

Self-Censorship and Self-Fashioning: Gaps in Libanius' Letter Collection

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Zelfcensuur en zelfpresentatie : Lacunes in Libanius' Briefcollectie.

De brieven van Libanius dateren uit de jaren 355 tot 365 enerzijds, en 388 tot 393 anderzijds. Sinds de zestiger jaren wordt het ontbreken van brieven uit de tussenliggende jaren verklaard als een act van zelfcensuur : Libanius zou zijn briefarchief onderbroken hebben uit angst voor vijandige keizers. Dit artikel stelt een nieuwe interpretatie voor. In de eerste twee secties wordt aangetoond dat de argumenten die traditioneel worden aangehaald om de hypothese van zelfcensuur te staven geen steek houden, en dat die hypothese in het algemeen onhoudbaar is. De derde sectie houdt de lacune opnieuw tegen het licht : hoewel de manuscripten geenszins aanwijzingen bevatten dat er tussen brief 839 en brief 840 een chronologische sprong voorwaarts van meer dan twintig jaar plaats vindt, presenteren de eerste brieven uit de late periode zich niettemin duidelijk als een nieuw epistolair begin. De laatste sectie, ten slotte, argumenteert dat zelfpresentatie een minstens even belangrijke rol speelt als zelfcensuur : omdat de brieven uit de jaren 366 tot 387 niet alleen gericht waren aan minder luisterrijke adressaten maar ook controversiële onderwerpen uit de weg gingen – in die zin is er wel degelijk sprake van zelfcensuur – zouden zij het beeld van een zelfzekere, goed geconnecteerde persoonlijkheid dat Libanius in de rest van de collectie en in zijn Autobiografie ontwikkelt, onderuit hebben gehaald.

Abstract

The letters of Libanius cover the years 355 to 365 and the years 388 to 393. Since the 1960s, scholars have explained the absence of letters from the intervening years as an act of self-censorship through which Libanius interrupted his habit of keeping duplicate correspondence files out of fear for hostile emperors. This article advances a different interpretation. Sections One and Two show that the arguments brought forward to support the traditional hypothesis do not hold up to scrutiny, and that the hypothesis is highly problematic in general. Section Three revisits the chronological gap : whilst the chronological leap forward is in no way marked in the manuscripts, the first letters of the late period clearly represent a new epistolary start. Section Four, finally, proposes that self-fashioning may have played at least as important a role in Libanius' twenty-three year epistolary silence as self-censorship : addressed to a less powerful cast of correspondents and avoiding controversial topics – in this sense, self-censorship does play a role –, the letters of the years 366 to 387 risked to detract from Libanius' self-confident pose in the remainder of the letter collection as well as in his Autobiography.

Self-Censorship and Self-Fashioning: Gaps in Libanius' Letter Collection

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Introduction: The self-censorship hypothesis

The correspondence of Libanius is one of the largest epistolary collections to have come down to us from antiquity. The 1544 letters that constitute the corpus⁽¹⁾ have been transmitted (as a collection or in anthologies) in more than 250 manuscripts, of which V (Vaticanus Graecus 83), Va (Vaticanus Graecus 85), and Vo (Vossianus Leidensis 77) are the most extensive and important. In these three manuscripts, the letters appear in more or less the same order⁽²⁾, but Va⁽³⁾ and Vo end with letter 1112. Chronologically, letters 19-839 have been dated to the years 355-363, letters 840-1112 to the years 388-393, and letters 1113-1544, conserved in V only, to the years 363-365. Overall, then, the collection covers the years 355-365 on the one hand, and the years 388-393 on the other. Whereas Seeck, in his 1906 study of the chronology of Libanius' letters, and Foerster, in his still standard 1920s Teubner edition, merely registered the absence of letters from 365 to 388, and Jean Martin attributed it to the hazards of the manuscript tradition⁽⁴⁾, A.F. Norman, in 1965, drew attention to the 23-year gap by making the following statement:

“The most significant feature of the correspondence is that from A.D. 365 to A.D. 388 practically none exists. It is fair inference that, during this period of rumour and conspiracy, he was as careful for its suppression as he had been earlier for its publication.” (Norman, 1965, p. 201)

Written at a Cold War high point, this statement, drawing attention to the chronological gap and explaining it as a form of self-censorship, continues to

(1) For the forgeries and falsifications that were later added to it, see FOERSTER, 1876.

(2) FOERSTER (1927) by an large follows the order of Va/Vo for letters 1-1112, which are supposed to follow the order of the archetype more closely (p. 71), that of V for the remaining letters. An overview of the order of the letters in V can be found in SEECK, 1906, p. 25-7. For extensive discussion of the order and manuscript tradition of Libanius' letters, see VAN HOOF, forthcoming.

(3) Both Va and Vo originally contained letters 1-1112. Of these, Va lost the beginning and end, now running from 95 to 1005, whilst Vo lost letters 411 to 498.

(4) As stated by CABOURET, 2009, p. 261.

shape thinking about Libanius' letter collection. As I shall engage with them throughout my paper, I quote two recent statements⁽⁵⁾:

"Prudence also dictated the interruption in the formal organization of his duplicates from 365 to 388, but it may equally be the explanation of the confusion of order and the manner of survival of those covering the years 363-365. Valens' reign of terror was notorious, and it is not inconceivable that the disorder of these files is due to Libanius' own hurried precautions in scrutinizing and withdrawing any possibly incriminating documents immediately, and then, when times became even more critical, in removing from his archives all correspondence written after the death of Julian. These would be deposited in some place of safety well away from prying official eyes, and there they stayed. This was an act of self-censorship, the prelude to the long period of almost total silence when the files were discontinued. For twenty-five years self-preservation took precedence over all else in the handling of his correspondence, and only when it was safe to do so were the duplicate files reinstituted in 388. The reactions of Libanius to his immediate circumstances at different stages of his career may thus be interpreted as the determining factor for the survival of his letters in their present format. The archetype was compiled after Libanius' death by his editor, but he went about his task in a very mechanical way. He had easy access to the whole corpus which survives in Va and Vo, since that was to be found at hand in the archives... It was presumably he who unearthed the remaining letters from their hiding place, and dealt with them in the easiest and most obvious way by simply appending them to the already existing corpus. Piety may well have prompted him to reproduce the letters as he found them; any literary presentation had already been effected by the author himself where it was possible and safe to do so." (Norman, 1992a, p. 42-43)

"The current collection clearly derives from the duplicate copies Libanius himself kept of the letters he dispatched. Normally he would dictate a letter to a scribe, who would then make a second copy on papyrus, and it was presumably this clean copy that was rolled, sealed with wax, and sent off by a trusted messenger. The first copy will have been put in a duplicates file. It cannot be known for certain why the surviving collection exists in two chronologically distinct groupings, 355-65 and 388-93... The most likely hypothesis for the 23-year gap is that he regarded it as politically injudicious to keep records under hostile emperors... It is hardly surprising that he kept duplicate files of his letters, but whether he himself planned to publish them cannot be known... If Libanius had intended to publish his letters, it is doubtful, in my view, that he would have chosen the arrangement that has come down to us in the manuscript tradition. The structure and order of

(5) The self-censorship hypothesis is also upheld by MARTIN & PETIT, 1979, esp. p. 255 and 258, WIEBE, 1995, p. 154, LENSKI, 2002, p. 6-7 and CABOURET, 2004, p. 17. CABOURET (2009, p. 266) rightly states that « [l]a diffusion de discours autrement plus violents dans le contenu et dans la forme » advocates « une position plus circonspecte » of scholars examining Libanius' letters.

the corpus would be more carefully worked out than is currently the case... The current structure of the corpus, however, suggests that an unknown literary executor or admirer, not Libanius himself, actually published the letter collection after Libanius' death." (Bradbury, 2004, p. 19-21)

In line with Norman's earlier statement, both Norman himself and Bradbury explain the absence of letters documenting the years 365 to 388 as a form of self-censorship. At first sight, this hypothesis seems very plausible. Ammianus informs us about several people who got into trouble on the basis of letters they had written⁽⁶⁾. Ammianus thus clearly points out the dangers that could be involved in writing letters. In a famous passage, he also tells us how "innumerable writings and many heaps of volumes (*innumeri codices, et acervi voluminum multi*) were hauled out from various houses and under the eyes of the judges were burned in heaps as being unlawful (*illiciti*)... although the greater number were treatises on the liberal arts and on jurisprudence" (XXIX, 1, 41, transl. Rolfe, 1939, p. 211-213), and how "as a result, throughout the oriental provinces owners of books, through fear of a like fate, burned their entire libraries (*libraria omnia*)" (XXIX, 2, 4, transl. Rolfe, 1939, p. 217). While Ammianus thus refers to publicly executed as well as privately undertaken forms of book burning, it should be noted that letters are not mentioned specifically in this context: *codices*, *volumina* and *libraria* may have included letter collections⁽⁷⁾, but Ammianus' focus is not on this specific genre of texts.

