



Summary :

Lucian of Samosata was a teacher of rhetoric and probably the most important satiric writer of the Roman period. His works reflect the social conditions of the 2nd c. AD (Antonine period) and place him among the representatives of the Second Sophistic, although his humble origins and education deprived him of a senior post in teaching.

Other Names

Date and Place of Birth

c. 120 AD – Samosata

Date and Place of Death

c. 190 AD – Egypt

Main Role

satiric writer – teacher of rhetoric

1. Introduction

Lucian was born circa 120 AD¹ in [Samosata](#), the capital of the region of [Commagene](#) a part of the province of Syria at the time. Despite the fact that in his works he often refers to facts and figures of his time in a prejudiced way, his contemporary sources hush up when they refer to him. This is possibly due to the fact that Lucian was relatively unknown in his professional field. His little biographical information is provided by his works, particularly by *The Dream* or *Lucian's Career* and *The Double Indictment*.

2. Activity

Lucian must have been born into a relatively humble family of Samosata because, although he managed to take rhetorical lessons, his education and social status prevented him from rapid ascent. The last part of his studies was followed in [Ionia](#). Then he taught rhetoric, fairly successfully, in [Asia Minor](#) and other regions of the empire, such as Galatia, North Italy and Macedonia. It is known that in 163-164 AD he was in Antioch of Syria on the occasion of a rhetorical competition in front of Lucius Verus, although he did not excel. After that, he must have been to the Paphlagonian city Abonuteichos, where he was occupied with the oracle of Glycon and foreteller Alexander of Abonuteichos. His stay there was rather brief because in the summer of 165 he went to Olympia to attend the athletic games and happened to be there when the cynic philosopher Peregrinus Proteus cremated himself on the flames. Sometime between these journeys he must have stayed in Athens, which he knew well, as indicated by his works. Circa 170 he gave up rhetoric and undertook the clerical post of the imperial secretary (a *cognitionibus*) in Egypt. This decision probably shows disappointment over his profession and financial uncertainty. His traces are lost after 180 AD. Although there is no relevant information, he must not have had a family, while his death probably came in the 180s or in the early 190s AD.

3. Historical and Social Background

The below analysed work of Lucian was a combination of satire and rhetoric with philosophical implications aiming at criticising anything wrong as well as social trends. Thus, his work should be approached taking into account the characteristics of both the 2nd century and the social environment where Lucian lived and activated.

The 2nd c. AD and, in particular, the Antonine period, characterised by the reigns of [Hadrian](#) (117-138), [Antoninus Pius](#) (138-161) and [Marcus Aurelius](#) (161-180), was the golden age of the Roman Empire. Pax Romana was established, while new, safe roads ran through the empire guaranteeing uninhibited commercial transactions. The upper and middle social classes lived in prosperity, thus developing arts and raising the cultural level. Most cities were rebuilt or embellished with new public buildings. However, at the same



time social differences became greater and philosophical and religious pursuits to fill the feeling of emptiness created by prosperity became more relentless.

Lucian's birthplace, Samosata, was a wealthy city and a junction along the road leading from Asia Minor to India. The population consisted of superficially Hellenised Iranians and Semites. As a result, Lucian received a Greek education but never stopped feeling like a Syrian,² which, along with his mild professional success, never made him feel fully integrated into his time and, particularly, into the spirit of luxury and fineness of the Greco-Roman cities he visited as a teacher.

4. Works

Although his job did not offer him the honours he expected all his life, it gave him the opportunity to travel the world, look about and broaden his horizons. He was eyewitness to important events and developments of his time, which he managed to describe in his works as a deeply conservative person that knows to parody the things he disagrees with. The most significant works-records for his time and mainly for the philosophical circles is the autobiographical *The Double Indictment*, which presents his relations with the Academy and the Lyceum in Athens, as well as *Nigrinus*, which describes the instruction of philosophy in Rome by the platonic philosopher Nigrinus, whom Lucian met during his brief stay there.

