

# Roman Governors of Syria in Late Antiquity: Problems and Perspectives of Prosopographic Research<sup>1</sup>

---

Paweł FILIPCZAK  
University of Łódź

Aziz al-Azmeh claims that the origins of Islam are ultimately traceable to the profound evolution that occurred in the eastern part of the Mediterranean and consisted in the adoption of Greek elements into Roman civilisation. One of these, characteristic of the Hellenistic period, was the deification of the ruler: in accordance with this idea, the Romans came to regard their emperors as the worldly emanations of the divine. From the fourth century AD, with the development of the Christian theory of power, the emperor acted as both the head and guardian of the Church, while the monotheistic Christian religion accommodated the imperial and centralist needs of the state. It has been a long-established view among scholars, mentioned also by al-Azmeh, that Galerius, Diocletian and Constantine “instituted something like Caliphate”<sup>2</sup>. Even if evidently exaggerated (and captivating), both in terms of facts and chronology, the above statement accurately captures general parallelisms between the Roman empire of late antiquity and the Umayyad state with regard to the symbiotic relationship of religion and state.

Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the distance between theory and practice in this respect: it could have been (and often was) remarkably significant. Even the most peremptory of rulers had to depend on people executing his orders; likewise, even the best thought-out idea depended on people as regards its implementation. The people dealing with these “mundane” matters were the officials: they embodied the Romanitas and represented it in the provinces, including, of course,

---

(1) This article has been written under the research project financed by the National Science Center (Poland). Decision number: DEC-2016/23//B/HS3/01891.

(2) A. Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity. Allāh and his people*, Cambridge 2014, p. 94.

Syria, Palestine and Arabia. If indeed, as Aziz al-Azmeh believes, “Islam was the end product of translation of Romanity to the East”<sup>3</sup>, then we should focus even more attentively on the officials who governed the eastern lands of the Roman Empire where a large part of the population was of Arab stock.

There is another reason why the identity of the governors of Syro-Palestine should be seen as vital – the province was surrendered by the Byzantines so rapidly that we must inquire into the actual state of affairs in the administration of these regions on the eve of the Arab conquest. The issue lies not only in the question of the geographical aspects of administration, but most of all in the question of who governed these geopolitically important lands and in the quality of that government.

### **Administrative divisions**

In Late Antiquity, the area of these two modern-day states, Syria and Lebanon, was divided into several smaller administrative units. From Septimius Severus to Diocletian, there were two provinces: the fairly large province of Coele Syria (*Syria Coele*) and the relatively small province of Phoenician Syria (*Syria Phoenices*). Coele Syria survived as an administrative unit throughout the fourth century, even though it was reduced with the separation of its eastern fringes, which formed the province of *Euphratensis*. As regards Phoenician Syria, Diocletian divided it into two smaller provinces: *Augusta Libanensis* and *Phoenice*. Under Theodosius II, Coele Syria was divided into two smaller units: Syria I (*Syria Prima*) and Syria II (*Syria Secunda*). This territorial division survived until Justinian I, when it was subject to a minor correction: the small coastal region known as *Theodorias* was separated at the time from within the borders of the two Syrias. While it is probable that Syria’s administrative divisions remained unchanged until Heraclius, it is not easy to answer the question of when the old provincial system came to an end. If, as proposed by Irfan Shahîd, Heraclius established the division into themes as early as about AD 628–636, he should have removed the provinces at the same time. If the themes had not been established under Heraclius, but much later, as argued by a number of

---

(3) Ibid p. 4.

critics of Shahîd's theory, the provincial system must have survived at least until the Persian conquest (c. AD 613), or, if the provinces were re-established after the Persians had reversed, until the Arab conquest.<sup>4</sup>

### The problem of sources in prosopographic research

The most serious problem in prosopographic research concerning the governors of Syria is the availability and nature of the sources.<sup>5</sup> They are indeed very unevenly distributed. The best covered of all is the fourth century, while the worst is by far the first half of the seventh century, which in fact remains a blind spot. To take a more detailed view, one should note that with reference to the fourth century we have the accounts of the "Antiochene" authors who were born in Syrian Antioch and stayed there for a long time (Libanius, John Chrysostom, Ammianus Marcellinus, and John Malalas). Most of them, with the exception of Malalas, lived in the fourth century and were mostly focused on describing contemporary events they were familiar with. With regard to the subject in question, the by far best documented historical period spans about forty years from roughly 353 and 393. From that time, there have survived 1,544 letters of Libanius the Rhetor, of which as many as 1,250 are dated to the decade AD 355–365; about 270 letters date back to the years 388–393 (other individual letters cover the years 353–354 and 365–388).<sup>6</sup> Riddled with ambiguities and extremely difficult

