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Introduction: Historiography as a cultural practice¹

The present volume seeks to understand late ancient historiography within its cultural context. There are two sides to such an endeavour. On the one hand, histories can bear witness to the cultural changes that late Antiquity underwent. In this volume, Christianisation is the key change, from which many of the phenomena studied in the following chapters derive, such as debates about the origin of the world, the creation of Christian historiographical forms and traditions, and the definition of a realm of society as profane or secular². Other important changes noted in this volume can be understood as indirect results of Christianisation: the development of Armenian and Syriac into fully-fledged literary cultures, for example, owes much to the adoption of Christianity³. The establishment of successor kingdoms had no immediate impact on later Latin culture, but accelerated a process of fragmentation that was soon reflected in literary production too⁴. On the other hand, this volume also wishes to draw attention to the active contribution of historiography to the shaping of the cultural face of late Antiquity. As the reader will notice, many of the historians studied in this volume had an axe to grind and defended positions about orthodoxy, the nature of the world, and the genealogy of mankind that conflicted with those held by other religious and social groups⁵. Put positively, historiography constantly projects ideals of what a society should look like. Often it does so by engaging in polemic, a posture that acknowledges the existence of alternative outlooks and seeks to expose their weak spots. Yet explicit polemic is not the only form such engagement takes: incorporation of pagan religious lore in a Christian work could be a powerful yet implicit statement about the relationship of both. Both the passive and the active side need to be taken into account when using historiography as a source for cultural history: historiography is a distorting mirror of society. This volume seeks to trace some of the convexities and concavities of that mirror.

The present volume starts out from the consideration that, within the wider field of late ancient studies, historiography does not yet assume the place it deserves as a locus of late ancient cultural debates. I see two reasons for this state of affairs. First, the transmission of late ancient historiography is complex and involves, besides frag-

¹ The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007–2013) / ERC Grant Agreement n. 313153 and from the Flemish Research Fund.
² See the chapters by Meyer, Roberto, Parmentier and Barone, Huck, Wirbelauer, Greatrex, Laniado, Moreau, and Camplani.
³ See the chapters by Hilkens and Traina.
⁴ See the chapter by Deswarte.
⁵ Most strongly in Hilkens, Camplani, Deswarte, Meyer, Roberto, and Stickler.
mentary works, translations and original texts in oriental languages, compilations and late excerpt collections. Much of the philological groundwork has yet to be done, and scholarship often needs to concern itself predominantly with issues of edition, translation, dating, and literary analysis. Yet this cannot suffice as an explanation, for late Antiquity has transmitted us a density of fully preserved historical works that is far higher than for any period of the classical world (imagine that a classicist working on the first century AD would possess the equivalent of historiographical sources we have for the sixth century AD: John Malalas, Procopius, Agathias, Evagrius Scholasticus, John of Ephesus, Marcellinus Comes, and Jordanes – to mention just the most important ones). Scholarly interests in late Antiquity are still determined by the impact of the founders of the field, few of whom had an active interest in historiography (e.g. H.-I. Marrou, A.H.M. Jones, P. Brown): if their work has led to an increased interest in hagiography and to studies of theological literature indebted to cultural history, the example of Averil Cameron’s study on Procopius and the sixth century has found less successors⁶, even if interest is clearly on the rise⁷. The aim of this volume is to continue this path. While many of the approaches in this volume are obviously and explicitly literary, the aim remains to move beyond mere literary analysis and to ask: what do literary forms mean as cultural practices?

In the previous chapter, P. Blaudeau has highlighted a number of themes that run through the volume: the role played by active engagement with the documentation of which a history is made up; the construction of narratives for the establishment and defence of social and religious identities; the formation of traditions within and outside historiography and their interaction; the use of knowledge in the context of conflict and opposition; the production of positive and negative models; and finally, the reception of late ancient historiography in the period immediately subsequent to it. In this contribution, I wish to take a step back and reflect on the conditions of transmission of knowledge: what are the cultural practices that shape historiography and its engagement with other forms of knowledge? Using the input of the various chapters, I shall try to see what roads have been opened upon the way towards a better understanding of historiography as a late ancient cultural practice. Three areas seem crucial: the culture of rhetoric; the circulation of information; and the interaction of argument and tradition.