As far as Libanius and his letters are concerned, three passages should be mentioned. The first two come from the author's *Autobiography*, and more particularly from the part that discusses Libanius' life under the reign of Valens that was written after the emperor's death⁽⁸⁾:

σπινθήρων τοίνυν ἐξ ἐπιστολῶν, τῶν μὲν παρ' ἐμοῦ πρὸς ἐτέρους, τῶν δὲ ἐμοὶ παρ' ἄλλων ἀφιγμένων, ἐν αἷς ἀδικία μὲν οὐδεμία, λαβαὶ δ' ἂν ἐγένοντο συκοφάνταις ἀνθρώποις, ταύτας δὴ τὰς ἀφορμὰς μάλα εὐπετῶς ἀνεῖλεν ἡ Τύχη, ὥστε ἐν μυρίοις γράμμασι μὴ εἶναι γράμμα ἐμόν.

"Yet there was some cause for misgiving owing to the correspondence which had passed between some of my friends and myself. There was nothing wrong in it, but it could have provided a handle for informers, but, by the favour of Fortune, this menace was removed quite easily, and in all the mass of correspondence there was not a single letter of mine." (Oration 1, 175, transl. Norman, 1992a, p. 243)

ὁ μὲν δὴ βασιλεύς, ὥσπερ τις θηρατῆς ἀμαρτάνων θηρίου, δεινῶς ἤχθετο, κινεῖται δὲ κίνδυνος ἐκ χαλεπότητός τε δεσπότης καὶ λύπης οἰκέτου. ὑπογραφεὺς μὲν ὁ οἰκέτης ἦν, οἰωνιστῆς δὲ ὁ

(6) e.g. XIX, 12, 4-5; XVIII, 1, 20; 6, 26; XXIX, 2, 25. By way of contrast, Marcus Aurelius is said to have burnt a packet of letters written by the usurper Cassius to his accomplices (Ammianus XXI, 16, 11).

(7) See below, n. 36.

(8) For more extensive discussion of (this part of) Libanius' *Autobiography*, see VAN HOOF, 2014.

δεσπότης. τοῦτον δὴ ποτε δι' ἐπιστολῶν ἠρόμην φαρμάκου τινὸς περὶ, τοὺς μὲν θεοὺς οὐκ εἰπών, ἱατρῶν δὲ μνησθεὶς ἀσφαλείας εἶνεκα. ταῦτα ὁ μὲν οὐ κατέκλυσε τὰ γράμματα, ὁ δὲ κτησάμενος ἐφύλαττεν, ὥπως, εἴ τί ποθ' ὕστερον ἐποίο δεινόν, σώζοιτο ταῖς ἐπιστολαῖς. ὥς οὖν ἐκάκου τε καὶ ἐδίδωκε τὸν δεσπότην ἐπὶ τοῖς οἰωνοῖς, ἐν τοῖς γράμμασι τούτοις εἶχε τὴν πίστιν· συνήσειν γὰρ δὴ τὸν δικαστήν, ὃ, τι ἐδήλουν οἱ ἱατροί· ἐμπεσόντι δὲ εἰς τὸ δίκτυον ὅπως οὖν ἐπέκειτ' ἂν εὐθὺς κεκραγῶς ὁ βασιλεὺς. ... δαίμων αὐτὸν ἃ μηδεὶς ῥητόρων, ἐπειθε, καὶ τὰ γράμματα ἀποπέμψας εἰσελθὼν ἡττάτο τῶν ἰσχυρῶν ἐστενημένους.

“The emperor, like a hunter balked of his quarry, was in a towering rage. Then I experienced some danger owing to the harshness of a master who practised divination from birds, and the resentment of a slave, his secretary. I had once written to him, inquiring of some remedy, with no mention of the gods but guardedly referring to physicians. He did not burn this letter and the slave got hold of it and kept it, so that, if any trouble arose in future, he could protect himself with the letters. So when he began to abuse his master and to prosecute him for his auguries, he placed his reliance upon this correspondence, for the governor would know exactly what ‘physicians’ meant, and the emperor would in any case set up a hue and cry against anyone so entrapped... But then destiny... made him change his mind. He returned the letters, carried on with the case and lost it, since he had lost the evidence to corroborate it.” (Oration 1, 177-178, transl. Norman, 1992a, p. 243-245)

According to these passages, Libanius on two occasions barely escaped being accused on the basis of some letters he wrote⁽⁹⁾. As a result, he displays a clear awareness of the fact that letters could – justly or unjustly – be used against their author, and he suggests that they therefore sometimes better be done away with in some way or other (ἀνεῖλεν, κατέκλυσε). The fact that Libanius thinks it noteworthy to mention that his correspondent did *not* burn a particular letter, may suggest that he himself burnt its duplicate; and if he did that for this letter, he may well have done so too for other, similar letters. Nevertheless, these passages cannot be taken as straightforward proof of the self-censorship hypothesis. Apart from the fact that certainly the second, and maybe also the first, passage does not refer to Libanius’ own duplicate files but to his letters as retained by their recipients⁽¹⁰⁾, two elements should be noted. First, these passages suggest that even during the reign of Valens,

(9) As has been shown, Libanius in all probability exaggerated the difficulties he experienced under the reign of Valens (Oration 1, 136-138 and 172-178, Letter 1220, 6). Cf. NORMAN, 1965, p. 201, LEPPIN, 2011, p. 439, and VAN HOOF, 2014.

(10) According to NORMAN, 1992a, p. 32, both passages refer to his correspondents’ archives (but see NORMAN, 1992a, p. 242, n. a, where he states that Libanius “had suppressed his correspondence files”). While this is clear for Oration 1, 177-178, Oration 1, 175 is more ambiguous: Libanius’ formulation may suggest that it is his own archive that is under scrutiny (ἐξ ἐπιστολῶν, τῶν μὲν παρ’ ἐμοῦ πρὸς ἑτέρους, τῶν δὲ ἐμοὶ παρ’ ἄλλων ἀφιγμένων: it is not immediately clear how anybody but Libanius himself would have archived letters by and to him), but the fact that “in all the mass of correspondence there was not a single letter of mine” may suggest the opposite.

letters, far from being systematically destroyed, were often being kept in archives. Only when prosecution actively threatened did people do away with those specific letters that might be used against them. And second, Libanius explicitly refers to another strategy which he did adopt for safety (ἀσφαλείας εἵνεκα): he carefully thought about and adapted the formulation of his letters. Not feeling free to write what or as one wishes can certainly be considered a form of self-censorship; yet it does not coincide with the kind of self-censorship described by Norman and Bradbury, who suggest that Libanius destroyed or hid away his letters.

The third passage comes from a letter addressed to Aristophanes, written in 364, at the beginning of the reign of Valens:

ἐπιστολὰς δὲ τὰς ἐκείνου πρὸς ἐμὲ καὶ πρὸς ἐκείνον ἐμὰς τὰς μὲν πέμπω, τὰς δὲ οὐ. κρίσει δὲ ἐκάτερον ἔσται· τὰς μὲν γὰρ οὐδὲν δεινὸν φανήναι, τὰς δὲ ἴσως.

