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LUCIAN'S *HIPPIAS*

ABSTRACT

Lucian's Hippias or The Bath*, traditionally considered to be a straight-faced encomium of a historical architect and real-life bath-house of the Antonine period, is now often judged to be a work of satire, though what exactly is being satirized has remained elusive. This article argues that the architect 'Hippias' is closely modelled on Plato's caricature of the sophist Hippias of Elis in the* Hippias Minor*, and that his bath-house is a comic extrapolation from the sophist's home-made oil-flask and strigil. Lucian's* Hippias *should be read as a parody of contemporary prose encomia of public buildings.*

Keywords: Lucian; Plato; Hippias of Elis; bath-houses; encomia

If, two thousand years from now, every walking guide to small English market towns, every £1 pamphlet on the historical monuments of parish churches, and every country house guidebook were to be lost, one wonders what the cultural historian of twentieth-century England would make of Osbert Lancaster's *Drayneflete Revealed* (1949). This po-faced guide to the fictional town of Drayneflete is, in fact, hilariously funny; but the humour is entirely dependent on the reader's familiarity with the kinds of texts that are being sent up. Drayneflete's architectural history, in Lancaster's telling, turns out to be staggeringly boring, the leading local families (the Littlehamptons, Fidgets and de Vere-Tipples) utterly undistinguished, and the town's literary products unreadably awful.[1] The satire works because all too many English local guidebooks really are exactly like this (or, more precisely, *almost* exactly like this): painfully earnest attempts to persuade the reader of the deep aesthetic interest and historical import of their mildly underwhelming wares. But for anyone who has not accumulated a knowledge of the wider sub-literary context through interminable Bank Holiday weekends trailing around National Trust properties, I suspect the whole thing would be totally mystifying.

For Roman cultural historians, Lucian's *Hippias or The Bath* poses a somewhat similar problem. This short text purports to be an encomium of an architect and engineer called Hippias (**1**–**3**, **8**), with a lengthy ekphrastic description of one of his works, a substantial public bath-house (**4**–**8**).[2] The opening chapters are an elaborate formal eulogy of the architect Hippias (**1**–**3**), articulated around the thesis that 'practice is superior to theory'.[3] Lucian begins with three illustrations of the thesis in other walks of life (medicine, music, generalship: **1**), followed by four historical and mythological examples of 'practical' engineers (Archimedes, Sostratos, Thales, Epeios: **2**), before finally turning to his main subject, the various excellences of the architect Hippias (**3**) and a particular construction of his, a bath-house which Lucian claims to have visited recently (**4**).

[1] Although Clive James correctly identified Bill Tipple's *crackup in barcelona* as a masterpiece: C. James, *Latest Readings* (New Haven and London, 2015), 69–73.

[2] On *ekphrasis* in Lucian, see B.E. Borg, 'Bilder zum Hören – Bilder zum Sehen: Lukians *Ekphraseis* und die Rekonstruktion antiker Kunstwerke', *Millennium* 1 (2004), 25–57; M. Cistaro, *Sotto il velo di Pantea:* Imagines *e* Pro imaginibus *di Luciano* (Messina, 2009), 20–55.

[3] On the rhetorical structure of the *Hippias*, see W.H. Race, 'The art and rhetoric of Lucian's *Hippias*', *Mnemosyne* 70 (2017), 223–39, noting close analogies with Pindar's praise-poetry (Pindar is quoted twice in the *Hippias*, **4** and **7**).

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The remainder of the text is structured as a tour of Hippias' baths from a visitor's perspective (a *logos periêgêmatikos*), beginning (after a short account of the site and substructure) with the monumental entrance (**5**) and finishing (more or less) with the exits (**8**).[4] This *ekphrasis* has attracted a good deal of attention from architectural historians, as the only extant extended description of a Roman bath-complex.[5]

In the high Roman Imperial period, epideictic speeches in praise of bath-houses were a recognized rhetorical genre. 'Entire speeches', says Menander Rhetor, 'can be based on one part of a city; for example, one can deliver a speech on the construction of a single bath-house (ἐπὶ λουτροῦ μόνου κατασκευῆ) or harbour, or on the restoration of some sector of a city.'[6] Lucian's contemporary Favorinus wrote a work *On Bath-houses*, whose character is quite unknown (to judge from the title, it was not concerned with a single real-life bath-complex).[7] We have a host of short verse accounts of bath-houses in both Greek and Latin, the best known being Statius' and Martial's poems in praise of the baths of Claudius Etruscus at Rome, none of which provides anything like the detailed architectural description which occupies the greater part of Lucian's *Hippias*.[8] For us, the trouble is that, since no unambiguously straight-faced Greek or Latin prose encomia of baths (or indeed other public buildings) survive, it is far from easy to judge whether the *Hippias* is, as it were, the real thing, or a Lancaster-esque parody of the generic quiddities of the real thing.

