PAPERS AND MONOGRAPHS OF THE FINNISH INSTITUTE AT ATHENS VOL. XXV

APOLOGISTS AND ATHENS
EARLY CHRISTIANITY MEETS ANCIENT GREEK THINKING

Edited by Gunnar af Hällström

HELSINKI 2020

ISSN 1237-2684
ISBN 978-952-68500-5-4

Printed in Greece by K. Pletsas - Z. Kardari O.E., Athens.

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Layout: Vesa Vahtikari

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Reading, Learning and Discussing. Being a Student at Athens in the Early Roman Empire

Karin Blomqvist

Since the symposium from which this volume stems was intended to discuss the second-century Christian apologists "with a particular regard to their connection to Athens", I will, firstly, try to sketch an image of this city in the period when the apologists were active and possibly may have known it. The description will focus on the intellectual life of the city and its position as a leading centre for higher education in the Roman Empire. Some of the apologists are reported to have been born or active in Athens, and the texts of others reveal that they are likely to have undergone rhetorical training of a sort that was offered by the schools of Athens.[1]

Secondly, I intend to discuss what may be styled as the relation of the ideal to the real. It is quite clear that Athens enjoyed a glorious reputation in the second century for its educational opportunities and its intellectual life. It is also clear that part of that reputation was not founded on the actual situation of Athens in the Roman Empire. Therefore, it is necessary to trace the origin of that reputation back to the classical period and to follow its continued existence throughout the centuries. Even in the second century AD, it contributed at a fundamental level to the attraction Athens exerted.

Athens: The educational centre

Once upon a time, in one of the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, there was a young man, intelligent and ambitious, who had all his life wished to become a student in the glorious city of Athens. Since he was so popular and beloved in his home town, many fathers were eager to marry off a daughter of theirs to him just to make him stay. But he was persistent and refused to let anything deter him from fulfilling his dreams. For he had heard so much about Athens, this centre of erudition and culture, that he could not imagine a life without it. Thus, he wrote to one of the most famous professors in Athens to introduce himself, and of course he received a warm invitation to the professor's school.

At last, it was time to embark on the journey. Alas, the sea voyage turned out to be a less than pleasant experience, for the stormy weather of the Mediterranean made the young man seasick and miserable all the time. When he was finally able to reach his destination, the harbour of Piraeus, he hoped that now his troubles would be over. But when he stepped ashore, weak and vulnerable, a gang of hooligans rushed up to him and kidnapped him in broad daylight! Ignoring his loud protests, they dragged him away and locked him up in a tiny cell, hardly any bigger than a *pithos*, and kept him prisoner there

[1] The apologists Athenagoras and Aristides are actually reported by ancient sources to have been Athenians. On second-century apologies with a rhetorical flavour, see Karadimas 2003 and the contributions of Karadimas and J. Blomqvist to this volume. On the (alleged?) bishop Quadratus of Athens, who may have been identical with the author of an apology now lost, see J. Blomqvist in this volume.

until he promised to become a student of a different professor than the one he had chosen himself.

This is what happened to Libanius of Antioch, the famous author and teacher of rhetoric in the fourth century (AD 314–393), when he tried his luck in Athens, at least if we are to believe the autobiographical portions of his own speeches. Those texts also provide further insights into certain aspects of Athenian student life that were not so glorious – fights, drinking parties – and some serious studying as well.[2]

Libanius' description of Athenian student life concerns the fourth century, but the situation was not much different in the second century, when the apologists may have visited the city. In the writings of a second-century Roman student, Aulus Gellius, there are hints of similar disorderly behaviour among his contemporaries. If Gellius paints a more favourable image of the Athenian professors and their students than Libanius, the reason is likely to be that he did not leave the city with the disappointment and resentment that Libanius did.[3]

The accounts given by Gellius, Libanius and other writers who visited Athens in these centuries illuminate its position as a leading intellectual centre of the Roman Empire. There were of course other illustrious centres of learning – Rome, Antioch and Alexandria, as well as later Constantinople – but, in the imagination of the inhabitants of the Empire, Athens seems to have held the rank of *the* dominant centre of the ancient world in this regard. This is evident particularly during the second and the fourth centuries AD. These are two relatively quiet periods in Roman history, characterized by economic prosperity and comparatively few internal conflicts, when the conditions for intellectual productivity were especially good. The prosperity of the Empire in general favoured also the quality and diversity of the higher education that was offered in Athens.[4]