“Of the letters which passed between him (i.e. the emperor Julian) and me, I will send you some but not all. It will be a matter of judgement, for though there is no harm in publishing some of them, there may perhaps be, in the case of others.” (Letter 1264, 5, transl. Norman, 1992b, p. 267)

Even more clearly than the passages from the *Autobiography*, this letter shows that Libanius did not wish to see all his letters published, and that, in this case, the reason was that their publication might be dangerous (δεινὸν)⁽¹¹⁾. *Might be* (ἴσως) is a key qualifier. At the beginning of Valens’ reign, before the revolt of Procopius, one could not be sure how the new emperor would behave towards Julian’s supporters. Much would depend on the interpretation of the documents in question. Indeed, as the first passage from the *Autobiography* also makes clear, innocent statements could be purposefully misinterpreted by those who might have an interest in incriminating Libanius⁽¹²⁾. If all of this suggests some form of self-censorship under pressure from the new regime, it should be emphasized that such self-censorship was not practised systematically in the sense that Libanius either destroyed all his letters or disposed of all his letters to particular people. As he explicitly says, careful judgement (κρίσει) has to be applied in every single case⁽¹³⁾.

The self-censorship hypothesis put forward by Norman and Bradbury, however, does not allow for careful judgement of individual letters. It supposes, instead, that Libanius, out of fear, simply did not keep any letters

(11) Another interpretation might be that Libanius wishes to select only the letters that are δεινόν in the sense of ‘skillful, clever’ (LSJ s.v. III). Yet the parallel μὲν... δὲ... -constructions in the first and second sentences suggest that he will send the letters that are οὐδὲν δεινόν, whilst he will not send the letters that are δεινόν. This suggests, then, that δεινόν must have a negative meaning here.

(12) Pace WIEBE (1995, p. 122), who states that Libanius “durch die inquisitorischen Suchaktionen kontrolliert und gefährdet” was, the passages quoted (and see, moreover, Libanius’ references to informers in *Oration* 1, 171 and 172) do not warrant the interpretation that imperial officials systematically searched through people’s correspondence; rather, local, personal enemies made use of letters when they wanted to blame someone.

(13) Against SIEVERS (1868, p. 87), DRINKWATER (1983, p. 353) has shown that this letter does not allow even for the conclusion that Libanius destroyed part of his correspondence with Julian. Cf. WIEMER, 1995, p. 18.

at all between 365 and 388. As a result, self-censorship cannot be the whole story behind the gap in Libanius' letter collection. In the following pages, I therefore examine the matter again. In the next section, I explore some further problems involved in the self-censorship hypothesis. After this, I re-examine the '23-year gap' that lies at the basis of the hypothesis. Finally, I propose that gaps in Libanius' letter collection are the result of the author's wish to present a particular, positive self-image that strongly resembles the self-image presented in the *Autobiography*.

Problems with the self-censorship hypothesis

As far as the self-censorship hypothesis is concerned, there are three main problems. First, it contradicts another assumption that has been made about Libanius' letters. Indeed, according to various scholars, ancient writers did not include in their letters any political issues, let alone any dangerous or controversial ones. Generically, "letters were not the place for reflections on public affairs"⁽¹⁴⁾, and, given the material circumstances of ancient letter exchanges, "sensitive information" could always be "reported orally by a trusted letter-carrier"⁽¹⁵⁾. As we have seen above, Libanius, in his *Autobiography*, indicates that he carefully weighed his words under the reign of Valens so as to avoid controversial formulations. Yet, if letters do not contain controversial statements, the reason for destroying them can hardly have been self-censorship. The conclusion must be that there is an error in the assumption about the non-controversial nature of Libanius' letters, and/or in the self-censorship hypothesis. As the following two passages show, both the assumption and the hypothesis are indeed problematic⁽¹⁶⁾:

Θεμιστίω... εἶθ' ὑμεῖς μὲν ἐπ' ἀγορᾶς δείκνυτε τὰ γράμματα, πνεῦμα δὲ ἐκείθεν ἄρθεν καὶ δεῦρο ἐμπεσὼν κύματα ἡμῖν ἐγείρει καὶ ποιεῖ ταῦτα ὁ Μακεδόνιος εἰδῶς, εἴ τις ἔροιτο, διδάξει.

"To Themistius. ... You in the city square display my letters; wind of it rises there, rushes here and creates storms for me, with consequences that Macedonius knows and will describe on request." (Letter 476, 2, transl. Norman, 1992a, p. 401)

Ἀνδρονίκω. Οἷον ἔδρασας, Ἀνδρόνικε; σοὶ μὲν ἐγὼ γέγραφα, σὺ δὲ ἐτέροις ἔδειξας, οἱ δὲ εἰς τοὺς ἐνθάδε ἐξήνεγκαν, καὶ γέγονας ἡμῖν ἀρχὴ πολέμου.

"To Andronicus. What have you done, Andronicus? I write a letter to you, you show it to somebody else, they report it to people here, and you leave me with a fight on my hands." (Letter 477, 1, transl. Norman, 1992a, p. 403)

(14) LIEBESCHUETZ, 1972, p. 19.

(15) BRADBURY, 2004, p. 20, CABOURET, 2009, p. 267-8.

(16) The fact that the letters quoted here are two subsequent letters towards the end of the (chronologically) first book of the collection, may give Libanius' practice here a programmatic value.

Although the first letter shows Libanius resorting to the letter-bearer Macedonius in order to communicate in more detail with Themistius, the references to previous letters containing information that caused trouble for Libanius proves that the author sometimes did include controversial information in his letters⁽¹⁷⁾. While the fact that the letters in question were not included in the collection is surely significant⁽¹⁸⁾, the clear and open references to such controversial issues in the letters quoted hardly fits the hypothesis of self-censorship. As proponents of the self-censorship hypothesis will point out, however, the letters quoted date from 356, whereas for the years 365 to 388, no letters whatsoever were included in the collection. Nevertheless, Libanius did conserve and publicize memory of potentially controversial letters written under the reign of Valens in the above quoted paragraphs of his *Autobiography* that were written after the emperor's death⁽¹⁹⁾.

This leads up to the second objection to the self-censorship hypothesis: if Libanius was really afraid that his letters might be used against him, abandoning the practice of keeping duplicate files could not offer any guarantees against this danger. For a start, as the two letters just quoted show, letters in antiquity were texts that recipients often read out to friends and bystanders⁽²⁰⁾ with little consideration for any controversial information that might be included in them. Several people could thus know of anything controversial one had written in a letter. While their oral testimony might not carry too much weight, the recipient of the letter would always have written proof of it. The passages from the *Autobiography* quoted in the Introduction are illuminating in this respect: the two times a letter got Libanius into trouble, it was, in all probability, the original letter kept by the recipient, rather than any duplicate copy, that caused the problem. The only secure way of guarding against accusations based on letters was, therefore, not to write any. If, as can reasonably be assumed for Libanius⁽²¹⁾, one did write, the better option might have been not so much to destroy all one's letters, but to destroy the controversial ones while faithfully conserving all the others, so as to try and argue that any controversial letters found with one's name on them were forgeries⁽²²⁾.

(17) That this also applies to letters written between 365 and 388, is clear from *Oration* 1, 175 and 177.

(18) Note, however, that although Libanius flags his frankness of speech, the reader does not get a chance to judge for himself.

(19) According to NORMAN (1992, p. 8), this part was written in 382. Yet whilst it is true that it was certainly written after 380, the dating of individual paragraphs of the *Autobiography* needs to be handled with care, as I have argued elsewhere: VAN HOOFF, 2014.

(20) Cf. NORMAN, 1992a, p. 30-1, TRAPP, 2003, p. 17, BRADBURY, 2004, p. 20. CRIBIORE (2013, p. 29-35), on the other hand, reminds her readers of the fact that letters are less public than discourses.

(21) Amongst Letters 1-18, 608-614, and 1543 several may, in fact, date from 365-388. Scholars indeed agree on the fact that Libanius continued to write letters between 365 and 388: cf. NORMAN, 1992a, p. 31-2, BRADBURY, 2004, p. 19, CABOURET, 2004, p. 17, WINTJES, 2005, p. 25.