---

(4) For more on the administrative geography of Syria in Late Antiquity and on the discussion about Irfan Shahîd's theory, see my book *An Introduction to Byzantine Administration in Syro-Palestine on the Eve of the Arab Conquest*, Łódź 2015, pp. 1–6, 86–94. Among the many earlier works on the subject, see in particular these two: J.-R. Coquais, "Syrie romaine de Pompée à Diocletien", *Journal of Roman Studies* 68, 1978, pp. 44–73; J. Balty, Sur la date de création de la Syria Secunda, *Syria*, 57, 1980, pp. 465–481.

(5) For a comprehensive, detailed and competent discussion of the sources for late antique history dealing with classical historiography and Church history, as well as the normative, papyrological, numismatic and epigraphic types of evidence, cf. *Vademecum historyka starożytnej Grecji i Rzymu*, vol. III – *Źródłoznawstwo późnego antyku*, ed. E. Wipszycka, Warszawa 1999, pp. 657.

(6) I use the classic edition: *Libanii Opera*, vol. X: *Epistulae 1–839*, rec. R. Foerster, Lipsiae 1921 (reprint: Hildesheim 1963); *Libanii Opera*, vol. XI: *Epistulae 840–1544 una cum pseudepigraphis et Basilii cum Libanio commercio epistolico. Fragmenta*, rec. R. Foerster, Lipsiae 1922 (reprint Hildesheim 1963; hereinafter: Libanius, *Ep.*); translations into modern languages: *Libanii Sophistae Epistolae grece et latine*, ed. J. Ch. Wolf, Amstelodamum 1738; Libanius, *Autobiography and Selected Letters*, vols. I–II, ed., transl. A.F. Norman, Cambridge

to interpret, they nevertheless constitute the basis for our knowledge about the administrators of the Middle Eastern provinces (particularly the Syrian provinces) in Late Antiquity. This is mainly due to the fact that in many cases these letters were addressed to provincial governors, while the issues raised in these letters directly concerned those officials. Many letters were sent to other imperial officials, including diocese governors, *praefecti pretorio*, even the imperial court, but also to members of the city council of Antioch. It is in these texts, addressed to the ruling elite in the broadest sense, that we find a great deal of information on Syrian governors.

Thus, if for the fourth century as a whole we know of almost 90 governors (48 governors of Syria, 30 governors of Phoenicia, and 11 governors of Euphratesia), then as many as 67 of them were in office between 353 and 394 (including 34 governors of Syria, 23 governors of Phoenicia, and 10 governors of Euphratesia).<sup>7</sup> It is no wonder then that Libanius' correspondence has served as the basis for most scholarly studies on this subject.<sup>8</sup>

In statistical terms, none of the subsequent centuries is even remotely as rich in information as the time when Libanius wrote his

---

(Mass.) 1992; *Selected Letters of Libanius from the Age of Constantius and Julian*, transl., introd. S. Bradbury, Liverpool 2004; *Letres aux hommes de son temps. Libanius. Lettres choisies*, trad., comm. B. Cabouret, Paris 2000; *Libanio, Cartas*, introd., trad. y notas Á. González Gálvez, Madrid 2005.

(7) A.H.M. Jones, J.R. Martindale, J. Morris, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. I: *AD 260–395*, Cambridge 1971 (hereinafter: PLRE I), pp. 1105–1110 (fasti). For the reviews, often negative, and corrections to the first volume of PLRE, cf. A.H.M. Jones, "Fifteen years of Late Roman Prosopography in the West" (1981–95), [in:] *Medieval Prosopography* 17/1, 1996, pp. 263–274.