1. A rhetorical culture

Ancient literary culture was rhetorical. Not only were many literary works aimed at, or originally produced for, oral performance, but the school system also culminated in training as a rhetor. The tools of rhetoric were thus as familiar to the author as they were to the audience. Historiography does not escape from this dynamic, but schol-
ars still struggle to precisely fathom the impact of rhetoric on classical historiography and the precise difference this generates with modern historiography. The contrast has often been couched in terms of “fiction” to argue that ancient historiography allowed a degree of invention that would be unacceptable for its modern counterpart. Such a definition starts out from a modern conception of the relationship between reality and language, namely that the purpose of historiography is to mirror real events in language. Yet a rhetorical view of reality presupposes that language should create in the reader the state of mind that one would experience when witnessing the events. It does not reflect reality in the text but recreates the experience of reality in the reader. If for classical historiography problems of interpretation are generated by the relative lack of explicit reflection on what it means to write history within a rhetorical culture, for late antiquity another set of specific problems arise from this rhetorical inheritance.

There is little doubt that schools of rhetoric remained important training grounds for historians: the continuation of classicising history until at least the end of the sixth century is sufficient proof for that, as is the conscious incorporation of classical authors in vast chronicles such as that of John of Antioch (one thinks of Plutarch). This seventh-century Christian author of a world chronicle seemed to have been fascinated by the Republican period and used it as a contrast to the dangers of kingship that marked subsequent Roman history. Such a focus on the Republic may very well reflect the classicising focus that rhetorical training continued to have. In the West, however, the school system was less robust and the decline of classicising literature has been linked to the progressive disappearance of the school in the rapidly changing world of the successor kingdoms. Yet the school left an inheritance: a set of authoritative texts, models that seem to have lingered in the margins of (Christian) culture but whose continuous if modest presence reminds us of the persistence of a culture whose institutional basis was lost. If slow decline seemed to be the inexorable fate of that culture, it continued to inspire and produce (what seem to us) surprises. Indeed, the models of the past could be resuscitated, as the monographs of Sallust may very well have inspired the Historia Wambae by Julian of Toledo, writing at the end of the seventh century.

Christian authors soon started to challenge the rhetorical culture: Christian literature both adopts the normative nature of traditional rhetorical styles (expressed in the proliferation of the topos of modesty and ineptitude in Christian prefaces) and challenges it as unsuited or distorting. As T. Deswarte shows, the desire to couch the narrative (and the argument) in a proper style never fully disappeared, even in seventh-century Spain. In the ninth century, Photius had a keen sense for the correct

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9 For further reflections, see Van Nuffelen 2012.
10 See the chapter by Roberto.
12 See the chapter by Deswarte.
style. Late antique Christian historiography is thus marked by an awareness that one was now not anymore on the level of the models of the past or unwilling to rise to that level.

The culture of rhetoric also travelled beyond the borders of the Empire and into other languages, in this volume illustrated by the Armenian example. As can be seen from G. Traina’s chapter, one would profit from studying the nature and forms of Armenian historiography by first looking at how ideas about rhetoric and literature travelled to Armenia and which models (such as the Alexander-novel) shaped the Armenian literary canon. Obviously, the imported models interacted with local traditions, but especially Armenian historiography is explicitly turned towards the Greek example. Engagement with Greco-Roman culture, incarnated in a (still) powerful empire, was inevitable.