Until the 1990s, most readers assumed that the text should be read at face value as a serious encomium of a real architect and a real bath-house of the Antonine period.[9] Yegül seems to have been the first to suggest that the bath-house itself might have been a literary fiction or a composite of several real-life models, though he did not explore the consequences of this for the existence of the architect Hippias.[10] More

[4] L. Pernot, *La rhétorique de l'éloge dans le monde gréco-romain* (Paris, 1993), 1.200 ('éloge-visite') and 1.202–8 (description of site); Cistaro (n. 2), 34. For *logoi periêgêmatikoi*, see S. Dubel, '*Ekphrasis* et *enargeia*: la description antique comme parcours', in C. Lévy and L. Pernot (edd.), *Dire l'évidence (philosophie et rhétorique antiques)* (Paris and Montréal, 1997), 249–64. Lucian's 'tour' corresponds not to the sequence of bathing-acts but to the itinerary of the bather (who passes rapidly through the *frigidarium* on the way to the warmer rooms, before returning to it later: **6–7**); S. Dubel, *Lucien de Samosate: Portrait du sophiste en amateur d'art* (Paris, 2014), 60.

[5] F.K. Yegül, 'The small city bath in classical antiquity and a reconstruction study of Lucian's "Baths of Hippias"', *Archaeologica Classica* 31 (1979), 108–29; Y. Thébert, *Thermes romains d'Afrique du Nord et leur context méditerranéen* (Rome, 2003), 108–11; E. Thomas, *Monumentality and the Roman Empire: Architecture in the Antonine Age* (Oxford, 2007), 221–9; R. Hanoune, 'L'*Hippias ou Le bain* de Lucien', *Topoi* 18 (2013), 315–31.

[6] Men. Rhet. 365.18–22 Russell and Wilson; Pernot (n. 4), 1.82.

[7] Philostr. *V S* 1.8.

[8] Stat. *Silv.* 1.5 (with the acute reading of C.E. Newlands, *Statius'* Silvae *and the Poetics of Empire* [Cambridge, 2002], 199–226) and Mart. 6.42; cf. also Mart. 9.75; *Anth. Pal.* 9.606–40. Both Statius and Martial, like Lucian, emphasize the use of decorative coloured marble (**5–6**) and the bright illumination of the baths (**5–7**; cf. also Plin. *Ep.* 1.3). S. Busch, *Versus balnearum: Die antike Dichtung über Bäder und Baden im römischen Reich* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1999) is an exhaustive study of Greek and Latin bath-house verse.

[9] J. Bompaire, *Lucien écrivain, imitation et creation* (Paris, 1958), 281–2, 727–8; J. Bompaire, *Lucien: Œuvres, Tome I: Introduction générale, Opuscules 1–10* (Paris, 1993), 32–3; Pernot (n. 4), 1.240, 2.557–8; S. Swain, *Hellenism and Empire* (Oxford, 1996), 419. Cf. also Hanoune (n. 5), 318 (western empire); A.-V. Pont, *Orner la cité: Enjeux culturels et politiques du paysage urbain dans l'Asie gréco-romaine* (Bordeaux, 2010), 134–5 (Asia Minor).

[10] Yegül (n. 5), 117 n. 22 ('may or may not have been based on a single, real building'); cf. F. Yegül, *Bathing in the Roman World* (Cambridge, 2010), 74–9 ('probably re-creating an imaginary bath based on many examples').

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radically, Cannatà Fera has argued that the whole text should in fact be read as satirical parody, though her specific interpretation of what is being satirized (luxurious Roman bathing practices) carries little conviction.[11] Dubel agrees that the *Hippias* should be read as ironical, but leaves open the question of what precisely the irony might be directed at.[12] Race thinks that the building and the architect are Lucian's own inventions, but argues that the rhetoric of eulogy has no comic or satiric colouring at all.[13] Most recently, Guast has suggested that the *Hippias* should be classified among a group of Lucianic works (including the mock-declamatory *Tyrannicide*) which 'fatally undermine various sorts of cultural products by producing imitations that are close to the real thing yet flawed in small but devastating ways', and which thereby 'slowly but relentlessly confound our expectations of a genre until the work becomes absurd'.[14] As will be clear, any consensus about the tone and purpose of the *Hippias* remains some way off.

