



Summary :

Orator and sophist of late antiquity (4th c. AD). He was born in Antioch, studied in Athens and worked as a teacher of rhetoric and philosophy in Constantinople and Nicomedia. He returned to Antioch in 354 and gained the seat of the school there. He is famous for his classicistic style and his nostalgia for the classical past and the pagan world that had started to fade. Among his numerous pupils were the philosopher Aedesius and John Chrysostom.

Date and Place of Birth

314 AD, Antioch

Date and Place of Death

392 or 393 AD, Antioch

Main Role

Orator, sophist, teacher of rhetoric and philosophy

1. Biography

Libanios (or Libanius) was one of the most important orators of late antiquity, about whom there is –oddly enough– ample information provided by both his own writings, which include his autobiography and numerous letters he exchanged with notable figures of his time about political matters, personal properties and his religious views.¹

Libanios was born in [Antioch](#) in 314 AD. He was born into a notable family of the city, which had a tradition of serving in public posts. His father, whose name is unknown, died when Libanios was still young and left him considerable property. His two uncles, Panolbius and Phasganius were councillors (bouleutai). They were his guardians after his father's death, although it was his mother who played a decisive role in his education. When he was twenty he had an accident, struck by a thunderbolt, which deteriorated his health for the rest of his life and made him suffer from migraines. The possibilities for marrying his cousin were eliminated when she suddenly died at a young age, while a concubine gave Libanios a son, Arabius, whom his father later called Cimon out of admiration for the Athenian politician and general. Between 381 and 388 Libanios mainly wanted to safeguard his son's interests so that the latter could inherit his property and his profession, since his father wanted him to become a teacher, too. However, Cimon pursued a career as a lawyer, contrary to his father's will, and aimed to hold a post in the imperial court as a senator. The humble origins of his mother restrained his ambitions. In 391, shortly after his mother's death, Cimon fell off his chariot and was fatally injured on his way back from Constantinople to Antioch. Libanios spent the rest of his life mourning for his dead relatives. But this was a short period as the orator died in 392 or 393.

2. Activity

2.1. Education

Libanios early on showed a tendency for classical literature and prepared himself for a career as an [orator](#) and philosopher. His teachers were among the most significant intellectual figures of his time, such as Ulpianus from Ascalon and Zenobius from Elusa. At the age of twenty-two, in 336 AD, he went to Athens, despite his mother's objections, because he wanted to complete his studies in philosophy and rhetoric, which he had successfully started in Antioch. Later on, when he became famous, he used to say that it was his dedication to the subjects he loved rather than his teachers that made him succeed.

2.2. His Career as a Sophist and Orator



In Athens Libanios became famous and started to teach after he finished his studies. However, in 340, probably because of the rivalry with his fellow students, who competed with him over the master's chair there, he went to Constantinople, which had started to turn into the economic and intellectual centre of the empire, and started to give private lessons. He was very successful, but in 342 he had to leave the city once again because of unfair competition. He worked in [Nicaea](#) for a while, but in 344 he held the chair of philosophy at the school of [Nicomedia](#), where he taught until 348. He met [Basil of Caesarea](#) there, with whom he exchanged lively correspondence. Moreover, the lecture notes from his classes became available to young Julian, who had escaped from the court and was living in Nicomedia, and contributed decisively to the conversion of the subsequent emperor to paganism. His spectacular success in Nicomedia led Emperor Constantios II to bring him back to Constantinople, where he was appointed imperial tutor of philosophy and rhetoric. But the court made Libanios feel bored and in 353, with the emperor's permission, he visited his birthplace again. The chair of the tutor at the [school of Antioch](#) was soon vacant and in 354 Libanios settled permanently in the city he loved tenderly. Apart from his teaching duties, he managed the paternal property. Despite the fact that he belonged to the upper class of the city, he did not hold any public posts, although through his orations he often tried to intervene with the sovereigns so that the heavy economic burdens of the decurions could be reduced.²

2.3. His Role as A Mediator

His absence from the active political life did not prevent Libanios from participating in public matters and helping his birthplace when necessary. His rhetorical ability as well as his moderate attitude and his status as spiritual figure of his time allowed him to personally contact the emperors or senior officials and voice the complaints or wishes of his fellow citizens as well as the views and advice of the empire to the people.

