

# Rhetoric and historiography in late Antiquity (AD 300-600)

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Ghent (Belgium), 18-19 September 2017

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Latin, Greek, Syriac; AD 300-600

Rhetoric and historiography were closely linked in Antiquity. Historians were rhetorically trained and used rhetorical tools when composing their histories. Conversely, history was a source of exempla and declamations for orators and panegyric described past and contemporary reality. This also holds true for Late Antiquity, when we see sophists writing history and historians abundantly using rhetorical tropes. A major debate in classical scholarship has been to what extent the reliance on rhetoric by historians allowed for the use of fiction in historiography. This has, in turn, led to questioning the extent to which modern historiography can be understood as a continuation of ancient historiography. If this interest focuses on the symbiosis of historiography and rhetoric, we wish to study another feature of their complex relationship: the mutual discourse of attraction and rejection. Historians would often contrast their activity with that of orators and claim greater truthfulness and hence superiority. Orators could turn the tables on historians and seek to defend oratory against historiography.

We start out from the assumption that historians and orators in the 4-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD found themselves in a competitive field of literature, a field that was characterised both by fast change and strict defence of classical rules and perceptions. This tension is perceivable also in milieus, like the Syriac-speaking one, where the orator was not a professional figure as such, but where the Greek rhetorical tradition exercised a fundamental influence all the same. Through a series of focused studies on individual authors or groups of texts (Greek, Latin, and Syriac), we seek to ask the following questions:

- How do historians and rhetoricians position themselves vis-à-vis each other and how is that relationship calibrated in function of the specific literary aim, audience, and social positioning of the author?
- How do historians and orators use competing claims to superiority to create authority for themselves and their texts? How do they generate belief in the trustworthiness of their texts?
- Can we see patterns in such self-positioning, depending on the religion of an author, on the language he uses or on the audience he is addressing? Is there a difference between classicising historians and authors that inscribe themselves in an explicitly Christian discourse?
- Is there a higher degree of explicit reflection on this issue, in line with the general literary self-awareness that is postulated for Late Antiquity?
- How is the relationship between historiography and rhetoric articulated in contexts where the orator was no institutionalised figure, but where the importance of rhetorical skills was acknowledged, and where a rhetorical training transpires from the texts? How did Syriac historians perceive Greek rhetors as social figures, and how did they look at the “art of

discourse” per se? Is such a perception shaped by situations of bilingualism and of blended cultural traditions?