Yet the school of rhetoric was more than a source of models and a training ground for style. It has been argued that at least until the fourth century the school of rhetoric was also a major social engine for historiography in that many works were primarily produced for this environment. Indeed, it is likely that the rapid circulation of works such as the breviorium of Eutropius is to be attributed to its popularity in schools of rhetoric. Here we touch on a wider issue, namely the changing audiences for historiography in late Antiquity. In this area, this volume has made relatively little headway. Some works can be located in very precise context: Philostorgius seems to have written for his fellow Eunomians, but his awareness of anti-eunomian arguments points to a larger audience at the horizon. Julian of Toledo targeted his Historia Wambae at an elite audience, probably focused on the Visigothic court. The same holds for Olympiodorus of Thebes, who aimed at the court of Constantinople. In geographical terms, the chapters confirm the focus on Constantinople (one has to take note of P. Gaillard-Seux’s suggestion that even the Historia Augusta was aimed at the Eastern capital), even when Alexandria appears as a major alternative centre in Camplani’s contribution. At any rate, we are squarely in the context of elite audiences, secular or ecclesiastical, which should give us pause to think before we consider late ancient historiographies as narratives that aim at producing popular identities (even if the topos of humility has caused generations of scholars to think this). At the very least such identity narratives are heavily mediated by elite transmitters before they reached the lower strata.

Even when it professes to take distance from its literary antecedents, late ancient historiography thus had deep roots in classical culture, too deep to be entirely dug up in the course of the many upheavals and transformations of the period. One last illustration of such creative continuity concerns the forms that historiography takes. It

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13 See the chapters by Bleckmann and Stickler.
14 See Van Nuffelen 2012, 76–82 with further references.
15 Van Nuffelen 2013 and the chapter by Stickler.
16 Historiography has been discussed in the context of recent discussions of identity formation, especially when studying Syriac texts: Debié 2009; Wood 2010.
has often been claimed that Christianity was responsible for the creation of a number of new historiographical genres, in particular the chronicle and ecclesiastical history. As is shown by R. Burgess and M. Kulikowski, the Christians adopted the chronicle form which was of Hellenistic origin and combined it with the (equally Hellenistic) argument about the priority of peoples. The founder of ecclesiastical history, Eusebius, acknowledged that he opened up a new territory for historiography; however he aligned his endeavour implicitly but clearly with classical models in the various prefaces. This is not to deny the innovative nature of late ancient historiography, but rather to demonstrate that every innovation is rooted in tradition. It is indeed only through tradition that the innovation that was the Historia Wambae can be explained. Moreover, innovation can take the form of privileging certain traditional forms that subsequently acquire greater visibility. If this holds for chronicles, it is also true for compilations in later Antiquity. Compilatory activity existed throughout Antiquity, but only from the fifth century onwards does it seem to become an important form of cultural expression. In the seventh century, Theodore Lector was excerpted and reassembled in a compilation into which excerpts from other historians were included too. Similarly, the Syriac history of Pseudo-Zachariah is the combination of a set of origin stories, such as the Seven Sleepers from Ephesus, with a substantial epitome of Zachariah Scholasticus and its continuation. We have only started to take such compilations seriously as cultural forms in their own right and not as failed attempts to transmit the text to us: their generally anonymous nature and the apparent absence of originality have been important impediments to serious study. In such compilations, attention is shifted away from the author/compiler towards the works and authors quoted. This ties it in with the “rhetoric of quotation” that develops in late ancient historiography. Rather than hiding their sources, late ancient chroniclers tend to include a high number of explicit references to the authors and texts used (see, e.g., John Malalas; the practice becomes most obvious in the very late Syriac chronicles, such as that of Michael the Syrian). Such chronicles become highly layered texts: they acknowledge earlier layers of historical transmission whilst at the same time incorporating them in a single work. More study is needed to map this phenomenon in detail, but I would like to suggest here that we are witnessing profound changes in conceptions of authorship and authority: the authority is transferred from the author who remains anonymous to the authorities he cites.

Such phenomena alert us to deeper changes away from a rhetorical culture focused on individual literary ability towards the insertion into a tradition. The terms of the preceding sentence, however, should not mislead us: classical rhetorical culture itself was highly indebted to tradition, and the révérence to authority was
2. The circulation of information

To be transmitted, information needs to circulate. For late Antiquity, we may think primarily of the disruptions caused by invasions, raids, peaceful take-overs, and material decline. There can be little doubt that horizons shrunk, even if the realm of the former empire remained the scope of any chronicle written in late Antiquity. Yet these material conditions of circulation may be of less importance than cultural conditions of access, upon which various chapters touch.