(8) Cf. G. Sievers, *Das Leben des Libanius*, Berlin 1868, pp. 324; O. Seeck, *Die Briefe des Libanius zeitlich geordnet*, Leipzig 1906, pp. 493; P. Petit, *Les sénateurs de Constantinople dans l'oeuvre de Libanius*, "L'antiquité classique", t. 26, fasc. 2, 1957, pp. 347–382; P. Petit, *Les étudiants de Libanius*, Paris 1957, pp. 206; R. Pack, *Curiales in the correspondence of Libanius*, [in:] *Libanius*, hrsg. G. Fatouros, T. Krischer, Darmstadt 1983, pp. 185–205; P. Petit, *Les fonctionnaires dans l'oeuvre de Libanius. Analyse prosopographique*, Paris 1994; S. Bradbury, A Sophistic Prefect: Anatolius of Berytus in the Letters of Libanius, *Classical Philology* 95.2, 2000, pp. 172–186. Letters and speeches of Libanius are used, along with many other sources, by G. Downey (*A Study of the comites Orientis and consulares Syriae*, Princeton 1939, pp. 22); biographical information is also provided in the classic and well-known studies on Antioch at the Orontes by such authors as R. Pack, P. Petit, G.L. Kurbatov, J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz and G. Downey.

letters. Although the fifth and the sixth century are known to us in this respect from a vast array of sources, we would look in vain for a “second Libanius” for that period: we know of only sixteen governors (nine in Syria, two in Phoenicia, five in Euphratesia) from the reign of Theodosius II (408–450) to that of Justin I (512–527).<sup>9</sup>

The times of Justinian I, those of his successors in the second half of the sixth century, and the reign of Heraclius, crucial though it is for our understanding of the advent of Islam, form one of the most neglected blind spots of research in prosopography. Suffice it to say that we do not know a single governor from Syria, Phoenicia and Euphratesia from that period (although we do know about as few as eight governors, mainly of Palestine I and Arabia, but only from the time of Justinian). For the reign of Heraclius, we have no surviving sources dealing with contemporary events, while later texts, Byzantine and Eastern alike, are not particularly accurate.<sup>10</sup>

**Old doubts, new propositions. *Addenda et corrigenda* to biographical information on Syrian governors from the first half of the fourth century.**

Research in prosopography of late antique Syria has so far compiled a long list of provincial governors, whose names and nicknames have been identified together with chronological information regarding their terms of office. The social background of those officials (including their family relationships), their education and their religious identity have also been specified. The case of governors of Celesyria can offer the most representative collective portrait of provincial governors. Among them there were Syrians, but also people hailing from other regions such as Cilicia, Phoenicia, Euphratesia, Palestine, and Bithynia, or even from further afield, including Epirus, Sicily, and Italy. The group therefore

---

(9) J.R. Martindale, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. II: AD 395–527, Cambridge 1980, pp. 1186–1187 (fasti).

(10) W.E. Kaegi, “Initial Byzantine Reactions to the Arab Conquest”, [in:] *The Expansion of the Early Islamic State*, ed. F.M. Donner, Aldershot 2008, p. 113 [idem, *Initial Byzantine Reactions to the Arab Conquest*, “Church History” 1969, vol. 38, pp. 139–149]; H. Kennedy, *Wielkie arabskie podboje. Jak ekspansja islamu zmieniła świat*, transl. M. Wilk, Warszawa 2011, pp. 13, 29.

was composed of people coming from diverse ethnic backgrounds. It included lawyers, advocates, and rhetors (but we do find among them a philosopher and a historian); many others, whose profession remains unknown, could be termed as men of letters (well versed in *culture littéraire*, as Petit has it) or people with a solid legal background (*culture juridique*). It is thus beyond doubt that most of them, if not all, were well educated. Nearly a half of this group were pagan, about one fifth were Christian, and even though religious identity is impossible to determine in a third of all cases, one can legitimately claim that the group was characterised by religious diversity, at least by the end of the fourth century.

However, even the most informative sources can be interpreted differently, which leads to a number of divergent opinions that persist among researchers. Some are only minor in character, but other differences in interpretation are a manifest sign of fundamentally different approaches. In many cases, these doubts and differing opinions relate to the identification of the office held, including the circumstances of the nomination, the duration of the term of office, and the time of leaving the office – thus, even what would seem to have been well known for a long time may become a matter of controversy.

My recent research on the governors of Roman Syria deals with the reign of Constantine the Great (from the moment he extended his rule to the Roman East in 324) and his sons, i.e. to the year 363. Below I present the tentative results (and, as yet, unpublished) of my research dealing with the most disputable pieces of biographical information from this period.

