



Libanius on Constantine Again

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LIBANIUS ON CONSTANTINE AGAIN¹

H.-U. Wiemer² opposes the image which Libanius gives of Constantine in his fifty-ninth oration (*Panegyric of Constantius and Constans*)³ to that which emerges from his later works, especially those of the Theodosian period when hostility is obvious, mirroring the opinion of pagan circles, who held this Emperor responsible for most of the calamities endured by the Empire in the fourth century.⁴ As the epideictic genre required, in 344/5 or in 348/9⁵ the father had to be praised so that the sons could be praised too. However, Wiemer claims that ‘the panegyric of 344/5 already foreshadows the critical view’, by remaining silent about Christianity, the founding of Constantinople, and the tax policy on the one hand, and on the other hand by clearly declaring Constantine responsible for the war against Persia, which troubled the entire reign of Constantius. I wish to supplement these remarks with a few others and to suggest that the portrait of Constantine in *Oration 59* presents us with a case of ‘disguised intention’⁶—a rhetorical proceeding based on *ὑποδήλωσις* and *παραψόγους*:⁷ the orator tries to convey a message that is different from his apparent intentions, even opposite to them.

PRAISING CONSTANTIUS-CHLORUS IN ORDER TO BLAME
CONSTANTINE

At the beginning of his oration, as he starts on the ‘topos’ of the *eugeneia* and before he starts speaking of Constantine, Libanius devotes four paragraphs⁸ to Constantine’s father. He proclaims he will praise only one good deed of Constantius I, that of having insisted on leaving wealth in the hands of owners. When it is well-known that Constantine’s taxation was particularly heavy,⁹ this long (thirty lines

¹ I would like to thank Miss F. Lefranc for the English translation, and *CQ*’s referee for his/her comments on the first draft of this article.

² H.-U. Wiemer, ‘Libanius on Constantine’, *CQ* 44 (1994), 511–24.

³ Apart from Morel and Reiske’s ancient editions, this text has been published only by R. Förster, *Libanii opera* (Leipzig, 1903–27), 4.201–96. I am preparing a new edition, with French translation and commentary.

⁴ Ammianus 21.10.8 quotes Julian who called Constantine *novator turbatorque priscaurum legum et moris antiquitus recepti*. See also Heliogabalus’s life in the *Historia Augusta*, as a dissimulated portrait of Constantine written by a pagan author in the Theodosian period, and the introduction to its French translation by A. Chastagnol (Paris, 1994), pp. CXXXIII. and 499–500.

⁵ The date of this oration is controversial: I do not want to enter that debate now. See Wiemer’s article (n. 2) and late studies of J.-P. Callu, ‘Un Miroir des princes: le “Basilikos” libanien de 348’, *Gerion* 5 (1987), 133–52 and W. Portmann, ‘Die 59 Rede des Libanios und das Datum der Schlacht bei Singara’, *Byzantion* 82 (1982), 1–18.

⁶ See B. Schouler, ‘Le Dégüisement de l’intention dans la rhétorique grecque’, *KTEMA* 11 (1986), 257–72, with bibliographical directions. See also C. J. Swearingen, *Rhetoric and irony* (Oxford, 1991); S. Ebbesen, ‘Les Grecs et l’ambiguïté’, *L’Ambiguïté, 5 études historiques réunies par I. Rosier* (Lille, 1988).

⁷ ‘Insinuations’, ‘indirect reproaches’, Plato, *Phaedrus* 267A. See Schouler (n. 6), p. 259.

⁸ Or. 59.14–17.

⁹ He created two new taxes, the *collatio lustralis* and the *collatio glebalis*, seems to have transferred local custom fees and *vectigalia* from city to imperial finances, and to have increased the rate of indiction: see A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* (London, 1964), p. 110 and n. 73; J. M. Carrié, ‘Le réforme économique da Aureliano a Costantino’, *Storia di Roma* (Torino, 1993), 3.308–11; Wiemer (n. 2) p. 520; R. Rémondon, *La Crise de l’empire romain de Marc-Aurèle*

in Förster's edition) and insistent praise of the father's moderation contrasts with the silence of the orator on the taxation policy of the son.