This role was established mainly during the short reign of Emperor Julian.³ Libanios had the same ideas as the emperor, who yearned for the classical past and advocated the traditional religions. In the winter of 361-362 the emperor was in Antioch, where he was preparing his campaign against the Persians. The Antiochians, either because of their Christian faith or because of their attachment to a life of indulgence condemned by the ascetic emperor, faced him with veiled hostility. Julian reacted by imposing heavy economic sanctions to the ruling class.⁴

This period Libanios developed personal relations with the emperor, who gave him the title of **quaestor** and legitimised his son, while the orator joined the emperor against the Antiochians, although at the same time he tried to alleviate the emperor and remit the sanctions imposed against the city. The inopportune death of Julian during his campaign in 363 and the dishonourable treaty imposed by the Sāsānids against the Romans, who would permanently lose important regions of the empire near the Euphrates, caused Libanios deep distress.⁵ He saw his last hopes of preventing inimical Christianity from spreading over the empire died out along with Julian. Apart from pathological and ideological reasons, Libanios was distressed because of real events, since after the emperor's death his opponents embrangled him in a series of trials, mainly accusing him of being a pagan.⁶

Intrigues against him as well as the religious prejudice and the general narrow-mindedness of Valens (364-378), who succeeded Julian, made Libanios live in obscurity for more than ten years. But when Theodosius I assumed the throne in 378 AD, Libanios started again to openly express his views on politics, religion and education, despite the Christian religious principles of the emperor. However, the strict administration of Theodosius and the continuing life of indulgence the Antiochians lived caused new conflict between the city and the monarch. In particular, in 387, following a heavy winter with famine, the citizens asked for a favourable taxation, encouraged by the decurions, who should pay the collective taxes of the city with money from their personal properties. The emperor refused and the citizens revolted and capsized all the statues representing the emperor and members of the imperial family. The furious forces sent to suppress "the Riot of the Statues" were stopped by Libanios, who also tried successfully to calm the emperor down and smooth over the situation by inflicting mainly administrative measures as punishment on the Antiochians.⁷

3. Work

In his long career Libanios wrote numerous works, mainly orations, several of which addressed the emperors or senior officials, thus aiming to influence them in the city's affairs or just praise them. He also wrote treatises, while he exchanged voluminous



correspondence with politicians and intellectuals. Several of these works are invaluable sources of his time, while they also offer a view different from that expressed in respective works written by Christians.⁸ His works are divided into the following categories:

a) autobiographical (*Autobiography*)

b) letters (among them are letters to the philosopher Themistius, the historian Ammianus Marcellinus, Basil of Caesarea, Julian and officials like Anatolius, the prefect of Illyria).⁹

c) commendatory and elegiac orations (the first category, among others, includes Basilikos Logos (Royal Oration)– to Emperors Constantios and Constans – and Antiochikos – to his birthplace Antioch, while the second category includes the three elegiac orations for Julian)¹⁰

d) Philosophical (*Apology of Socrates*)

e) Hortative and political orations (such as "*On the Emperor's Anger*", "*On the Protection Systems*", "*To the Emperor Julian as Consul*", "*The Embassy to Julian*", "*To the Emperor, on the Prisoners*", "*For the Peasantry about Forced Labour*", "*To the Emperor Theodosius, about the Riots*".

Because of the historical information provided, the commendatory oration he wrote for his birthplace, Antioch, in 360 AD, known today as '[Antiochikos](#)',¹¹ is invaluable. Of particular interest is also his autobiography, which provides information not only about his life but also his social environment. Basilikos is also an important oration Libanios wrote in honour of Constantios and Constans, as this oration reveals the style and function of panegyrics in the 4th century. Finally, an important source of information about the spiritual life of the 4th century are his letters, which reveal aspects of the personal relations between intellectual and political figures of the time, while at the same time they are examples of correspondence thoroughly studied for their style.

