

**Heinz-Günther Nesselrath, *Libanios: Zeuge einer schwindenden Welt* (Standorte in Antike und Christentum, 4), Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 2012. Pp. vii, 165. ISBN 9783777212081. € 39.00 (pb).**

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At the end of his review of Donald A. Russell's translation of a selection of Libanius' *Declamations*, Mark Edwards, back in 1998, wrote that 'despite Libanius' importance as the leading orator and teacher of the fourth century A.D., comparatively little attention has been devoted to him by modern scholars',<sup>[1]</sup> and expressed the hope that this would change. Since then, a number of translations of selected Libanian texts have appeared, a new biography and several studies have been published, and a conference has been dedicated to the author.<sup>[2]</sup> Yet overall, and notwithstanding the boom in late antique studies, Libanius' oeuvre remains understudied, especially when it comes to interpretative analyses. What accounts for this lack of interest on the part of many scholars, is Libanius' inaccessibility: his oeuvre is the third largest to have been bequeathed to us from antiquity, only about half of it has been translated into a modern language, and until now, no introduction to the author and his oeuvre was available.<sup>[3]</sup>

At least for those who read German,<sup>[4]</sup> Heinz-Günther Nesselrath has now provided such an introduction. His book consists of six chapters and an epilogue. In the first chapter, Nesselrath presents Libanius as 'ein Fixpunkt in einer Zeit, die einem tiefgreifenden und unumkehrbaren Wandel ausgesetzt war' (p. 5). Building on this idea, the epilogue points out some striking similarities between Libanius' position in the fourth century, and that of the university lecturer of Greek today. The introductory chapter furthermore offers a short survey of some canonical evaluations of Libanius: whereas Wilhelm Schmid, in the *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, was rather negative about Libanius, Gibbon and von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff were more ambiguous in their judgment, and Johann Jakob Reiske, one of the most important editors of Libanius before Foerster's still standard 1903-1927 Teubner-edition, was straightforwardly positive. In the second chapter, Nesselrath reconstructs Libanius' life. In doing so, he quotes extensive passages of Libanius' *Autobiography* (in German translation), thus allowing the reader here, as elsewhere in the book, to catch a direct glimpse of Libanius. Nevertheless, as Nesselrath briefly but correctly indicates in the last section of the chapter, the *Autobiography* is a rhetorical construction, and should be read as such. The third chapter gives a brief overview of Libanius' preserved works, dealing first with the orations (pp. 37-41), then with the school texts, including declamations, progymnasmata, and hypotheses to the speeches of Demosthenes (pp. 41-48), and finally very briefly with the letters (pp. 59-50). A short discussion of Libanius' educational views concludes the chapter.

If the first three chapters thus offer a general introduction to Libanius, his life, and his works, the following two chapters directly or indirectly focus on one particular aspect: his position in a world of religious tensions between traditional polytheism and Christianity. Chapter four offers a survey of Libanius' references to the traditional gods, shows that he saw these gods as real presences in his own life, and lists his most important descriptions of Christians and Christianity. Chapter five, in turn, addresses Libanius' relations with adherents of traditional religion (including, most prominently, the Emperor Julian), with Christians, and with adherents of other religions. The overwhelming conclusion here is that Libanius' religious views were not decisive in his relations with individuals. The sixth chapter of the book, finally, discusses Libanius' reception. Nesselrath does not limit himself to Libanius' success in late Antiquity and Byzantium as testified through direct statements as well as through the addition of various forgeries to the author's oeuvre, most noticeably the forged epistolary exchange between Libanius and Basil the Great; instead, he also sketches the extraordinary medieval tradition that turned Libanius into all but a Christian Saint ('Vom Heiden und Freund Julians zum Freund von Bischöfen und Teilhaber christlicher Erlösung', pp. 124-8), surveys various renaissance translations and forgeries, and gives an overview of Libanius as a character in

19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>- century fiction, especially in Gore Vidal's *Julian* (1964). Few, if any, readers will fail to learn something from this broadranging and exciting chapter.

