. As this article demonstrates, however, this image is not so much a description of reality as a rhetorical construct composed in hindsight and with the specific aim of the *Autobiography* in mind. In order to show this, I shall deal subsequently with Athens, Constantinople, Nicomedia, Constantinople again, and, finally, Antioch.

## 1. Athens or « the Urge for This Way of Life » (§11)

The first « move » in Libanius' career is his decision to go to Athens to complete his studies. In itself, studying in Athens was, of course, nothing out of the ordinary, at least for the elite : Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and the Emperor Julian are only a few examples of men who studied in Athens before embarking on other careers<sup>8</sup>. As Libanius presents it, however, his choice to go to Athens was a choice for a different kind of life (ὁρμή τέ με ἐπὶ τοῦτον εἰσελθούση βίον... ἐπιθυμία τοῦ χωρίου κατελάμβανέ μοι τὴν ψυχὴν, §11)<sup>9</sup>. Had he not made this conscious choice, Libanius suggests, he would now be engaged in « a career in local politics, for instance, or law, or even in the imperial administration » (§6), as intended for him first by his father, later by his uncle Panolbius and his mother. Whilst he could, in other

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are taken from NORMAN 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. WINTJES 2005, 95-97.

<sup>8</sup> Many others must have followed the example of these famous men. Flavianus, for example, studied with Himerius in Athens before becoming proconsul of Achaëa (Himerius, *Oration 12*, 36). For more examples, see WINTJES 2005, 71-2 and 75.

<sup>9</sup> This refusal of worldly values is confirmed later in the text, when Libanius refuses to be seduced by fathers offering large dowries for their daughters and prefers to go to Athens instead (§12), where he does not accept any gifts from his friend Crispinus except for books (§54), and when he endures the loss of 1500 staters with equanimity and refuses compensation for it (§§61-62). Much later in the *Autobiography*, Libanius also suggests that « to live at home » was a more important factor in his move to Antioch than the promise of a big salary (§92).

words, have had the usual career of a person of curial rank, he preferred to become a sophist. The positive character of this choice is highlighted not only through reference to Phasganius' suggestion that a stay in Athens promised great returns (καρποῦ μεγάλου, §13), but also through repeated suggestions to the reader that « it is not difficult » (§6) and « it will be clear » (§14) how his choice for a sophistic life should be evaluated : whilst most readers would, in all probability, not have been so sure as to whether a sophistic career was a good choice, Libanius thus teaches them, at the beginning of his *Autobiography*, that the life he chose not only yields good results according to worldly standards, but is also a worthwhile choice in itself.

Once in Athens, Libanius does not seem to have taken part in student life as fully as most : academically, he purports to have had a strong preference for the classical authors over contemporary teachers in Athens (§§17-18 and 23), whilst socially he held aloof from student activities, especially from fighting (§§19-22)<sup>10</sup>. As Libanius himself presents it in his *Autobiography*, then, he surpassed his teachers rhetorically, his fellow students morally. Other interpretations of his behaviour in Athens were possible, though. Libanius himself, in the *Autobiography*, states that his attitude « was held to be derogatory towards Athens and I was held guilty of not respecting my professors » (§17). And Eunapius imputes Libanius' stance on the sideline of Athenian student life to his fear of « being obscured, partly by so great a crowd of fellow-pupils, partly by the celebrity of his teachers » (οὔτε... οὔτε... ὡς ἐν τῷ πλήθει τῶν ὁμιλητῶν καὶ τῷ μεγέθει τῆ δόξῃ τῶν διδασκάλων καλυφθησόμενος, Eunapius, *Lives* 495). In general, Eunapius, who had a particular agenda of his own, is definitely not a more trustworthy source on Libanius' life than Libanius' *Autobiography*. In this particular case, moreover, Eunapius seems to contradict himself when first saying that Libanius avoided Epiphanius and Prohaeresius with their numerous students in order not to be obscured, but then stating that Libanius ended up with Diophantus, the third official teacher, because of a trap set for him by Diophantus' students. What Eunapius does show, however, is that Libanius was liable, in the second half of the fourth century, to criticism based on his behaviour as a student in Athens.

It may well be, in fact, that Libanius' presentation in the *Autobiography* is trying to counter such criticisms. Take, for instance, the fact that his disappointment in Athenian rhetoric (§ 17-18) is surrounded by his high expectations of Athens (§§ 11-12, 19). The fact that Libanius explicitly states to have set out with the positive assumptions about Athens which his audience probably holds, allows him to present himself as a witness who is definitely not negatively biased towards the city. If, subsequently, he indicates that the reality on the ground in Athens does not match such high expectations, the audience is strongly encouraged to believe him. In addition, Libanius proudly describes how he was twice offered a chair in Athens, first during his four-year stay in Athens as a student (336-340), then whilst in Constantinople in the early 350s, in which case he points out that the Athenians unusually offered him a chair although was holding a chair elsewhere, because he was acknowledged to be a better professor. On both occasions, Libanius ends up going elsewhere. I shall come back later to the second offer, which Libanius refused. The first offer, on the other hand, was withdrawn because of circumstances not directly related to Libanius, yet Libanius suggests that he had in mind to leave Athens anyway : §27 paints a grim image of those staying in Athens as people who « reach old age with no chance of showing their eloquence », §28 suggests that staying in Athens is the fate of those who