### **Plutarchus<sup>11</sup>**

All information that we have on Plutarchus comes from the very late account of John Malalas (6th c.). The sequence of events described by the chronicler, immediately preceding his account concerning Plutarchus, is as follows: Emperor Constantine leads a war campaign

---

(11) Biographical notes: W. Ensslin, *RE* 21/1, 1951, col. 975 [s.v. Plutarchos, n. 5]; G. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria from the Seleucus to the Arab Conquest*, Princeton 1961, p. 348; *PLRE* I, p. 707 [Plutarchus 2].

against Persia, which ends with a peace agreement solicited by the Persians. Constantinople establishes a new province, Euphratensia, separated from two other provinces: Syria and Osroene. Having returned from the expedition, he stays in Antioch, where he orders the construction of a large church and hospice, as well as a basilica (known as the Basilica of Rufinus). Prefect Rufinus sets off with the emperor for a campaign against Persia, but, at the emperor's request, remains in Antioch, where he completes the construction of the basilica. Meanwhile, the emperor goes to Rome. Finally, on leaving Antioch, he appoints a Christian by the name of Plutarchus as the governor of Antioch (ἄρχοντα Ἀντιοχείας), whose task was to supervise the construction of the church and the basilica.<sup>12</sup>

The circumstances related by Malalas do not correspond to the facts. First of all, Constantinople did not lead a victorious campaign against Persia, nor did he ever appear in person in Syria. As Eusebius of Caesarea wrote, the emperor set off for an expedition, but died shortly afterwards near Nicomedia.<sup>13</sup> The circumstances of the founding of the new province of Euphratensia are unclear; it could have been established as early as during the reign of Diocletian, although it is more likely that it was created by Constantius.<sup>14</sup> The so-called Basilica of Rufinus was most probably built at a later date: either in the 340s under Constantius, or in the late fourth century.<sup>15</sup> Constantine himself never returned to Rome after 324. Bearing in mind these inaccuracies, are we to believe Malalas' remark on the nomination of Plutarchus for the office?

It seems to me that the key part of Malalas' account is his remarks on the tasks assigned to Plutarchus. In the light of the latest research, there can be no doubt that the construction of the cathedral church in

---

(12) *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, ed. J. Thurn, Berolini et Novi Eboraci 2000 (hereinafter: Malalas), XIII, 3.

(13) *Eusebius Werke. Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, hg. F. Winkelmann, Berlin 1975 (hereinafter Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*), IV, 56.

(14) P. Filipczak, *The Imperial Administration in Syria during the Reign of Diocletian and Constantine the Great. The Problem of Establishment of the Province Euphratensia*, [in:] *Saint Emperor Constantine and Christianity. Proceedings of the International Conference Commemorating the 1700th Anniversary of the Edict of Milan*, vol. I, ed. D. Bojović, Niš 2013, pp. 217–223.

(15) G. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest*, Princeton 1961, pp. 651–653.

Antioch began in 326 or 327.<sup>16</sup> I assume that Plutarchus supervised the construction of that church from the very beginning. Thus, in 326 or 327, the emperor appointed a Christian to take the office of the governor of Syria in order to oversee the construction, important as it was to the Church (and, in part, also to the state). With this assumption in mind, it must be consequently assumed that Constantine appointed Plutarchus, but not, as Malalas would have it, in Antioch, which the emperor never visited, but in some other place, probably in Constantinople, where the emperor stayed most of the time from 324 AD. It is unknown how long Plutarchus held his office. Also the date of his leaving this post remains unknown. An adjustment should therefore be made to the date given by *PLRE I* (at some point between the years 324 and 337).

Malalas calls Plutarchus “the archon of Antioch”, which in my opinion – contrary to the hypothetical statements of Ensslin (Plutarchus as a *Statthalter Syriens*), Downey (a “governor of Syria?”), and *PLRE* (“governor of Syria?”), can refer to nothing else but the office of the governor of Syria (*consularis Syriae*). All alternative views can be easily eliminated. This particular *archon* is not the prefect of the city, because an office such as this was never established in Antioch. It is certainly not the governor of the diocese of the East: although this office had its permanent seat in Antioch, Malalas systematically referred to it as “the *comes* of the East”.<sup>17</sup> Nor could the person in question have been a military commander in the rank of *magister militum per Orientem*, since Malalas consistently uses the term “the strategos of the East” with reference to that military office.<sup>18</sup> Finally, he cannot have been an official of the city administration: first of all, the emperor never appointed members of municipal councils let alone municipal officials and, secondly, these officials did not hold a *praetorium* (which is contrary to Malalas’ remark concerning Plutarchus). Wherever Malalas writes about “archons” (the term is used in two other places in his chronicle<sup>19</sup>), he always refers to provincial governors.