The complex personality of Lucian made his writings present considerable differences and variations. Lucian, particularly in his early career, was occupied with works of philosophical content in dialogical or rhetorical style. Besides, the treatises he prepared in the same period, known as 'preambles', were also in a rhetorical style.³ As it becomes obvious from these works, Lucian could never refrain from his personal tendency towards making acid remarks on reality and, thus, develop an elevated philosophical or rhetorical style, as it happened with other famous sophists of the time, such as Aelius Aristides.

The fact that these works of Lucian did not become particularly famous must have made him turn to satire probably in the mid-150s or shortly later, when he wrote paradoxologies in a rhetorical or narrative style, such as his classic 'A True Story', one of the earliest texts of science fiction, similar to the 'Utopia of Iambulus' cited by Diodorus Siculus in 'Library of History'.⁴ Influenced by the comic writer Menippus, he also wrote a series of dialogues balancing between fiction and reality.

However, after 160 AD he was occupied almost exclusively with satirical dialogues, a literary style he introduced, as well as acid satire on extreme philosophical and spiritual trends of his time. The latter include, among others, the works '[Alexander or The Oracle-monger](#) (The False Prophet)', where he comments on Alexander of Abonuteichos,⁵ and 'The Passing of Peregrinus', where he recounts the suicide of a cynical philosopher at the same time ironically describing the feeling of emptiness created by the prosperity of the 2nd century, which led the people to philosophical and religious pursuits.

Lucian dealt mainly with three issues: human weaknesses, philosophy, particularly Cynic, and religion, particularly when it was expressed as pietism and credulity. The recognised student of ancient literature A. Lesky supports that the sarcasm of Lucian against elevated and high matters had its roots in both his own inadequacy in dealing with them and a complex of inferiority he had, mainly because of his casual and superficial relations with the intelligentsia. However, he is so vivid in his descriptions and critical when he chooses to criticise things that his work becomes classic, which rarely happens with inefficient and superficial people.

Several of his works were imitated, while his tendency to use pseudonyms raises questions about the authorship of some of his works. Among those doubtfully attributed to Lucian are: *Philopatrim*, the *Consonants at Law*, the *Pseudo-Sophist* or the *Soloikist* as well as *the Syrian Goddess*. Regardless of the writer, the latter is one of the most important literary sources of the cult of Atargatis at the temple in Baetocece.⁶

5. Evaluation and Opinions

Despite the mild success he had when he was alive, Lucian was one of the writers whose works became widespread later. Strangely enough, Lucian was studied in Byzantium, while he was particularly dear to intellectuals, such as Patriarch Photios and John Tzetzes.



Moreover, he was an informative source, as evidenced by the ‘*Gnomologion*’ of Ioannes Georgidis (late 9th c.) and ‘*Selection (Ekloge) of Attic Names and Words*’ of Thomas Magistros (14th c.). His satirical style was so successful that several Byzantine writers, such as Leo the Wise (10th c.), imitated him.⁷ The fact is that his skepticism as well as his involvement in religious matters and the fact that several of his works are against Christians made other Byzantines, such as Arethas (second half of 9th c.) and the compiler of ‘*Suda*’ criticise him very bitterly.

In the late Byzantine period, towards the late 14th and the early 15th century, reascent Italy started to come closer to the intellectual circles of educated Byzantium. Several writers ‘travelled’ then to the West in the luggage of Byzantine scholars, who were invited to Italian cities and courts of monarchs. One of them was Lucian. In this period his works were copied by Italian scribes, while his first translations into Latin, such as the translations by Guarino da Verona (1374-1460) and Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) had appeared until the mid-15th century. Latin translators and scholars appreciated deeply the humour, the trenchant wit and the morality of Lucian, while they were not discouraged by his open anti-Christian attitude, probably because the ecclesiastical power was disputed in the West at the time. Lucian was discovered at the right moment. Imitators here were Maffeo Vegio (1407-1458) with his work *De felicitate e miseria* or *Palinurus* and Leon Batista Alberti (1404-1472) with *Virtus dea*, which was part of his collection *Intercoenales*. From Italy, towards the late 15th century, Lucian travelled through the Alps and became known in France and Central Europe. He was one of the relatively few ancient writers whose Complete Works were published. They were printed by the printing house of Laurentius de Alopa in 1496, although they must have been edited by Ianos Laskaris.