<sup>10</sup> For student life in late antique Athens, see BERNARDI 1990 and WATTS 2006, 24-142.

cannot make it as sophists elsewhere, and §34 states that leaving Athens was « the sole cause of my career as a teacher and of the production of the many orations I have composed in so many provinces, in short, of the fruits of the state I now enjoy ». So if the reader, like Eunapius, criticizes Libanius because he did not make it in Athens<sup>11</sup>, he is here taught that heading one's own school and giving speeches all over the world are to be valued more than a professorship in Athens. A great part of Libanius' account on Athens is thus intended to show how Libanius was too good for Athens, could have stayed there if he wanted, but chose to go elsewhere.

## 2. Constantinople, the Big City

The reason why Libanius decided to leave Athens and settle in Constantinople instead is, I think, neatly explained by Eunapius :

As he gained confidence in his eloquence and convinced himself that he could rival any that prided themselves on theirs, he resolved not to bury himself in a small town and sink in the esteem of the world to that city's level. Therefore he crossed over to Constantinople, a city which had recently attained to greatness, and, being at the height of her prosperity, needed both deeds and words to adorn her as she deserved. (Eunapius, *Lives* 495)

Although formulating it in more general terms, Eunapius here confirms Libanius' suggestion that only people who could not make it elsewhere stayed in Athens. And indeed, as Edward Watts has shown, Athens had only education left to pride itself on : other than that, it was a city in decline<sup>12</sup>. Constantinople, on the other hand, was burgeoning : « founded » by Constantine in 324, the city was soon embellished by a series of building projects, and, in the 340s, seems to have been promoted intensively by Constantius II as a pendant for Constans' capital, Rome<sup>13</sup>. It has recently been stressed, moreover, that this promotion included culture<sup>14</sup>. Eunapius therefore suggests that Libanius moved to Constantinople because of the sophistic opportunities offered by the new capital.

Two elements may, at first sight, seem to plead against Eunapius' interpretation of Libanius' move to Constantinople. On the one hand, Libanius presented himself earlier in the *Autobiography*, as we have seen, as not being moved by worldly motives : he chose not the usual career for a man of curial rank, but a sophistic career. If it was added that such a life could yield great returns, this was presented as being his uncle's words, not Libanius' own. On the other hand, Libanius is usually thought to have hated Constantinople : many letters, for example, present a very negative image of the city<sup>15</sup>. As we shall see, the *Autobiography* itself also contains negative references to Constantinople. Careful study of the rhetorical context in which such negative comments occur shows a more nuanced image, however. Against letters that contain

<sup>11</sup> Such an interpretation may have been elicited by the fact that Libanius did not stay in Athens eventually although he had earlier refused to return to Antioch when his father's estate was being sold. On this episode, cf. *Oration* 1, 26, and *Oration* 55, 15.

<sup>12</sup> WATTS 2006, esp. 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. VANDERSPOEL 1995, 60-61, with further bibliography in n. 40. For the early development of Constantinople, see furthermore DAGRON 1974, MANGO 1985, and VANDERSPOEL 1995, 51-70 ; of the Constantinopolitan senate, see SKINNER 2008 ; for the choice of senators in Constantinople, cf. HEATHER 1994.

<sup>14</sup> For Constantinople as a city of culture, cf. HENCK (2001), 177-9 and VAN HOOFF (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> E.g. *Letters* 34, 81, 434, 580.



negative remarks about Constantinople can be placed others that present a much more positive picture of the new capital<sup>16</sup>, and in the *Autobiography* too, Constantinople is at first presented in much more positive terms. Indeed, before settling in Constantinople, Libanius declaimed in the city whilst on a trip to Heraclea together with his friend Crispinus :

Our experience in Constantinople was no less pleasant, for the many famous men of letters, who come from all over the world to reside there, welcomed us and gave and received their meed of praise. (*Oration* 1, 30)

Constantinople is clearly presented here as a major centre of culture which Libanius appreciates and where his talent is valued. In fact, Libanius is appreciated so much in Constantinople that he gets offered a class of forty students, « the sons of our many wealthy citizens » (§31). In addition, his enthusiasm is kindled by mention of the fee the city paid to its official sophist (§31). Libanius' first real<sup>17</sup> visit to Constantinople, then, was very successful, and his account of the city very positive. Once settled in the city, however, the deal about the class of forty students falls through. Initially, this leads to a great disappointment, as Libanius feels « cheated both of Athens and of my high hopes » (Ἀθηνῶν τε ὁμοῦ καὶ ἐλπίδος ἀμαρτῶν, §35). Soon, however, Libanius uses this disappointment as a foil that highlights his extraordinary rhetorical successes in oratorical competitions :

