The Letter Collection of Libanius of Antioch

LIEVE VAN HOOF

One of the largest and earliest Greek letter collections to have been handed down to us from antiquity, Libanius’s letters are one of our most important sources on the prosopography and sociocultural history of the fourth century, and among the most influential parts of the sophist’s literary output. Nevertheless, Libanius’s letters have been largely neglected by researchers working on ancient epistolography, and students of the author have tended to focus on his progymnamata, declamations, and speeches. The reason for this neglect is threefold. First, the vast corpus of letters, although available in a good edition, has been only partially translated. Second, the manuscript tradition is very rich and highly complex. And third, only a few studies on Libanius’s letters, mostly dating from the first quarter of the twentieth century, are available to provide guidance. Introductions to recent translations, such as those by Albert Norman in 1992 and Scott Bradbury in 2004, have done an excellent job of collating these earlier studies, but have added rather little by way of original contribution. As a result, much groundwork still needs to be done before a study of the broader themes of Libanius’s letter collection becomes possible.

In particular, scholars thus far have explicitly or implicitly assumed that what we have in the case of Libanius’s letters is the preserved part of his archive, with little or no editing by the author himself, with chronological disturbances being ascribed either to a posthumous editor or to accidents of transmission. As a result, the corpus as a whole has not been considered a collection—that is, a unified literary composition that has more to offer than the sum of the individual letters that constitute it. This essay hopes to lay the groundwork for future study of Libanius’s letters along the lines now pursued for other epistolary authors, by showing that Libanius’s letters as we have them today are not just a series of stand-alone items haphazardly assembled, but a true collection in which the author himself certainly had an important—though not necessarily the only—hand.

FROM LETTER TO COPYBOOK AND BEYOND

In 336, at the age of twenty-two, Libanius traveled from his native Antioch to Athens. After four years of study there, he left for Constantinople. His stay in the new capital lasted from 340 to 342, when he went to teach briefly in Nicaea, then in Nicomedia. After six years of absence, Libanius returned to Constantinople for another five years. In 354, after almost twenty years of absence, he moved back to his hometown of Antioch, where he would remain until his death, probably in 393. In the course of his travels and career, Libanius acquired a wide network of friends and acquaintances with whom he wished to keep in touch. When geographical distance made personal visits impossible, letters were indispensable. Of all the letters that Libanius wrote, 1,544 have been transmitted to us through medieval manuscripts, together covering some sixteen years of his life. Yet judging by the average number of letters per year for these documented years (95.81/year), he likely wrote more than five thousand letters in the course of his life.

Like many ancient letter writers, Libanius kept copies of the letters he sent. This is clear from two instances where he can produce a copy (antigrapha) of a letter sent earlier but not delivered to its addressee. The recipient’s copy was often further copied by others. In theory, then, letter collections could take their beginning in authors’ archives, recipient archives, or both.
In the case of Libanius, the sheer number of letters that have been preserved and the fact that they are not ordered per addressee makes it nearly impossible for the large collection we possess to have been compiled from the recipients’ copies. The letters found in the manuscripts, or at least the vast majority of them, thus in all likelihood go back to the copies that Libanius made before sending them off to their addressees.

In Libanius’s archive, several letters were copied into a biblion, a copybook or duplicates file. Scholars have traditionally assumed that these books or files as such are the constituent parts of the collection as we have (and lack) it, but in a famous letter to Aristophanes of Corinth (Ep. 1264), who had asked for his correspondence with Julian, Libanius explicitly admits to practicing editorial selection, neither withholding his whole correspondence with Julian nor circulating it in its entirety: careful judgment (krisis), he says, is necessary in order to decide which letters will be shared, and which ones will be withheld. In the particular case of the correspondence with Julian, self-censorship of dangerous letters may have played a role; but alongside this negative selection, a more positive bias toward significant letters may also have influenced Libanius’s selection. As Richard Foerster pointed out, it is unlikely that Libanius used careful judgement only in the case of his correspondence with Julian: selection is likely to have been applied to the remainder of the corpus as well. Apart from the fact that we have only very few letters documenting the period before 355 and the period between 365 and 388, there are indeed several references to letters from years that are well documented that have not been preserved.

Editorial intervention also included consciously changing a letter’s content. In Ep. 933.2, Libanius promises his correspondent Eustochius, who had taken offense at Libanius’s previous teasing letter to him, to erase his name from the original letter in his archive:

But since you were vexed, and he shared in your feeling, and the two of you thought terrible something that is not terrible, I shall not commit injustice against the letter by erasing it, but I shall substitute one name for another. It is easy anyway to delete Eustochius and introduce Eustathius. (Ep. 933.2, my translation)

Libanius’s formulation in this letter confirms the existence of copybooks (cf. the imagery of entering and exiting: ), but it also suggests that drastic interventions such as whitewashing were by no means inconceivable. Ep. 915 may be the letter in question: separated from Ep. 933 by less than twenty letters and rather teasing in nature, it is now addressed to “Eustathius:” A more daring intervention may be visible in Ep. 333: as Otto Seeck demonstrated, Libanius there deleted part of a sentence, thus creating an anacoluthon in the remaining text. The deleted sentence in Ep. 333 probably asked Anatolius for a personal favor: in Ep. 19, Libanius claims to have written Anatolius about his position merely in order to test Anatolius’s friendship, and in Ep. 80, he states that he merely asked Anatolius for a favor, which Anatolius could easily award and had, in fact, already bestowed on many others. By deleting his actual question in Ep. 333, Libanius avoided publishing an act that might have detracted considerably from his image as a disinterested orator; but by paraphrasing and contextualizing it in Ep. 19 and 80, Libanius could hope to guide the reader’s interpretation and present himself as self-consciously innocent—for who would mention something supposedly shameful without knowing that he did nothing wrong?