By 'higher education', I do not just mean the concrete disciplines that come to mind in this context, i.e. the teaching of the philosophical and rhetorical schools in contrast to the basic school curriculum. Within higher education I include also the broader concept of *paideia*. The meaning of this Greek term, for which Cicero proposed *humanitas* as a Latin equivalent and the German-speaking theorists of the nineteenth century used *Bildung*, has been discussed repeatedly, but it is hard to find a satisfactory definition that covers all aspects of it.[5] In this context, I find it essential to emphasize in particular one of its

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[2] Autobiographical information provided by Libanius will mainly be found in his *Oratio* 1.

[3] Notes on Gellius' experiences in Athens are interspersed in his *Noctes Atticae*; see Holford-Strevens 2003, in particular 83–147.

[4] The following survey of the intellectual activities in Athens is largely based on the results of a major research project that was conducted at Lund University in 2001–2005. The project had the title 'Athens as the Cultural Metropolis of the Roman Empire' (*Athen som det romerska imperiets kulturmetropol*). The project sought to describe the role played by Athens in a process taking place in the first centuries AD, by which the Greek tradition of thought, culture and education was integrated into the cultural complex of the Roman Empire and with the theological superstructure of the then evolving Christianity. The project addressed not only the activities that actually took place in the philosophical and rhetorical schools of Athens, but also the notion of an ideal Athens, characterized by learning, clarity and intellectual acumen, that was coming into being at the same time all over the Empire and which has lived on up to the present day. That period and the events taking place in it were of primary importance for the development of a common European cultural tradition. The results have for the most part been published in a number of articles by the participants of the project, several of them written in Swedish. When relevant, they will be cited in the following. Cf. also the sections on Athens in Watts 2008.

[5] The most important work on *paideia* is still Jaeger 1934–1959. Some of the contributions in Andersen 1999 discuss in particular Christian appropriation of Greek *paideia*. On *paideia* in Athens, see K. Blomqvist 2016.

aspects: *paideia* denotes something that is supposed to lead to a true love of education for its own sake and to a deeper understanding of our human condition and of our human nature. It could, in popular terms, be described as 'getting the big picture' and an ability 'to read between the lines'. It is an ideal impossible to attain to perfection, but because of that also attractive to strive for. *Paideia* in that sense was offered to the Athenian students. The Greek word denotes both the process of forming a young person's character and individuality and the result of that process, manifesting itself in an adult's personality; an individual can undergo *paideia* but also, as a result, possess *paideia*.

Sometimes, especially in older representations, the higher educational institutions in Athens are all subsumed under the collective designation 'the University of Athens'.[6] This term is misleading, however. The institution now known as 'university' is a newcomer in comparison to its ancient counterparts; the oldest universities existing today stem from the Middle Ages and they had from their beginnings the organizational structure that is typical of our universities. Universities in the modern sense of the term are organizations for education and research in a number of specified disciplines, which also create a basis for the organizational units that exist within the university – faculties, departments, centres, etc. Such a diversified and specialized activity never existed in ancient Athens, even if not all schools, teachers and students were active in the same field. Somewhat simplified, there were two main directions of studies that a student could choose between, i.e. rhetoric and philosophy.

Furthermore, a university of today has a central administration with a principal and a board, and the individual disciplines are brought together in units, such as faculties, departments and centres, with their own deans, directors and governing bodies. Compared to this, the educational establishments of ancient Athens appear to have been a mass of independent, private enterprises. It is significant that while modern Greek terms for professor, student and the activity they are engaged in are handed down from ancient Greek (καθηγητής 'professor', μαθητής 'student', σπουδάζω 'to study'),[7] the words for the university itself and its organizational units are either calques (πανεπιστήμιο 'university', a loan translation of Latin *universitas*), ancient words with redefined meanings (τμήμα, τομέας 'faculty', 'department'), or reintroductions of terms that exist as Greek loan-words in other languages of western Europe (σχολή, κέντρο). There was no need for such terms for organizational units in the ancient language, because such units did not exist.