Something else is even more striking: after Libanius has announced that he will develop only one single point concerning Constantius-Chlorus, he adds another, pretending to obey a last-minute necessity (*τοῦτο παρελθεῖν ὥσπερ οὐ θεμιτὸν εἶναι μοι φαίνεται*): 'when he had other children, he was able to select the most suitable to succeed him as emperor: he set the former aside and brought to power the one whom he had recognized as competent; which shows a better anticipation of the events than if he had promoted every one of his children equally'.¹⁰ The listener could not have helped thinking of what had happened six or seven years earlier: after his death, Constantine had left behind five heirs who had roughly the same rank, which had caused a succession of riots, dynastic massacres, and fratricidal struggles.¹¹

AMBIGUOUS COMPLIMENTS

In his account of a category of disguised intention, which Hermogenes calls *κατὰ ἔμφασιν*, B. Schouler writes that it is a question of 'exprimer allusivement ce qu'il n'est pas possible d'énoncer, de telle sorte que les auditeurs puissent deviner sans que rien puisse être reproché à l'orateur';¹² unless I am mistaken, *Oration 59* provides examples of the principle.

Libanius assures us that the time when Constantius and Constans were born 'was nothing but a succession of good omens',¹³ one of which being that the Emperor 'drew lavishly on the riches of his palace and poured them over his subjects'.¹⁴ Constantine's generosity, which was indeed a fact widely attested by his admirers as well as by his detractors¹⁵ (it may sometimes be a disguised attack on his prodigality and on his lack of discrimination in his choice of the beneficiaries), seems to be praised here without any adverse implication. Yet it is to be noticed that at the end of the oration¹⁶—distant enough from the compliment for an inattentive listener to have forgotten it—the sophist says, as he specifies how the current Emperors are superior to their predecessors, that

à *Anastase* (Paris, 1964), p. 147; and Seeck's articles in *RE* 'collatio glebalis' 4.365–7, 'collatio lustralis' 4.370–6. Moreover, the requirement that some taxes should be paid in gold (*adaeratio*) instead of the traditional payment in kind seems to have been ill-accepted, especially by lower middle-class taxpayers: see Zosimus 2.38.2–3.

¹⁰ Or. 59.17.

¹¹ Four Caesars (Constantine II, Dalmatius, Constantius, Constans) and the 'king' Hannibalianus. Dalmatius was eliminated with diverse members of the imperial family in Constantinople in 337, then Hannibalianus in Caesarea. In 340, Constantine II was killed when attacking his young brother Constans' empire. Last, there were tensions between Constantius and Constans in 341 and 345–6 for religious matters (see Seeck, 'Constans', *RE* 4.1.948–52 and 'Constantius', *RE* 4.1.1044–94). Moreover, if Libanius praised Constantius-Chlorus's *πρόνοια*, he understood, by omission of the *topos*, that Constantine lacked in one of the most important virtues and one usually praised in panegyrics of emperors: see L. Pernot, *La Rhétorique de l'Eloge dans le monde gréco-romain* (Paris, 1993).

¹² Schouler (n. 6), p. 265.

¹³ Or. 59.28.

¹⁴ Or. 59.29.

¹⁵ It is well known that Constantine spent a lot of money (foundation of Constantinople, gold coinage, church building, gifts to friends): Jones, *LRE* p. 109. Not only opponents (Zosimus 2.32, 38; Julian 10.36; Ammianus 16.8.12) but even panegyrists (*Vita Constantini* 4.29–31; Sozomenus, *Hist. Ecc.* 33; Eusebius, *Hist. Ecc.* 10.10; Julian 1.6) concede it. If he inherited Licinius's treasure, that treasure was certainly pretty soon spent, and he needed more money (see evidences for new taxes, n. 9).

¹⁶ Or. 59.156.

then (at the time of the predecessors) . . . the confiscations took back the presents (made by the Emperors). What was happening then actually looked like the ebb-and-flow of the Euripus: what had been given came back to the giver after having brought ill-fate to the beneficiary. . . . But nowadays if wealth flows lavishly from the Emperors towards their subjects, everywhere this honour goes together with stability.