Two conclusions can be drawn from the discussion thus far. First, it is clear that Libanius did not merely keep copybooks of the letters he sent, but also reworked the letters in his archive by selecting and editing at least some of them. We cannot know exactly how much or in how many cases he intervened, but the unmistakable fact that he did engage in selection and editing shows that the letters as we have them are not simply a faithful reproduction of all the letters of Libanius as he originally wrote them. This, in turn, should inspire us to proceed with utmost care when using these letters as a documentary source, as has usually been done. The second conclusion is that Libanius and others must have suspected that his letters might, one day, be published. This is proven not so much by the fact that he kept duplicate files—keeping a letter archive seems to have been standard practice in antiquity, and could simply be done for practical purposes such as resending lost items—but by the fact that Libanius selected and edited his letters post factum. Eustochius, for example, would not have cared that his name be erased from Libanius’s teasing letter (Ep. 915) had he not thought that Libanius’s letters might one day be published. A more positive example can be found in Ep. 773.5: its addressee, Entrechius, has asked Libanius for a letter “so as to gain eternal fame.” Either Libanius planned to publish his collection and his correspondents knew this, or they knew that the letters of a man such as Libanius were likely to be published. And whether they feared (Eustochius), hoped (Entrechius), or at least simply expected (Libanius) the survival of the letters, they all acted upon it: Eustochius asked for a letter to be deleted or...
changed, Entrechius asked for one to be included, and Libanius himself changed particular passages so as to project a more positive image of himself. If the first conclusion urges care in using Libanius’s letters as a documentary source, this second conclusion opens them up to a more discursive approach of the collection as an exercise in (self-)presentation.

FROM MANUSCRIPTS BACK TO ARCHETYPE

Letters of Libanius have been transmitted in more than 250 manuscripts. The vast majority of these offer more or less extensive anthologies: only three manuscripts (and a number of their apographa) do not anthologize. Two of these three manuscripts belong closely together: the eleventh-century Vaticanus gr. 85 (Va) and the twelfth- or thirteenth-century Leidensis Vossianus gr. 77 (Vo). Although both manuscripts have suffered serious losses—Va lacks beginning (Ep. 1–94) as well as end (Ep. 1006–1112), Vo a substantial number of letters in the middle (Ep. 411–97)—four groups of letters can be clearly distinguished in them. First, there are seventeen letters that stand apart at the beginning of Vo and are simply numbered 1–17, stemming from disparate years ranging possibly from 352 to 392. Following these, one finds Ep. 19–608, which cover the years 355 to 361 and which are, in both manuscripts, clearly divided into six books of between 79 and 114 letters each. The individual letters are numbered, starting anew with each book, and each book has a simple incipit (mostly something along the lines of + number) and explicit (mostly simply or + number). In both codices, book 6 ends with the explicit ‘(End of Book 6). The third group of letters is again a very small one, comprising only Ep. 608–14, invariably short letters that are mostly difficult to date. In Va, these letters are not numbered; in Vo, they are numbered in the margin, counting on from the last letter of book 6 (i.e., numbers 114–20). After Ep. 614, both manuscripts display a new incipit: (Letters of Libanius the Sophist). In the margin of Va, a later scribe added the book title (Book 7); in the margins of Vo, a second hand added (‘another beginning’). Like group 2, this is a large group of letters, containing several hundred items. Yet unlike group 2, group 4 contains no further subdivisions. This is all the more striking given the huge chronological leap from Ep. 839, dating from 363, to Ep. 840, dating from 388. But although Ep. 840 is addressed to a wholly new addressee who held the conspicuous position of prefect of the East from 388 to 393, and although the letter itself clearly alludes to a new epistolary start, there is no indication whatsoever in the manuscripts of a new beginning or a new book or, for that matter, of the fact that letters would be missing between Ep. 839 and 840. The series of letters simply runs on until the end: in Vo, Ep. 1112 is not only specially laid out, but also followed by the explicit (1,021 Letters of Libanius). As stated above, Va is mutilated at the end, breaking off in the middle of the first sentence of Ep. 1006.

Foerster prints Libanius’s letters in the order in which they can be found in Vo/Va. As stated above, however, his edition contains 1,544 genuine items. Ep. 1113 to 1542 can be found in, and are printed in the order of, the eleventh-century Vaticanus gr. 83 (V), the third major manuscript of Libanius’s letters. V underwent substantial changes in subsequent centuries. Indeed, after about half of the letters contained in the original manuscript were lost, a second hand, in the twelfth century, restored the missing items. Whereas the first scribe (V1) had numbered the letters continuously, the second scribe (V2) mechanically divided them into five books of each three hundred letters, numbered 1–300 each and a sixth book containing the remainder. Each of these six books also received the incipit + number (Book + number) and the explicit . . . (End of the n-th Book). The second scribe also added a table of contents listing the beginning of each letter under the heading (“of the letters of the Syrian sophist and quaestor Libanius”). Mainly on the basis of this table of contents, a third scribe (V3), in the fourteenth century, made further corrections and additions to the manuscript. As a result of all these contributions, V is the manuscript containing the greatest number of Libanius’s letters: in addition to Ep. 1113–1542, which Va and Vo do not incorporate, V with few exceptions also comprises all the letters contained in Va and Vo.

Although scholars working on the letters of Libanius regularly refer to Foerster’s description of the manuscript tradition, no effort has thus far been made to analyze its implications. To carry out such an analysis in full would by far exceed the scope of this essay; yet I do wish to look more carefully into the order in which the letters appear in the three manuscripts described above, and, where relevant, in other codices. Schematically, the order of the letters in Vo, Va, and V can be represented as shown in table 7.1.