Consequently, in imperial Athens we can discover no such thing as a university; instead, we meet with a rich variety of institutions, different in size, orientation and prestige. At the upper end there were the major, well-established schools, often with more than one teacher who could guide and supervise students on different levels in their studies (and, at times, form a gang to kidnap a new arrival in Piraeus). Since the early second century, there had existed in Athens a formal chair for a professor of rhetoric, appointed and paid for by the emperor. With Marcus Aurelius, the leaders of the four old philosophical schools of Athens – Platonists, Peripatetics, Stoics, Epicureans – were also appointed and salaried by the emperor.[8] These were of course the most prestigious teachers.

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[6] Walden 1909 (esp. 97–108); Westaway 1922.

[7] Καθηγητής, for instance, which now means 'professor', is attested already in Plutarch as a designation of an important teacher (*Quomodo adulator ab amico internoscatur* 70e).

[8] Watts 2008, 33–34.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there existed quite a few freelance teachers who constantly had to hustle about trying to recruit students and who depended on short-time student fees for their livelihood. In one of his stories about his salad days in Athens, the Roman Aulus Gellius paints a bleak picture of one of these unfortunate fellows, shabbily dressed and unkempt, lurking in a doorway and trying to recruit some of the young men passing by. Gellius himself, who was one of the privileged students of the enormously rich and famous Herodes Atticus, naturally just expresses his disdain for the poor man.[9]

In the university system of today, teachers are under constant pressure to incessantly change and modernize their methods of teaching, according to the latest trend in vogue. In contrast, the ancient methods of teaching had hardly changed since the first Athenian schools of rhetoric and philosophy were founded in early fourth century BC. With only a little exaggeration, we may speak of a continuity that had subsisted for eight hundred years – and possibly longer too, for the methods are not likely to have changed in any significant way during the centuries that followed, being taken over when higher education under Christian auspices was introduced.

The content of what was taught, on the other hand, was continuously renewed. An illustrative example of this is the Academy, the philosophical school that Plato himself had founded. The Academics themselves claimed throughout the centuries that they faithfully preserved Plato's doctrines, possibly achieving a new and better understanding of what Plato really meant. One can get the impression that their teaching was quite static, even stagnant, and that innovation and development was absent in the school. The actual history of the Academy, however, reveals that it underwent great changes. Even a superficial survey shows that, during the Hellenistic period, the Academy went through a period of radical scepticism, stereotypically characterized as a dogma that claimed that no certain knowledge was attainable. In the early imperial period, the scepticism was replaced by the so-called Middle Platonism, which, inter alia, was characterized by an interest in natural science, testified to by Gellius but up until then largely alien to the Platonic tradition. With Neo-Platonism, when it was eventually introduced into the Academy of Athens, interest was directed almost exclusively toward the transcendental sphere and Plotinus' three-level reality and its mystical quest for an ascent to the highest level.[10]

So, after having chosen your professor (or, as in the case of Libanius, been forced to choose), how did you become a student? At the basic level, studying principally meant that the students attended lectures. We may safely assume that, as a complement to the oral lectures, the teacher used certain simple technical utilities to illustrate his words, for example, white-washed boards for drawing graphs and figures, placards with maps and other illustrations or three-dimensional models. Such pedagogical tools had been in use since Aristotle,[11] and they presumably existed in second-century lecture rooms as well.[12]

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[9] Gell. *NA* 7.10.5.
[10] On the introduction of Neo-Platonism in the Athenian Academy cf. Watts 2008, 89–110.
[11] Arist. *Int*. 22a22–31; *Eth*. *Nic*. 1107a33; *Eth*. *Eud*. 1220b36–1221a12.
[12] The – probably fictitious – Platonist Nigrinus, who had taught in Athens and whom Lucian claims to have visited in Rome after his return there, had in his den a board (πινάκιον) on which geometric figures were drawn and an unsophisticated replica of the solar system in which the trajectories of the heavenly bodies were represented by reeds bent into circles (Lucian *Nigr*. 2).

When the students had advanced to a higher level of their education, they were gradually allowed certain privileges. One of the most important was access to the libraries to pursue independent study.[13] But the truly advanced training came later and was, for obvious reasons, open only to a small number of students, in a select group. Their training consisted in what for lack of a better term could be called seminars, in the form of a discussion on a specified question between the teacher and the group of students, or more likely one of them. Often there was a student who took notes, which is why there are documentations preserved to show what shape these discussions could take. Gellius gives us some glimpses from such discussions, a few writings by Plutarch and Dio Chrysostom are intended to depict the exchange of arguments between teacher and student. Above all, the teaching methods of Epictetus are known to us from Arrian's copious records of his teachings. Generally, the debates seem to have been quite agreeable conversations, even if the modern reader may notice that the discussions did not always move on the highest intellectual levels.

