



FACULTEIT LETTEREN  
EN WIJSBEGEERTE

# RHETORIC AND HISTORIOGRAPHY IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Ghent, 18-19 September 2017

A workshop funded by  
the ERC-project

*Memory of Empire:*

*The Post-Imperial Historiography of Late Antiquity*



UNIVERSITEIT  
GENT



**PROGRAMME**

MONDAY 18 SEPTEMBER 2017

12.00-13.00: Welcome and sandwich lunch

13.00-13.30: Opening – Lieve Van Hoof

*Greek Rhetoric and Historiography*

13.30-14.30: Peter Van Nuffelen (Ghent) - From Rhetoric to Epic in Late Antique Greek Historiography

14.30-15.30: Edward J. Watts (San Diego) - Julian and Prohaeresius

15.30-16.00: Coffee break

16.00-17.00: Alan J. Ross (Southampton) - Peeking beneath Libanius' Robes of Rhetoric: Panegyric and Historiography in Oration 18

17.00-18.00: Laura Carrara (Heidelberg/Tübingen) - Rhetorical Structures in the Chronicle of John Malalas

18.00-18.30: General discussion

19.30: Conference dinner





TUESDAY 19 SEPTEMBER 2017

*Syriac Historiography. And Rhetoric?*

9.00-10.00: Maria Conterno (Ghent) - Barhadbeshabba Arbaya's "The Cause of the Foundation of the Schools": History and Rhetoric in Disguise

10.00-11.00: Jan Van Ginkel (Leiden) - For Good or for Bad: Educated Men in the Works of John of Ephesus

11.00-11.15: Coffee break

11.15-12.15: Andy Hilkens (Ghent) - The Poet and the Martyr: Jacob's Mimra 181 on Mar George the Martyr

12.15-13.15: Sandwich lunch

*Latin Rhetoric and Historiography*

13.15-14.15: Gavin Kelly (Edinburgh) - Ammianus and the Rhetoricians

14.15-15.15: Roger Rees (St. Andrews) - Praise at History's Turning-Point: The Rhetoric of 'Antiquity' in Latin Panegyric

15.15-15.45: Coffee break

15.45-16.45: Diederik Burgersdijk (Nijmegen) - The Classical Debate about Rhetoric and Historiography in the "Historia Augusta"

16.45-17.15: General discussion & Round-up

19.00: Dinner



## ABSTRACTS

**Peter Van Nuffelen** - *From rhetoric to epic in late antique Greek historiography.*

Late antique history often situated itself in between rhetoric and poetry. This paper argues that this positioning changed in the course of time: in Greek historiography of Late Antiquity, we witness a shift away from panegyric as the main point of reference and competition towards epic. If Greek classicising history of the 4th and 5th c. is poorly preserved, the ecclesiastical historians of this period are mostly concerned with positioning themselves vis-à-vis rhetoric. The shift can be sensed in Procopius, whose preface positions itself vis-à-vis rhetoric and poetry but polemicalises most strongly against Homeric language. It is completed in Theophylact Simmoca, in whose early 7th c. history the main literary point of reference is Homer.

Besides mapping these changes, this paper asks the following questions. A) How can this shift be explained? Is it the result of wider changes in literary taste? Indeed, the shift is paralleled in the upsurge of epics on contemporary events from the middle of the 6th c. onwards. Such epics are attested in the 4th and 5th century too, yet they seem to be playing a less prominent role in the self-presentation of the court. Does it reflect self-representation of leading military men or of an ideology of military success in 6th and 7th c. Byzantine society? B) Does this change of reference have an impact on the way history was being written? One can indeed argue that Procopius, Agathias, and Theophylact have many more scenes of heroic battle in their histories, which tend to have a strong military focus. Does it also have an impact on the focalisation and characterisation of the main protagonists?