Lucian became famous thanks to the theatre. His satirical dialogues were often staged, usually adapted for educational reasons, while one of them, *Timon The Misanthrope*, became classic and was copied and imitated more than twelve times, most famous being that of Shakespeare.

Finally, the imaginative journey of the *True Story* inspired the imagination of other western writers, such as Swift, who wrote *Gulliver’s Travels*. In any case, the students of Lucian seem to agree that he had a great impact on the works of two major European thinkers, Erasmus (16th c.) and the English writer and man of letters Henry Fielding (18th c.).

In modern Greece Lucian is a dear playwright, particularly with his ‘*Dialogues of the Dead*’, which inspired the members of the ‘*Free Theatre*’ and Manos Hadjidakis in 1980.

Contemporary literary research has been occupied with Lucian at length, though not exhaustively. There are mainly two views, the ‘classicistic’, which considers that Lucian’s works belong to a philological and literary school of his time and, as a result, are the creation of a successful adaptation of established styles with a tendency for innovation,⁸ and the ‘social’, which believes that Lucian’s satire was a genuinely personal achievement of the writer and had its roots in the social turmoil and intellectual pursuits of the time, in combination with the personality of their creator.⁹

1. 120 AD is a conventional date. More specifically, researchers believe he was born between 115 and 125 AD.

2. This feeling is better expressed in the work *The Syrian Goddess*, which is attributed to Lucian, though not positively. See also next footnote.

3. About this literary style, see Mras, K., ‘Die bei den griechischen Schriftstellern’, *Wien.Stud.*64 (1949), p. 71.

4. About the ‘*True Story*’, see Anderson, G., ‘Lucian, *Verae historiae*,’ in: G. Schmeling (ed.), *The Novel in the Ancient World* (Leiden 1996), Fauth, W., ‘Utopische Inseln in den Wahren Geschichten des Lukian,’ *Gymnasium* 86 (1979) pp. 39-58, Devereux, G., ‘An undetected absurdity in Lucian’s *A True Story* 2.26,’ *Helios* 7.1 (1979-80) pp. 63-8 and Georgiadou, A. and D.H.J. Larmour, *Lucian’s Science Fiction Novel True Histories: Interpretation and Commentary*, *Mnemosyne Supplement* (Leiden 1998).



5. See also the illuminating study Caster, M., *Etudes sur Alexandre ou le faux prophète de Lucien* (Paris 1938).
6. About the work and the arguments concerning its authorship, see Attridge, H.W., *The Syrian Goddess attributed to Lucian* (Graeco-Roman religion series; 1. Society of Biblical Literature: Texts and translations; 9, Missoula, Mont. 1976), *NPauI* v. 4 (1999) p. 675, see entry 'Kombabos, bei Lukian (de Dea Syria) der Erbauer des Tempels der Atargatis in Hierapolis' (Graf, F.).
7. Lucian's *preambles* were particularly popular and were imitated by Theodore Prodromos (early 12th c.) for example in "*Rodanthe and Dosikles*" and Ioannes Katrarios in *Ermodotos* or the unknown writer of the dialogue *Philopatris* (mid-11th c.). Another popular work was the *Dialogues of the Dead*, which were also imitated and, as a result, a whole series of Byzantine satirical dialogues referring to the underworld were written, such as Timarion of an unknown writer. About this literary style of the Byzantine period, see Tozer, H., 'Byzantine satire', *JHS* 2 (1881) pp. 233-270.
8. About this trend, see mainly Bompaire, J., *Lucien écrivain* (Paris 1958), particularly pp. 123-154.
9. See Baldwin, B., 'Lucian as social satirist', *CQ* 55 (1961), pp. 199-208.