There are of course many anecdotes preserved. It may suffice here to mention that the students enthusiastically engaged in entertaining themselves during their free time with interesting (and perhaps less interesting) discussions, drinking-parties and unfortunately also fights, cheating and outright criminal acts that were punished by the Roman governor in Corinth.

If the educational practices of the Athenian schools occasioned conservatism, what were its effects? There is no self-evident answer to that question. On one hand, one can rightly say that the continuity of teaching, learning and researching entailed a certain conservatism. On the other hand, it meant a continuity that guaranteed the existence of a favourable working environment for both teachers and students, those qualities so essential for a creative atmosphere. And despite the very hierarchical structure of these institutions, we do have examples of kindness and caring from the part of the teachers.

What is even more remarkable, the academic activities appear to have been conducted in Athens under a high degree of intellectual freedom, although of course everyone was subject to the restrictions imposed by Roman absolutism. The established schools were not closed to adherents of new ideas or beliefs. It is simply not true that poverty and precarious conditions are a prerequisite for creative work.[14]

One reservation should be added, however. It is quite possible that meddlesome policymakers wanted to interfere and control research and teaching even more than they actually did, although they were too wise to overly restrict the academic autonomy. This independence should of course not be exaggerated for, as we know, the Roman Empire was in many ways an un-free society. A professor was by definition appointed by the emperor, and there is evidence to show that certain philosophically interested members of imperial families interfered with great enthusiasm in the internal affairs of the schools. One example was the Empress Pompeia Plotina, wife of Trajan and adoptive mother of Hadrian. Being a follower of the Epicurean school, she managed to exert her influence

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[13] The building complex traditionally known as Hadrian's Library actually included a (presumably) public library. Close to the Agora existed a public library donated by a certain Pantaenus in the time of Trajan. See Camp 1998, 187–193; Camp 2001, 202–203. Plutarch (*Coniugalia praecepta* 145b–d) recommends that women should be kept out of libraries.

[14] In her brilliant essay, Woolf (1929) points out that peaceful and financially stable conditions are the ontological prerequisites for any constructive work, academic as well as artistic.

to effect the appointment of a professor.[15] Another example of the power wielded by the emperors was provided by Justinian, who in 529 ordered the closing of the Academy in Athens.[16] The surprising fact is *not* that the people in power wanted to exert influence on the schools, which of course they did. We should rather be surprised that academic freedom was still relatively extensive.

Athens glorified

At this point, let us return to the experiences of Libanius in Athens. His reactions are essential for our understanding of the reputation that Athens enjoyed in the Roman Empire. Despite his angry remarks on the city and its schools, it is obvious that it was exactly the reputation Athens enjoyed that had induced Libanius to abandon his position in Antioch for the chance of a career there. He had been attracted by the glorious radiance of its intellectual life, just like so many other people in the first centuries AD.

The high esteem that Athens enjoyed in these centuries was of course due in a not infinitesimal degree to the existence of educational institutions of high class and on the opportunities for ambitious jobseekers provided by those institutions and by a city that attracted so many visitors. But the high esteem of Athens was a product not only of the institutions that existed in reality, but also of a non-material image of Athens as an ideal setting for higher intellectual activities. That image had been created, or perhaps rather 'invented',[17] by the Athenians themselves. It can at first be attested in texts of the fifth century BC, and in the classical period it was carefully nurtured by Athenian politicians and intellectuals. They were successful, for the image of Athens that they propagated was largely accepted also outside of Athens during the Hellenistic period. Even if some protesting voices were raised, it was again accepted by the Romans and promulgated in the Empire. In fact, still to this day, it lives on as a predominant image of ancient Athens.[18]

In what follows I will focus on the relationship between the reality and the perception of Athens, i.e. the underlying ideas that shaped the image of Athenian superiority in what we might call the intellectual sphere. We will search for an answer to the question why Athens continued to exert such an attraction, even long after she had lost her political and military position of power.