Apart from his writings, his teachings were important as well. Throughout his long career, Libanios remained attached to the academic approach to life and knowledge, which he understood only through classical rules. Despite this fact, he avoided the boring repetition of classicistic types of his time, which aimed to educate people superficially so that they could later be suitable to man the administrative hierarchy, and was innovative as he created works that were strictly organised and were characterised by rhetorical style and accurate content, which interested and touched his audience. He handed down his principles to his numerous students. Due to his travels, Libanios had mainly two circles of pupils, one in Nicomedia, indirectly including Julian, and one in Antioch, which included more pupils and some important men of the time, such as his successor Acacius and the bishop and ecclesiastical father [John Chrysostom](#), whose exceptional talent had been recognised by Libanios, although he did not hide his regret for the fact that his pupil had chosen to use his talent for strengthening the Christian faith, to which Libanios was strongly opposed.¹²

4. Ideology

Almost all the works of Libanios reflect his love for Greek culture and his admiration for the Greek ideal of the 'city' and the values it represents: participation in common affairs, sophisticated spirit, trained body, worship of gods. Because Libanios produced his works in a period of ideological turmoil, which was characterised by the conflict between old religions and fast-spreading Christianity, he expressed an entire social class, the wealthy middle class and aristocrats, who felt that their social and economic status was downgraded because of a new public bureaucracy backed by a Christian emperor. While several of his peers chose to be Christianised and assumed public posts, this category, including Libanios, remained loyal to idolatry and had a special love for classical literature and anything sophisticated the past could still offer. The ideas of Libanios were best expressed in the short period like-minded Julian reigned. However, the post and vocation of Libanios did not allow him to be very critical of the government. Besides, the signal for his starting career had been given when he delivered in Constantinople his "*Tricennalia oration*" about Constantios II. Nevertheless, even when the throne was occupied by Theodosius I, who gave the final blow to the world of traditional cults and values, Libanios insisted on being entreating and uncritical, as John Chrysostom could have been. In his oration "*To the Emperor Theodosius, For the Temples*" Libanios tries to protect the pagan rural sanctuaries against the furious Christian priests and monks,



while in his oration, "*On Emperor's Anger*" he tries to intervene between the emperor and the citizens of Antioch, who revolted in 387, so that he could break the resistance of the latter and give good reason for the rage of the emperor.

5. Evaluation

Libanius was undoubtedly one of the most important intellectual figures of Late Antiquity. He developed a rhetorical style strongly reminiscent of great classic orators like Isocrates, whom he really admired for his style. The number of his saved works and the development of a classical-like, yet original and vivid, style prove that he was reasonably described as the 'last sophist'. The circle of his students preserved his teachings for some years after his death, while some of them later turned to Christianity and transferred rhetorical and educational elements to the theological school of Antioch. However, his frequent involvement in trials and the rivalries he caused have formed the impression that in his personal life he was a man with fixed ideas and his attachment to the classical past was an extension of his meticulous and conservative character.