Modern historians work on the basis of archives and we sometimes see use of archives by ancient authors as the litmus test of proper historiographical work. Yet demonstrable direct recourse to archives is rare and remains difficult to prove²¹. More commonly, late ancient historians derived their documents from pre-fabricated collections, which usually had a particular ideological outlook²². The distinction between both can be hard to make. The so-called History of the Alexandrian Episcopate, as A. Camplani indicates, was probably a compilation of documents interspersed with brief narratives, rather than a proper history on the lines of Eusebius²³. The same conclusion largely holds for use of legal evidence, even though O. Huck argues that some historians may have had recourse to laws that were directly drawn from local archives. This relocates the activity of historians from the archive to the library and from building up a narrative from scratch to active engagement with formed traditions and arguments, about which I shall say more below.

Libraries are, then, the more important institution in this context. Not enough has yet been done to map the world of late antique libraries, so it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions. Yet it seems likely that the concentration of resources in a few cities (such as Constantinople) and, later, monasteries and ecclesiastical institutions reinforced the tendency already visible in late ancient historiography to be closely linked to courts and episcopal sees. Evidence for the persistence of more local forms of historiography still needs to be gathered. Circulation of knowledge probably happened more intensively and faster in locations where such a concentration of resources could be found: the reception of Eusebius studied by E. Parmentier and F. Barone points, for example, to Antioch and Alexandria.

The availability of resources was the condition for another phenomenon: the search for the little-known, driven by sheer interest. As shown by B. Bleckmann, Photius was interested in the particular and the lesser-known, an interest that

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²¹ See the chapters by Wirbelauer and Huck.
²² For examples, see the chapters by Huck and Moreau.
maps relatively well onto those of the *epitomator* of Theodore Lector: while excerpting Theodore, he added a few excerpts from lesser known and sometimes heretical church histories. Unless we suppose the excerptor to have had an extensive culture, it is likely that he intentionally looked up, in a library, other texts that could supplement Theodore. Excerpting here appears not as a passive attitude (linked by us to cultural decline) but as the trace of a culture of scholars, who were driven by interests and a desire for knowledge. “Interest” may seem a highly psychological and arbitrary category, but in these cases it can be understood as an acknowledgement that heretical historians also aimed at the truth (and sometimes found it) or, at least, preserved an alternative vision of the past that was worth discussing.

### 3. Argument and tradition

I have characterised late ancient historiography as remaining, in multiple ways, tied to the culture of rhetoric, directly through the persistence of rhetorical training or indirectly through the adherence to the canon that had been produced for and through schools. One could call it rhetorical in another way: as much as classical historiography, late ancient historiography always had a cause to defend. Compared to late antiquity, classical culture was relatively homogenous. Its disputes about the power of language, the nature of government or the good life were largely carried out by members of a single social group. In the later Roman world, classical culture itself was disputed, whereas pagans and Christians (and Christians among themselves) disagreed about the nature of God and the world (not to mention Manichaean and later Muslims). Seen from a world in which different ethnic groups and languages, such as Armenian, Syriac, and Arab, become prominent and acquired also meaning as a marker of social identity, the classical world seems cosy and uniform (and the result of a different degree of imperialism than what the later Roman empire proved able to generate). From the perspective of late ancient ecclesiastical historians, society was divided in a profane and ecclesiastical sphere, a distinction that could be merely social but implied also a judgement about which part received God’s privileged attention.

To the eye of an unsuspecting classicist, late ancient literature may seem very argumentative. The form of these arguments was shaped by classical rhetoric and philosophy, even if the reference to texts of authority (Bible, Chaldean oracles, or florilegia of Church Fathers) is sometimes seen as a late ancient innovation. This volume has assembled several examples of how ancient knowledge was used to construct an argument, which could serve different purposes. As U. Roberto shows, Christian world chronicles could incorporate pagan oracles to demonstrate a degree of continuity between the pagan past and the Christian present. In turn, Philostor-

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24 See the chapter by Greatrex.
25 Athanassiadi 2006.
gius demonstrates ample knowledge of ancient medicine and cosmology, precisely to argue for the superiority of a Christian world view (D. Meyer). Physiognomics, so argues P. Gaillard-Seux, drives the portraits of emperors in the *Historia augusta*. Leaving the realm of classical knowledge, legal documents were a prime tool in ancient debates, and pontifical documents could be presented as such (O. Huck; D. Moreau).