The earliest preserved expression for the superiority of Athens was formulated by Pindar:

> O sparkling, violet-crowned, celebrated in song,
> bulwark of Hellas, famous Athens, divine citadel.[19]

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[15] An inscription in the Epigraphical Museum of Athens (*EM* 10404) attests Plotina's involvement in the appointment of a new school-leader. See K. Blomqvist 1997, 88–89 (with n. 83).
[16] See af Hällström 1994; Watts 2008, 128–138.
[17] Cf. the title of Loraux 1981.
[18] *The Image of Athens throughout the Ages* was the theme of a symposium arranged by the Nordic Plato Society (*Platonselskabet*) in 2001. The contributions to the symposium (published in J. Blomqvist 2003) are in the Scandinavian languages with short summaries in English. My presentation here is largely based on that volume, plus the research of the Athens Project (cf. n. 2 above). Cf. also K. Blomqvist 2008.
[19] Pind. frg. 77: Ὦ ταὶ λιπαραὶ καὶ ἰοστέφανοι καὶ ἀοίδιμοι, / Ἑλλάδος ἔρεισμα, κλειναὶ Ἀθᾶναι, δαιμόνιον πτολίεθρον.

With these words, Pindar described Athens in a hymn composed c. 475 BC, when the city of Athens was close to its floruit in its military and political powers. The magnificent words of the dithyramb reflect the Athenians' high opinion of their own city, an opinion that, without any doubt, they took for granted that everyone else should agree with.

Thus, the notion of the superiority of Athens had been formed early: it is already solidly established in the fifth century BC. Probably it is even older, but it is in the 470s that we find the earliest explicit expression of it.[20] A few years after Pindar's dithyramb, Aeschylus' tragedy *The Persians* was performed. This drama describes the Greek victory over the invading Persians in the naval battle of Salamis in 480, in which Athens played a leading role. The author effectively creates an antithesis between the Athenians and *les autres*, i.e. the barbaric Persians. Athenians are depicted as endowed with the quintessence of all things Hellenic and far superior to their opponents, despite their numerical inferiority. They are brave, intelligent and resolute. They are pious without superstition and self-confident without arrogance. They are cherished by the gods and even by the elements of the universe: earth, air and water. Without possessing any excessive riches, they prevail by using their existing resources in the best possible way.

Above all, in contrast to their opponents, the Athenians are free, politically and intellectually. Despite – or rather because of – not being governed by any autocrat, they manage to defeat the numerically superior enemy fleet. They are also disciplined, moderate and wise in their planning. They are – to use a more poetic phraseology – a people of light and beauty who represent the order of cosmos.

All these features are made to appear, of course, in stark contrast to the oppressed, superstitious and disorderly barbarian hosts and their arrogant king. With overweening pride, the Persians put their trust in their wealth, in their huge army, in their innumerable ships and, above all, in the king's unlimited power. Xerxes could not possibly imagine that his enemies would not tremble before his very name, just like his subjects did.

This thoroughly flattering picture that the Athenians painted of themselves was in contrast not only to their perception of foreigners, but to their description of other Greeks as well. Athenian democracy, freedom of expression and freedom of thought, and not least the city's allegedly privileged relationship with the divine powers, made its inhabitants superior to all other Greeks.

This view was often repeated, with some variations, long after Aeschylus had produced his drama. The other tragedians followed his example. The same ideology was particularly manifest in publicly produced texts of another sort, viz. the official funerary orations for Athenians fallen in the wars. The most well-known of those is Pericles' funerary speech in 431 BC, of which Thucydides renders a free-hand version in his history of the Peloponnesian War.[21] The Athenians are depicted there not primarily as superior to the eastern barbarians, but especially to the Spartans. This is hardly surprising given that Athens, in the second half of the fifth century, was at the height of its power. The tragedies and other festivals were important channels for the marketing of the Athenian self-image.

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[20] In the Homeric poems Athens plays a very modest role; cf. Skafte Jensen 2003.

[21] Thuc. 2.35–46. Other examples of real or fictitious funerary speeches of the fifth and fourth centuries are preserved among the works of Gorgias, Lysias, Demosthenes, Plato and Hyperides. Two of Isocrates' speeches (*Panathenaicus*, *Panegyricus*) are also above all intended to praise the city. Cf. Loraux 1981; Andersen 2003; Akujärvi 2008.

The fundamental ideas were hammered in repeatedly. Newly written tragedies were performed every year at the lavish feasts of Dionysus, and the state funerals for Athenians who had died in war during the year also returned with almost frightening regularity.