1. About his autobiography, see Norman, A.F. (ed.), *Libanius' autobiography (Oration 1)* (Oxford 1965) and Norman, A.F. (ed.), *Libanius: Autobiography and selected letters* (London 1992). About the German bibliography, see Wolf, P. (ed.), *Libanius, Autobiographische Schriften*, (Zürich-Stuttgart 1967) as well as the old, though classic, work of Seeck, O., *Die Briefe des Libanius* (Leipzig 1906). Biographical information about Libanius is also provided by Eunapius, *Vitae sophistarum*. As for recent biographies of Libanius, see Metzler Lexikon Antiker Autoren (Stuttgart & Weimar 1997), see entry 'Libanius' (Krischer, T.), *N Pauly*, VII (Stuttgart & Weimar 1999), pp. 129-132, see entry Libanius (Weißberger, M.).
2. The relation between Libanius and politics was determined by two main axes: on the one hand, his hereditary position among the aristocrats of Antioch and the awareness of the post he held and, on the other hand, his devotion to an academic way of living, which would have been ruined in case the orator had been involved into the tumult of the political developments of his time. See: Banchich, T.M., 'Eunapius on Libanius' refusal of a prefecture', *Phoenix* 39 (1985), pp. 384-386, Carrié, J.-M., 'Patronage et propriété militaires au IVE s. Objet rhétorique et objet réel du discours sur les patronages de Libanius', *BCH* 100 (1976), pp. 159-176.
3. The relationship between Libanius and Julian as well as the fragments of the national culture that was dying out in a Christian environment has been the object of several studies. See Criscuolo, U., 'Libanio e Giuliano', *Vichiana* 11 (1982) pp. 70-87, Wiemer, H.-U, *Libanius und Julian, Studien zum Verhältnis von Rhetorik und Politik im Vierten Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Munich 1995), Bouffartigue, J.- Scholl, R., *Historische Beiträge zu den julianischen Reden des Libanius* (Stuttgart 1994). The entire text of the mediation of Libanius to Julian has been saved in the respective oration 'Embassy to Julian' in Norman, A.F., *Libanius: selected works I, The Julianic orations* (London 1969). See also the hortative oration: 'On the Anger of the Emperor', through which he tried to moderate the reactions of his fellow citizens.
4. The stay of Julian in Antioch and his dispute with the Antiochians is exceptionally outlined in his oration Antiochikos or Misopogon (*Beard-Hater*). See Wright, W., *The Works of the emperor Julian* (London 1913), v.2, pp. 421-511.
5. The distress Libanius suffered over the death of Julian appears in three orations he delivered about the emperor in 363: "*The Lament over Julian*", "*Funeral Oration over Julian*", "*Upon Avenging Julian*". See Norman, A.F. (ed.), *Libanius: selected works I, Julianic Orations* (London 1969).
6. Cracco-Ruggini, L., 'Libanio e il camaleonte: politica e magia ad Antiochia sul finire del IV e secolo, in Italia sul Baetis', in Gabba, E., Desideri, S., Roda, I., *Florilegi* 7 (Torino 1996), pp. 159-166.
7. See his oration '*To the Emperor Theodosius, about the Riots*'. As a consequence of the "Riot of the Statues" the bishopric seat of Antioch lost its primacy for some years, for the benefit of the bishopric of Laodicea, which became the seat of a metropolitan bishop.
8. Modern historians actually managed to recompose the history of Antioch and 4th c. Syria mainly thanks to Libanius. See, for example: Festugière, A., *Antioche païenne et chrétienne, Libanius, Chrysostome et les moines de Syrie* (Paris 1959), Downey, G., *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton 1961), Liebeschuetz, J.H.G.W., *Antioch, city and imperial administration in the Later Roman Empire* (Oxford 1972).
9. About the letters of Libanius, see mainly Norman, A.F. (edit.), *Libanius: Autobiography and selected letters* (London 1992) and Seeck, O., *Die Briefe des Libanius* (Leipzig 1906).



10. About the relations between Libanios and Constantios, see Seiler, E.-M., *Konstantios II. bei Libanios. Eine kritische Untersuchung des überlieferten Herrscherbildes* (Hannover, Univ., Diss., 1997) Frankfurt am Main [u.a.] : Lang, 1998. - 257 S. - (Europäische Hochschulschriften / 3; 798).

11. About *Antiochikos* and its importance as well as the views of Libanios about the city and culture in general, see at first the comments in the publications of the text: Downey, G., 'Libanius' oration in praise of Antioch', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 103 (1959), pp. 652-686, Libanios, *Antiochikos* (edit. by A. Kamara) (Athens 1999), Hugi, L. (edit.), *Der Antiochikos des Libanios* (Solothourn 'Union' 1919), Norman, A.F., *Antioch as a center for Hellenic Culture as observed by Libanius* (Liverpool 2000). See also relevant studies based on Libanios concerning the restoration of Antioch: Müller, O., *Antiquitates Antiochenae* (Göttingen 1839), and the comments of Bowersock, G., 'The search for Antioch: Karl Ottfried's Müller's *Antiquitates Antiochenae*' in Bowersock, G. (edit.), *Studies on the Eastern Roman Empire: social, economic and administrative history, religion, historiography*, Bibliotheca Eruditorum 9, Goldbach 1994, pp. 411-427, Hebert, B.D., *Spätantike Beschreibung von Kunstwerken. Archäologischer Kommentar zu den Ekphraseis des Libanios und Nikolaos* (Diss. Techn. Uni Graz 1983), Downey, G., *A History of Antioch in Syria from Alexander to the Arab conquest* (Princeton 1961), Downey, G., 'Polis and civitas in Libanius and Saint Augustine. A contrast between East and West in the Late Roman Empire', *Bull. de la Classe de Lettres de l'Acad. Royale de Belgique* 52 (1966), pp. 351-366.