---

(16) P. Allen, W. Mayer, *The Churches of Syrian Antioch (300–638)*, Leuven – Paris – Walpole 2012, pp. 69–70.

(17) Malalas, XIII, 4; XV, 15; XVI, 1–2; XVI, 6; XVII, 14; XVII, 22; XVIII, 2; XVIII, 64.

(18) Malalas, XIV, 13; XIV, 23; XIV, 37; XV, 13; XVI, 9; XVII, 3; XVII, 20; XVIII, 10; XVIII, 54; XVIII, 61; cf. *LSJ*, p. 1652 [s.v. στρατήγιος]. H. Mason, *Greek Terms...*, pp. 155–162.

(19) Malalas, X, 20; XIII, 20.



### Flavius Dionysius<sup>20</sup>

According to *PLRE*, Fl. Dionysius served as the governor of Phoenicia (in 328–329), the governor of Celesyria (*consularis Syriae*, at some point between the years 329 and 335), and acted as a representative (*comes*) of the emperor at the Synod of Tyre (in 335).

There can be no doubt about the earliest stage of his career, when he held the post of the governor of Phoenicia: it is undeniably evident from the normative sources indicated by *PLRE*.<sup>21</sup> The subsequent stages of his career are problematic. The accounts of Eusebius of Caesarea and Socrates, referred to by *PLRE* as proof of Fl. Dionysius' governorship in Syria, clearly refer to an official in the rank of a consul – and thus, implicitly, the provincial governor (*consularis*) – assigned with the task of organising and overseeing the synod convened in Tyre.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, these two historiographers may have referred to either the governor of Syria (*consularis Syriae*), as *PLRE* would have us believe, or to the governor of Phoenician Syria, since the governors of the latter province held the titles of *praesides Phoenices*, but also *consulares Phoenices*. Given that Tyre was the capital of Phoenician Syria, it seems even more probable that it was the governor of that province, with his residence in Tyre, who was responsible for overseeing the synod. It is difficult to reach a definitive conclusion on this matter. If, however, at the time when the synod was taking place Fl. Dionysius was the governor of one or the other province, he could not have held the office of the imperial *comes* assigned to this task at the same time. We cannot rule out the possibility that we are dealing here with two different people. In the letter of Emperor Constantine, quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea as sent to the participants of the synod,<sup>23</sup> we find that there are two clearly distinguishable officials: one of them resides in Tyre at the time of writing – the *consularis* mentioned above, i.e. the provincial governor – while the other is an envoy whom the emperor can send to Tyre from

---

(20) Biographical notes: *PLRE* I, p. 259 [s.v. Flavius Dionysius 11].

(21) *Theodosiani libri XVI cum Constitutionibus Sirmondianis et leges novella ad theodosianum pertinentes*, eds. Th. Mommsen, P. Meyer, vols. I–II, Berolini 1954 (hereinafter: *C.Th.*), IX, 34, 4 and VIII, 18, 4.

(22) Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, IV, 42; Socrates, *Kirchengeschichte*, hrsg. G.Ch. Hansen, Berlin 1995 (hereinafter: Socrates, *HE*), I, 28; Socrates, *HE* I, 31.

(23) Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, IV, 42.

Constantinople, if necessary.

Of all the authors taken into account in *PLRE* who made reference to the office of *comes* in the year 335, only *Apologia contra Arianos* by Athanasius of Alexandria mentions Fl. Dionysius by name.<sup>24</sup> If we were to assume that this was the case, we would have to reject the version of Eusebius (and Socrates as well). It is impossible to give priority to any of these sources. *Vita Constantini* dates back to about 337 AD and is much closer to the events described; *Apologia contra Arianos* was written about twenty years after the synod of Tyre, but its author participated in person in the event. Whichever is more plausible, the *cursus honorum* of Fl. Dionysius presented in *PLRE* does not preclude other possibilities. For instance, Fl. Dionysius may have attended the synod of Tyre as the provincial governor, while the name of the *comes* sent from Constantinople is unknown.

### **Anatolius of Berytus<sup>25</sup>**

Our knowledge on the biography of Anatolius of Berytus is based on three categories of sources dating back to the period from 346 to about 399: 1. imperial constitutions, 2. letters of Libanius, and 3. historiographical works, i.e. *Res gestae* by Ammianus Marcellinus, the *Breviarium* of Sextus Aurelius Victor, and the *Lives of the Sophists and Philosophers* by Eunapius of Sardes.