That Lucian's bath-house itself is a literary fiction seems highly likely, even if we do not accept the (rather tenuous) scatological and sexual references detected by Cannatà Fera or the satiric cosmic allegory suggested by Thomas.[15] Lucian has taken some care not to give his reader the slightest hint as to the location of the bath-house, beyond the rather unhelpful detail that it is situated on a steep slope.[16] The building is eerily empty: it is entirely devoid of people, activities, sculpture (aside from two statues in the *frigidarium*, **5**) or other artworks.[17] Moreover, in the final sentence Lucian slyly promises his listeners that he is confident they will join him in praising the baths, 'if the god were ever to give you the chance of bathing there', εἰ δὲ θεὸς παράσχοι καὶ λούσασθαί ποτε (**8**)—an odd qualification to include if this were, as it purports to be, an oration delivered about a real urban bath-house.[18]

What about the architect Hippias?[19] He is introduced by Lucian in the following terms (**3**):

> Among these men [*sc*. exemplary engineers] we ought also to mention Hippias here, a man of our own day, who in his verbal training can fully match any one of his predecessors you might choose, who is both quick to grasp things and exceptionally clear at expounding them, but who has furnished works greatly superior to his speeches, and has fulfilled the promise of his technical ability, not in those kinds of practical problems in which his predecessors succeeded in achieving pre-eminence, but as the geometers' catchphrase has it, in accurately constructing

[11] M. Cannatà Fera, 'Comunicazione e umorismo. L'*Ippia* di Luciano', in E.A. Arslan et al., *La 'Parola' delle immagini e delle forme di scrittura* (Messina, 1998), 229–42, especially 241–2; cf. Thomas (n. 5), 221–9.

[12] Dubel (n. 4 [2014]), 58.

[13] Race (n. 3).

[14] W. Guast, 'Lucian and declamation', *CPh* 113 (2018), 189–205, at 197, 203.

[15] Cannatà Fera (n. 11), 235–9, criticized by Race (n. 3), 232–3; Thomas (n. 5), 224–8, criticized by Hanoune (n. 5), 319–21.

[16] The building praised in *The Hall*—also surely Lucian's own invention—is likewise unlocated (Thomas [n. 5], 229). Lucian is perfectly capable of being specific about artworks' locations, such as Aetion's painting of the wedding of Roxane and Alexander (*Her.* 4–6, cf. *Imag.* 7) and the copy of Zeuxis' centaur-painting (*Zeux.* 3–7), although M. Pretzler, 'Form over substance? Deconstructing ecphrasis in Lucian's *Zeuxis* and *Eikones*', in A. Bartley (ed.), *A Lucian for our Times* (Newcastle, 2009), 157–72 has argued that the latter is Lucian's own invention.

[17] M. Courrént, 'Du sublime en architecture: le *De architectura* de Vitruve lu et commenté par Lucien de Samosate dans *Hippias ou les bains*', *Cahiers des études anciennes* 56 (2019), 91–107.

[18] Race (n. 3), 234.

[19] The name Hippias was fairly widespread in the Roman Imperial period: 32 of the 170 instances of the name in *LGPN* I–V.C date to the first three centuries A.D.

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the triangle from a given line.[20] Whereas each of the others sliced off one part of universal knowledge, excelled in that alone, and so won the reputation of being a great man, he is visibly one of the foremost in engineering, geometry, harmonics and music, and despite this displays such mastery in each of these fields as if it were the one and only skill he possessed. It would take no little time to praise his theoretical expertise in rays and refractions and mirrors, and astronomy too, in which he has shown up his predecessors as mere children.

On a superficial level, the list of disciplines in which Hippias is said to have excelled recalls Vitruvius' recommendations on the architect's educational curriculum (including geometry, music, optics, astronomy).[21] But in his alleged mastery of so wide a range of technical skills, Lucian's 'Hippias' also bears a marked similarity to the polymathic fifth-century sophist Hippias of Elis, who likewise laid claim to mastery across a startling range of theoretical and practical fields. The sophist Hippias' breadth of expertise is ironically emphasized (and undermined) in Plato's *Hippias Minor*, in which Hippias is represented as boasting of being 'the wisest of all men in the greatest number of fields' (πλείστας τέχνας πάντων σοφώτατος … ἀνθρώπων), among which Plato singles out arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, poetry and prose, rhythm, harmony and letters—a list which closely overlaps with the range of skills which Lucian attributes to the architect 'Hippias'.[22] The intellectual versatility of Hippias of Elis is a common theme in authors of the late Republican and Imperial periods (all of whom are apparently drawing on Plato): similar lists of fields are given by Cicero and Philostratus, and Dio Chrysostom takes Hippias as his jumping-off point for his seventy-first discourse, *On the Philosopher*, which is dedicated to the question of whether the philosopher can reasonably claim to be an expert in every craft.[23]