(22) One can think here of the forged letters that got Silvanus into trouble with Constantius, as famously described in Ammianus, book 15.

Last but not least, the self-censorship hypothesis is problematic for chronological reasons. Indeed, it should not be forgotten that the collection resumes only with letters dated to 388. If, as suggested by Norman, Valens' 'reign of terror' was the reason for Libanius' self-censorship, why did he wait for a full ten years after the emperor's death before resuming his duplicate files? Libanius, in his *Autobiography*, explicitly states that threats based on his letters came to an end when Valens departed for Adrianople (Oration 1, 179). Norman's explanation is that Libanius waited until the end of the revolt of Magnus Maximus, which Libanius was rumoured to have supported⁽²³⁾. With hindsight, we can indeed see that the collection resumes about a year after the crushing of the revolt, but Libanius, in 378, could not possibly know that a revolt would come with which rumours would link him, and that he therefore better not resume his duplicate files. Bradbury, on the other hand, dates Libanius' self-censorship rather vaguely to the reign of 'hostile emperors', in the plural⁽²⁴⁾. Yet apart from the fact that there are no sources linking Theodosius with any form of censorship in general, there is also no confirmation that Theodosius was at any time hostile to Libanius.

The gap revisited

As pointed out by Jorit Wintjes, "der auf den ersten Blick merkwürdig anmutende Überlieferungszustand der Briefe ist bis heute nicht zufriedenstellend geklärt"⁽²⁵⁾. In this section, I therefore examine the problem from a different angle, and start from what we have rather than from what we do not have. Abandoning the focus on the '23-year gap', I wish to take my starting point from the collection as it was transmitted in the manuscript tradition.

The first thing to note is that whereas scholars since Norman have focused on the gap, there is no sign of an interruption in the manuscript tradition: Foerster starts a new Teubner-volume with letter 840, i.e. the first letter dated to 388, but that letter is simply the next letter in line in the numbered order of V, Va, and Vo. Judging by the manuscripts, then, there is no formal 'gap' in the collection as transmitted in the manuscripts⁽²⁶⁾. On the other hand, it is a fact that letter 839 dates from 363, and more specifically from before the death of Julian, whereas the next letter dates from 388, when Theodosius had already been emperor for nine years. There is, thus, a chronological leap of 25 years. If Bradbury and Norman talk about a '23-year gap', this is because they take into account the fact that we also possess letters covering the years 363-365, without taking into consideration that these letters are transmitted

(23) NORMAN, 1992a, p. 32. Accusations concerning the revolt of Procopius are dealt with in *Oration* 1, 171, concerning that of Maximus in *Oration* 32, 27.

(24) As BRADBURY (2004, p. 11) remarks, Libanius' letters cease exactly at the time of Procopius' revolt.

(25) WINTJES, 2005, p. 24. See also CRIBIORE, 2013, p. 28. A first step towards disentangling Libanius' letter collection can be found in VAN HOOF, forthcoming.

(26) Given that Va/Vo and V do not display all (groups of) letters in the same order, the fact that they do so here suggests that the letters from 388 and following were published together with the preceding ones dating from 363.

in V only, and in that manuscript come after the letters from 388 to 393.

If historical readers of the collection have thus always read letter 840, dating from 388, immediately after letter 839, dating from 363, the question is whether they would have noticed a chronological leap. To a large extent, what one notices or not depends on the lense through which one reads the collection. If, as maintained by Seeck and Bradbury⁽²⁷⁾, late antique and Byzantine readers read Libanius' letters merely for aesthetic reasons, one might assume that the chronology of the letters may simply not have mattered to them. Libanius was, of course, a major rhetorical and epistolary model for generations of subsequent readers and writers, but one cannot read the style of a text without reading its contents. As a result – and in line with the situation for other ancient epistolary collections⁽²⁸⁾ – politics will never have been far off. For modern readers, such an historical interest is usually the main aim for reading Libanius' letters. As with other ancient epistolographers⁽²⁹⁾, such historical interests have led to a focus on chronology, best exemplified, in Libanius' case, by Otto Seeck's 1906 study *Die Briefe des Libanios zeitlich geordnet*. Seeck determined the approximate date of each letter in the corpus by using prosopographical information and datable historical facts mentioned in some letters for absolute chronology, and by grouping series of letters delivered by the same carrier at different stages on a specific journey for relative chronology⁽³⁰⁾. As a result, chronological gaps that had been neglected before took centre stage, as in the works of Norman, who prints his translations in a strictly chronological order, and Bradbury. Yet to what extent would these gaps be visible to a reader who does not have Seeck's book at hand, as was the case for ancient and Byzantine readers⁽³¹⁾? Given the continuous numbering of the letters in the manuscripts and the recurrence of many names already mentioned in the preceding letters, for example, it seems unlikely, to my mind, that the 18-month gap which Seeck discovered between Letter 914, dated to 388, and Letter 915, dated to 390, would be visible⁽³²⁾. Although, as mentioned before, the manuscript numbering continues uninter-

(27) Cf. SEECK, 1906, p. 18, at least as far as Libanius' editor is concerned, and BRADBURY, 2004, p. 22. Yet as SEECK (1906, esp. p. 18-23) and NORMAN (1992a, esp. p. 32-3 and 37-9) have shown, there is a clear historical design in the collection.

(28) Cf. TRAPP, 2003, p. 12.

(29) Cf. BEARD, 2002 and GIBSON, 2012. In the case of Libanius, FOERSTER, notwithstanding the availability of SEECK's chronological study, made the fortunate choice of following the order of (an important part of) the manuscript tradition, rather than rearranging the letters on a strictly chronological basis.

(30) It should be emphasized, however, that the chronological order of Libanius' letters is much less strict than is often assumed: there are, in fact, plenty of uncertainties and exceptions, and one can see other ordering principles at work too. Cf. VAN HOOFF, forthcoming.

(31) As SEECK (1906, p. 2) pointed out, 'dass ein chronologisches Gesetz die Anordnung der Briefe beherrscht, hat Sievers nicht bemerkt und konnte es auch nicht in seinem vollen Umfange verfolgen, weil ihm die handschriftliche Überlieferung noch unbekannt war. Doch wahrnehmen läßt es sich schon in der Ausgabe Wolfs, so fehlerhaft sie ist. Denn bis zum 1030. Briefe folgt sie mit ganz geringen Abweichungen dem Vossianus 77'.

(32) Cf. SEECK, 1906, p. 445-6. In line with this, NORMAN (1992, p. 39) suggests that this gap 'may well mark a missing file accidentally lost in Libanius' last years or after his death'.

ruptedly between Letters 839 and 840 as well, the situation in the case of the chronological leap between Letters 839 and 840 is different. Indeed, in Letter 845, Libanius states that one of the Emperor's sons already shares in his reign, whereas the other will do so soon⁽³³⁾ - a reference to Theodosius and his sons Arcadius (Augustus since 383) and Honorius (Augustus since 393) that would have escaped but few readers. This leap forward towards the later decades of the fourth century is confirmed by the introduction, in Letter 840 and following, of a series of new addressees, several of whom were consul in the later decades of the fourth century: Tatianus, for example, would become consul prior in 391, whereas Saturninus, had been consul posterior in 383 - dates which, if unknown, could be easily retrieved through consular lists. Consular lists would only take one so far, though. Without the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* (PLRE) or Seeck at their disposal, it is unlikely that fifth- or sixth-century readers, let alone later Byzantine readers, would have known the details of the *cursus honorum* of any of Libanius' new addressees, which one needs to know in order to determine the exact date of the letters. The conclusion must be, then, that readers before Seeck and the PLRE would not have known the precise date of each of Libanius' letters nor, therefore, the exact extent of the chronological leap between Letters 839 and 840. But they would, in all probability, have noticed the jump from the middle years of the fourth century to its last decades.