**Edward J. Watts** - *Julian and Prohaeresius.*

In the year 361, the Christian rhetorician Prohaeresius wrote to the Emperor Julian and asked him for materials that he could use as sources in a panegyric. Julian loathed Prohaeresius and had no interest in allowing the rhetorician to give the emperor a speech that everyone knew was full of disingenuous praise. Julian responded to the request with the letter dripping with powerful sarcasm. He offered to provide any materials the rhetorician wanted, but only if Prohaeresius agreed to write a history instead of an oration. Julian understood that the rhetorician could easily disavow praise given in an oration, but he was bound to any points of view he expressed in history. This exchange then highlights a fundamental difference between history and rhetoric that producers and consumers of literature both clearly recognized. Although both types of literature used the same basic raw materials, historians appear to have been bound to the portraits of the individuals they presented. At the same time, it was understood that rhetoricians could radically shift their perspectives on a subject or an event as time and circumstances changed. Using materials like the exchange between Julian and Prohaeresius, the orations of Themistius and the letters of Libanius, this essay will show that authors were expected to believe and maintain the points of view they argued in histories but had considerable flexibility to later disavow things said in panegyrics.



**Alan J. Ross** - *Peeking beneath Libanius' Robes of Rhetoric: Panegyric and Historiography in Oration 18.*

In late 363, during the aftermath of the emperor Julian's death in Persia, Libanius wrote to Julian's former notarius, Philagrius, asking him for details of the disastrous campaign of which Philagrius had also been part (Ep. 1434). Libanius' letter collection is an astonishing resource for contextualising his other works; we have nothing comparable for any historian, but we generally assume that Libanius' practice of soliciting information from eyewitnesses was the standard practice of historians too (it is what Thucydides maintains he himself did, 1.22). The work that Libanius was composing was not a work of history, however, but of rhetoric: Oration 18, the Epitaphios for Julian.

Oration 18 is clearly panegyric in tone, though the particular sub-genre of Epitaphios necessarily involves a performative context which was atypical for standard imperial panegyric: the praise of a deceased honorand. If historians maintained that the reign of past emperors was the domain of their genre, and that of the current emperor was the domain of panegyric, then Epitaphios demonstrably crosses this boundary, and could then be inherently more 'historiographical'. Furthermore, in the case of Oration 18 we can clearly see that Libanius wanted to compose a narrative which was well-informed in terms of detail, though he promises Philagrius that 'you will inform me of the bare facts; I will dress them in the robes of rhetoric'.

In this paper I will investigate how Libanius combines, negotiates, or rejects tropes of historiography and panegyric in this speech. Particularly I will consider the positioning of Libanius' oratorical persona in relation to his audience, and the form and function of his narrative (which comprises a large portion of the work) vis-à-vis narrative in more typical examples of panegyric and historiography in the fourth century. If time and space allow, I will also draw comparisons with Gregory Nazianzen's Oration 5 ('Against Julian') which shares a similar compositional context (the aftermath of Julian's death) but is a work of invective (the generic inverse of panegyric). My conclusions will shed light directly on question of mutual attraction and rejection of these two proximate genres of late-antique literature.

**Laura Carrara** - *Rhetorical structures in the Chronicle of John Malalas.*

The style of the bulky sixth-century chronicle of John Malalas (an account of the world history from Adam and Eve to Justinian) has been defined by authoritative scholars as "plodding" (Scott 1981, 23); its language as rich in repetitions and almost "formulaic" (M. Jeffreys 1990). These features seem to support the widespread theory that Malalas was employed in the offices of the imperial bureaucracy in Antioch and that he chose for his literary work the same written language he used for his daily office routine. Generally speaking, this appreciation of the linguistic texture of the chronicle and the resulting reconstruction of the professional and social position of its author might well be true. Against this background, however, another aspect deserves attentive consideration, namely the nickname 'Malalas' given to the author of the chronicle by some contemporary and later writers. As it is widely acknowledged, the sobriquet 'Malalas' (Μαλάλας, sometimes also Μαλέλας) is the Greek expansion of a Syriac root (mll) meaning 'eloquent', 'endowed with fluency of speech'; a concrete investigation into how the rhetorical ability of John influences his chronicle and gives shape to the narration still largely remains to be carried out.



In my contribution for the volume, I plan to look for passages in Malalas' chronicle that show traces of rhetorical elaboration and structuration, attempting to trace them back to John's education in an ancient Greek-speaking rhetorical school (on which see most recently Berardi 2017) and/or to his acquaintance with rhetorical handbooks and works. At the workshop, I will present and discuss a case of rhetorical elaboration in Malalas' chronicle I have already studied *en detail* in a recent publication (Carrara 2017), the long and articulated earthquake description in *Chronographia* XVII 16 (earthquake of Antioch in 526 AD). I argue that Malalas, in order to compose this stylistic striking passage, exploited a rhetorical monody and that this monody was, conceivably, the one written down soon after the quake by the famous rhetorician Procopius of Gaza. If my reconstruction is accepted, this source relationship illustrates well the phenomenon of adoption and adaptation of *rhetorical* practices in historical works and contributes to give a more vivid and interdependent picture of the activity of rhetoricians and historians in Late Antiquity.

