



Universiteit
Leiden

Dubious letters. The inauthentic epistles ascribed to Julian the Apostate (AD 361-363)

Applicants

| Supervisor Name | Discipline |
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| Dr. R.M. (Bert) van den Berg | Classical Languages and Cultures, Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS), Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University |
| Dr. L.E. (Rens) Tacoma | Ancient History, Institute for History (LUIH), Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University |

Project description

Of all Roman emperors, Julian (r. AD 361-363) is one of the most controversial, due to his renouncement of Christianity. He is also one of the best documented emperors, which is all the more remarkable given that he only reigned for 18 months. He was himself a prolific author, advocating his own brand of Greco-Roman religion, suffused by neo-Platonic philosophy, in a stream of speeches and treatises. Pagan adherents welcomed him as the ideal Platonic philosopher-king, while Christian authors hated him with such an intensity that they dubbed him ‘the Apostate’.

The controversial nature of Julian’s reign has affected the preservation of his works. This is in particular visible in the corpus of his letters, which is markedly less stable than that of the treatises and speeches that Julian published during his lifetime. As any utterance of an emperor was deemed to have legal force, letters were assigned enormous authority. Many letters of Julian have survived, but they have been preserved through various routes, for example in quotations of hostile commentators. Adherents and opponents tried to reshape the image of Julian in order to fit their agenda, not just by their selection of letters, but also by manipulating them. Some are manifest forgeries, others show traces of textual intervention or are otherwise suspect.

The considerable body of dubious letters has hardly attracted scholarly attention. This project argues that these letters are worthy of scholarly attention in their own right precisely because of their dubious nature. They allow us to study the ways in which various groups of people (Christians, pagans, neo-Platonists) tried to (re)write the history of the reign of Julian. We will do so, first by distinguishing three sub-groups within the corpus and next analyse how these clusters of letters try to steer the reception of the emperor Julian.

Research Trainee Profile

The project seeks two students with an interest in late-antique political culture and philosophy. The project team will start by selecting a number of letters of dubious authenticity for further analysis. The aim is to investigate how these texts were employed by opposing groups to create their own persona of the emperor-philosopher. The project combines an analysis of the text of the letters with a cultural-historical contextualisation of late-antique religious and philosophical debates.

We seek one student with good historical knowledge of Late Antiquity, and one student with good knowledge of Greek. The project is primarily meant for students of ancient history and classics and/or ancient philosophy, but other students who are interested in the project and possess the requisite skills are equally welcome. BA3, MA, and RMA students can apply. The exact nature of their research will be adapted according to their skills and interests.

Collaboration

The project brings two subjects together that are usually far apart: Roman political culture and neo-platonic philosophy. It combines two different types of approaches: a contextualising historical one and a philological-philosophical one. It does so in the field of Late Antiquity: although there is at Leiden wide expertise available, this remains scattered over different departments and institutes. It brings two scholars together who both have a longstanding interest in Julian.

Van den Berg is an internationally recognized scholar of neo-Platonism, who has published, among many other topics, on Julian and his circle. He has a special interest in the intersections of religion (both pagan and Christian) and philosophy, of literary form and philosophical content, and of theoretical philosophy and practical politics in late Antiquity. In order to promote the study of Late Antiquity from a multi-disciplinary perspective, he frequently co-teaches courses on relevant themes.

Tacoma has taught several classes on Julian as ‘the last pagan’. The research trainee project aligns well with his current NWO Open Competition Medium project on [Roman fake news](#), which investigates documentary fictions from the Roman imperial period. There is a remarkable number of official texts whose authenticity is debated: some may be authentic, some are probably forged, while others seem to have been manipulated. The project finds its root in Tacoma’s interest in Roman political culture, on which he published in 2020 a monograph at Oxford University Press.

In practical terms this means that the PhD-student of the NWO-project of Tacoma (Indira Huliselan) will also be involved in the meetings of the Research Trainee-project. In this way a larger team will be constructed of 2 senior researchers, 2 student trainees and one PhD. The value for all involved needs no further elucidation.

Deliverables

The project will result in a scholarly article that will be submitted to a Dutch journal like *Hermeneus* or *Lampas*, or to an English equivalent. The article will be published under the name of all team members, including those of the research trainees.

The traineeship is accompanied by two, possibly three smaller outreach activities:

- the section on Julian’s letters from the [Dutch](#) and/or [English](#) Wikipedia-page on Julian will be updated;

- a small expert-meeting will be organised to present and discuss the outcome, followed by a public lecture by an invited guest speaker at the Forum Antiquum in Leiden;
- the research will be presented during the *Maand van de Geschiedenis 2024*, devoted to ‘Echt Nep’ (to be confirmed).

Planning

The project consists of 7 phases, each of 4 weeks. After the opening meeting, each phase will be concluded with a session in which the results will be discussed. The major part of the research takes place in Phases 2-4, where a select number of Julian’s dubious letters will be analysed in close detail.

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| Phase 1 Febr. | General study of corpus of dubious letters Selection of three clusters of letters to be analysed in detail |
| Phase 2 March | Detailed study of first cluster of letters Study modern literature |
| Phase 3 April | Detailed study of second cluster of letters Writing draft Introduction |
| Phase 4 May | Detailed study of third cluster of letters Presentation of preliminary results at expert meeting |
| Phase 5 June | Writing draft of main sections of the article |
| Phase 6 July | Writing draft conclusion Revision Wikipedia page |
| Phase 7 August | Completion article; submission to a journal |

Student Application

Students who wish to apply are advised to read the following two articles:

- Elm, S. (2016). ‘The Letter Collection of the Emperor Julian’, in C. Sogno, B.K. Storin, and E.J. Watts (eds.), *Late Antique Letter Collections - A Critical Introduction and Reference Guide*. Oakland, 46–54.
- Trapp, M. (2012). ‘The Emperor’s Shadow: Julian in His Correspondence’, in S. Tougher and N. Baker-Brian (eds.), *Emperor and Author: The Writings of Julian the Apostate*. Swansea, 105–121.

Students should send a motivation letter of ca 400 words, in which they explain what they want to contribute to the project and what they hope to learn from it. In the letter they should state in which programme they are studying, where they are in their studies, and when they intend to graduate. The letter should be accompanied by a resume and an official list of their grades in the BA and – where appropriate – (R)MA. In their resume they should list which languages (ancient and modern) they read, and at what level.

No letters of recommendation are required, but instead the name of a teacher at Leiden University should be provided (name, e-mail address, telephone, position) who is willing to give further information. This person cannot be one of the two project leaders.

Please send your application to Rens Tacoma (l.e.tacoma@hum.leidenuniv.nl) and Bert van den Berg (r.m.van.den.berg@hum.leidenuniv.nl)