The similarity between Plato's polymathic Hippias and Lucian's polymathic Hippias has often been noted, but the significance of the link remains elusive. Jones assumes that the architect Hippias was a real person, but suggests that Lucian chose to praise the architect in language that recalled the sophist, 'as if he tried to blend the two figures together and thus to give the building an aura of antiquity'.[24] By contrast, Cannatà Fera thinks that Lucian's modelling of the architect Hippias on the fifth-century sophist shows that Lucian's Hippias is an entirely fictitious individual, part and parcel of the *Hippias*' wider (if rather hazily defined) 'ironic and parodic' character; Race agrees

[20] κατὰ δὲ τὸν γεωμετρικὸν λόγον ἐπὶ τῆς δοθείσης, φασίν, εὐθείας τὸ τρίγωνον ἀκριβῶς συνισταμένου. 'To construct an equilateral triangle on a given finite straight line' is the first proposition in Euclid's *Elements* (1.1). The point of the metaphor here is rather obscure (Cannatà Fera [n. 11], 233–4). I wonder if the emphasis should lie firmly on the word δοθείσης (as the position of φασίν implies): Hippias shows his skill not through the posing and solving of original problems but in the context of routine commissions ('given' projects) which leave little space for innovation.

[21] Vitr. *De arch.* 1.1.3–14; Yegül (n. 5), 118 n. 23 ('simply echoes Vitruvius'). Courrént (n. 17) sees the entire *Hippias* as a 'ironic exegesis' of Vitruvius' picture of the ideal architect, and suggests that Lucian's 'Hippias' should be identified with Vitruvius himself.

[22] Pl. *Hp. mi.* 366c–368e, especially 368b–d. A similar list in *Hp. mai.* 285b–d (astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, syntax, letters, rhythm, harmony). On Plato's characterization of Hippias, see R. Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge, 2002), 128–64 (especially 140–3 on Hippias' polymathy); F.V. Trivigno, 'The moral and literary character of Hippias in Plato's *Hippias Major*', in V. Caxton (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy Volume L* (Oxford, 2016), 31–64. On the historical Hippias, see M. Węcowski, 'Hippias of Elis', *BNJ* 6.

[23] Cic. *De or.* 3.127; Philostr. *V S* 1.11 (495); Dio Chrys. *Or.* 71.2, with Fornaro's discussion in H.-G. Nesselrath (ed.), *Dion von Prusa: Der Philosoph und sein Bild* (Tübingen, 2009), 14–17, 142–4.

[24] C.P. Jones, *Culture and Society in Lucian* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 155; similarly Swain (n. 9), 419–20 and apparently Thomas (n. 5), 224 (while also emphasizing the satirical tone of the *Hippias* as a whole).

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that Lucian's Hippias is fictitious, but (contrary to Cannatà Fera) sees him as an 'idealized' figure rather than a satirical one.[25]

I suggest that Lucian has a specific reason for modelling his (wholly fictitious) architect on Hippias of Elis—or, more precisely, on the caricature of Hippias of Elis found in Plato's dialogues. In Plato's *Hippias Minor*, Socrates illustrates Hippias' polymathic expertise with the following anecdote: 'You said that you once went to Olympia with everything you had on your body your own work. First, the ring you were wearing (for you started with that) was your own work, showing that you knew how to engrave rings; another signet was your own work, and a strigil and an oil flask, which you had made yourself. Then you said that you had cut from leather the sandals you were wearing, and that you had woven your cloak and tunic; and what seemed to everyone most remarkable and a display of the greatest wisdom was when you said that the belt of the tunic which you wore was like the expensive Persian ones, and that you had plaited it yourself' (368c). This story caught the imagination of many later writers, including Cicero, Quintilian (*Inst.* 12.11.21) and Dio. But the most detailed elaboration of the anecdote is owed to Lucian's near-contemporary Apuleius, in his encomium of Sex. Cocceius Severianus Honorinus, proconsul of Africa in (probably) A.D. 160/1 (*Flor.* 9.14–29).[26] Apuleius passes quickly over Hippias' tunic, belt, cloak, sandals and ring, before lingering in particular detail on the oil flask and the strigil: 'I have not yet mentioned all that he had, since I will not be shy to mention something he was not shy to display: he announced to a large crowd that he had also crafted for himself the oil flask that he was carrying, elliptical in shape, with smooth edges and slightly convex sides, and in addition a handsome little strigil, with a straight-sided, tapering grip and a curved, grooved blade, so that the grip made the strigil steady in the hand, and the channel allowed the sweat to run off' (*Flor.* 9.22–3, transl. C.P. Jones). Apuleius drily goes on to say that he cannot lay claim to such technical skills himself: 'I purchase my strigil, oil flask and other bathing equipment at the market' (9.26).