Letters 840 and following indeed constitute a new beginning. Thus it cannot but strike the reader, for example, that the cast of addressees introduced in Letters 840 and following is entirely unfamiliar from the preceding letters⁽³⁴⁾: Tatianus 5/I, Antiochus 6/VIII, Theodorus 17/IX, Magnus 7/IV, Eusebius 26/XXVII, Mardonius 2/II, Proclus 6/III, Saturninus 10/I, and Ursus - to take just the first twenty letters of the group - are all new to the reader⁽³⁵⁾. Just like at the beginning of the collection, Libanius carefully introduces these new characters to his readers by repeatedly addressing several of them: between Letter 840 and 859, Eusebius 26/XXVII receives five letters, Tatianus 5/I and his son Proclus 6/III each get three, Antiochus 6/VIII,

(33) οὐτ' ἂν ἐπελαθόμεν ... βούλεσθαι μὲν αὐτῷ πεπηγέσθαι τὴν βασιλείαν, βούλεσθαι δὲ τοὺς υἱεῖς εἰς ἀκμὴν ἐλθόντας πάνυ γέροντος παραλαβεῖν τοὺς θρόνους, μᾶλλον δ' ὁ μὲν ἤδη κοινωνός, ὁ δὲ αὐτίκα (Letter 845, 5).

(34) Granted, Decentius 1/I, the addressee of letter 839, as well as Alexandros 5/III, the addressee of 838, were also new correspondents. Yet whereas the letter to Decentius is more or less timeless, Alexandros 5/III of Heliopolis, whom Julian appointed as *consularis Syriae* when he left for Persia, would probably have been well-known to Libanius' readership.

(35) This presupposes, of course, that the reader would be able to distinguish Magnus 7/IV from Magnus I (last mentioned in Letter 748), Proclus 6/III from Proclus II (last mentioned in Letter 823), and Saturninus 10/I from Saturninus III (last mentioned in Letter 707). If this would be a very hard task for any modern reader deprived of the PLRE, ancient readers would, of course, have been more familiar with these personalities, just as modern Americans are unlikely to have problems distinguishing the 'Kennedy' at stake in texts about the Cuba-crisis from the 'Kennedy' who made it into Congress in the 2012 elections. In addition, Libanius helps his reader by repeatedly addressing most of the addressees, so as to take away any doubts about their identity. By way of comparison, in the twenty letters preceding Letter 840, only Modestus (3 letters) and Maximus (2 letters) are addressed more than once.

Theodorus 17/IX, and Mardonius 2/II each get two, while only three addressees receive just one letter in this sequence. The reader is thus progressively familiarized with Libanius' new correspondents and their career. But the sense of a new beginning is especially reinforced by the contents of Letter 840:

Τατιανῷ. Τῶν πρώτων σου γραμμάτων εὐθὺς ἡμῖν ἐν ἀρχῇ τῆς ἀρχῆς ἠκόντων, εἶτα ἐτέρων οὐχ ἠκόντων θαυμάζειν ἐπήει τοῖς φίλοις καὶ ζητεῖν, ὅτῳ ποτὲ τοῦθ' οὕτως ἔσχεν. ἐγὼ δὲ αὐτοὺς οὐκ εἶδον ἀπορεῖν οὐδὲ σὴν τοῦτο νομίζειν μεταβολήν, οὐ γὰρ σὸς οὗτος ὁ τρόπος, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τὴν αἰτίαν ἦν ἔσχον ὡς πονηρὸς εἰς τοὺς κρατοῦντας γεγονώς, ἦγον τῆς σιωπῆς τὴν αἰτίαν κωλύειν λέγων τὸν νόμον τὰς τῶν τηλικούτων πρὸς τοὺς τοιούτους ἐπιστολάς, τῆς μέμψεως δὲ ἐξελεγχθείσης ἔφην ὄψεσθε τὰ γράμματα. ταῦτα εἶπον, ταῦτα προσεδόκησα, ταῦτα ἐξέβη τῆς αὐτῆς ἡμέρας σὴν ἐνεγκούσης ἐπιστολήν καὶ τινων ἄλλων, ἐν αἷς ἦν μανθάνειν ὡς ἀφείθημεν ἐλεύθεροι. καὶ οὐκ ἠγνοοῦμεν τὸν συνηγωνισμένον τοῖς πράγμασι προσθέντα γε αὐτὸν τοῖς ἀπ' ἐκείνων. καὶ γὰρ, εἰ μὴ λέγεις, ἀλλὰ βεβοήθηκας. καὶ πρόποι ἂν σοὶ μὲν τοῦτο μὴ λέγειν, ἐμοὶ δὲ λέγειν. ὁ γὰρ εὖ παθὼν οὐκ ὦν κακὸς τοῦτο ποιήσει. ἐγὼ δὲ σε καὶ ἀπόντα φιλεῖν εἶχον ἐν τῷ σῷ παιδί καὶ προσάγων τῷ Πρόκλου στόματι τοῦμόν ἀμφοτέρους ἡγούμεν φιλεῖν καὶ τῇ γε ἐμαυτοῦ συνέχαιρον οὕτως ὑμᾶς ἀμειβομένη νικῶσι πάντα τὰ πρὸς ἄρχοντας αὐτῇ πεπραγμένα καὶ μάλα εἰκότως· καὶ γὰρ ὑμεῖς τοῖς ὑμετέροις αὐτῶν τὰ τῶν ἄλλων εἰς ταύτην.

"To Tatianus. 1. Your first letter reached me right at the start of your term of office and then was followed by no more. This occasioned surprise among my friends and inquiries as to why this came to pass. 2. I would not let them remain in their puzzlement, or think that this marked a change of feeling on your part, for that is not your way. The grounds for your silence I attributed to the grounds of complaint preferred against me – of my alleged disloyalty towards our rulers. I told them that normal practice forbade people in your position to write to those in mine. "When this accusation is proved baseless," said I, "you will see his letters". 3. That is what I said, that is what I anticipated, and that is what came to pass on the very day which brought a letter from you and from certain others. These gave me to understand that I was acquitted, a free man. 4. I was not unaware that the one who had assisted me in my career lent his services in dealing with its accidents. Indeed you have certainly helped, even if you do not admit it. The mention of this might not be proper for you, but it is for me, for the beneficiary who is not an ingrate will do so. 5. Even in your absence I have been able to show my affection for you in your son; as I apply my lips to those of Proclus, I think to kiss you both, and am delighted with my native city for repaying you so and excelling all that she has ever done for her governors – and rightly so, for you have both by your actions excelled anything that anyone else has done for her." (Letter 840, transl. Norman, 1992b, p. 303-307)

No less than the letters that open books 1 and 2 of Libanius' letter collection, Letter 840 starts metareflexively by referring to a letter, which is in this case explicitly said to have been the recipient's *first* letter (τῶν πρώτων σου γράμμάτων) to Libanius. This sense of a new epistolary start is highlighted by the parallel reference to ἀρχὴ τῆς ἀρχῆς, the very beginning (of Tatianus' term of office). At the same time, however, Letter 840 draws attention to the period *preceding* this new start. On the one hand, the reference to Tatianus' previous letter, which implies that Libanius probably wrote to Tatianus before too, makes it absolutely clear that there *was* epistolary activity in the period before the dramatic date of the current letter. On the other hand, the reader does not get to see any of these previous letters, and Libanius suggests that there was not as much epistolary activity as there might have been. The reason for this, he suggests, is political: as Libanius was suspected to have been disloyal to the rulers, he was *persona non grata* to people who, like Tatianus, occupy high positions in the imperial administration. Yet now that the accusations have been proven to be false, people like Tatianus are writing to him again, and the collection can take a new start.