TABLE 7.1 Organization of Libanius’s Letters in Vo/Va and V

---

Copyright © 2016. University of California Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foerster</th>
<th>Vo/Va</th>
<th>V</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–17</td>
<td>1–17</td>
<td>1–5 and 8–14 = Book V 1.1–12; 6–7 = Book V 3.197, 198; 15–17 missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–96</td>
<td>Book 1</td>
<td>19–310 = Book V 1.13–292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97–202</td>
<td>Book 2</td>
<td>Occasional lacunae and additiona in 1.13–29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>203–310</td>
<td>Book 3</td>
<td>One addition in 1.237 (Ep. 636)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Book V 1.293–300: 33, 627, 629, 634, 637–40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>311–89</td>
<td>Book 4</td>
<td>311–614 = Book V 3.1–300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>615–1112</td>
<td>Va: Book 7;</td>
<td>615–882 = Book V 2.12–274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vo: another</td>
<td>Repeated lacunae and additions throughout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>beginning</td>
<td>One major addition in V 2.27–36 (Ep. 34–43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Book V 2.1–11: 1083–85, 504, 544, 546, 554, 564, 566, 587, 591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Book V 2.275–300: 901, 947, 1086, 958, 962, 893, 890, 757, 821, 843, 844, 852, 861, 869, 943, 949, 951, 968, 970, 973, 980, 984, 988, 990, 1049, 1087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>883–1044 = Book V 5.153–299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Repeated lacunae and additions throughout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1045–1110 (but not 1083–1101) = Book V 6.1–39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Repeated lacunae and additions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Missing letters: 1098, 1100, 1101, 1105, 1006, 1112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Book V 6.40–45 (no number 6.44): 1096, 641, 1099, 1008, 1542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1112–1542</td>
<td></td>
<td>1113–1400 = Book V 4.1–289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Occasional additions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Book V 4.290–300: 891, 892, 1077–79, 935, 1088, 1107, 1072, 917, 920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1401–1541 = Book V 5.1–142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Two additions in 5.126 (&gt;Ep. 1239) and 5.141 (Ep. 1047)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Book V 5.143–52: 87, 90, 104, 134, 139, 146, 148, 159, 160, 201 (all copied again by V2 in the same sequence as in Va/Vo)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aLacuna = one or more letters missing from a sequence. Addition = one or more letters that occur out of sequence. Most letters that are missing in a lacuna return elsewhere as an addition.

When the organization of the three main manuscripts set out in table 7.1 is analyzed, two elements stand out. First, the vast
majority of letters occur in largely identical sequences in both Vo/Va and V. Ep. 19–310, 311–607, 615–882, 883–1044, and 1045–82 are the most conspicuous cases in point. These sequences, it should be said, are never completely identical: V sometimes leaves out one or more individual letters from a sequence compared to Vo/Va (in what I have termed “lacunae”), and sometimes inserts a letter between two letters that are immediately following upon one another in Vo/Va (in what I have called “additions”). Nevertheless, these small discrepancies remain the exception: as a rule, most letters occur in the same sequence and order in Vo/Va and V. This cannot be simple coincidence: Libanius’s letters must have been transmitted from the very start not as individual items, but in larger units containing several hundred letters in a particular order.

Given, then, that there was an “original” order in Libanius’s letters, the question is, Which of the two branches of the manuscript tradition preserved that order more faithfully? When V and Va/Vo are not in agreement, did V leave out a letter or did Va/Vo insert one, and vice versa? As will be clear from the layout of the table and the terminology I have used, four elements point in the direction of a precedence of Va/Vo over V: where V and Va/Vo are not in agreement, Va/Vo are likely to have remained faithful to the original order, while V is more likely to have deviated from it. First, there is the chronology of the letters. In general, the groups of letters recognizable in the three manuscripts belong to the same period (even though, as shall be argued below, the chronology of the letters is much less strict than is often assumed). The “additions” in V, however, often appear completely out of order in a way that none of the letters presented in both V and Va/Vo, or in V only, do. Like the letters preceding and following them in Va/Vo, Ep. 848–49, for example, date from 388, but in V they occur in a sequence of letters written in the late 350s and early 360s. Likewise, whereas Ep. 1095, written in 393, interrupts, in V 2.217, a series of letters that were all written exactly thirty years before, in V, it has its place in a sequence of letters that were all, like Ep. 1095, written in 393. Or again, Ep. 928, dating from 380 like the letters surrounding it in Va/Vo, in V interrupts a series of letters dating from 364. Second, several letters have clearly been displaced in V for a particular reason. Much research remains to be done here, but Seeck already offers a good example: Ep. 636, which talks about the rape of a woman by a certain Lucianus, was put just before Ep. 256, in which Libanius asks his addressee to pardon a certain Lucianus. The two Luciani are not identical, but their homonymy may well explain why the scribe of V (or of its model) put the two letters next to each other. Third, several letters have inadvertently been included twice in V. In all cases, these letters occur once in the same place as in Va/Vo, once somewhere else, and mostly grouped together. Interestingly, it is mostly V that inserted them in the same place as in Va/Vo, whereas V1 grouped them together in between two recognizable sequences. Ep. 87, 90, 104, 134, 139, 146, 148, 159, 160, and 201, for example, were included as a series in 5.143–52 by V1, between Ep. 1401–1541 on the one hand and Ep. 883–1044 on the other; but they were later included a second time by V2 into book 1 in exactly the same places as in Va/Vo. Although the codex used by V2 to rework manuscript V was closely related to the codex from which V1 made the original manuscript V, must, then, have contained these letters in the same order as Va/Vo, and V2 perceived this as authoritative. Finally, all the sequential units of Va/Vo recur, albeit with minor discrepancies, in V, but not the other way round. The most striking cases are the series of letters included twice in V: whereas the order they have in Va/Vo recurs in V, the separate series they also form in V does not recur in Va/Vo. But the same goes for letters that occur only once in V. Ep. 504, 544, 546, 554, 564, 566, 587, and 591, for example, stand together as a miniseries in V 2.4–11, and are left out in the sequence of letters running from Ep. 311 to 614 (V 3.1–300), in V 3.199–279. As they are the only letters missing in V compared to Va/Vo in this sequence, the latter’s book 6 is still clearly recognizable. The miniseries they represent in V, on the other hand, nowhere returns in Va/Vo. They may have circulated independently as small anthologies that were incorporated into V (or its model), and when V then found the same letters in their original sequence, it omitted them there, as they had already found a place. In some cases, V2 decided to reintroduce them in their original order too, which led to double appearances of the same letters at various points in V. Or perhaps V (or its model) left out these letters from their original sequence, but then realized that these letters were missing and inserted them between the large sequences of letters that form the main building blocks of the collection. This would explain why such miniseries always occur in V between large, recognizable series that occur in both V and Va/Vo, and mostly at the beginning or the end of V’s various books. This latter possibility is perhaps the more likely one. But in either case, the order of the letters in Va/Vo takes precedence over that in V: either it is an anthology of letters in the order of Va/Vo that lies at the basis of the miniseries, or V itself made the miniseries because it realized that letters were missing from a sequence.