But now we come to what is the most interesting part. Long after Athens had lost its political and military influence, its inhabitants still managed to maintain their self-perception and, what is more, managed to persuade their Greek neighbours and eventually the rest of the Roman Empire to embrace the same view. Of course, the picture underwent some changes. Thus, for example, the message of the city's military and political superiority became less relevant in the post-classical periods, and the cultural activities, including philosophy and drama festivals, were brought to the foreground. The Peloponnesian War had made an end of all Athenian ambitions in the last part of the fifth century BC. Further, with their defeat in the wars against the Philip of Macedonia and Alexander, the Athenians, with other Greeks, became the subjects of foreign powers, first the Hellenistic kingdoms and, eventually, the Roman Empire. Yet, mythical and historical military enterprises are still elevated in a grand style by Aelius Aristides in his *Panathenaicus* that he was engaged to deliver at the Panathenaic festival (c. AD 150).[22] However, Aristides is eager to point out one creation of the Athenian mind that was, in his time, manifest – audible, in fact – all over the Empire and sometimes even beyond its frontiers, viz. the standard variety of Greek that originated from the classical Attic dialect and had become the language of all speakers of Greek during the Hellenistic period.[23] "Thanks to you the whole world speaks the same language", says Aristides. "You can see chariot-drivers and shepherds and those who gain their living from the sea, all existing peoples of every city and every country holding on to your speech and striving to reach your soil, just as those who cannot swim."[24] There may be some exaggeration here – after all, Aristides had been hired to praise the city of Athens – but basically it is a true statement.

The image of Athens that had been gradually established included the following characteristics, some of which were inherited and others were new or at least modified:

(a) Freedom, ἐλευθερία: This concept, the importance of which cannot be stressed enough, included freedom in all fields – political, cultural and intellectual. In Athens you had the freedom to think – and to say – what you wanted, i.e. παρρησία. This freedom was founded on the prominent Athenian export product that comes next in this list.

(b) Democracy and equality: The personal qualities of the individual, subsumed under the term ἀρετή 'virtue', formed the basis for prestige and influence, not inherited wealth or ancestry. The people were regarded as a collective of autonomous and equal members. Poverty was not considered as an obstacle to civic merit. In fact, there were during the early Roman imperial period philosophers who went far enough to claim that

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[22] Oliver 1968.

[23] On the '(socio)linguistic landscape' in which the early Christian texts were written, see Blomqvist and Blomqvist 2017, 390–396.

[24] Ael. Arist. *Pan.* 325 (p. 294 Dindorf 1964; 180.27–33 Jebb 1722) καὶ δι᾽ὑμῶν ὁμόφωνος μὲν πᾶσα γέγονεν ἡ οἰκουμένη, ἴδοις δ᾽ἂν καὶ τοὺς ἡνιόχους καὶ τοὺς νομέας καὶ τοὺς ἀπὸ τῆς θαλάττης ζῶντας καὶ πάντα ὅσα ἔθνη καὶ κατὰ πόλεις καὶ κατὰ χώρας τῆς παρ᾽ὑμῶν φωνῆς ἐχομένους καὶ πειρωμένους τῆς γῆς ἀνθάπτεσθαι, καθάπερ τοὺς νεῖν ἀδυνάτους. My translation is slightly different from Oliver's; cf. J. Blomqvist 2014, 1–2.

it was the poor (οἱ πένητες) of the Empire that had the greatest qualifications for a life in accordance with virtue.[25]

(c) Autochthony, αὐτοχθονία: The Athenians believed that they had sprung from Attic earth and that, unlike most other Greeks, they were in no way immigrants; that notion was established by the myths about the wanderings of the Greek tribes. Therefore, they claimed that they were also favoured by nature and by the elements themselves, which provided them, if not with an abundance, with a sufficient supply of resources. Consequently, they could maintain the concept of having a special role to play among the community of the Greeks. Their claims to be the leading Greek state were founded, among other things, on myths that declared that certain other states, such as those in Ionia, were colonies founded by the Athenians. As late as in the second century AD, there were references to those foundation myths in the decoration of the Olympieion, the huge temple of Zeus in Athens that the emperor Hadrian completed: Pausanias reports that a set of bronze statues in the precinct representing the Ionian cities were called simply "the colony cities" by the Athenians.[26]

(d) Intelligence: This manifested itself as intellectual clarity, stringency, wit and curiosity. The phrase τί καινόν; "what's new?" was often heard in the streets of Athens. This feature is emphasized by the account of Paul's visit to Athens in *Acts*.[27] Its author was obviously familiar with the image that the Athenians had acquired. It was thought characteristic of both Athenians and of foreigners who lived in the city that they spent all of their time talking about and listening to what was new for the day. Intelligence was closely linked with the next item on our list.