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	The Works of Lucian of Samosata http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/luc/fowl/index.htm

Sources

Works

The earliest and complete publication of the works of Lucian in modern times is that by C. Jacobitz, *Lucianus Samosatensis opera*, 4 vol. (Leipzig 1836-1851, repr. vol. 3, Teubner 1896-7).

A more recent publication was that of Oxford by H.W. and F.G.Fowler, while the last publication is by Loeb Publications, edited by M.D.Macleod and translated by A.D. Harmon, K.Kilburn and M.D.Macleod.

The works of Lucian are divided into the following categories:

a) Rhetoric:

The Tyrannicide
The Disinherited
Hippias or balnaeum
About the house
Slander, a Warning
Patriotism (*)
Of Sacrifice
Of Mourning
Apology for 'The Dependent Scholar'



The rhetorical works include preambles, that is, discourses in rhetorical style:

Herodotus and Aetion
Harmonides
Dionysus, An Introductory Lecture
Heracles, An Introductory Lecture
The Scythian
Swans and Amber
Dipsas, the Thirst-Shake
Zeuxis and Antiochus

Some of Lucian's παραδοξογραφίες are in rhetorical style:

Phalaris
The Fly, An Appreciation
Trial in the Court of Consonants
The Parasite, A Demonstration That Sponging Is a Profession
The Rhetorician's Vade Mecum

b) Dialogues (among them are the satirical dialogues, a kind Lucian developed first). There are various categories:

1. Dialogues of Platonic-philosophical character:

About dance
Images
Nigrinus, A Dialogue (written under the pseudonym Lycinus)
A Feast of Lapithae
Hermotimus, or The Rival Philosophies
Ευνούχος
The Liar
The Ship: or The Wishes
Pseudosophist or Soloikistes
Anacharsis, A Discussion of Physical Training
Lexiphanes
Toxaris: a Dialogue of Friendship

2. Satirical Dialogues:

Act of lives
Timon the Misanthrope
The Fisher
The Double Indictment
Dialogues of the Sea-Gods
Dialogues of the Gods
Dialogues of the Hetaerae
Jugments of the gods
A Literary Prometheus

c) 'Μενίππεια' scripts: texts (dialogues or treatises) referring to the well-known comic writer of the Roman period Menippus from Gadara:



Icaromenippus, An Aerial Expedition
Menippus
Zeus Cross-examined
Zeus Tragoedus
The Gods in Council
Dream or Coq
Saturnalian Letters
"Kataplous" or Tyran
The Runaways
Charon

d) Narratives:

A True Story: a grotesque fantastic story reminiscent of the 'utopias' of the time, such as that of Ιαμβούλου reported by Diodorus Siculus.

About the dream, that is the life of Lucian(*)
Lucius or the ass(*)

e) Pungent treatises on phenomena of his time:

Remarks Addressed to An Illiterate Book-fancier
How to Write History
Alexander, The Oracle-monger
The Iyer
"Περί των επί μισθώ συνώντων"
The Death of Peregrine
Life of Demonax (*)
The Syrian Goddess (*)

The validity of some of the above works (marked with a star), as Lucian's works, is challenged and they are attributed to different, usually unknown, writers. Lucian was often responsible for this confusion, as he usually used a pseudonym in his works or appeared in them as a literary persona.

Finally, there are works attributed to Lucian, but modern research has shown that they were written by different writers. Such works are: Μακρόβιοι, Περί της αστρολογίας, Έρωτες, Demosthenes, An Encomium, Αλκυών ή περί μεταμορφώσεων, Ωκύπους and The Cynic.

(**) This work is believed to be based on the same myth as 'The Golden Ass' or 'Metamorphoses' of Apuleius from Madauros. As the two writers were contemporary, there is confusion about who influenced whom. However, modern researchers, who dispute the fact that 'Λούκιος ή Όνος' was written by Lucian, assume that both works may have been based on a Greek model of some unknown writer.