The second striking element in table 7.1 is that the sequences of letters recurring in V and Va/Vo are not always arranged in the same order: Ep. 19–310, preceded by several (V) or all (Vo) of Ep. 1–17, stand in pole position in both V and Vo, but after that, V first presents Ep. 615–882, only then Ep. 311–614, followed by Ep. 1113–1541 (which do not recur in Vo/Va), and
finally Ep. 883–1110. This shows that by the eleventh century, when both V and Va were produced, Libanius’s letters, although arranged in the sequential groups of letters discussed above, were not circulating as a fixed collection—that is, a unified and uniform literary work—in the same way as, say, the ten books of Pliny’s letters. Given that some seven centuries separate Libanius’s initial composition of the letters and the production of V and Va, different scenarios are possible. A first possibility is that Libanius’s letters originally circulated in the form of independent groups of a few hundred letters each, which were gathered together by later scholars, who put them together as they came to hand or as seemed fit. The fact that not all Byzantine scholars found the same sequences of letters, and that not all of them arranged the letters in the same order, led to collections in which the groups of letters do not occur in the same order. A second possibility is that the different groups of letters were joined together by the time the archetype of all our manuscripts was produced, so either from their very first publication, or else at least from a very early date. Whereas either V or Va/Vo simply copied (a more or less exact copy of) this archetype, the other branch goes back to a copy of the archetype that had fallen apart into large groups of letters that were subsequently reunited in a different order. Just like the first scenario, this one too takes into account the fact that substantial groups of letters occur in the same order in V and Va/Vo as well as the fact that these groups of letters do not occur in the same order; but the difference is that the second scenario, as opposed to the first, posits an original order. If the letters were indeed circulated from a very early age in a particular order, then whichever of the manuscripts preserves that order more faithfully is to be seen as the better manuscript, at least in this respect.

It can in all probability be proven not just that the second scenario is the most likely but also that the order in which the letters can be found in Va/Vo takes precedence over that of V: V seems to contain an unmistakable remnant of the book order as it can be found in Va/Vo. Indeed, according to Foerster, on the reverse side of folio 187, V1 added the title (?) (“Book 4 of the Letters of Libanius [the Sophist?]”). This title is followed by Ep. 311. Yet in V, Ep. 311 forms the start of the third, not fourth, book. In Va/Vo, however, Ep. 311 is indeed the first letter of the fourth book. This is not just a case of miscounting. While not erasing the original title just mentioned, V3 added the standard inscription (“Book 3”) before Ep. 311, correctly indicating that this is, in V, the start of book 3. This is also the only place in V where the start of a new book is indicated with a full title including author (and possibly qualification) and work: whereas the index, added by V2, is preceded by the title , the start of the individual books is otherwise signaled with a mere + number (“Book n”). These standard book titles were mostly added by V2, which deleted all previous titles, with the exception of the title under examination. While V2 and V3 thus systematized the new book divisions and ordering, V1 contains a clear reminder of the original organization, which fully coincided with Va/Vo. The importance of this remnant of the original organization of the corpus cannot be overestimated: it proves not only that at least some sequences of letters recognizable in both V and Va/Vo were formally designed as books, but also that these books were originally ordered as they are in Va/Vo. As a result, it makes sense to speak of a letter collection.

The superiority of Va/Vo over V as far as the order of the individual letters and of the books of letters is concerned is confirmed in the remainder of the manuscript tradition, albeit with a caveat. As all other manuscripts are anthologies, they cannot inform us with certainty on the order of the letters within the corpus. This is clearly illustrated by the copies made of V and of Vo: whereas the full copies of V40 and Vo41 present the letters in the same order as their respective models, the order of the letters in the various anthologies made on the basis of the same manuscripts ranges from fully identical (e.g., Neapolitanus II C 32) to partially recognizable (e.g., Vindobonensis phil. gr. 90) to entirely different (e.g., Ambrosianus A 115 sup.). This suggests that whereas full copies reproduce the order of their model, any changes in order can (but need not) be made when an anthology is being made. As a result, the order of the letters in the many anthologies cannot give a definitive answer to our question. Nevertheless, a striking difference between two groups of anthologies is noteworthy. On the one hand, the vast majority of anthologies based on manuscripts that are at least five steps removed from the archetype in Foerster’s stemma mostly present the letters in a different order (although sometimes presenting several letters in the same order as the three main manuscripts). The few anthologies that go back directly to the archetype, on the other hand, are remarkably consistent with V, but especially with Va/Vo, as far as the order of the letters is concerned. For the Bodleianus Baroccianus gr. 50 (Ba), Foerster notes that the only six Libanian letters that have been preserved in it, occur in the same order as in V, Va, and Vo. For Ambrosianus B4 sup. (A), he states that the order is almost exactly the same as in V, Va, and Vo. While this is true, it is in particular with Va/Vo that A coincides: not only does Ep. 313 follow upon Ep. 306 without any of Ep. 615–882 in between, but Ep. 611–14 also occur in the order of Va/Vo, not of V (where they appear as Ep. 297, 299, 300, and 296 of book 3). The same is true of Berolinensis gr. qu. 3 (Be): after a selection of letters from Ep. 68 to 263, it presents a selection of letters from Ep. 876–909. As none of the Ep. 311–614 are included between these two groups, one might, at first sight, think that Be
anthologized from a codex that presented the letters in the same order as V, in which \textit{Ep.} 615–882 follow immediately upon \textit{Ep.} 1–310. This is not necessarily the case, though: in V, \textit{Ep.} 876–80 and 882 on the one hand, and \textit{Ep.} 883–909 on the other, do not stand together. As these letters occur sequentially in Be as well as in Va/Vo, and as the order of the individual letters in Be follows that of Va/Vo rather than that of V, it is at least as likely that the model of Be presented the letters in the same order as Va/Vo. The absence of any letters from the intervening sequence 311–614 could simply be due to the particular selection made by Be’s anthologist. The final anthology that goes back directly to the archetype is the now sadly disturbed Athous Laurae 123 (Ath). As this anthology contains a selection of letters from \textit{Ep.} 1131–1239, it must have used a manuscript that contained the letters of V 4.1–289, which are absent from Va/Vo. Two arguments make it unlikely, though, that Ath goes back to a manuscript presenting the letters in the same order as V. First, Ath presents these letters \textit{before} a selection of letters derived from the sequence 615–949, which, as part of book 2 in V, \textit{precede} the letters of V’s book 4. And second, where Ath gives a selection of letters that occur in both V and Va/Vo, it gives them in the order of the latter rather than the former. In contrast to the majority of anthologies, then, the few anthologies that go back directly to the archetype present their selected letters in rather the same order as Va/Vo.

