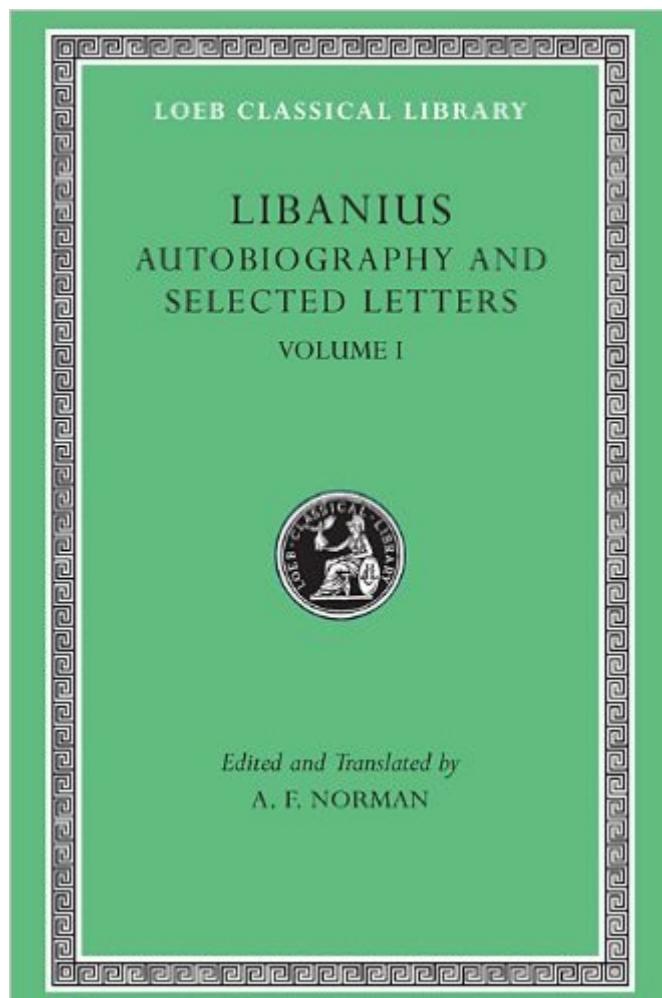


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Libanius: Autobiography And Selected Letters (1-50) (Loeb Classical Library No. 478) (Volume I)



Synopsis

A professing pagan in an aggressively Christian empire, a friend of the emperor Julian and acquaintance of St. Basil, a potent spokesman for private and political causesâ "Libanius can tell us much about the tumultuous world of the fourth century. Born in Antioch to a wealthy family steeped in the culture and religious traditions of Hellenism, Libanius rose to fame as a teacher of the classics in a period of rapid social change. In his lifetime Libanius was an acknowledged master of the art of letter writing. Today his lettersâ "about 1550 of which surviveâ "offer an enthralling self-portrait of this combative pagan publicist and a vivid picture of the culture and political intrigues of the eastern empire. A. F. Norman selects one eighth of the extant letters, which come from two periods in Libanius's life, 355â "365 and 388â "393 CE, letters written to Julian, churchmen, civil officials, scholars, and his many influential friends. The Letters are complemented, in this two-volume edition, by Libanius's Autobiography (Oration 1), a revealing narrative that begins as a scholar's account and ends as an old man's private journal. Also available in the Loeb Classical Library is a two-volume edition of Libanius's Orations.

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Customer Reviews

The life of Libanius of Antioch (314-393 AD) witnessed the entire reigns of Constantine, Constantius II, Julian, Jovian, Valentinian, Valens and Theodosius. Thus he was a spectator to perhaps the most crucial and turbulent times the Roman Empire had yet faced. During his life-saga, Christianity was elevated to a very privileged position under Constantine, virtually functioning as the State Religion.

A generation later, Julian rescinded the work of Constantine and re-established the traditional religion, but only to have his dream destroyed by his death in the eastern sands. Libanius also beheld the severe measures taken against his beloved Hellenic faith with the all out prohibition of polytheistic worship, in all its forms, by Theodosius. Furthermore, Germanic hordes were ravishing Rhineland in the north, Persian's were dismantling the eastern frontiers and Gothic nations were sweeping across the Danubian countryside inflicting untold devastation to that region. But Libanius was more than just a spectator to these events of empire, for his Autobiography and Letters reveal the active, practical and professional side Libanius, as opposed to the schoolman--the bookish recluse reveling in the Greece of Pericles and Demosthenes of ages long since passed. Now, the autobiography is a genre almost non-existent in the antique world, the most known one of course, is Augustine's Confessions, which reads more like a diary than pure autobiography. Libanius' Autobiography is much more the archetypal model, conducive to the ones written today. Of the work itself, the running theme is obviously hinged upon the most significant and memorable turnings of his life. And presiding over that theme is the concept of Fortune and how she manifested herself in the affairs of his life. First off, Libanius begins with his early years and admits that he had no taste for learning in his childhood. It was not until he was fifteen that his love for learning was kindled. From this point he begins the proper course of his autobiography. Libanius will briefly discuss the academic education he received in Athens and the fortuitous occasion that propelled him to the chair of rhetoric in that city. He will move on to his explanations on how he became a private teacher at Constantinople, then as a municipal teacher at Nicomedia up until his return to his hometown Antioch, where he would thrive and bask in fame the rest of his life. But these fortunes were not bestowed upon him without risk and danger, Libanius will tell. So often was he victimized by envious rivals and the dangers of Late Roman court intrigue. Many times Libanius depicts himself as facing certain death, only to barely escape it, under the care Fortune. He also tells of his recurring battle with the gout and migraines and of other illnesses which nearly vanquished him. Most memorable though, to the reader, will be his narrative on the Emperor Julian which describes the friendship they cultivated during Julian's long hiatus in Antioch before launching his fatal Persian campaign. Additionally, Libanius' lament over the destruction of the temple of Apollo at Daphne and the toppling of the cypress trees sacred to Apollo, is very notable especially when contrasted with the accounts preserved in the writings of churchman like Sozomen. Some other valuable historical data will be found here pertaining to the Imperial administration, yet most will not be that appealing to general readers other than those highlighted above. Now, the Letters are of great worth as well, since Libanius' correspondents were men of great importance and influence: of those are Julian,

Themistius the Peripatetic and a whole litany of powerful government officials, to name a few. The contents of the Letters will not be elucidated here since the same essential features of the Autobiography overlap with the affairs discussed in Libanius' Letters. The four volumes available in the Loeb Edition of Libanius are definitely recommended for those with a specialized interest in the study of the Later Roman Empire. Unfortunately, the selections only constitute a mere fragment of the enormous body of works extant by Libanius.

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