Despite the relatively large number of sources, Anatolius of Berytus remains one of the most mysterious figures among the fourth-century Roman officials. The accounts provided in the sources are incoherent to such an extent that according to some scholars there was only one Anatolius, while others argue that there were two officials by

---

(24) *Athanasios Werke*, Bd. 2, *Urkunden zur Geschichte Arianischen Streites 318–328*, hrsg. H.G. Opitz, Berlin–Leipzig 1935, 71.

(25) G. Sievers, *Das Leben...*, p. 235; O. Seeck, *Die Briefe...*, pp. 59–66; O. Seeck, *Regesten der Kaiser und Päpste für Jahre Jahre 311 bis 476 n. Chr. Vorarbeit zu einer prosopographie der christlichen Kaiserzeit*, Stuttgart 1919, pp. 119, 448, 468; G. Downey, *A Study of the Comites Orientis...*, p. 21; P. Petit, *Libanius et la vie municipale...*, pp. 266, 367–368; 385–386; P. Petit, *Les fonctionnaires...*, pp. 33–37; A.F. Norman, *The Illyrian Prefecture of Anatolius*, “*Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*” Neue Folge 100/3, 1957, pp. 253–259; *PLRE* I, pp. 59–60 [s.v. Anatolius 3]; S. Bradbury, “A Sophistic Prefect: Anatolius of Berytus in the Letters of Libanius”, *Classical Philology* 95, no. 2, 2000, pp. 172–186.

this name having the same origin and very similar careers. It is not my intention to offer solutions to this fundamental question, let alone the broad array of minor ones: suffice it to say that in my view the career of Anatolius is still a topic for discussion. In what follows, I shall limit the scope of my presentation and refer only to the sources which may indicate that Anatolius held an office in Syria.

1. The imperial constitution (XII, 1, 39), signed by Constantius and Constans and addressed to Anatolius, *praefectus praetorio*, was promulgated in Antioch on 1 April 349 or 350.<sup>26</sup> The constitution obliged state officials to protect the legal rights of city councillors and city officials who follow the orders of the provincial governor.
2. Letter 311 of Libanius to Anatolius (355). Libanius, disappointed about Anatolius' behaviour after his arrival in Syria from Italy (he did not find time to meet the rhetor), poses the question of whether the granting of privileges to various settlements in Syria should not be viewed as something unfair by Anatolius, who seems to ignore the city which he had embellished himself.<sup>27</sup>

Based on the two sources mentioned above, Seeck and Petit assume that Anatolius held the office of *consularis Syriae*. It was considered that there was a mistake in the preamble to the aforementioned constitution: it would appear that since the document was proclaimed in Antioch and concerned the relationship between city councillors and the governors, it must have been addressed to the provincial governor and not to the *praefectus praetorio*. This argument, however, is questionable. The functioning of the administration of the late Roman Empire was not based on a precisely defined division of competences and a clear hierarchy. Recent studies by Polish scholars, for instance, have demonstrated that the competences of the prefect of Italy, Illyria and Africa included the functioning of city councils.<sup>28</sup> Seeck and Petit also assumed that the city referred to in Letter 311 was none other than Antioch, where Anatolius, continuing the practice followed by numerous provincial governors, initiated the construction of new buildings or the renovation of old ones

---

(26) *C.Th.*, XII, 1, 39: idem aa. [Constantius and Constans – P.F.] ad anatolium praefectum pretorio.

(27) Libanius, *Ep.* 311, 2: ὑπὸ σοῦ πόλεως κεκοσμημένης.

(28) Sz. Olszaniec, *Prefektura praetorio Italii, Illyrikum i Afryki (312–425 n.e.)*, Toruń 2014, pp. 234–251.

(hence the mention of the embellishments added to the city). However, Downey, *PLRE*, Norman, and Bradbury pointed out that this may have referred to the governor of the diocese of the East (*comes Orientis*). Antioch was the seat of this office, too, and the incumbent official could also be involved in construction works.

In other words, the identification of Anatolius as the governor of Syria, based on Constitution XII, 1, 39 and on letter 311, can only be termed as hypothetical. However, two more sources that have so far been omitted can be added to these two.