In other words, whatever Constantius and Constans give will not be taken back, whereas in former reigns things were quite different. The listener in the know is entitled to rank among these reigns (Libanius just says *πρότερον*, 'previously') not only those of Diocletian and his consorts, but the time of Constantine too, since the orator has pointed out his generosity, but without specifying what happened to his gifts.¹⁷

There are also cases when the orator clearly wants the opposite of what he is saying to be understood.¹⁸ When he talks about the education of the Princes, Libanius explains that Constantine had his children benefit from his *savoir-faire* without being held back by envy (*φθόνος*) and a parenthesis, which appears superfluous at first, precisely states: 'by nature, he was above (*ἰσχυρότερον*) this disease'.¹⁹ Would the orator (and his audience) have forgotten what had happened to Crispus? This was Constantine's elder son, nominated Caesar, who had made himself famous when fighting the Germans, had played a decisive part in the war against Licinius, and had thus gained great popularity.²⁰ But all of a sudden his father had called him back, and during a trip to Italy had suddenly had him executed.²¹ Needless to say that in his

¹⁷ Libanius perhaps has in the mind the *collatio glebalis*, a surtax on senators (see n. 9). It seems, too, that some confiscated properties that had been given were taken back: see T. S. Vigorita, 'Nuovi indirizzi di politica fiscale nella legislazione di Costantino', *Società romana e impero tardoantico* (Roma, 1986), pp. 1.71–80. Does Libanius think also of the philosopher Sopater (the father of one of our sophist's friends), first exalted, next sentenced to death? See Eunapius 6.2; Lippold, 'Sopatros' *RE* 3.a.1.1002–3; F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London, 1992), pp. 99–100. I suppose that the reproach aims at a general process of alternation of kindnesses and confiscations, as summed up by Julian, *Or.* 10.36: *πολλὰ κτησάμενον, πολλὰ χάρισασθαι*, or by Jones, *LRE* p. 111: 'extravagant expenditure and reckless fiscality'. Maybe Libanius thinks especially about confiscation of temples properties in 331 (and these confiscations coincided with the favours towards the Church—see B. Lançon, *Le Monde romain tardif* [Paris, 1992], p. 136; A. Piganiol, *L'Empire chrétien* [Paris 1947], p. 52; Libanius, *Or.* 30.6, 62.8; Sozomenes 1.8.10, 2.3—which implies some religious understatement inside the fiscal criticism), taxes on *curiales* (Libanius, *Or.* 49.2), venality of honours, as noted by Zosimus, 2.38.3. See also G. Giannelli and S. Mazzarino, *Trattato di Storia Romana* (Roma, 1956), pp. 2.450–1.

¹⁸ See Schouler (n. 6) p. 266: this process is named *ὁ δὲ οἷς λέγει τὰ ἐναντία λόγος* by Pseudo-Dionysius and *ἐναντία* by Hermogenes. ¹⁹ *Or.* 89.34.

²⁰ Constantine's elder son, born of Minervina, his first wife, or his concubine, he was made Caesar in 317, consul in 318, 321, and 324; he defeated Franks, Alamans and Licinius' fleet, superior in number: Nazarius, *Pan.* 17; *Anonymus Valesianus* 5.26–7; O. Seeck, 'Crispus', *RE* 4.2.1722–4; A. Demandt, *Die Spätantike—Römische Geschichte von Diocletian bis Justinian 284–565 n. Chr.* (München, 1989), pp. 70–1; Jones, *LRE*, pp. 84–5.

²¹ In Pola (Istria), in 326. The motives for his execution are mysterious and gave rise to many interpretations (see Seeck [n. 20]): if Aurelius Victor, *Caes.* 41.11 and Orosius 7.26 confess their ignorance (but Orosius elsewhere, 7.28.23, attributes it to Crispus' supposed arianism), many authors (Eutropius 10.6.3, Sozomenes 1.5, Zonaras 13.2, Zosimus 2.29) saw a connection with the Empress Fausta's death some months later. Crispus might have committed adultery with Fausta, or he might have been falsely denounced by her, like Hippolytus by Phaedra—see P. Guthrie, 'The Execution of Crispus', *Phoenix* 20.325–31; F. Paschoud, 'Z. 2.29 et la version païenne de la conversion de Constantin', in *Cinq Études sur Zosime* (Paris, 1975), pp. 17–58; H. M. D. Parker, *A History of the Roman World A.D. 138 to 337* (London, 1935, new edn 1958), p. 305 and p. 400n. Guthrie (see above) thinks that the murder was an application of Constantine's dynastic policy. However—and the important thing is not what really happened, but what in Libanius' time seemed to have happened—most authors (especially Julian 10.38; Sidonius Apollinaris, *Ep.* 5.8.2;