In a few days my class had grown to more than eighty by the influx of students from elsewhere and by the defection of those within the city. People who had been all of a flutter about the chariot races or the theatrical performances had changed to a sudden interest in rhetoric, and a decree was drafted by the emperor enjoining me to stay in the capital, for they were afraid that, if I were at liberty to leave, I would bethink me of home. (*Oration* 1, 37)

Instead of the forty students promised to him by someone else, Libanius thus manages to attract eighty by his own brilliance ; the attention of the city in general was geared from horses and drama to rhetoric ; and the emperor honoured Libanius officially. The conclusion must be that Libanius was doing very well by traditional criteria : successful as a teacher, a celebrity in Constantinople, honoured by those in power. For all the stress on his choice for a different kind of life at the beginning of the *Autobiography*, then, Libanius takes pride in worldly success. As a result, Eunapius may, after all, not have missed the mark when suggesting that Libanius chose Constantinople because of the unique opportunities for advancement offered in the new capital.

### 3. Avoiding Constantinople : Nicomedia

At a certain point, however, Libanius left Constantinople. According to Libanius' own account at this point of the text, he decided to leave the capital (§§47-48) when he was unjustly accused of magic (§§43-47) by competing sophists who were envious of his success (§§38-42).

<sup>16</sup> E.g. *Letters* 70, 241, 399, 482, 503. *Letter* 391 confirms Libanius' changing fate in, and feelings towards, Constantinople.

<sup>17</sup> Libanius had, in fact, already passed through Constantinople on his trip from Antioch to Athens. The unkept promise he met with at that occasion (§14) in some way foreshadows the unkept promise of Nicocles (§35).

Libanius thus presents his departure as a conscious choice of his own, inspired not by any negative or illegal feats of his own, but by other people's envy at his extraordinary success<sup>18</sup>. In addition, he points out that there was not only a push away from Constantinople, but also a pull from Nicomedia and, on his way there, from Nicaea.

In the ensuing opposition of one city chasing him and two cities, and especially Nicomedia, wooing him<sup>19</sup>, a drastically different picture of Constantinople emerges. Whilst Nicomedia is said to be the nurse of eloquence, Constantinople now appears no longer as the city full of famous men of letters, but as a city full of self-indulgence (§48). Constantinople is also no longer characterized as the city where people run from the hippodrome and the theatre towards rhetoric, but as a city that « revelled in the delights of the stage », whereas Nicomedia is said to revel in the fruits of learning (§52)<sup>20</sup>. Through this negative reinterpretation of Constantinople, Libanius here presents Nicomedia as preferable to Constantinople as a city : Nicomedia is indeed explicitly called a change for the better (§48), and his years there are termed the very best years of his life, in which he enjoyed « health of body and peace of mind, frequent declamations and excited applause at each of them, throngs of students and their progress, study by night and the sweat of my labours by day, honour, kindness and affection » (§51).

Not everybody, however, would have bought into Libanius' positive presentation of his departure from Constantinople for Nicomedia. Not many people would probably have ranked a career in Nicomedia above one in Constantinople at this point of time<sup>21</sup>. Libanius' comparisons just before discussing his return to the capital are telling in this respect :

Could Tellus or those Argive youths, who blessed their mother by their exploit with the carriage, have had greater happiness than I?... Certainly, Melanthus was not unlucky in his exile, since it was destined that instead of being a dweller in Messene he should be ruler of Athens. (*Oration* 1, 73)

When Croesus asked Solon, after showing him his riches, whom he deemed to be the happiest man on earth, he clearly expected, as Herodotus points out<sup>22</sup>, to come out first, or if not, at least second. Likewise, many people may think that sophists in Constantinople were better off than Libanius in Nicomedia. As Solon taught and Croesus would later experience, however, worldly riches and power do not necessarily make one happy : the wise man judges happiness by a different standard, and according to that standard, people who do not have such outward apparel but who are successful in what they undertake, even if they live in a rather less glamorous part of the world, may well be happier than those in power. Libanius thus suggests that happiness does not necessarily lie where most people think it lies. The second comparison, with

<sup>18</sup> On Libanius' biased presentation in these paragraphs, see already WINTJES 2005, 86.

<sup>19</sup> One of the reasons for including a short account on Nicaea may be the resulting numerical superiority of cities wooing him as compared to cities chasing him.

<sup>20</sup> Libanius concludes that « there (sc. in Constantinople) they had not the wit to keep the good things they had, here (sc. in Nicomedia) they knew how to gain possession of those they had not'. In addition, he contrasts the official acknowledgement he got in Nicaea and Nicomedia (ψηφίσμασι, §48) to the petty personal envy that induced him to leave Constantinople.

<sup>21</sup> The ranking may have been different, of course, under Diocletian, when Nicomedia was the capital for a short time. Cf. Aurelius Victor 39.45, Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 7.8 and *Institutions* 5.2.2, and Hieronymus, *On Famous Men* 80. See also SCHEMMEL (1908), 147-151.

<sup>22</sup> *Histories* 1.30 (ἐλπίζων εἶναι ἀνθρώπων ὀλβιώτατος) and 1.31 (δοκέων πάγχυ δευτερεῖα γῶν οἴσεσθαι).