FROM LIBANIUS TO ARCHETYPE

Thus far, we have followed the process from the composition of the letters to Libanius’s later editing of them and, backward, from the manuscript tradition to the archetype. The question now is, what happened between Libanius’s editing of his letters and the production of the archetype? We do not know when Libanius’s letters were first published as a collection. Eunapius, writing within ten years of Libanius’s death, tells us that “very many of [Libanius’s] works are in circulation.” Although he does not specify that the letters were among them, it is likely that they were, given Eunapius’s special praise for them. In any case, they were well known by the early sixth century: by that time, the forged epistolary exchange between Libanius and Basil, which not only contains (references to the) genuine letters of Libanius but is also predicated on Libanius’s fame as a letter writer, was well on its way to becoming a famous work in its own right.

Libanius certainly had various secretaries at his disposal, but in contrast to Cicero, he never suggests that one of them would be involved in editing his letters. Nevertheless, scholars since the beginning of the twentieth century have interpreted the fact that not all the letters are ordered chronologically as proof for the intervention of an editor (or at least for posthumous disturbances of Libanius’s archive that the editor failed to remedy). Book 1 contains letters from summer 358 to winter 359/60; book 2, from winter 359/60 to spring 360; book 3, from spring 360 to spring 361; book 4, from summer 357 to winter 358/9; book 5, from spring 355 to spring 356; book 6, from summer 356 to summer 357. These books are therefore identified with six batches of Libanius’s duplicate files. Since chronology is less clear in the remaining part of the collection—\textit{Ep.} 615–839 dating from 361 to 363, \textit{Ep.} 840–1112 from 388 to 393, \textit{Ep.} 1342–1461 from 363, and \textit{Ep.} 1462–1542 from 365—a posthumous editor is assumed to have edited these books. The same idea, that Libanius ordered his letters chronologically, but that an editor disturbed this chronological order or was unable to restore disturbances that had occurred after Libanius’s death, has also been applied to the order of the different books or “batches” within the collection. The collection starts with books 1 to 3, which cover the years 358 to 361, then jumps back to 357–359 in book 4, and again to 355–357 in books 5 and 6, then moves forward, in \textit{Ep.} 615–1112, first to the years 361–363 (\textit{Ep.} 615–839) and then, all of a sudden, to the years 388–393 (\textit{Ep.} 840–1112), and finally, in V, presents the letters from 363–365 (\textit{Ep.} 1113–1542). As the different books that make up the collection are thus far from being ordered chronologically, scholars have concluded that the collection was edited by “an unknown literary executor or admirer, not Libanius himself.”

While a posthumous editor’s involvement cannot be disproven, it should be stressed that it is only one possible hypothesis of how Libanius’s letters came to take the shape they have in the manuscript tradition—and a problematic one at that! Nothing proves, for example, that Libanius’s copybooks were organized on a strictly chronological basis: with equal right, one might suggest that the rather loose chronological grouping of \textit{Ep.} 615–839, 840–1112, and 1113–1542 represents the “original” state of Libanius’s copybooks, whereas the supposedly strict chronology in books 1 to 6 is the result of Libanius’s (or even an editor’s) chronological reordering. Perhaps Libanius organized the duplicates of his letters by addressee or geographical region, and later reworked them into the books we know. The letters referred to above make clear that Libanius could easily find the originals of lost letters to a particular addressee in his archive; but they do not tell us how this archive was organized. Conversely, it is not at all obvious that an editor must be incapable of preserving or even restoring chronological order. If, as
was the case with Cicero, the editor was one of Libanius’s secretaries—that is, one of the people who actually made, maintained, and managed his archive—he would have known its contents and their ordering principles perfectly, perhaps even better than the author himself. If, conversely, the editor was not so familiar with Libanius’s archive, how and why would he have changed the order of individual letters within this massive archive? After all, with few exceptions, the vast majority of letters were kept in Libanius’s archive not as separate items but as parts of larger units or books, which, given Libanius’s care in reworking them and giving the size of his archive, probably either had some kind of tag attached to them or else bore an incipit—perhaps of the type ‘—so that they could be retrieved and ordered quite easily. Consequently, chronology or the lack of it cannot provide a safe criterion to distinguish between Libanius and an editor.