whole speech, Libanius never mentions this unfortunate young man, just as if he had never existed. However, in a slightly later oration, Julian, who was then Caesar in Gaul and addressed Constantius in a very official manner, clearly and encomiastically refers to this half-brother of Constantius,²³ a victim of *damnatio memoriae*:²⁴ this token of a possible rehabilitation of Crispus by Constantius reinforces suspicion about disguised intention on the part of our sophist: perhaps he knew that this hidden reproof would be favourably accepted by his imperial reader.

Two other passages contain concealed reproof of *φθόρος*: in paragraph 151 of the same oration, as he praises love and harmony between the brothers Constantius and Constans, Libanius writes:

Formerly, Envy was part of every reign . . . and equality between sovereigns nourished even more that disease; nature's law [i.e. love between members of the same family] came after passion for the power, the whole family was full of hatreds . . .

We may think not only about the executions of Crispus and Fausta, but also about Constantine's wars against his co-emperor and brother-in-law Licinius, and about the latter's execution. There were two wars between Constantine and Licinius, but, according to P. Petit, Libanius would only mention one, the second one, that in which Licinius was the aggressor.²⁴ Here is the text: Constantine

made war against the Barbarians without envying the Emperor [i.e. Licinius] who ruled over peoples of the same race as his. And it is truly on that point that he proved twice virtuous: he refused war when peace was possible, but did not refuse it when it was necessary, and he behaved scrupulously in one, and bravely in the other; that is the reason why the other man broke the treaty, and he himself was victorious in the war.²⁵

One might suppose that Libanius knew nothing of the first war, which had taken place in the year he was born, or else, as Petit suspects, he might 'avoir obéi à un mot d'ordre en négligeant les événements de 314, peu glorieux pour Constantin'.²⁶ But Libanius as a rule is vague and allusive in his way of relating events, and if we take a closer look at the passage quoted above, this chronology may be seen: the peace treaty with Licinius in 315/the 323/4 war. Does he disregard what had lead to the 315 treaty? Is there not a hint at the first war too? For, by asserting that Constantine fought the Barbarians without trespassing upon his colleague's territory, Libanius says exactly the opposite of what really happened: it is through chasing the Goth people that the father of Constantius and Constans stepped into Licinius's empire and started the war.²⁷

Eutropius 10.6.3) incriminate Constantine's nature: he was the persecutor of his own family (and this is one of the seven features of the figure of the Bad Emperor, of which L. Jerphagnon, *Histoire de la Rome antique—Les armes et les mots* [Paris, 1987, new edn 1994], p. 343, makes the inventory from Dio Cassius, Aurelius Victor, and *Historia Augusta*). In this context (Libanius speaks of relationship between father and sons), I think that the word *φθόρος* is to be understood as envy towards his own family; see, however, Gibbon (ed. Bury, London, 1909), p. 2.221.4, who asserts that the main reason for the execution was literally jealousy.

²² Julian, *Oration* 1.7d.

²³ Constantine had erased his name on the inscriptions: Seeck (n. 20), p. 1724.

²⁴ In 314 and 324: see J. Vogt, 'Streitfragen um Konstantin den Großen', *Mitteil. Arch. Instit. Rom. Abt.* 58 (1943), 199–200; P. Petit, 'Libanius et la *Vita Constantini*', *Historia* 1 (1950), 562–82.

²⁵ Or. 59.21.

²⁶ P. Petit (n. 24), p. 568.

²⁷ A. Piganiol, *L'Empereur Constantin* (Paris, 1932), p. 134. It is to be noticed that, as a justification for sending the two Caesars Constantius and Constans to the East for one and to the West for the other, Libanius says that the Emperor 'wanted the Barbarians on either side to be

CONCLUSION

To those reservations about Constantine asserted by Wiemer can be added a few more: heavy taxation, lack of foresight concerning his succession, generosity soon contradicted by confiscations, *φθόνος* towards his own family and Licinius. Yet when it comes to disguised intention it is necessary to remain extremely cautious, so as not to fall into pure fiction.²⁸ Two extremes can be reached by the reader of *Oration 59*: one is to accept everything literally and to bring it closer to the ideas expressed later on by Libanius without taking any notice of chronology, and, then, to perceive in this oration nothing but ‘une succession de flatteries, clichés littéraires usés, un fatras’;²⁹ the other extreme is to make out of Libanius an active opponent of tyranny who hides severe criticisms of the reigning dynasty everywhere in his speeches.³⁰