12. About the circle of pupils and companions of Libanios, see the work of H. I. Marrou, *Les étudiants de Libanios*. See also Npauly, (1996), 'Akakios, Rhetor und Dichter aus Caesarea, Zeitgenosse des Libanios' (Weißberger, M.). In particular, about his relationship with John Chrysostom, see Hunter, D., 'Libanius and John Chrysostom: New Thoughts on an old Problem', *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989), pp. 129-135. Moreover, about his correspondence with the Cappadocian ecclesiastical father Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, see Gallay, Paul, ed. *Gregor von Nazianz: Briefe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1969).

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	Downey G. , "Julian the Apostate at Antioch", <i>Church History</i> , 8, 1939, 305 κ.ε.
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	Petit P. , <i>Libanios et la vie municipale à Antioche au IVe siècle après J.-C.</i> , Paris 1955



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	Seeck O., <i>Die Briefe des Libanios</i> , Leipzig 1906
	Wiemer H.U., <i>Libanios und Julian, Studien zum Verhältnis von Rhetorik und Politik im Vierten Jahrhundert n. Chr.</i> , Munich 1955

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	http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog/L451.html

Glossary :

	questor (lat. quaestor, -oris) or quaesitor
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Antiquity. Elected officials who supervised the treasury and financial affairs of the state, its armies and its officers.

Byzantium. Q. derived from the Latin quaestor; originally high-ranking legal officials, drafter of laws, later a judicial official of lesser rank. In the Early Byzantine period q. was a powerful official.

1.) **q. of the sacred palace** (Lat. quaestor sacri palatii), high-ranking official of the late Roman Empire, an office created by Constantine I. The quaestor was originally responsible for drafting imperial laws. His judicial rights were relatively insignificant, but as the emperor's closest adviser in legal questions he acquired enormous influence.

2.) In 539 Justinian I introduced another office called **quaesitor** (called also simply quaestor), involving police and judicial power in Constantinople, esp. control over newcomers settling in the capital.

During the Middle Byzantine period quaestor had lost his earlier prestige, some of his functions having been transferred to the Logothetes tou dromou, the Epi ton Deeseion. He was considered one of the judes (kritai). The quaestor survived at least until the 14th C., when he occupied 45th place in the hierarchy, but this was only an honorary position.

Chronological Table

314 AD: Libanios is born in Antioch

334 AD: An accident with his coach causes him a permanent health problem

336 AD: He goes to Athens to study

340 AD: He completes his studies and goes to Constantinople, where he gives private lessons

342 AD: He goes to Nicaea

344 AD: He holds the chair of the school of Nicomedia

348 AD: Following an imperial invitation, he goes to Constantinople and works in the imperial court

354 AD: He returns to his birthplace, Antioch, and holds the chair of the school of Antioch

361-363 AD: As a follower of Julian he is awarded the title of quaestor

387 AD: He plays a leading role in the settlement of relations between Theodosius I and the Antiochians after the 'Affair of the statues'.



391 AD: He loses his wife and son

392 or 393 AD: He dies in Antioch

Auxiliary Catalogs

Works

The first attempt for the publication of the complete survived works of Libanios was made by the German scholar Richard Förster in 9 volumes in the 1910s and 1920s. This work is still the reference point for the works of Libanios, although the absence of translation soon made students in England, France and other countries translate selected parts of this extensive work. The publications of the greatest part of his work are included in the following titles:

- Reiske, J.J. (edit.), *Libanii Sophistae Orationes et Declamationes*, 4 v. (Altenburg 1791) [with information about manuscripts and previous publications]
- Förster, R., *Libanii Opera*, 9 v. (Leipzig, Teubner, 1913-1927 [with information about manuscripts and previous publications])
- Libanios, *Autobiography and selected letters*, 2 v., A. F. Norman (edit.) (London 1965)
- Libanios, *Selected works*, 3 v., A. F. Norman (edit.) (London 1969-1974)

Moreover, there are independent publications of his orations as well, such as:

- Libanios, *Discours sur les patronages*, (ed.) P. Harmand (Paris 1955)
- Hugi, L. (edit.), *Der Antiochikos des Libanios* (Solothurn „Union“ 1919)
- Norman, A.F., *Antioch as a center for Hellenic Culture as observed by Libanios* (Liverpool 2000)