But there is more. While definitely playing a role in Libanius’s letter collection, chronology may be much less important than often assumed. Indeed, if one takes into account the details of Seeck’s study and the corrections to it by Hans Silomon and especially the PLRE, it is clear that chronology is not the whole story even in the first six books of the collection. First, numerous letters are actually undatable and assigned a date only on the basis of their position between datable letters. Many recommendation letters for students, for example, can have been written at almost any time during Libanius’s career. If their placement between two letters dating from a particular year inevitably suggests that they, too, belong to that year, this may well, but does not need to, be the case. I do not wish to deny that the collection invites the reader to read these letters as part of the same chronological sequence; quite the contrary. But there could be other reasons for their position, like variety—a common principle among many ancient letter collections but never considered in Libanius’s case. Second, a significant number of datable letters are not in their correct chronological place. Book 3, for example, is supposed to present the letters from spring 360 to spring 361, but out of 108 letters, nine, and possibly eleven, belong to 358 or winter 358/9. Book 4, which is said to cover summer 357 to winter 358/9, starts with a letter to Anatolius 3/i dating to 355. The most famous example is no doubt the opening letter of book 1, and thus of the collection: Ep. 19 (addressed, incidentally, to the same Anatolius) is positioned “recognizably out of chronological order.” While most scholars seem to accept that Ep. 19 was intentionally placed at the head of the collection as a programmatic letter displaying Libanius’s (frankness of speech), there has been no investigation into other chronological inconsistencies.

More broadly, there is an important overlap between books 1 and 4: book 4 runs from summer 357 to winter 358/9; book 1 starts in summer 358 and runs until winter 359/60. This means that several events that occurred between summer 358 and winter 358/9 pop up twice in the collection. As these events include the famous earthquake in Nicomedia (August 358), to which attention is drawn at the very start of the collection, this overlap can hardly be overlooked. And yet, no study thus far has examined it. There are two reasons for this neglect. First, many readers have limited themselves to selections of letters, which often present the letters in a different order. This goes for Byzantine anthologies as well as for the vast majority of modern translations. Fortunately, Foerster printed the letters in the order of the best manuscripts, and the contemporary reader can now read any individual letter and the collection as a unified literary work. Second, since the late nineteenth century scholars have posited chronology as the criterion for ordering letters within collections. In the case of Libanius, this has led to a focus on a hypothetical editor: scholars have postulated the editorial hand wherever there are chronological inconsistencies. This hypothesis is problematic, as we have seen, and has problematic implications: because of the (hypothetical) intervention of an editor, the collection as such was supposed to be no longer of interest to scholars of Libanius.

Yet the order in which one reads the letters inevitably influences the reader’s interpretation. The twenty-six preserved letters to Anatolius 3/i offer a good example. If one reads these letters in their chronological order, as is usually done, the overall impression is that of a long-lasting friendship turned sour by Anatolius’s insult. Scholars have emphasized that Anatolius was Libanius’s “most powerful and reliable patron,” and have termed Libanius’s attacks on Anatolius in Ep. 19, chronologically following, as it does, twenty-two friendly letters to him, a “remarkable” “astonishing insolence.” If, on the contrary, one reads the letters to Anatolius in the order in which they appear in the collection, their relationship appears to be different: Ep. 19 opens the correspondence with Anatolius in the collection, and thereby inevitably colors the reader’s impression of all subsequent letters to the same addressee. After reading Ep. 19 and the equally critical Ep. 80 and 81, the reader fully understands Libanius’s anger, and does not have a positive impression of Anatolius at all. As a result, the subsequent, friendly letters to Anatolius are not only surprising, but are read in light of Anatolius’s untrustworthiness. Likewise, the order in which one reads the letters also influences the one’s overall interpretation of Libanius and his letters. As transmitted by the manuscript tradition, for example, the letter collection starts with the letters of a time when Libanius was well established as Antioch’s official sophist. It thus starts on a self-confident note, which inevitably takes the edge off the earlier letters documenting
Libanius’s struggle to obtain both permission to leave Constantinople and the official chair at Antioch that had been promised to him before his return. Had the order of the letters been strictly chronological, the first impression Libanius makes on the reader would have been much less self-confident. As these examples show, the collection of letters as it was transmitted by Albert Frank Norman, 1–839, This much can be derived from Gregory of Nyssa’s 67, 66

This essay has questioned many accepted truths. Contrary to what is often suggested, for example, Libanius reckoned with the possibility of publication and acted accordingly; the letters entered the archetype as a collection composed of books or units that abide by an order that is not always chronological; and the proposed criteria for distinguishing between Libanius and an editor are highly problematic. In many cases, this critical examination of established views has not led to sure answers: To what extent did Libanius edit his letters? Did he publish his own letters? Was there someone else involved in the editing and publishing process? Yet what matters is the fact that question marks have come to replace full stops. The ground is now open for a new approach to Libanius’s letters as a collection: What were the original building blocks of the collection? What is the collection’s overall effect, and its impact on its individual letters? To what extent does it complement other images of Libanius, such as that projected in the Autobiography or the forged epistolary exchange with Basil? And how do the various anthologies—Byzantine and modern—differ from this? In a sense, the current essay thus ends where many other essays in this volume begin. Yet for Libanius, this preliminary discussion was a necessary first step: by disputing accepted truths that have impeded such questions, the current essay hopes to have opened up the possibility of starting to raise and answer questions about Libanius’s letters as a collection.

NOTES

1. Isidore of Pelusium’s collection, containing about two thousand letters, is larger than Libanius’s. The number of medieval manuscripts, and the number of forgeries inserted into them, confirm the popularity of Libanius’s letters. For a fuller account of the reception of Libanius and his letters, see Heinz-Günther Nesselrath and Lieve Van Hoof, “The Reception of Libanius: From Friend of Julian to (almost) Christian Saint and Back,” in Libanius: A Critical Introduction, ed. Van Hoof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 160–83.


5. Libanius also occasionally wrote to people he had not met before (e.g., Ep. 558).

6. This is substantially more than the two thousand-odd lost letters posited by Bradbury, Selected Letters, 73. Ep. 1–18 (written between 352 and 386) confirm that he wrote letters before 355 and between 365 and 388. Libanius likely responded to the letter from Phasganius mentioned at Or. 1.95. Likewise, Gregory of Nyssa’s Ep. 13 and 14, if genuine, suggest that Libanius wrote to Gregory too in the early 380s. Jorit Wintjes, Das Leben des Libanius (Rahden: Verlag Marie Leidorf, 2005), 25–26, confirms both that Libanius is likely to have kept a letter archive already before 355, and that he wrote more letters than have been preserved even in the years for which the collection is very rich.