3. Letter 492 of Libanius to Anatolius (written in 356), where Libanius wrote that Anatolius, a native of Phoenicia, also had spent some time “among us”,<sup>29</sup> i.e. in Antioch. If this is an allusion to holding some sort of office in this particular city, it may indicate that the governorship of the province or of the diocese is implied.

4. Letter 552 of Libanius to Anatolius (written in 357). In Antioch, in the headquarters of Strategius Musonianus, the *praefectus* of the East, Anatolius was mentioned during a conversation about outstanding officials.<sup>30</sup> If the archons whose work was discussed had been the governors of the province, then Anatolius would be one of them.

Considering this additional evidence, I subscribe to the view of Downey, Norman, and Bradbury: the correspondence of Libanius indicates that Anatolius was the governor of Celesyria or the governor of the diocese of the East. Further in-depth prosopographic research is needed to answer the question of which of these two offices Anatolius actually held.

### **Gymnasium<sup>31</sup>**

The literature on the subject shows two divergent opinions on the career of Gymnasium, an official known only from a few letters of Libanius. According to Otto Seeck and *PLRE*, Gymnasium was the

---

(29) Libanius, *Ep.* 492, 2: σὺ γὰρ δὴ Φοίνιξ ὦν καὶ διατρίβων τὰ μὲν ἐκεῖ, τὰ δὲ παρ’ ἡμῖν.

(30) Libanius, *Ep.* 552, 5: καὶ λόγος ἦν τις ὑπὲρ ἀρχόντων ἀρετῆς, ἐν ᾧ μὴ τὸ σὸν εἶναι ὄνομα οὐκ ἐνῆν.

(31) Biographical notes: O. Seeck, *Die Briefe...*, p 166; O. Seeck, *RE* VII, col. 2026 [s.v. Gymnasium]; *PLRE* I, p 405 [s.v. Gymnasium 2]; P. Petit, *Les fonctionnaires...*, pp. 118–119.

governor of Syria from 355 to 356, while Paul Petit argued that most probably he never held this office.

Seeck based his argument on Letter 504 and believed that the praise given there to Gymnasius could have been given to no other official than the *consularis Syriae*. In addition to Letter 504, PLRE refers to the following letters of Libanius in support of that argument: 401, 503, and 537. But it has to be emphasised that Letter 504 includes a passage of key importance in this respect: Gymnasius expected to be appointed to an important official position, but was eventually given a function of a considerably lower rank: “He was glad [Gymnasius – PF] of the power he rightly hoped for and of what he had received from the Fate as just, while no adversity could make him upset”.<sup>32</sup> Letter 401, addressed to Strategius Musonianus, the Prefect of the East, indicates that whenever an opportunity occurred, Gymnasius would come to Antioch;<sup>33</sup> that he was praised there by Strategius for his love of Syria,<sup>34</sup> and that he craved for something that he could receive in Antioch.<sup>35</sup> None of these snippets of information, oblique and enigmatic as they are, indicates the governorship of Syria. At most, they may suggest that Gymnasius wished to be given an official position in Antioch. Letter 503 proves that Gymnasius stayed in Antioch and left the city for Constantinople in the first half of the year 356.<sup>36</sup> Finally, there is Letter 537, where the phrase “ἄρχοντος ἐκεῖνου”<sup>37</sup> appears: contrary to PLRE, I believe that it refers to Strategius Musonianus, not to Gymnasius. Consequently, we cannot prove on the basis of that letter that Gymnasius held the office of *consularis Syriae*.

In conclusion, Libanius’ letters prove that Gymnasius lived in Antioch and had come to Syria in the hope of taking an important office, perhaps that of the provincial governor. Gymnasius enjoyed the support of Strategius Musonianus, the prefect of the East; he was among the friends of Libanius himself, but for unknown reasons he did not take up the post he had hoped for. For this reason, he left the city and went to Constantinople.

---

(32) Libanius, *Ep.* 504, 2, 6–8.

(33) Libanius, *Ep.* 401, 1, 1.

(34) Libanius, *Ep.* 401, 1, 3.

(35) Libanius, *Ep.* 401, 2.

(36) Libanius, *Ep.* 503, 3, 1–3; *Ep.*, 503, 5.

(37) Libanius, *Ep.* 537, 2, 3.