Melanthus of Messene who became king of Athens, goes even further : it not only opposes Libanius' position in Nicomedia (βασιλεύειν) favourably to his position in Constantinople (οἰκεῖν)<sup>23</sup>, but also compares Nicomedia to Athens and Constantinople to Messene, a rather less cultured part of the classical Greek world<sup>24</sup>.

#### 4. Constantinople Once More

That not everyone may have been convinced by Libanius' presentation of his reasons for leaving Constantinople becomes clear when we turn to the account of his return to the capital. The reason for his return, he says, was an imperial summons (§74). In itself, such an imperial invitation would, of course, have been considered a great honour. Especially after leaving the capital following what was presented as an unjust accusation of magic, one would imagine such an acknowledgement by the emperor to be highly valued. Eventually, Libanius was indeed « to be courted once again by the city and to be engaged in all my former activities, with the sons of its inhabitants attending me as students and the theatres filled with men of all ages » (§79). Nevertheless, Libanius' initial reaction, according to the *Autobiography*, was to grieve « as prisoners grieve, who have lost land and liberty and go into slavery in a foreign clime. I was fated to lose all my pleasure and profit and to be brought into trouble and distress » (§75). In itself, this negative reaction seems hard to understand. The ensuing negative image of Constantinople had, admittedly, been prepared in the paragraphs on Nicomedia, yet as we have seen, such negative evaluations of Constantinople had to do less with the city itself than with a change in Libanius' position : they were less a description of reality than a means to present Libanius' move from Constantinople to Nicomedia in the best possible light. Had he really been unjustly accused of magic out of envy and then successfully restored by an imperial summons, as he claims, one would, in fact, expect him to pass over Nicomedia rather briefly and then spin out his glorious restoration in Constantinople by the emperor. Instead, he extols his five years in Nicomedia over no less than twenty-six paragraphs (§§48-73) and then compresses his five-year return to Constantinople into a mere seven paragraphs (§§74-80, of which §§77-78 deal with repeated summer holidays in Nicomedia). Of these seven paragraphs, three describe his lack of success in Constantinople (§§74-76) : notwithstanding his imperial nomination and his successful oratorical efforts, Libanius loses his students. What, then, is going on here ?

The key lies in a remark made almost in passing just before narrating the exceptional honours bestowed upon him at the end of his second stay in the city : in §79, we read that « some from malice, others from ignorance, were calling my retirement from the capital what it never was, dubbing the abuse of a wretched cabal a punishment » (τιμωρία) and « an ordinance of the city » (ψηφον τῆς πόλεως). Notwithstanding Libanius' earlier claims to have voluntarily left Constantinople after having been accused unjustly of magic, then, rumours about the reasons for his departure seem to have been going round in the capital more than five years after the facts. Rumours that were negative and persistent enough to gall the honour of an imperial sum-

<sup>23</sup> Note that this presentation induced Libanius to adapt the story of Melanthus, who was not a mere dweller, but king of Messene. Cf. Strabo, *Geography* 8.4.1 and 14.1.3.

<sup>24</sup> Messene as a city was founded only in 369, after the Battle of Leuctra. Cf. LAFOND (2000), 53. Comparing Constantinople to (a region with) such a recent capital city may thus be an extra way of criticizing Constantinople on Libanius' part. The reference to Melanthus' *exile*, on the other hand, may be a slip of Libanius', who may thus unwittingly confirm that he *had* to leave Constantinople.

mons. Rumours, also, that seem to have been of a quite different nature than the accusations of magic which Libanius referred to when first discussing his departure from Constantinople. Indeed, the terms « punishment » and « calumnies » (as he terms the accusations in §73) seem to refer to accusations of a moral rather than political or religious nature<sup>25</sup>. Eunapius may, again, offer a clue :

A scandalous charge was brought against him in connexion with his pupils. I cannot allow myself to write about it, because I am determined to record in this document only what is worthy to be recorded. For this reason, then, he was expelled from Constantinople, and settled at Nicomedia. (Eunapius, *Lives* 495, transl. Wright (1921), 521)

According to Eunapius, then, Libanius left Constantinople because he was guilty, or at least accused, of pederasty. The fact that Eunapius could, around 399, i.e. some twenty-five years after the original publication of Libanius' *Autobiography* and some fifty-five years after the facts, mention this accusation, and do so in suggestive rather than explicit language, strongly suggests that the idea had at least some currency in the second half of the fourth century. As a result, it is not implausible that similar criticisms regarding his departure from Constantinople were circulating in Antioch when Libanius was writing his *Autobiography* : had he faced no such accusations, it would, after all, have been much easier and better for him to silence them over.