Tradition always had been an argument of authority and within a context of conflicting views, this was so much more the case. Here historiography comes into its own: recovering tradition (and in the process: (re)defining it) is a proper historiographical task. Local churches produced their own historiographies. The survey of A. Camplani shows how an Alexandrian historiography developed that focused on its glory in crisis. Since Arius and Meletius, so it seemed, the see had always been challenged by various enemies. This past proved its steadfastness in orthodoxy – even if the result was a progressive shrinking of the geographical area on which Alexandria could exercise its authority. If Alexandrian historiography is largely partisan, E. Wirbelauer shows how the legend of Sylvester of Rome was developed and adopted by various parties in the sometimes turbulent history of the Church of Rome in the sixth century. Even Olympiodorus of Thebes fits into this pattern: his argument that the West has deviated from good Eastern way of doing this presupposes the court of Constantinople as the norm and thus reconfirms that norm.

As the legend of Sylvester demonstrates, the search for tradition generated numerous legends and falsifications. This, in turn, produces modern disputes about the degree of truthfulness such texts possess: in this volume, R. Teja argues for the authenticity of the Greek version of the *Life of Porphyry of Gaza*. Yet there are numerous questions that are equally important in this context: what does this teach us about the formation of tradition? To what degree do readers and authors accept the suggestion of truthfulness a text wishes to convey? What kind of truthfulness do such texts aim at? Historical or spiritual, if these categories are mutually exclusive?

We may wish to draw a strict line between tradition and history, yet both constantly influence each other. O. Huck shows how the idea of Constantine as a Christian legislator developed in conjunction with Eusebius’ portrayal of the emperor in the *Life of Constantine* and the construction of Constantine in the *Codex Theodosianus*. This image then fed into contemporary church histories and henceforward to later generations. In one way, scholarship has rightly raised serious doubts about such a characterisation of Constantine’s legislation. At the same time, we are still indebted to the view of Constantine as the first Christian emperor: the spate of books in recent years on Constantine finds no other justification. A couple of years ago, I have shown how historical narratives about Athanasius of Alexandria in the fifth century are profoundly influenced by a vulgate version that circulated much earlier. Popu-

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26 See further Blaudeau 2006, for the other Church of the East.  
27 See the chapter by Stickler.  
29 Van Nuffelen 2004. See also the chapter by Camplani.
lar traditions mark out important events and figures, such as Constantine, Athanasius, and, in Gaza, Porphyry. As such, they are preconditions for the historical narratives that we read: the past was not a virgin territory onto which the historian entered but it had received a scansion that influenced his task. Close engagement with such traditions is therefore imperative to understand how historians adopted the tradition, modified it, and distanced themselves from it.

To conclude: historiography never was the single one locus for developing a coherent view of the world in Late Antiquity. Yet it was an important one. The culmination of this process can be seen in the paper by A. Hilkens. In the chronicle of 1234 the narrative of early mankind is, in fact, an etiology of how good and evil entered the world: warfare, cities, astrology, and idolatry are all tied to specific individuals and their decisions. If, as is likely, this goes back to the sixth-century chronicler Andronicus, this insertion of mankind’s progress and lapse within an expanded biblical genealogy had already taken place in the age of Justinian. This example shows, as do the chronicles of John Malalas and John of Antioch, that historiography, and especially chronicles that covered the distant past, developed into a genre that sought to explain the world. These works develop (or at least try to) a coherent world view that was obviously Christian but did not shirk away from accepting classical knowledge in its fold. In such works one senses best how classical and biblical tradition were reconfigured into an original synthesis that provided orientation in a complex world. As children of the modern world, we rapidly notice the fractures and tensions in such syntheses. Yet we have been raised to be biased towards the original and the classical. Such conditioning may lead us to underestimate the degree to which these are original syntheses, which were to become classical for later generations of medieval scholars.

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