At first sight, this letter may seem to confirm the self-censorship hypothesis: whereas there are no letters in the collection covering the period when Libanius was suspected to be disloyal, the new start of the collection is explicitly linked with the clearance of such accusations. Upon a more precise reading, however, things appear to be more complex. First, the letter only says that people *like Tatianus* (τῶν τηλικούτων), i.e. holders of high office, could not write to Libanius. This suggests that Libanius waited for his correspondence *with high-ranking officials* to resume before making a new epistolary start. Second, Libanius, far from betraying any fear of the regime, comes across from Letter 840 as a confident and loyal citizen: he knew all the time that he was innocent of any suspicions that may have arisen, and he publicly foretold that he would be honoured again by those in power. Letter 840, which acknowledges the receipt of a letter from Tatianus as well as of letters that confirmed his innocence, intradiegetically shows that Libanius' confidence was well-founded. The publication of Letter 840 together with a series of letters addressed to several of the most powerful men of the late fourth century proves this to the reader on an extradiegetical level. Yet if Libanius wanted to pose as a confident and loyal citizen, why does he refer to political accusations at all? Why not rather pretend that he had always remained out of trouble? In order to answer these questions, we must examine the aims and strategies of Libanius' letter collection as a whole.

Self-fashioning

Self-fashioning through publication

As stated in the Introduction, the collection of Libanius' letters as we have it today was made on the basis of the duplicates which Libanius himself kept of the letters he wrote. Proof of the existence of such duplicates can be found in several letters in which Libanius narrates how he produces copies (ἀντίγραφα, Letters 88, 1218 and 1307) of letters which had failed to reach

their addressee. In one case, he explicitly says that the copy is produced from a book (τὸ βιβλίον, Letter 1307) containing duplicates of the letters originally sent⁽³⁶⁾.

From these letters, however, it should not be concluded that the collection as we have it is nothing more than the collation of Libanius' various copy books, each containing, in neatly chronological order, all the letters of a particular year or period. For a start, although Libanius tells us that he kept some duplicates in the form of 'books', this does not mean that he necessarily kept all his duplicates (immediately) in books. Moreover, if books could be created by gluing together several papyri containing single letters⁽³⁷⁾, they could also be re-created by cutting them up again and ordering them differently. In the course of such a (re-)organization, a process of selection and adaptation could take place. The process of selection can be seen, for example, in Letter 387, 1, where Libanius claims to have written three letters to Thalassius before, whereas we have only one letter to Thalassius predating it (Letter 377)⁽³⁸⁾. A clear example of adaptation can be found in Letter 933 to Eustochius, where Libanius promises to erase his addressee's name in the previous letter he wrote to him. That letter treated Eustochius harshly, in a teasing manner according to Libanius, but in a way that rather offended Eustochius. After Eustochius complained, Libanius promises *not to delete* the letter from his duplicate files, *but to substitute* Eustochius' name as an addressee with Eustathius'. Letter 915, some 20 letters before Letter 933, is indeed a rather biting letter addressed to a certain Eustathius⁽³⁹⁾. A more intrusive instance of editorial intervention may be discernable in Letter 333 to Anatolius. In Letter 19, which is chronologically the next letter of Libanius to Anatolius, Libanius is angry because Anatolius, in his reply to Letter 333, ridiculed the fact that Libanius had brought up his 'position' - ὀξύωμα is the word he uses, which often refers to some 'honorary rank'. In Letter 333, however, we find no such request. But as Seeck pointed out, there is a lacuna in the text of Letter 333 at a point where such a request would fit perfectly⁽⁴⁰⁾.

Libanius, then, took great care of his duplicate letters. The logical conclusion is that he must at least have considered the possibility of their being published one day. For if not, why would he keep copies of his letters and, on top of that, go through the effort of making selections and adaptations? During Libanius' lifetime, there seems, moreover, to have been an upsurge of publications of letter collections in the Greek East: whereas for earlier periods we have no Greek counterparts for the letter collections of Cicero, Pliny, or Fronto, in the fourth century Gregory Nazianzen published a collection of his own as well as one of Basil's letters, Gregory of Nyssa

(36) Cf. FOERSTER, 1927, p. 49, NORMAN, 1992a, p. 29. Libanius' use of the word βιβλίον to refer to his own (presumably unpublished) copy-books may suggest that the *innumeri codices, et acervi voluminum multi* mentioned by Ammianus XXIX, 1, 41 (cf. above) indeed included letters.

(37) As Trapp (2003, p. 12) explains, "single sheets of letter-papyrus could be gummed together to make one or more large book-rolls of correspondence".

(38) Further examples can be found in SEECK, 1906, p. 21-2.

(39) On these letters, see also SEECK, 1906, p. 18-19.

(40) Cf. already SEECK, 1906, p. 22, approved by PETIT, 1994, p. 36 and BRADBURY, 2000, p. 179.

collected and published his letters, and the letters of Julian also started circulating. I emphatically leave aside, here, the question of whether Libanius himself effectively *published* his own letters. But given his eminently public stance, given the wide range of his network, and given the esteem in which his letters were held already during his lifetime⁽⁴¹⁾, it was almost written in the stars that his letters would, one day, be published. Libanius cannot but have known this: he wrote, as Liebeschuetz already noted, “with posterity in mind”⁽⁴²⁾. Although the process whereby Libanius’ letters were edited and published will require further investigations that exceed by far the scope of this chapter⁽⁴³⁾, I wish to use the last section of this chapter to explore the possibility that Libanius himself may have had a hand in *editing* his letter collection: not only would this explain the striking similarities between the way in which Libanius presents himself in his *Autobiography* and the way in which he comes across from his letter collection, it would also put the letter collection with its chronological structure and gaps into new light. This will emphasize self-fashioning alongside a limited form of self-censorship as the driving principle behind this work of literature.

Self-Fashioning through letters and gaps

The first⁽⁴⁴⁾ letters in Libanius’ collection which a reader of manuscripts V, Va, and Vo, as well as of Foerster’s edition, gets to read, are some three hundred letters that were written between summer 358 and spring 361. The collection opens, in other words, with the letters of a period in which Libanius was firmly established as Antioch’s official sophist, when the troubles that had arisen between him and Constantius II as a result of his return from Constantinople to Antioch had been settled, and when civil war had not yet broken out. These letters not only display the wide social and geographical range of Libanius’ epistolary network, they also picture him as taking an independent stance and displaying frankness of speech in the face of power, as explicitly discussed and implicitly but clearly shown in Letter 19⁽⁴⁵⁾:

Ανατολίω... καὶ προφέρεις δὴ ἐμοὶ τὸ πολλοὺς ἐπαινεῖν, ἐγὼ δὲ σοὶ τὸ πάντα ψέγειν. οὐκοῦν ἀκρισία μὲν ἐν ἀμφοῖν, ἔχει δὲ τινα τοῦμὸν φιλανθρωπίαν. μᾶλλον δέ, οὐκ ἔστιν ὄντινα ἐπῆνεσα τὰ οὐκ ὄντα προσιθεῖς, ὥσπερ ὁ μῦθος ἀλλότρια τῷ κολοῖω

(41) In Letter 773, Entrechius is said to desire a letter from Libanius since “in them he will get everlasting fame” (transl. NORMAN, 1992a, p. 30); and in *Oration* 13, 52, Libanius refers to the ‘reputed merits’ of his letters (transl. NORMAN, 1969, p. 33). Cf. also FOERSTER, 1927, p. 50, n. 2 and NORMAN, 1992a, p. 18-19.

(42) LIEBESCHUETZ, 1972, p. 22. Cf. also FATOUROS & KRISCHER, 1980, p. 239, NORMAN, 1992a, p. 40-43, and CABOURET, 2009, p. 261 and 263.

(43) For a more elaborate discussion of this question, see VAN HOOF, forthcoming.

(44) Letters 1 to 18 were added before the beginning of the collection at a later date. Cf. SEECK, 1906, summarized in NORMAN, 1992a, p. 37, who proposes a different origin for these letters on p. 40.

(45) On the statement made by the positioning of this letter at the head of the collection, see NORMAN, 1992a, p. 39.