(e) Light, φῶς: Clarity characterized both the sky over the city and the minds of the people. Nowhere was the air as clear as in Attica, if we are to believe the tragedians, and nowhere was it so easy to breathe. Heaven's light was reflected in the residents' characters; they were a people of the κόσμος, a universe characterized by order, by clarity and beauty, and intellect (νοῦς). This was the essence of their *paideia* and self-understanding (signifying intelligence, common sense and self-control).

(f) Dialogue: The institutionalized conversation was the premise of dialectic and logic, and the dialogue more or less defined all higher education. It was by means of dialogues and discussions that higher education was conducted, and by these methods the students were led to clearer insights. The dialogue was both a result of and a prerequisite for intellectual freedom and frankness.

That these – imaginary or real – features of Athenian superiority were cherished with great enthusiasm by the Athenians themselves is not surprising. But the same was

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[25] E.g. Dio Chrysostom's seventh oration, on which see K. Blomqvist 1989, 81–85.
[26] Paus. 1.18.6. Cf. Akujärvi 1999, 12–23.
[27] *Acts* 17:16–34. Some other traits characterizing the current image of Athens are present in this passage. The word καινός 'new', implying curiosity, occurs twice, discussions are constantly going on (ἢ λέγειν ἢ ἀκούειν), the audience at the Areopagus court demonstrate their παρρησία, some by mocking (ἐχλεύαζον) Paul, some by expressing their interest.

true of visitors, both from other Greek states and from abroad, from the Hellenistic period onwards. Athenians were considered to be characterized by an openness and a curiosity that made them willing to seek knowledge for its own sake. Training for specific professions, which is the ideal today, was not always a priority of those who found their way to the Athenian schools, although the rhetorical schools often produced administrators and officials. The aim was rather *Bildung*, and this seems to have been particularly attractive to prospective students.

Without its glorious renown, Athens might have been reduced to a shadow of its past superiority in the troublesome last centuries BC, when Rome became the dominant power of the Eastern Mediterranean area. Compare the fate of Corinth: it was razed to the ground by the Romans in 146 BC and, when it was rebuilt a century later, it was no longer a Greek city state but a settlement for Caesar's veteran soldiers, a Roman *colonia* (although it soon regained some of its Greek character). In the wars the Romans fought, Athens repeatedly supported the wrong side, without being severely punished for its mistakes. It is true that the Athenian support for King Mithridates in the first Mithridatic war resulted in the looting of the city by Sulla's troops in 87 BC, but later on, when Athens sided with Pompey against Caesar, with Caesar's murderers Brutus and Cassius against his avengers Mark Antony and Octavian and, finally, with Antony against Octavian, the Athenians were pardoned each and every time. Caesar is just reported to have remarked sarcastically that it was their dead ancestors that saved the Athenians.[28] The glory of Athens was evidently recognized also by the Roman emperors.

In antiquity, Athens was never really overshadowed as a cultural metropolis by any of its competitors, such as Alexandria or Pergamon in the Hellenistic period, nor later by Antioch, Rome or Constantinople. Even in the fourth century AD its fame remained. One of the leading Christian intellectuals of the time, Gregory of Nazianzus, who had studied there in the 340s, could speak of the "really golden Athens",[29] and his phrase was repeated by several later writers.[30] The cities that rivalled Athens should be owed due respect, but it is illustrative of the city's dominant position that it was precisely Athens that was pointed out by Tertullian as the main opponent of Christian culture in his indignant rhetorical question: "What has Jerusalem in common with Athens?"[31]

But how do we know that this idea was more than an oratorical topos? The glory of Athens is enhanced by the grandiose speeches of the panegyrists, discreet in Herodotus and less discreet in Gorgias, Isocrates, Aelius Aristides and other invited or self-appointed guest speakers, but is there anything to show that the idea of a glorious Athens flourished beyond the rhetorical schools and public platforms? That question can be answered in the positive, for we have textual sources that are important in this context.