### Nicentius<sup>38</sup>

In the case of Nicentius, there is no doubt that he held the office of the governor of Syria (*consularis Syriae*). In Libanius' *Autobiography* he is mentioned as "the administrator of Syria",<sup>39</sup> in numerous other letters mentioning his name he is simply called "administrator"<sup>40</sup>. He assumed the office no later than in March 358,<sup>41</sup> he was still in charge before 24 August 358.<sup>42</sup> At the turn of the 359 and 360, Nicentius was no longer in Antioch,<sup>43</sup> *eo ipso* he must have left the office no later than in the second half of 359. According to Seeck and Petit, Nicentius was dismissed following charges of irregularities in the supply of the garrison stationed at Callinicum over Euphrates (according to Petit, in the summer of 358). However, the key source in this case, Letter 21, proves that Nicentius was punished by a fine: the letter does not mention that he had to resign in the wake of the Callinicum affair. Moreover, it suggests that Nicentius stayed in Antioch all the time after the affair broke out and remained in office.<sup>44</sup>

Contrary to the claims of *PLRE* and Petit, namely that Nicentius held a number of offices before he came to Syria, Letter 21 proves that Nicentius did hold some offices in Antioch, or more broadly in Syria, but not elsewhere.<sup>45</sup>

According to Petit, although Nicentius' religion is unknown, Libanius mentioned some festivals which may suggest that Nicentius was a pagan. In my view, the passages in these three letters of Libanius which make references to celebrations taking place in Antioch are not related to religious matters.<sup>46</sup> They should not be read literally, as they appear to describe metaphorically the good and just exercise of power by the provincial governor. Libanius writes about him with sympathy,

---

(38) Biographical notes: O. Seeck, *Die Briefe...*, p. 220 [s.v. Nicentius II]; W. Ensslin, *RE* XVII, col. 172 [s.v. Nicentius 2]; G. Downey, *A Study...*, p. 17; *PLRE* I, p. 628 [s.v. Nicentius 1]; P. Petit, *Les fonctionnaires...*, pp. 176–177.

(39) Libanios, *Autobiographie. Discours I*, éd. J. Martin, trad. P. Petit, Paris 1979, I, 114.

(40) Cf. e.g. Libanios, *Ep.* 193.

(41) Libanius, *Ep.*, 364

(42) Libanius, *Ep.*, 21, 3, 5–7.

(43) Libanius, *Ep.*, 122, 1; *Ep.*, 193, 1.

(44) Libanius, *Ep.* 21, 6–7.

(45) Libanius, *Ep.* 21, 3: ἡμῖν ἢ πόλις; *Ep.*, 21, 9: ἡμῖν ἐπὶ τοσαύταις ἀρχαῖς.

(46) Libanius, *Ep.* 364, 2; 21, 3; in particular 122, 2.

but that is not enough to prove that Nicentius was a pagan.

On the basis of Letter 193, Petit argued that Nicentius hailed from Egypt, where he also settled after his stay in Syria, but it seems to me that the tenor of this letter allows us to claim that Nicentius lived in Egypt for some time, after leaving the governorship in Antioch.<sup>47</sup> His origin, however, remains unknown.

## Conclusions

Each of the above biographies may be amended to some extent. There is no doubt that Plutarchus was the governor of Syria. He was a Christian, which was probably decisive, or at least important, for his nomination: he was supposed to oversee the construction of the Antiochene cathedral. Flavius Dionysius organized the council in Tyre, not necessarily as the imperial *comes*, but, more probably, the governor of Phoenicia or Syria. His role in Tyre certainly requires further research, more source-based in character than prosopographic. Anatolius of Berytus held an important office in Antioch: either as the governor of the province of Syria or of the diocese of the East. Solving this dilemma, if possible at all, requires more detailed research into the meaning of the word “*archon*” in Libanius’ literary output. The most considerable corrections should be made to the last two biographies, that of Gymnasius, who is mistakenly believed to have been the governor of Syria, and of Nicentius, who certainly held this office, but did not come from Egypt, did not hold offices outside Syria, and was not dismissed from the governorship of Syria because of the affair of insufficient supplies for the garrison of Callinicum.

---

(47) Libanius, *Ep.* 193, 1.

**Abbreviations:**

*RE* - *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft: neue Bearbeitung*, eds. August Pauly, Georg Wissowa, Wilhelm Kroll, Kurt Witte, Karl Mittelhaus, Konrat Ziegler, Stuttgart 1894–1980.

*PLRE I* - A.H.M. Jones, J.R. Martindale, J. Morris, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. I: AD 260–395, Cambridge 1971.