The restrictions imposed by the epideictic genre must be taken into account: a eulogy should praise certain qualities even if the Emperor lacks them;³¹ for instance, the *philanthropia* of the Prince must be eulogized even if he has just had his whole family executed. For all that it does not prevent disguise. While he abides by the rules, the orator can provide some of his listeners with the opportunity of hearing something different from what the rest of the audience may perceive. Consequently, in these official and formal eulogies, there is no incompatibility between *controversiae figuratae* and *relatio recta*.³² Whom are these hints for? Perhaps for a few connoisseurs of *λόγοι*, most probably for the Emperors themselves, as Wiemer suggests:³³ no doubt

curbed by fear of those he had sent against them; thus he undoubtedly would provide peace to the world, since the borders of the Empire would be strengthened’ (*Or.* 59.44). Yet it was not necessary for the speech to specify these motives of geopolitics (besides the sophist straight after gives a more appropriate reason for his topic: it is a matter, he explains, of giving the future emperors an experience of a state of war). Is this a case of disguised intention? Indeed, Constantine has had noticeable successes over the Barbarians, but it is also to be pointed out that his military reformation was much criticized: the best troops were called back inland to build up the *comitatenses*, so that you could only find the *ripenses* along the borders, who were made up of auxiliaries and consequently much less reliable (see D. Van Berchem, *L’armée de Dioclétien et la réforme constantinienne* [Paris, 1952]). What is more, the pagan authors condemned the introduction of Barbarians into the Empire and their rising to the highest ranks (Ammianus 1.20; Aurelius Victor 1.4). So, to say that Constantine reinforced the borders and terrified the Barbarians may seem suspicious (see also Julian, *Or.* 10.30 : *τά γε μὴν ἐς τοὺς βαρβάρους ἦν γελοῖα αὐτῶ· φάρους γὰρ ὥσπερ ἐτετέλεκει*). But the sophist, not very familiar with military matters (but he was able to find enough information for a very detailed narration of the Singara battle, §99–120), may not have had the necessary time to look back over the consequences which these new measures would eventually have.

²⁸ There is a remarkable example of *oblique* reading: the philosopher A. Kojève’s book, *L’Empereur Julien et son Art d’écrire* (Paris, 1990), where the author tries to prove that Julian’s loudly asserted paganism is to be read as atheistic propaganda.

²⁹ P. Petit, *Libanius et la vie municipale à Antioche*, (Paris, 1955), p. 185.

³⁰ See Petit (n. 24), pp. 203f.

³¹ Libanius always refuses, as a point of honour, to praise a virtue when it does not exist at all, and, in that case, prefers to keep silent. So, he never praises Constantius and Constans acting for the sake of *λόγοι* or cities. See the letter to his friend Anatolius which Schouler quotes in *La Tradition hellénique chez Libanios* (Lille/Paris, 1984), p. 938.

³² Quintilian 9.2.65–6, quoted by Schouler (n. 6).

³³ Even if neither of the Emperors were present when, on some high official’s request, Libanius recited his oration in Nicomedia, this panegyric was aimed to reach them. See the reasons given by Wiemer (n. 2).

they could find some enjoyment in picking up hints of subdued criticisms of their father, whose figure weighed so heavily over their reigns,³⁴ and who had left them with an inheritance that was so difficult to manage.

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³⁴ So when laying stress on how much Constantine watched over young Constantius and Constans, how much he directed, inspected, tested them, and wanted their absolute obedience (*Or.* 59.36, 42, 44, 46), Libanius may have looked to them as sympathetic. Otherwise, when he means that Constantine, unlike his own father, has not been able to choose between his sons the most efficient for the throne, Libanius perhaps leads his reader to think that the most efficient was Constantius, his direct Lord—and history will acknowledge it. Therefore, *Oration 59*, if composed in 348/9, would have been the evidence for goodwill that granted to its author a return to Constantinople (see Libanius, *Or.* 1.72–4).