**Maria Conterno** - *Barhadbeshabba Arbaya's "The Cause of the Foundation of the Schools": History and Rhetoric in Disguise.*

Barhadbeshabba Arbaya's *The cause of the foundation of the schools* or, more literally, *The cause of the establishment of the sessions of the schools*, is a peculiar text which fits the subject of the workshop in many respects. It is an inaugural lecture written between the 6th and the 7th centuries to welcome a new incoming class at the School of Nisibis, the famous theological school founded by refugees from the 'School of the Persians' of Edessa after the closure of the latter in 489. It is therefore a rhetorical text proper, written to be read out in front of an audience. This is already an exception in the Syriac world, where the rhetorician as a public and professional figure did not exist. As the title makes clear, the author borrowed for his speech the format of the 'cause' genre ('elltā), a literary genre unique to Syriac literature consisting of aetiological treatises on the origins of religious festivities or liturgical practices. But the aetiological discussion of the school year is preceded by an overview of universal history, where the history of the world is metaphorically presented as 'scholastic history', namely as a succession of schools, from the school established by God for the angels up to the School of Nisibis itself. Last but not least, Barhadbeshabba Arbaya was possibly a historian too, a history of the Church of the East being preserved under his name.

Although rhetoric, rhetoricians, and rhetorical skills are not addressed directly and explicitly in the text, a certain number of passages and remarks of the author prompt reflections on the following points: a) The role of rhetoric in the teaching activity of the School of Nisibis; b) the attitude towards rhetorical skills and 'speech embellishment' in the author's circles; c) the author's view on the relationship between rhetoric and history; d) the author's (and the School's) view on the relationship between human speech and divine speech, between men's word and God's word, between fabricated discourse and revealed truth.

Although the identification of the authors of the two works is still debated, a comparison with the *Ecclesiastical History* will prove all the same enlightening, since the two texts were certainly written in the same period and in the same context, and they either depend on one another or share the same sources. Looking at the two of them together, therefore, will allow to shed further light on the intellectual circles from which they both issued, and on their approach to history as well as to rhetoric.



**Jan Van Ginkel** - *For Good or for Bad: Educated Men in the Works of John of Ephesus.*

Within early Syriac literature (pre 600) there is little reflection on Rhetoric and Rhetors per se. Even though several authors are 'classically' trained – being bilingual –, their theoretical works are usually more focused on Philosophy or related topics. Whether or not Syriac higher education Schools (for example in Edessa and later Nisibis) actually taught their pupils according to the established Greek curriculum is still debated. Many other Syriac authors came through the monastic education system, which usually put little emphasis on the classical curriculum and was focused on religious texts, notably the Psalter, as the starting point of any form of literacy. In later stages of the education many translated Greek texts were used as well and, because these were written by well-educated literati like the Cappadocian Fathers, much of the knowledge and technique from the Greek educational system did trickle through into the Syriac education.

One of these monastically trained authors is John of Ephesus. He was a Sixth century author, who was one of the first to compose original historiographical works in the Syriac language, notably a three-part Church History up to CE 588. In addition he was personally heavily involved in the Church politics of his day, especially in the ongoing separation between the Chalcedonians and the Miaphysites. Even though he represented that dissident movement, he was well connected with the palace in Constantinople. He acted as a 'missionary' in Western Asia Minor, converting pagans and heretics, while being sponsored by members of the palace, possibly including Justinian himself. He also became actively involved in the persecution of 'Pagans' in Constantinople in the 540's. Although raised in his mother tongue he did acquire some knowledge of Greek, but not to the level of being to write in it.

John himself was not 'classically' trained and seems to be proud of his 'rustic' style. However, in describing himself as 'plain' in his introduction to his monastic 'History', *The Lives of the Eastern Saints*, his style does become more verbose and intricate. In that sense the influence of the works that he has read, can be detected. But from his own accounts it becomes clear that for him and his audience a 'classical education' could easily trigger suspicion about the truthfulness of one's Christian beliefs. He uses this frame in his discussion on paganism in the capital or in Antioch. There is often even an element of hostility towards the 'professionals' like grammarians and doctors, who acquired their status through their education.