In fact, it looks like Libanius carefully constructed the text of the *Autobiography* so as to do away with such rumours as much as possible. First of all, he avoids drawing attention to the accusations by presenting them as a mere *fait divers* : whereas he took care to narrate and refute accusations of magic, pederasty is only mentioned briefly and obliquely. Secondly, he discusses the matter not where it chronologically belongs in his life story, but postpones it. This narratological device allows him not only to suggest that the accusation of pederasty had nothing to do with his departure from the capital, but also to wipe it out by the ensuing narration of the honours he received from the Senate and officials in Constantinople as well as from the Emperor (§80) : without offering any precise argument, as he (more or less) did regarding accusations of magic, Libanius thus manages to suggest that he has « proof » to refute these calumnies. Last but not least, he ascribes what he terms misinterpretations (cf. μετονομάζοντα, §79) of his first departure from Constantinople to malice or ignorance<sup>26</sup>. If the *Autobiography* claims to offer knowledge about Libanius' life, the only remaining criterion for criticizing him, Libanius suggests, is malice. This is a clever argument, as surely none of the friends or students present in his audience would want to be accused of malice towards their friend or teacher.

<sup>25</sup> In §73, he states that people in Constantinople « thought that by their calumnies they made it impossible for me to live in towns or even in the tiniest villages'. In light of these suggestions, it is tempting to re-interpret at least some of Libanius' earlier statements (ἐλοιδορείσθην βίαιον, πλεονέκτην, ἀκόρεστον, οὐδαμοῦ στήναι δυνάμενον, §38) in sexual terms as well : both βίαιον (e.g. *Odyssey* 22.37) and ἀκόρεστο (e.g. *AP* 10.56.7 Pall.) can be used in the context of sexual actions. When these accusations were first mentioned, however, such an interpretation was discouraged by the ensuing explicit references to accusations of magic (§43).

<sup>26</sup> As was the case with accusations of magic, then, Libanius imputes accusations of pederasty not to any negative acts of his own, but to a deficiency, respectively an evil disposition, of the accuser.

## 5. Antioch : Libanius' Best Bet ?

In the last paragraphs on his second stay in Constantinople, as we saw, Libanius recounts his renewed popularity (§79) and the exceptional honours awarded to him by officials, the Senate, and the Emperor (§80). The next paragraphs continue with « a stroke of luck more important than this – or indeed, than anything you could think of for a man who, as I did, sought a name for eloquence for himself » : the offer of an official chair in Athens (§81-84). The impression conveyed by the juxtaposition of the honours offered by both cities is to stress that Libanius could have had it all : Constantinople represented the summum of political power, Athens the summum of culture. Nevertheless, Libanius chose to return to Antioch.

The choice for Antioch, then, is clearly presented as a positive choice : it was not because there was no other place where he could build out his career that he returned home. As far as the reasons for his choice are concerned, however, Libanius is remarkably vague : he says nothing at all about why he leaves Constantinople, and claims not to accept the Athenian offer because he fears to be physically threatened or assaulted by envious professors and their gangs of students (§85). Even if this is true and if such fears played a role, they seem hardly sufficient reason not to accept the honour of a professorship in Athens. In addition, this explanation still leaves the question why he did not stay in Constantinople, or, for that matter, why he did not go to, say, Nicomedia, where he spent such happy years and where he returned for successive summer holidays during his second stay in Constantinople.

When discussing the reasons for Libanius' return to Antioch, scholars often suggest that Libanius settled in Antioch because he believed in the ideal of the city as opposed to the empire. There are, indeed, a number of speeches by Libanius that defend the city councils and that criticize the increasing power of the imperial bureaucracy. Yet these speeches are all rather late : they date from long after Libanius had settled in Antioch and would therefore have an interest in taking this position. As Isabella Sandwell has recently shown, moreover, many of Libanius' *Letters* are designed to overcome, rather than to stress, the opposition between the imperial centre and the civic elites<sup>27</sup>. Other scholars have sought the reasons for Libanius' move to Antioch in his letters, where three reasons are given : health, friends and family, and the fact that Constantinople is not a good place for him as a teacher. All three reasons probably contain some degree of truth, yet even taken together, they do not seem to tell the whole truth : Libanius himself admits in the letters that his claims of illnesses were, at least initially, fake ; friends and family never were enough reason for him to return in the sixteen preceding years of absence from Antioch (336-352) ; and as we have just seen, the *Autobiography* claims that Libanius was very popular and successful as a teacher in Constantinople at the time he decided to leave. It should not be forgotten, moreover, that all the letters date from 354 or later, i.e. after Libanius' definitive return to Antioch<sup>28</sup>.

Before his definitive return, however, Libanius spent the summer of 353 in his native city. That summer journeys were nothing unusual for teachers of rhetoric is clear not only from

<sup>27</sup> SANDWELL 2009.

<sup>28</sup> There are, admittedly, two earlier letters (15 and 16), yet the only one amongst them that gives some more specific information (16, referring to Libanius' past acquaintance with his addressee Thalassius, and expressing the wish to return, presumably to the place where Libanius met Thalassius and where Thalassius now finds himself) makes it likely that even they date from after Libanius' first return to Antioch during the summer of 353. On Thalassius 1/i, see SEECK 1906, 289, BRADBURY 2004, 268, and WINTJES 2005, 51-4.