Firstly, there are comments in texts that are not primarily panegyrics of Athens. These texts do not always belong to those most frequently studied by the classical scholars, and their literary ambitions are not always of the highest sort. Examples of such texts are the travel report of Heraclides, Philostratus' biographies and Aulus Gellius'

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[28] Cass. Dio 42.14.2.
[29] Greg. Naz., *Oratio funebris in laudem Basilii* 14.1 Ἀθήνας τὰς χρυσᾶς ὄντως.
[30] Cf. Rubenson 2010.
[31] Tert. *De praescr. haeret.* 7.9 *Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis?* As pointed out, for example, by Hallonsten (2003 and 2005), Tertullian and other Christian teachers of his time were not unconditional enemies to Greek thought and learning. Rather, the early church was Hellenized to a considerable degree.

Noctes Atticae.[32] There are also relevant passages in the letters exchanged between Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus, who were fellow students in Athens and later were elevated to the rank of bishops and, eventually, church fathers.

Secondly, and more significantly in this context, there are critical voices raised against Athens by authors who claimed that the idealized image needed to be modified. In this context, it suffices to mention Plutarch and Libanius. For various reasons, both attacked the image of Athens as the mother of all culture. Plutarch argues, in his attempts to reduce the city's greatness, that the founders of the Athenian philosophical schools were mostly immigrants from other Greek states.[33] But this merely emphasizes just what he wants to refute. Plutarch intended that his remark showed that the Athenians were not more remarkable than other Greeks. Actually, it indicates that Athens offered a unique setting for those who wanted to pursue philosophical studies under conditions favourable for such activities. For without freedom, comparative safety from political interference and an intellectual openness – at least among the Athenian elite – these schools could not have been established, much less have lasted for many centuries.

In his autobiographical speech, Libanius claims that he was terribly disappointed with the reality of Athens (for understandable reasons of course). But behind his remarks there looms an obvious bitterness because he was not allowed to enter the fast career path to which he considered himself entitled. His autobiography would presumably have taken a very different tack if he had received the professorship that he thought he had been promised. The reputation of Athens must have contained enough truth to justify his embittered reaction.

Conclusion

The first three centuries AD – approximately the era of the apologists – spanned the time during which Christianity established itself as one of the leading religions in the Graeco-Roman world. Early Christianity made its appearance in a society that, to a considerable degree, had become Hellenized in the preceding centuries, the Hellenistic era. The early Christians were operating in a largely Hellenized environment, and the early church quite naturally became Hellenized to some extent, too.

One important and conspicuous component of Hellenism was Greek *paideia*. It manifested itself, among other things, in a variety of educational institutions that had existed since long before in the originally Greek-speaking regions of the Roman Empire but which, after Alexander's conquests, had been introduced into those parts of Asia and Africa where the Greek and Macedonian settlers established themselves. The Greek type of education had exerted a tangible influence on Roman schooling as well, and its impact was traceable all over the Empire.

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[32] The otherwise unknown Heraclides (κριτικός or Κρητικός?) travelled in Greece c. 200 BC. Fragments of his report on Athens have been preserved; cf. Pfister 1951. Heraclides praises the festivals and schools of Athens, but points out deficiencies in housing, water supply and town planning. Cf., for example, Philostr. *V S* 2.570.9–574.15 on Alexander, a famous orator from Antioch, who eagerly took the opportunity to perform a speech before an Athenian audience.

[33] Plutarch repeatedly criticizes Athens for other reasons too; see Teodorsson 2003. Cf also Synesius' critical remarks (*Ep*. 54 and 136).

Higher education, i.e. philosophy and advanced rhetoric, was not on offer in every small community of the Empire; the higher-level educational institutions were concentrated in a number of centres, primarily the most important cities – Rome, Athens, Alexandria, Smyrna, Antioch and Caesarea. Among those centres Athens held a prominent position, not only because of the quality and quantity of educational opportunities that were offered there, but also because of the fame that the city had acquired at an earlier time, a fame that was carefully nurtured by its inhabitants throughout antiquity. That fame attracted great numbers both of prominent professors and of promising or hopeful students, thereby enhancing the fame of Athens ever more.

The process that was taking place eventually resulted in the victory of Christianity in matters of religion. But the Greek ideal of *paideia* lived on and remained an integrated element of civilization as it was understood in Christianized Europe and other parts of the world. The ancient city of Athens had played an important role in that process. The apologists, whether they made their acquaintance with Greek *paideia* in Athens or somewhere else, were also part of that very process.

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