7. Ep. 88.5 and 1218.2.

8. This much can be derived from Gregory of Nyssa’s Ep. 14.4, which, if genuine and if applying to the Antiochene sophist rather than any other sophist called Libanius, states that a letter of Libanius to Gregory passed from hand to hand, with some people memorizing it, others making a copy of it.

9. The only possible exceptions to this rule are Ep. 1–18, which Seeck suggested were collected from their recipients. Yet, pointing out that the editor would have been extremely unsuccessful if collecting no more than eighteen letters from Libanius’s recipients, Norman (Libanius, 40) and others suggest that even those letters were probably found among Libanius’s papers.

Libanius, See Van Hoof, “Gaps in Libanius’s Letter Collection,” 219–20. For the pun on the names Eustochius and Eustathius, which confirms that a substitution has taken place, see Van Hoof, “Gaps in Libanius’s Letter Collection.”


The following two paragraphs of observations on the manuscript tradition of Libanius’s letters are based on Foerster and Richtsteig, Libanii Opera, 9:49–197.

The earliest letter in this group is either Ep. 16, which dates from sometime between 352 and 353 (see PLRE 1:886, s.v. “Thalassius I”), or Ep. 15, which dates from either 352 or 354 (see PLRE 1:991, s.v. “Zenobius”). The latest letter in the group is probably Ep. 9, addressed to Martinianus 6/iv or Martinianus 7/ii, possibly in 392.

In the current state of preservation, book 1 numbers only seventy-nine letters; yet from the subscription to this book in Vo, it is clear that this book originally contained eighty-three.

If it is true (as the PLRE suggests, albeit with a question mark) that some of these letters date from 357–360, the fact that these letters were not integrated into books 1–6, which cover these years, is another argument in favor of selection before publication.


Together with Ep. 18, Ep. 1543 and 1544 are the only letters of Libanius that do not occur in one of the three main manuscripts. Ep. 18 was transmitted in Barocianus gr. 50 only; Ep. 1543 and 1544 were transmitted (together with the genuine Ep. 1264) in several manuscripts.

Both addressed to bishops, they may have been excluded from the collection by Libanius, but recovered from their recipients.

See Foerster and Richtsteig, Libanii Opera, 9:52n1). Libanius wrote to Modestus 2 Domitius preceding

Together in Vo/Va do not occur in one of the three main manuscripts. Ep. 18 was transmitted in Barocianus gr. 50 only; Ep. 1543 and 1544 were transmitted (together with the genuine Ep. 1264) in several manuscripts.

Both addressed to bishops, they may have been excluded from the collection by Libanius, but recovered from their recipients.

See Foerster and Richtsteig, Libanii Opera, 9:52n1). Libanius wrote to Modestus 2 Domitius preceding
shown by the fact that although scribe V2 included in their “proper” place several letters that had previously been included in a different place, he did not change the overall order of the different sequences of letters. Given the extremely bad state of V at the time—almost half had been lost—V2 could easily have changed the order of the groups of letters he wanted to.

37. The only case that might seem, at first sight, an exception to this rule is that of a dozen letters toward the end of the series running from 615 to 1112, which forms the end of Vo as well as of V: Ep. 1083–88 and 1090–95 are scattered throughout V. Many of these letters (Ep. 1083–87, 1091, 1093, 1095), however, were added to V only in the fourteenth century by V3. And notwithstanding the fact that these letters are missing in V 6.1–39, and that several nearby letters are either presented in a different order (Ep. 1096, 1099) or missing altogether (Ep. 1098, 1100, 1101, 1105–6, 1112) in V, the series of letters as it occurs in Vo is still recognizable. Far from suggesting that Vo collected at its end letters that had originally occupied places throughout the corpus, then, this constellation makes it likely that the models of V1 and V2 presented this sequence of letters in a defective way, which V3 tried to remediate as far as possible.

38. The tenth-century Ambrosianus B4 sup., which is the oldest manuscript containing letters of Libanius, presents only twenty-one letters to Julian, together with a number of letters written by the emperor himself. This suggests that these may have circulated separately.

39. Foerster and Richtsteig, Libanii Opera, 9:53. I have not yet had the chance to check this with my own eyes.

40. Neapolitanus III A 12, and the part of Parisinus gr. 2963 based on V.

41. Parisinus gr. 2962, Vaticanus Urbina gr. 127, Mutinensis II F 4 (but with several insertions from Vaticanus gr. 1323), and Universitatis Havniensis collectionis Fabricianae 142.

42. As the codices presenting the Ecloga Lapaceniana, and the anthologies based on descendants of b.

43. To an extent, this is a petitio principii: one of the reasons why Foerster and Richtsteig (Libanii Opera, 9:163) concluded that these manuscripts were based directly on the archetype is precisely the order in which they present the letters.

44. Foerster and Richtsteig, Libanii Opera, 9:163.

45. Ibid., 9:164.

46. The anthologist may have decided not to include any of Ep. 615–882.

47. Foerster and Richtsteig, Libanii Opera, 9:170.

48. It should be noted, however, that these letters do not always occur in exactly the same order as either Va/Vo or V; most notably, the series first proceeds from Ep. 68 to Ep. 263, and then only inserts Ep. 87–89. As the latter, in contrast to the former, lack the names of their addressees, though, it is likely that they were copied from somewhere else.

49. Various folia of Ath have perished or been displaced; but if the original order is restored, Ath presents an anthology of Ep. 1131–1239 before a selection of Ep. 615–949 (originally until Ep. 980). See Foerster and Richtsteig, Libanii Opera, 9:164–67.