Libanius' earlier summer holidays in Nicomedia, but also from his statement that Acacius, who was teaching rhetoric in Antioch, had gone home to his native Phoenicia during the summer of 353 « as usual » (νόμῳ, §90). At the end of the summer, however, teachers would obviously be expected to return to their chairs : that was the condition on which Libanius got leave (§86), that was also clearly the expectation in Antioch (§90)<sup>29</sup>. Yet after spending the summer of 353 in Antioch, Libanius was determined to move back to his home city. What, then, happened during that summer ? What convinced him to leave Constantinople whilst he was, according to the *Autobiography*, at the height of his popularity and honour there, and to decline the exceptional offer of a chair in Athens ?

In order to find out, it is worthwhile to have a closer look at the *Autobiography*, especially paragraphs 86 and following<sup>30</sup>. In §86, Libanius first underlines how great an achievement it is to be honoured in one's home city, and then describes that city as follows :

I saw the streets and gates that I loved, the temples, the colonnades, the old walls of my home, my grey-haired mother, her brother who had not yet lost the name of father, my elder brother already a grandfather, all my school-friends, some of them as governors, some as advocates, my father's friends, the few that were left, and my city strong in the number of its learned sons. (*Oration* 1, 86)

Libanius, then, loved the city and people he found in Antioch. As he says to have done so too in Nicomedia, however, this in itself is not enough to account for his choice to move to Antioch. Through the « number of its learned sons », Antioch is also presented as a learned city. Yet so was Athens, and yet Libanius declined the chair offered him there. What distinguishes Antioch, however, is that he there has old friends, both of his own and of his family, some of whom are now in powerful positions. If Libanius had elsewhere been appreciated by some governors, Antioch was the first place where he had known many governors from early onwards. In §87, Libanius recounts how the whole city came to listen to his first declamation in Antioch. They would, according to Libanius, like his rhetoric to bits, yet that, of course, they could not know before hearing him. The reason, rather, why they seem all to have come, is that the return, after 17 years, of the son of one of the city's most prominent families, must have been quite an event. The importance of family connections is again highlighted in the next paragraph, where Libanius tells how his uncle introduced his speech. The subsequent paragraph underlines the success of his rhetoric, and ends with the following comparison :

The sun did not shine more brightly for Agamemnon the day he captured Troy than it did for me on the day when I had the reception I have described. (*Oration* 1, 89)

The comparison with Agamemnon's capture of Troy not only stresses the greatness of Libanius' achievement, but also presents it as the ultimate aim towards which all efforts over many past long years have been directed. This, of course, is not the picture painted by Libanius earlier in the *Autobiography*. The only time it is mentioned earlier in the text that Libanius might

<sup>29</sup> In §90, Libanius recounts how Acacius was warned that if he did not come back from his summer holiday immediately, his pupils would leave Antioch together with Libanius - not that Libanius would stay in Antioch and continue to teach them.

<sup>30</sup> For an account of Libanius' « gains » in returning to Antioch, cf. WINTJES 2005, 108-9.

want to return home is when he first arrives in Constantinople and an imperial decree is drafted « enjoining me to stay in the capital, for they were afraid that, if I were at liberty to leave, I would bethink me of home » (§37). Returning home is there presented, in other words, as an idea of the Constantinopolitans, not of Libanius himself. Before §89, there is, in fact, no sign whatsoever in the text that Libanius would have considered returning to Antioch his ultimate aim. This should inspire us to caution when it comes to presenting Libanius as « the great sophist from Antioch », who deliberately chose to leave the capital because he believed in the classical ideal of the city-states. What rather seems to have attracted him to Antioch is the combination of rhetoric and culture on the one hand and power, influence, and connections on the other : if the full deployment of his rhetorical talents made him stand out amongst the curial elite of Antioch, his connections as a member of a curial family allowed him to outshine his rhetorical rival Acacius, who, hailing from a family of teachers (§90), needed Eubulus, the offspring of an important curial family, to support him (§104). In Antioch more than anywhere else, then, Libanius seems to have enjoyed success and influence as a teacher, a sophist, and a politically active citizen.

Libanius' choice to settle in Antioch, then, may well have been inspired by much more than a longing for friends and family or a belief in the ideal of the city-state and the concomitant will to support his own city against the increasing centripetal forces of the empire. A good parallel is offered by the tug-of-war for the two new EU positions created by the Lisbon Treaty. At a certain point, David Milliband, then U.K. Foreign Secretary, was top favourite to become the first High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, commonly called the EU's Foreign Minister. Although denying to be interested in the job, Milliband decided on the last minute to fly over to Berlin where European politicians were not only celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, but also discussing the new EU top jobs<sup>31</sup>. The result of his journey was, however, that he thanked for the job. Milliband, in other words, preferred London over Brussels. On the one hand, of course, Brussels is not London : historically, and especially before the EU institutions settled in Brussels, London has been a much more powerful city on the world-stage. Likewise, Antioch had long been one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire, whereas Constantinople had been turned into an imperial capital only some thirty years before<sup>32</sup>. In addition, it should not be forgotten that it was often in Antioch rather than in Constantinople that the Emperor resided : Constantius was in Antioch from 337 to 350, and after that sent his Caesar Gallus to the city. Thus whilst it is not sure if Libanius ever met an Emperor in person in Constantinople, he did meet with several ones in Antioch, and immediately seems to have enjoyed success at court<sup>33</sup>. On the other

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<sup>31</sup> For Mr Milliband's chances of getting the job, his trip to Berlin, and his subsequent distantiating from the job, cf. <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5A84O520091109> ; <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article6910176.ece> ; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/oct/22/david-miliband-europe-foreign-minister>.