To my mind, it is these two items—Hippias' home-made oil flask and strigil—which both clinch the link between Lucian's 'Hippias' and Plato's literary caricature of Hippias of Elis, and (more importantly) explain the purpose of the allusion. For Apuleius, the culminating piece of evidence for Hippias of Elis' versatility was the fact that he crafted his own items of rather ordinary everyday bathing equipment; for Lucian, the key illustration of Hippias' versatility was his design and construction of a rather ordinary bath-house.[27] The bath-house of Lucian's *Hippias* is a hyperbolic (and comic) extrapolation from the two modest items of home-made bathing gear in Plato's anecdote in the *Hippias Minor*.

The humour of Lucian's *Hippias*, therefore, derives not from any semi-concealed erotic or scatological hints in Lucian's description of the bath-house, still less from

[25] Cannatà Fera (n. 11), 239; Race (n. 3), 235–6. Dubel (n. 4 [2014]), 58 agrees that Lucian's Hippias is a fictional calque on Plato's Hippias, but leaves the significance of the link open.

[26] See S.J. Harrison, *Apuleius: A Latin Sophist* (Oxford, 2000), 105–9; B.T. Lee, *Apuleius' Florida: A Commentary* (Berlin and New York, 2005), 96–112; for the date of Honorinus' proconsulship, M. Chetoui and C. Hugoniot, 'Les proconsuls d'Afrique sous le règne de Marc Aurèle (161–180): étude chronologique', in S. Aounallah and A. Mastino (edd.), *L'epigrafia del Nord Africa: Novità, riletture, nuove sintesi* (Faenza, 2020), 223–36, at 230.

[27] The two culminating examples are introduced in strikingly similar language: *enim non pigebit me commemorare quod illum non puditum est ostentare* (*Flor.* 9.22); ἃ δὲ ἔναγχος ἰδὼν αὐτοῦ τῶν ἔργων κατεπλάγην, οὐκ ὀκνήσω εἰπεῖν (*Hippias* **4**). The link is noted by Hanoune (n. 5), 315 n. 5, without drawing the consequences suggested here.

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any implicit criticism of the Roman practice of public bathing.[28] Rather, the central point of the text is to dramatize the gradual revelation that this fictive bath-house, praised in such hyperbolic and rhetorically elaborate terms, is a completely standard example of a building-type to be found in any medium-sized city of the Roman world, with no unusual or distinctive features whatsoever—an Antonine Drayneflete, if you like.[29] Lucian in fact drops strong hints to this effect, through repeated use of the adjectives κοινός 'commonplace' and μικρός 'small, minor': 'This particular project is a commonplace one, and very widespread in our own culture today, namely the construction of a bath-house—but even in this commonplace field of expertise, his ingenuity and intelligence are wondrous' (**4**); 'Let no-one suppose that I have chosen to take a minor work as my theme and add adornment to it through my oration; I consider it a sign of no minor wisdom to contrive novel examples of beauty in a commonplace field of endeavour' (**8**).[30] Lucian's decision to model the architect of this building on the sophist Hippias of Elis was a particularly neat choice, since the historical Hippias too—in Plato's hostile account—used the most 'commonplace' and 'minor' objects to illustrate his polymathic genius, his little oil flask and strigil.

The real point of Lucian's *Hippias* is to parody the hyperbolic boosterism of contemporary prose encomia of bath-houses and other public works, which (we may infer) claimed that the most tediously standard, flat-pack buildings were truly dazzling masterpieces of design and execution. As with Lancaster's Drayneflete—and as with Lucian's own magnificently straight-faced *Encomium of the Fly*—the joke lies in the dramatic mismatch between the speaker's earnest over-the-top puffery and the exceedingly mundane object towards which his rhetoric is directed. Hippias of Elis' disproportionate pride in his modest home-made bathing tools serves as a delightfully sly analogy for the heroic lack of proportion that Lucian shows in his own fictive *ekphrasis*.

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[28] In the *Nigrinus*, Lucian criticizes wealthy individuals' behaviour in bath-houses (13, 34), but—*pace* Cannatà Fera (n. 11), 241—not the institution of public bathing itself.

[29] Hyperbole: note the ten superlatives in sections **4–6** (Cannatà Fera [n. 11], 240). The pile-up of superlatives in the opening chapter of Lucian's *The Hall* has a similar effect.

[30] κοινός: Thomas (n. 5), 224; cf. Pernot (n. 4), 2.686.

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