Nevertheless this form of education is not 'evil' of its own, but it is the search for wealth and status that are clearly frowned upon (e.g. *Life of Thomas the Armenian* [284-5]) as potential sources of sin. If used to further theological and spiritual aims Greek education can be reason for praise. Although a simple and plain text could do just as well.

Rhetoric and rhetors are never mentioned per se in this context, but it is clearly that they are part of the set up. To what extent the hostile attitude itself was partly an rhetorical device – as in the quoted introduction – will be further elaborated upon.

**Andy Hilkens** - *The Poet and the Martyr: Jacob's Mimra 181 on Mar George the Martyr.*

The subject of this paper is not a historiographical work, but a mimra, a metrical homily, on St. George the Martyr, written by the Syriac anti-chalcedonian poet-theologian Jacob of Serugh (c. 451-521). The majority of the hundreds of homilies that have been ascribed to Jacob deal with themes from the Old Testament, but on occasion Jacob did indeed touch upon historical and hagiographical subjects such as the emperor Constantine, the Persian capture of Amid or the deaths of martyrs such as Bacchus or Gurya. In this paper I analyse how Jacob delighted, amazed,





scared and offered mental support to his audience with his own gruesome version of the martyrdom of St. George who is said to have died during the reign of the fictitious pagan emperor Dadianus. In his highly personal reconstruction of early Christian history, Jacob, elaborating on elements from the Syriac Acts of St. George, fills in the blanks in the story with his own vivid description of the events that led up to the martyr's violent death. In his typical rhetorical style, Jacob evokes the heroism that St. George displayed during his torture, using the vocabulary of war and battle and off-playing the calmness of St. George who was at death's door against the unbridled rage of the emperor, and even goes so far as to claim that Dadianus' wife, an anonymous Roman empress, was converted to Christianity because she was in awe of George's heroism and steadfast belief in God. Through rhetorical devices such as wordplays and direct speech, Jacob engages with his audience, trying to affect their emotions, urging them to hold fast in their faith in "the One God" and in "Christ, the Son of God," like St. George who withstood Dadianus' attempts to convert him to the worship of idols.

**Gavin Kelly** - *Ammianus and the Rhetoricians*.

Ammianus Marcellinus said of his account of the emperor Julian that it would almost reach the level of material for panegyric, *paene ad laudatium materiam pertinebit* (16.1.3). At the end of his work, he implicitly contrasted his truthful history to the panegyrists who would cover the current regime of Theodosius (31.16.9). Even at his most rhetorical – and he could be highly so – Ammianus maintained a formal distance between his own history and what rhetoricians did, between truth and embellishment. The speeches that Ammianus gives to characters – that signal feature of classical historiography – are relatively few and therefore relatively unstudied. In fact, the only speeches included are by rulers, and subjects can only be eloquent by report or in short snatches of direct speech. The most distinguished practitioners of rhetoric in Ammianus' times (Libanius, Themistius, Symmachus, Gregory Nazianzen) are never directly mentioned, even though it is clear in every case that Ammianus knew and alluded to their works. In this essay I shall attempt to understand Ammianus how Ammianus saw the place of rhetoric in his society with a particular focus on two sometimes interlocking themes: the place and effect of speeches and eloquence in the work, and allusive engagement with contemporary rhetorical authors such as those named above.

**Roger Rees** - *Praise at History's Turning-Point: The Rhetoric of 'Antiquity' in Latin Panegyric*.

Although the extant third and fourth century Latin prose panegyrics [the late antique XII Panegyrici Latini, Symmachus' fragmentary *Orr. 1-3* and Ausonius' *gratiarum actio*] show an increasing tendency to employ poetic parole in the form of quotation, citation, intertext and language, as suitable ornamentation to the discourse of praise, it also took pains to distance itself from the fictional character of verse – the 'fabulous' associations of poetry served as a foil to the orators' insistence on their own sincerity and truthfulness (eg PanLat X(2)1.3, 2.5). This ambivalent orientation towards poetic discourse captures panegyric's attempts at self-definition. This contribution will argue that in a complementary move, imperial panegyric also sought to shape its own reputation by engagement with history and historiography. Panegyric traded in recent history, such as an emperor's accession, or its anniversary, his marriage, successful military campaign or visit to the provinces - in fact, more often than not, these events or occasions seem to have been the reason for the civic gathering at which the panegyric was





delivered. *res gestae* were as much the stuff of praise-giving as they were of historiography, although the tensions that generated frequently exercised ancient writers (eg Tacitus, Lucian, Ammianus, Aurelius Victor).