<sup>32</sup> In the early 350s, it was not yet clear how important Constantinople would become. Cf. KELLY 2003 on Ammianus' silences regarding Constantinople.

<sup>33</sup> Libanius describes his oratorical successes with Gallus in §91, his privileged position during the crisis of 353/4 in §§96-97. As for Constantius, although Libanius was honoured by him, they seem to have missed one another : whilst Constantius spent much time in Antioch between 337 and 350, Libanius was away from his home city between 336 and 354. Pace Portmann (1988), 128 and (1989), 6, Constantius does not seem to have been present when Libanius delivered his *Panegyric* (*Oration* 59). Cf. MALOSSE 2003, 8.

hand, both Libanius and Milliband seem to have made an informed calculus : Libanius went on summer holidays, Milliband on a trip to Berlin before coming to a decision. As we have seen, Libanius wielded much more influence as a teacher, sophist, and political citizen in Antioch than he did in Constantinople. David Milliband, for his part, may well have hoped to become the next Labour-leader<sup>34</sup>. For other people, of course, the calculus may yield different results. Lady Ashton, for one, seems to have been very happy to become the EU's High Representative. It seems unlikely, indeed, that she would ever have acquired more power in U.K. politics than she now wields in the EU. Likewise, Libanius decided to leave Constantinople for Antioch, but Themistius was very happy to make a career for himself in Constantinople.

Libanius himself points out the kind of calculus involved in a letter to Iamblichus, the grandson of the famous Neoplatonist Sopater :

Both your uncle and I approve of your prudence in trying to avoid buying a pig in a poke. [...] You must come here to contest the demands from Thrace and to keep quite clear of the Senate. That position profits nonentities, but it could never increase the renown of people with an inheritance like yours. (*Letter* F34=N48.2 and 4, to Iamblichus)

At the beginning of his letter, Libanius clearly suggests that Iamblichus should think carefully about an offer to become a senator in Constantinople. At the end, he explains what kind of calculus ought to be made : the senate of Constantinople will be profitable for « people who have no name », i.e. people who do not stem from famous families or who are not famous, but it cannot add anything to the renown of people who, like Iamblichus, belong to a famous and influential family.

If, then, a calculus underlies the decisions taken by Libanius and Milliband concerning their career moves, these decisions always imply a risk. Milliband, after all, did not become his party's next leader. Likewise, Libanius' preference for Antioch over Constantinople can, with hindsight and taking into account the influential position of Themistius under a succession of emperors as well as the future importance of Constantinople, seem an odd choice. Libanius himself, in fact, may well have had doubts concerning his decision soon after moving to Antioch in 354. The situation had indeed changed dramatically : the cousin to whom he was betrothed died, Caesar Gallus fell out with the Antiochene council, Libanius was accused of magic, and Zenobius did not keep the promise to yield his chair to him. As a result, Libanius was, in his own words « full of despondency » (§101), and seems to have regretted his decision :

Here I was disappointed in my hopes and I could not return to Constantinople without becoming a laughing stock. [...] Then I addressed Calliope thus : « Most glorious of the Muses, our city's guide, for what reason do you punish me so ? Why do you, a goddess, ruin me ? Why have you removed me from one position and refuse me another ? » (*Oration* 1, 101-102)

Libanius, then, appears to be acutely aware of the questionable consequences of his decision to leave Constantinople for Antioch. Interspersed amongst the chapters that discuss the changed

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<sup>34</sup> News of Mr Milliband's candidacy was made official after an earlier version of this article had been delivered at a conference in Montpellier in March 2010 : [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/8704885.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/8704885.stm). Even before this, however, speculations regarding Mr Milliband's ambitions were circulating : <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1226576/David-Miliband-clears-way-Labour-leadership-tilt-turning-EU-foreign-affairs-job.html>.