50. See Foerster and Richtsteig, Libanii Opera, 9:166.


53. It should be noted, however, that in the famous letter about Tiro’s involvement in the edition of Cicero’s letters (Att. 16.5.5), the stress is on Cicero’s careful decision-making process rather than on Tiro’s assistance in keeping track of letters.

54. E.g., Norman, Libanius, 39: “The books themselves are most obviously explained as six separate batches of his duplicate files”; Bradbury, Libanius, 21: “These books were undoubtedly based on six batches of duplicate files kept by Libanius.”

55. E.g. Norman, Libanius, 39; Bradbury, Selected Letters, 22.


57. Norman (Libanius, 39) in fact suggests that “none of these has been subjected to any elaborate reworking before editing.” Yet if one supposes that the original ordering was chronological, then one has to hypothesize that “the copy books upon which this whole section was based had evidently been sadly disturbed by the time they came to hand for editing.”


59. See, for example, Seeck, Briefe, 74, on a series of letters addressed to Andronicus 3/i: “Da es fast alles Empfehlungbriefe sind, ergibt sich ihre chronologische Ordnung nur aus ihrer Reihenfolge.”


61. Ep. 248, 249, 254, 255, 260, 261, 270, 273, 279, and possibly also 281 and 282, which the PLRE dates to 358 or 361, but Seeck to 361.

62. Norman, Libanius, 38. Ep. 19 mentions Antonius’s criticism of a speech that Libanius gave for his cousin Spectatus after the latter’s return from an embassy to Persia, which took place just after the destruction of Nicomedia (August 358). The following letter, though, is addressed to Libanius’s Nicomedian friend Aristaeuatus, who perished in the earthquake; only in Ep. 25 does the reader learn about the fall of Nicomedia. But in order for Spectatus to return to Antioch, Libanius to produce and deliver a speech in his honor, Anatolius to hear of this and react to it, and Libanius to write in reply, at least some additional time must have gone by.

63. The only exception is Angel González Gámez, Libanio: Cartas, Libros I-V (Madrid: Gredos, 2005), who has published a Spanish translation of all the letters of the first five books (Ep. 1–493) in the order in which they are given in Va/Vo.

64. In line with the work that was being done on other epistolary corpora around 1900 (see Beard, “Ciceronian Correspondences,” 106–16).
Foerster was not interested in the collection as a collection: although he clearly indicates the beginning and closing formulae of the various books in the different manuscripts both in the introductory volume and in the apparatus criticus of his actual edition, he does not print them as part of the text. As demonstrated above, however, the book divisions have formed an integral part of the manuscript tradition since the very archetype—a fact implicitly acknowledged by Foerster too (Foerster and Richtsteig, *Libanii Opera*, 9:53).


67. The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the European Research Council under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007–2013)/ERC Grant Agreement n. 313153, as well as the help of the volume’s editors in preparing the final version of this essay for publication while she was on maternity leave.

FURTHER READING


The Letter Collection of Ausonius

CHARLES N. AULL

Decimus Magnus Ausonius was a teacher of rhetoric, an accomplished poet, and an influential bureaucrat whose life spanned nearly the entire fourth century. He was a voluminous writer. All together over six thousand lines of prose and poetry survive from his total output, which must have been far larger than what we have today. His portfolio is eclectic. It includes serial biographies of his ancestors, teachers from the Gallic city of Bordeaux, and Roman emperors; dozens of epigrams; a thanksgiving speech that he delivered before the emperor Gratian in the year 379; and numerous longer and shorter poems on topics as diverse as the Moselle River, the number three, and a painting of Cupid that he saw in the city of Trier. In this corpus, there are also some letters—about thirty, though as we shall see, any number that one might propose for Ausonius’s letters is not hard and fast. The contents of the letters are varied. The author sends out invitations, describes food and drink, tells jokes and riddles, complains, and critiques literature. The recipients of Ausonius’s letters are equally varied. He wrote to the Roman senators Quintus Aurelius Symmachus and Petronius Probus, to the rhetoricians Axius Paulus, Theon, Ursulus, and Tetradius, to his son Hesperius, and to his former student Pontius Meropius Anicius Paulinus, better known as Paulinus, the bishop of Nola.

Ausonius’s letter “collection” is one of the most idiosyncratic collections under discussion in this volume. There are several reasons for this. First, most of the letters are in meter. Only a few are in prose. Thus, stylistic influence often came from Horace, Ovid, and Vergil rather than Cicero and Pliny. Second, Ausonius wrote letters in Latin and in Greek. Sometimes, he even merged them by transliterating Greek into Latin or vice versa and blending the syntax and morphology of each language. Third, Ausonius himself may never have even made a collection of letters; and if he did, we know close to nothing about it. This last issue is deeply problematic for any modern study or edition of Ausonius’s letters, but, as will be argued below, it also serves to make the letters more interesting. The following discussion will provide a brief overview of Ausonius’s life and career, the manuscript tradition and transmission of the letters, and finally the historical and literary reception of the letters.

LIFE AND CAREER

Ausonius was born in the second decade of the fourth century in the city of Bordeaux, an important economic and educational center in southern Gaul positioned along the left bank of the Garonne River some fifty kilometers east of the Atlantic coast. His father was a doctor of humble origins named Julius Ausonius. His mother was Aemilia Aeonia, whose parents, Ausonius tells us, could be traced back to the Gallic tribes of the Tarbelli and Aedui. Ausonius spent his childhood and the majority of his early professional life in Bordeaux. He studied grammar and rhetoric there, and later went on to become one of the city’s most accomplished professors. In the fourth century, Romans knew Bordeaux primarily for the educational opportunities that it offered the young men of the local Gallic elite. The city was home to an exceptional community of teachers and students. Ausonius commemorated the lives of many of these individuals in a work known as the Professores. Several of Bordeaux’s teachers were known far beyond the confines of southeastern Gaul. Jerome and Ammianus Marcellinus, for example, knew the rhetor Attius Tiro Delphidius (Hier. Chron. 355, Ep. 120; Amm. Marc. 18.1). Jerome also knew the orator Tiberius Victor...