περὰ. ἀλλ' ὃ χρώμαι νόμῳ περὶ τοὺς ἐπαίνους, ἄκουσον... φέρε, εἰ σοὶ λόγον ἐποιοῦν καὶ με τοῦτ' ἐπεισας δεηθεῖς, ἄρ' ἂν οἶε τῷ δημιουργῷ πανταχόθεν προσελθεῖν τοὺς ἐπαίνους; σὺ μὲν ἴσως οἶε, τὸ πρᾶγμα δὲ οὐ τοιοῦτον, ἀλλ' εἶπον μὲν ἂν ἐπιμέλειαν, ἀγρυπνίαν, πόνους, ψῆφον ὀρθήν, πρόνοιαν <τοῦ> μέλλοντος, φρόνημα δίκαιον, γνώμης ὀξύτητα, γλώττης ἰσχύν, πολλὰ δ' ἕτερα, καλὸν δὲ καὶ μέγαν οὐκ ἂν εἶπον· οὐ γὰρ ἔνι σοι ταῦτ' ἐν τῷ σώματι. μεμνημένος δὲ χρημάτων κλοπῆς μὲν ἂν σε πλείστον ἔφην ἀφεστάναι, μισθὸν δὲ μὴ ἔχειν τῆς ἀρετῆς οὐκ ἂν ἰσχυρισάμην, ἔχεις γὰρ τὰ βασιλέως δῶρα καὶ σοι τῆς ἀρχῆς ὁ χρόνος τὰς οἰκίας πεποίηκε πόλεις ἀδικοῦντι μὲν οὐδένα, λαμβάνοντι δέ. πολὺ δ' ἂν ἦσθα βελτίων μηδαμόθεν λαμβάνων, ὥς λαμπρότερόν γε κιόνων οὐς δίδωσι βασιλεὺς τὸ χρῆμα τῆς δόξης ἣν ἡ πενία φέρει. καὶ μὴν ἀκκείνῳ γέ σου τραχὺ καὶ οὐχ ἡμερον ...

"To Anatolius... You allege against me the fact that I sing the praises of many people: I tell you that you censure everybody. So both of us display a lack of judgement, but my attitude does have some generosity. Nor is there anyone I have praised by attributing to him something he does not have, like the jackdaw's borrowed plumes in the fable. Just listen, and I will explain my methods of panegyric... Look! If I compose a speech for you, supposing you had prevailed upon me to do so, do you think that the topics to be commended would present themselves to the composer from all points of the compass? You might think so, but the case is very different. I would refer to your industry, your vigilance, your exertions, your correct judgement, your foresightedness, your upright character, keen intellect, powerful eloquence, and so on; but I would never call you handsome and tall. Your physical characteristics are not like that. If I mention money, I would say that you are far removed from peculation, but I would not assert that you enjoy no reward for your ability, for you possess gifts from the emperor and your long period of office has made your villas into towns! You have done wrong to no one, but you do gather things to yourself. You would be a much better man if you had not, for the acquisition of a fame brought by poverty is more splendid than all the pillars granted by a prince. Moreover, another aspect of ungentle harshness in you ..." (Letter 19, 7-12, transl. Norman, 1992a, p. 487-491)

Only after this come the letters that document Libanius' personal growth to power in Antioch between 355 and 359 on the one hand, and Julian's reign as (sole) Augustus on the other⁽⁴⁶⁾.

Although it is easy to overlook, the collection thus actually starts, in a sense, with a double gap. First, there is a 'gap' in the documentation of Libanius' life in the sense that there are no letters whatsoever documenting the period before 355. Scholars have explained the absence of letters from

(46) In Va and Vo, the letters dating from 355 to 358 precede those from 361 to 363. In V, it is the other way round.

Libanius' early career by suggesting that he either did not keep any duplicate files at the time, or he did not attach much importance to them and allowed them to get lost in his removal between Constantinople and Antioch in 354⁽⁴⁷⁾. It should be noted, however, that the collection does not start at the time when Libanius returned home definitively, in 354, but in the spring of 355, that is, a full year later⁽⁴⁸⁾. Jorit Wintjes has therefore rightly pointed out that the traditional hypothesis "entbehrt jeder Plausibilität. Zwar dürfte er tatsächlich nicht schon während seiner Studienzeit in Athen begonnen haben, seine Briefe in Kopialbücher einzutragen. Da er aber bereits zu Beginn seiner Laufbahn als Rhetoriklehrer in Konstantinopel mit bedeutenden Persönlichkeiten der Zeit in Kontakt kam, wird er allerspätstens in Nicomedien damit begonnen haben, ein Briefarchiv anzulegen; nicht zuletzt dürften ausgewählte Briefe dort auch im Schulbetrieb von Libanius benutzt worden sein"⁽⁴⁹⁾. If this is true, then why were these letters not included in the collection? In many respects, Libanius' early career in Constantinople was indeed a great success: he was honoured by several governors, the senate and the emperor Constantius II, and became a celebrated professor of Greek rhetoric. Nevertheless, after more than fifteen years of absence, and against the explicit wishes of Constantius II, he decided to move to his home city, Antioch. As is clear from Eunapius as well as from Libanius' own *Autobiography*, serious and continuing rumours concerning pederasty as well as accusations of magic haunted Libanius in Constantinople. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the former not only provided an important incentive to move away from Constantinople, they also caused Libanius to treat this period of his life extremely briefly in his *Autobiography*: Libanius goes out of his way to minimize, and even cover up, these accusations⁽⁵⁰⁾. It is therefore not unthinkable that the same rumours may have been one of the reasons why no letters documenting Libanius' career in Constantinople are to be found in the collection. The other 'gap' at the start of the collection lies in the fact

(47) e.g. WIEMER, 1995, p. 18, NORMAN, 1992a, p. 32-34. Cf. WINTJES, 2005, p. 25, n. 50.

(48) Cf. already NORMAN, 1992a, p. 32.

(49) WINTJES, 2005, p. 25. CABOURET (2009, p. 260) suggests that the absence of correspondence from Libanius' early years can be explained "par le fait que le sophiste n'a pas encore noué les relations suffisantes et qu'il ne possède pas d'anciens élèves en tous lieux ni à tous les postes de l'Empire. Qu'il n'a pas non plus pris le soin, encore, d'établir systématiquement des copies de ses missives". Whilst this double explanation may indeed hold true for the very early years, I agree with Wintjes that it cannot account for the absence of letters until 353, as the *Autobiography* stresses his connection with important people in and around Constantinople, with whom Libanius is likely to have corresponded during his absence from the capital, and letters with whom it would have been worthwhile to conserve.

(50) VAN HOOF, 2011 and 2014. For discussion of Eunapius' accusations of pederasty, see also GIANGRANDE, 1953-1954, p. 389, PENELLA, 1990, p. 103, WINTJES, 2005, p. 86, and CIVILETTI, 2007, p. 629-30, n. 746; for discussion of Libanius' references to these accusations in the *Autobiography*, see also MARTIN & PETIT, 1979, p. 226, NORMAN, 1965, p. 160 and 169, and NORMAN, 1992a, p. 143, n. d. CRIBIORE, 2013, p. 111-16 offers a good discussion of rhetorical uses of references to deviant sexual behavior in Late Antiquity, but does not discuss Eunapius' similar criticism of Libanius himself or the elements in Libanius' *Autobiography* that confirm the accusation (2013, p. 46-47).

that the letters covering the years 358 to 361 precede those covering the years 355 to 358. As has been pointed out by Seeck and Norman, this makes for a grand opening: rather than starting with the letters documenting his struggle to return to Antioch (“Kampf um die Heimat”), the reader first gets to see Antioch’s confident, well-connected, and successful professor of rhetoric⁽⁵¹⁾.

After the letters covering 358-361, 355-358, and⁽⁵²⁾ 361-363, there is, as discussed above, a leap of twenty-five years to 388, nine years into the reign of Theodosius. No less than the gaps at the beginning of the collection, this large and conspicuous gap at its centre had a well-defined effect as it omitted the letters written under Valens and in the early years of Theodosius. As far as the letters written under the reign of Valens are concerned, they may have been a rather cowardly lot. As we saw in the Introduction, Libanius practised a form of self-censorship in the sense that he opted for non-controversial formulations, and perhaps even removed any letters that could have brought him into trouble. As a result, the letters written under Valens risked conveying an image of Libanius as submitting to the political pressure of the time and preferring safety to freedom of speech. This image goes against the image of Libanius as conveyed not only through the grand opening of the letter collection, but also in the *Autobiography*, where, as has recently been argued by several scholars, Libanius exaggerates his pose as a resistance hero under the reign of Valens⁽⁵³⁾. As a result, it may have seemed preferable to Libanius not to include these letters in a selection destined for publication. Instead of presenting the reader with the rather bland letters written under the reign of Valens, Libanius withholds those letters and has his collection start again with a (much later) letter in which he, looking back from his new position of safety and influence, can proudly allude to his former – and only vaguely dated and described⁽⁵⁴⁾ – resistance.