situation in 354, however, are positive comments about Libanius himself : Libanius personally did alright under Gallus and could even step forward as a defender of others (§§96-97) ; the accusation of magic was rejected and Libanius did not lose the Caesar's favour (§§98-100) ; and whilst Zenobius betrayed him, Libanius got advice from an elderly gentleman and managed to establish a successful school of rhetoric (§§100-105). The remainder of the *Autobiography*, fifty paragraphs covering his twenty-year stay in Antioch between 354 and 374, seems to be designed to confirm this positive image. First, eleven paragraphs are dedicated to the six years in which Libanius flourished whilst Strategius Musonianus (354-358) and Hermogenes (358-360) were Prefect of the Orient (§§106-116). After two paragraphs covering the deaths of family members and friends as well as the earthquake that struck Nicomedia (§§117-118), Libanius then extensively describes the reign of Julian (361-363, §§118-135) : the emperor's eight-month stay in Antioch receives no less than twelve paragraphs. In contrast, the reign of Valens, ten years on its way when Libanius wrote the *Autobiography*, is covered by no more than eleven paragraphs (§§139-150). Of these, only two deal with Valens directly (§144-145), imputing his lack of interest in Libanius' rhetoric to jealous courtiers rather than to the emperor himself, and counterbalancing it by Valens' approval of Valentinian's law in favour of illegitimate offspring. Before these two paragraphs, five paragraphs recount how Libanius, although suffering from ill health, was able to continue teaching, and how he finally recovered from an attack of gout (§§139-143). After them follow two paragraphs describing the deaths of numerous enemies (§§146-147), and three on the loss and recovery of a manuscript of Thucydides (§§148-150). In this way, Libanius manages not only to minimize the importance of the reign of Valens, but also to present it as, all in all, a positive rather than a negative period for him. That this was a deliberate strategy when Libanius first composed his *Autobiography* becomes clear when one confronts the description of the difficulties he suffered under various governors in the reign of Valens in the additions to the *Autobiography* (§§156-179). The original *Autobiography* thus seems to have been designed to prove that Libanius flourished in Antioch : selective in the material covered and biased in its presentation, it was designed, in other words, to justify Libanius' career moves.

## Conclusion

Career moves, so we can conclude, play a key role in the *Autobiography* : whilst modern scholars have tended to follow Libanius' presentation of himself as the great sophist of Antioch, his twenty-one years in the city since 353 take up less pages of text than the preceding seventeen years of travelling to different places. Given the importance of career moves in Libanius' life, then, a large part of the *Autobiography* is concerned with their motivation and justification.

As far as motivation is concerned, two conclusions can be drawn from my analysis. First, it can be said that Libanius does not always tell the truth concerning his career moves : he presents all his career moves as deliberate choices on positive grounds and leaves out any negative motivations. As we saw, his first move away from Constantinople, for instance, is presented not as a flight from the capital because of accusations of pederasty or even mere magic : Libanius says that he « thought that it is sheer lunacy to die to no purpose, especially after my triumph in the matter of the examination » (§47) and decided to accept the invitation of Nicomedia, thus suggesting that he could have stayed had he wanted to. The second conclusion concerning the motivations behind Libanius' career moves is that Libanius does not always tell the *whole* truth : according to his presentation, his moves were motivated by his love of rhetoric and his concern for family and friends, yet confrontation with Eunapius and comparison with David Milliband

has shown that rather more worldly ambitions may be at play in what may well have been a clear calculus.

As we saw in the introduction, Libanius says that his aim with the *Autobiography* is to narrate his life in order to prove that he is neither the happiest nor the unhappiest man on earth. Given this aim, what one would expect apart from a discussion of the motivation behind his career moves, is an *evaluation* of them : to what extent were they successful – thus making him a happy man –, to what extent were they not – thus proving him not to be the happiest. In reality, however, Libanius is not so much concerned with evaluating his moves as with *justifying* them : he makes the point that his choices were the right ones because he is, ultimately, successful. In order to do so, he makes a careful selection and gives a biased presentation of his life story. Two important consequences follow from this. On the one hand, Libanius' real agenda with the *Autobiography* seems to be slightly different from his professed aim : far from spending equal effort at demonstrating his good and his bad fortune, the argument that he is not the unhappiest person in the world dwarfs the argument that he is not the happiest. Libanius' aim, in other words, is to prove that his life is successful. Indeed, by telling how, thanks to his rhetorical talent, he overcame the serious difficulties which he sometimes faced, Libanius turns these difficulties into a way of proving his success rather than his bad luck. In combination with what was said above about the continuing circulation, in the second half of the fourth century, of negative rumours surrounding his career moves, his stress on the refutation of criticism makes it likely that the *Autobiography* was a more apologetic speech than has often been assumed. As I said at the onset, however, the *Autobiography* seems to have been targeted at friends and students, that is, at an audience that was positively rather than negatively predisposed towards Libanius. How, then, can we reconcile such a target audience, inclined to consider him the happiest of men, with a stress on proving that he is not the unhappiest of men ? On the basis of my analysis of his career moves, my suggestion is that Libanius' ultimate point is that the life he chose can lead to great success and influence : by proving that critics who consider him the unhappiest of men are wrong, his aim is to encourage friends not to stop admiring him and students not to be discouraged from following his example. The second consequence of Libanius' aims and procedures in the *Autobiography* is a warning against taking the text at face value as a source of information, as it has often been done : the *Autobiography* is not an objective description of reality, but a rhetorical construct, composed with hindsight and designed to present Libanius in the best possible light. Whilst careful analysis of the text is therefore needed before we can extract information from it on Libanius' life, the text also has the potential to offer us much more than mere data : as this article has demonstrated, it can also teach us a lot about the way in which Libanius was perceived by his contemporaries, the self-image he wished to project in order to influence their perception of him, and the rhetorical strategies he adopted to this end in his *Autobiography*.

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