All in all, Nesselrath's book offers a most readable and solid starting point for anybody who would like to know something about this important yet understudied author: in the space of 142 pages, it presents Libanius' life, works, and religious opinions as scholars since Gibbon have reconstructed them. Designed as a true introduction, it mostly does not bother the reader with critical inquiries into specific points (e.g. the debate concerning the authenticity of the letters to Basil,<sup>[5]</sup> or, for that matter, other bishops). Yet although it builds on the work of some of the most renowned scholars in the field, not everyone may agree with every single aspect of the book. Following Isabella Sandwell's book on *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity*,<sup>[6]</sup> for example, one may wonder whether religion is really as central an aspect of Libanius' thinking as the focus on religion in chapters 4 and 5 suggests. It is noteworthy, in this respect, that chapter 5, although dividing Libanius' network according to religious allegiances, eventually comes to the conclusion that religion did not matter that much in Libanius' relations with individuals. Likewise, the image of Libanius finding himself on the wrong side of a series of important divides (Christianity vs. paganism, Latin vs. Greek, law vs. rhetoric) should be treated with great care: apart from the fact that such dichotomies are increasingly being abandoned in late antique studies, the rhetorical context of Libanius' references to (or omissions of!) such dichotomies should always be taken into account, and it should not be forgotten that the outcome of these tensions had not yet been decided in the (first half of the) fourth century. From a linguistic point of view, for example, the Byzantine empire was, after all, to be a Greek, not a Latin empire. Nevertheless, even those who disagree with Nesselrath on such points will admit that his book offers not only a solid introduction for those new to Libanius, but also (especially, though not exclusively, in the sixth chapter) stimulating reading for those wishing to expand their knowledge of the author and his reception. As such, it constitutes another important step in rendering accessible an understudied yet fascinating and important author.

<sup>[1]</sup> M. J. EDWARDS, rev. 'Russell, D.A. (1996), *Libanius. Imaginary Speeches*, London', in *The Classical Review* n.s. 48 (1998), 491.

<sup>[2]</sup> Examples of translations: Malosse, P.L. (2003), *Libanios. Discours LIX* (Collection des Universités de France), Paris; Bradbury, S. (2004), *Selected Letters of Libanius from the Age of Constantius and Julian*, Liverpool; Gibson, C.A. (2009), *Progymnasmata. Model Exercises in Greek Prose Composition and Rhetoric*, Leiden. Biography: Wintjes, J. (2005), *Das Leben des Libanios* (Historische Studien der Universität Würzburg 2), Rahden. Examples of studies: Cribiore, R. (2007), *The School of Libanius in Late Antique Antioch*, Princeton; Sandwell, I. (2007), *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity. Greeks, Jews, and Christians in Antioch*, Cambridge. A conference on Libanius and the first humanist was held at Montpellier, France, in 2010. The proceedings were published as Lagacherie, O. – Malosse, P.-L. (edd.) (2011), *Libanios. Le premier humaniste*, Alessandria.

<sup>[3]</sup> Bernard Schouler's magisterial two-volume *La tradition hellénique chez Libanios* (Paris, 1984), for example, although a milestone in Libanius-studies, is hardly an easy read for, say, a beginning Ph.D. student who might be interested in Libanius.

<sup>[4]</sup> A critical introduction in English, to which Nesselrath equally contributes a chapter, will appear with Cambridge University Press in the course of 2013, edited by the author of the current review.

<sup>[5]</sup> Nesselrath (2010), 'Libanio e Basilio di Cesarea. Un dialogo interreligioso?', *Adamantius* 16, 338-52 discusses the debate concerning the authenticity of the letters between Libanius and Basil in great detail. This shows that the omission of this material here was a deliberate choice in view of the book's target audience.

<sup>[6]</sup> Sandwell, I. (2007), *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity. Greeks, Jews, and Christians in Antioch*, Cambridge.