But why, then, did he wait for another ten years after Valens’ death? As stated towards the end of Section Three, Letter 840 offers an important clue. Indeed, as shown in that letter, Libanius’ local and imperial network had probably been seriously weakened under the reign of Valens, and it will have taken a couple of years to build it up again. During those years, Libanius

(51) Cf. SEECK, 1906, p. 20-21, NORMAN, 1992a, p. 33.

(52) It should be noted that the letters covering (roughly) 355-358 and 361-363 respectively occur in this order in Va and Vo, but are given in the opposite order in V, which has the letters from 361-363 before those from 355-358.

(53) See above, n. 9. That letters can undo carefully built-up poses of opposition is clear when one reads scholarly verdicts on Libanius’ critical comments of Proclus 6/III in *Oration* 42.33-44 versus his ‘flattery’ of the man in the letters addressed to him: NORMAN (2000, p. 159, n. 47) says that “nothing is more disconcerting”, and CABOURET (2011, p. 129) refers to the letter as “écoeurante d’hypocrisie”. Yet except from the fact that Libanius may have been disappointed by Proclus 6/II, as suggested in *Oration* 42, 43, Libanius’ difference in tone can be very well accounted for by the difference in genre and public. Cf. CRIBIORE, 2009, p. 237.

(54) Given the specific date at which letter 840 was written, the reference to political accusations contained in it probably refers to the revolt of Maximus (383-387). Yet as shown above, ancient and Byzantine readers are unlikely to have known the exact date of Letter 840. Given the use of letters in treason trials under Valens, as discussed in the Introduction, it is likely that readers would have interpreted Libanius’ reference to political resistance as a reference to the reign of Valens rather than to that of Theodosius.

also increasingly came to the fore as a public speaker on the local as well as imperial level – an increase in power that may well have culminated with his (self-proclaimed) stance as Antioch's saviour after the riot of the statues in 387⁽⁵⁵⁾ – almost the very moment when the letter collection resumes. Only at that point could he display the self-confidence evoked in Letter 840, which was the ideal opening letter for this part of the collection. Addressed to a (at the time of writing future, but at the time of reading, in all probability former) consul, it presents Libanius as a confident and loyal citizen under Theodosius, whilst containing a possible reminder of his former stance as an opponent under earlier and worse regimes.

Conclusion: Indirect self-censorship, but above all self-fashioning

Self-censorship, so we can conclude, is probably not the whole story behind the '23-year gap' in Libanius' letter collection. It probably does play a role in the sense that he may have sometimes written less than he would have wanted to, and that high-ranking correspondents may have sometimes felt it safer not to write to him, but it cannot be proven that censorship or self-censorship compelled Libanius to interrupt his habit of keeping duplicate files or induced him to systematically destroy his letters. Unfortunately this is hard to pin down as we have only Libanius' silence, respectively his rhetoric to go by.

While self-censorship plays at most an indirect role in shaping Libanius' collection, self-fashioning seems to have been a more important determinant. This is certainly the case in individual letters, as we have seen for Letters 19, 476, 477, and 840. It also played a role in determining the nature of the collection as a whole and the way in which individual letters were selected and adapted for inclusion in it. By withholding the letters written during the ten years after the death of Valens and then resuming his letter collection with Letter 840, Libanius not only presented himself as one who once resisted political persecutions, but also as a once more confident and well-connected citizen.

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(55) Cf. WINTJES, 2005, p. 203-18, NESSELRAH, 2012, p. 28-9.

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ABSTRACT

The letters of Libanius cover the years 355 to 365 and the years 388 to 393. Since the 1960s, scholars have explained the absence of letters from the intervening years as an act of self-censorship through which Libanius interrupted his habit of keeping duplicate correspondence files out of fear for hostile emperors. This article advances a different interpretation. Sections One and Two show that the arguments brought forward to support the traditional hypothesis do not hold up to scrutiny, and that the hypothesis is highly problematic in general. Section Three revisits the chronological gap: whilst the chronological leap forward is in no way marked in the manuscripts, the first letters of the late period clearly represent a new epistolary start. Section Four, finally, proposes that self-fashioning may have played at least as important a role in Libanius' twenty-three year epistolary silence as self-censorship: addressed to a less powerful cast of correspondents and avoiding controversial topics – in this sense, self-censorship does play a role –, the letters of the years 366 to 387 risked to detract from Libanius' self-confident pose in the remainder of the letter collection as well as in his Autobiography.

Keywords: Libanius, Letters, Self-fashioning, Self-censorship, Late Antiquity

RÉSUMÉ

Autocensure et auto-représentation: Les lacunes dans le corpus épistolaire de Libanios

Les lettres de Libanios couvrent les années 355 à 365 ainsi que les années 388 à 393. Depuis les années soixante, la lacune qui sépare ces deux périodes a été interprétée comme signe d'un acte d'auto-censure en ce sens que Libanios aurait interrompu son habitude de conserver des copies de ses lettres par crainte de l'hostilité des empereurs. Cet article propose une interprétation différente. D'abord, il se révèle que les arguments en faveur de l'hypothèse traditionnelle ne sont pas valides, et que celle-ci est, en général, problématique. Ensuite, un examen détaillé de la lacune montre que, alors que les manuscrits ne l'indiquent nullement, les premières lettres de la période tardive se présentent clairement comme un renouveau épistolaire. Finalement, une analyse de la collection en sa totalité suggère qu'un désir d'auto-représentation joua un rôle au moins aussi important que l'auto-censure: adressées à des correspondants moins impressionnants et évitant tout ce qui pourrait être perçu comme controversé – en ce sens, l'auto-censure joua bien un rôle – les lettres des

années 366 à 387 risquaient de compromettre l'image d'un personnage influent et sûr de lui soigneusement développée dans le reste de la collection ainsi que dans l'Autobiographie.

Mots-clés: Libanios, Lettres, Auto-présentation, Autocensure, Antiquité tardive

SAMENVATTING

Zelfcensuur en zelfpresentatie: Lacunes in Libanius' Briefcollectie

De brieven van Libanius dateren uit de jaren 355 tot 365 enerzijds, en 388 tot 393 anderzijds. Sinds de zestiger jaren wordt het ontbreken van brieven uit de tussenliggende jaren verklaard als een act van zelfcensuur: Libanius zou zijn briefarchief onderbroken hebben uit angst voor vijandige keizers. Dit artikel stelt een nieuwe interpretatie voor. In de eerste twee secties wordt aangetoond dat de argumenten die traditioneel worden aangehaald om de hypothese van zelfcensuur te staven geen steek houden, en dat die hypothese in het algemeen onhoudbaar is. De derde sectie houdt de lacune opnieuw tegen het licht: hoewel de manuscripten geenszins aanwijzingen bevatten dat er tussen brief 839 en brief 840 een chronologische sprong voorwaarts van meer dan twintig jaar plaats vindt, presenteren de eerste brieven uit de late periode zich niettemin duidelijk als een nieuw epistolair begin. De laatste sectie, ten slotte, argumenteert dat zelfpresentatie een minstens even belangrijke rol speelt als zelfcensuur: omdat de brieven uit de jaren 366 tot 387 niet alleen gericht waren aan minder luisterrijke adressaten maar ook controversiële onderwerpen uit de weg gingen – in die zin is er wel degelijk sprake van zelfcensuur – zouden zij het beeld van een zelfzekere, goed geconnecteerde persoonlijkheid dat Libanius in de rest van de collectie en in zijn Autobiografie ontwikkelt, onderuit hebben gehaald.

Sleutelwoorden: Libanius, Brieven, Zelfpresentatie, Zelfcensuur, Late Oudheid