As was recommended by surviving treatises, panegyric regularly deployed historical exempla and synkrisis as the rhetorical leverage by which to better demonstrate the addressee-emperor's achievements; Ted Nixon, for example, plotted the orators' preference for Roman Republican reference points and comparanda. But while regularly drawing on 'antique' figures as a means to calibrate and celebrate the addressee-emperor, prose panegyrics frequently undermine the reliability of 'antiquity'. Much like panegyric's relationship with poetry, the result is a curious two-way flow in rhetorical traffic – both valorising and demeaning the authority of 'antiquity' and its discourses in the generation of praise of the current emperor. This rhetorical contraflow orbits in particular round the concept and lexis of *vetus* and *vetustas*. The abstraction *vetustas* is variously presented as venerable and quasi sacred, or as inflated and self-interested. Two texts in particular, Nazarius' speech to Constantine in 321 (PanLat IV(10)), and Pacatus Drepanius' to Theodosius in 389 (PanLat II(12)), both delivered in Rome, are preoccupied with this rhetoric: amongst other references, Nazarius places Constantine's triumphal entry into Rome above all the triumphs recorded in the texts of *vetustas*; Pacatus Drepanius sneers at *vetustas* for its hyperbole and self-interest (17.1). With the memorable quality of a 'soundbite', such references to antiquity and (implicitly or explicitly) its written record serve as a powerful shorthand for the orators' promotion of the reliability and integrity of their own discourse.

Where, in order to circumvent the loftier style of celebratory rhetoric, imperial historiography tended to close its account before the reign of the sitting emperor, the *raison d'être* of panegyric was to address him; and at their close, panegyrics often articulate visions of the future, elegantly premised on the assumed perpetuity of the reigning house. Bold predictions about the House of Constantine or Theodosius have more authority after the subtle undermining of the ethical and intellectual stock of *vetustas*.

**Diederik Burgersdijk** - *The Classical Debate about Rhetoric and Historiography in the "Historia Augusta"*.

In this paper, I intend to analyze the theory and practice regarding the relationship between historiography and rhetoric as reflected in the fourth-century collection of imperial biographies, named the *Historia Augusta* (HA). The unknown author/editor of the HA explicitly comments upon the position of the biographer in the field of historiographers (in the preface to the *vita Macrini*) as well as rhetoricians (in the preface to the *vita Aureliani*), thereby uttering contradictory statements concerning the degree of historical reliability in both genres. At the same time, the author practices rhetoric himself by interweaving numerous speeches of his own making in the historiographical narrative. This procedure results in a creative reception of the classical debate about the relationship between historiography and rhetoric as laid out by Cicero in several of his theoretical works (*De oratore* and *Brutus*, among others). Cicero, being steeped in rhetorical theory as well as practice, served as an important model for the author of the HA in many respects, and therefore the former's theoretical reflections may inform the analysis of the same debate within the HA-biographies. On the practical side, the author of the HA uses many elements from the historical narrative in order to construct his speeches, which not only concords with classical historiographical practice (Sallust, for example), but also with Cicero's





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prescripts of rhetorical practice to build up a speech (*exaedicatio*) from words (*verba*) using the elements (*res*) needed for the plea. The relationship between historical *res* and rhetorical *verba* is a recurring theme in the HA, the occurrence of which may directly be traced back on the classical debate about this same theme. Apart from the theoretical background and practical use of rhetoric in historiography, some considerations about the role of rhetoric in the later Roman empire will be added, as the insistence on this theme in the HA may well reflect an ongoing debate about the relations between genres, which were ever more mixed up in the lively literature of Late Antiquity.





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## VENUE

**Academic sessions** - Archaeology Meeting Room, UFO-Building (1st floor), Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 35, 9000 Ghent.

**Lunches and coffee breaks** - Pirenne Room, UFO-Building (1st floor), Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 35, 9000 Ghent.

**Conference dinner** - Het Pand, Onderbergen 1, 9000 Ghent.

**Dinner Tuesday evening** - Oude Vismijn, Sint-Veerleplein 5, 9000 Ghent.

