

Lucian of Samosata - Main Biography

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[Lucian - Wikipedia](#)

Lucian of Samosata^[a] (c. 125 – after 180) was a Hellenized [Syrian satirist](#), [rhetorician](#) and [pamphleteer](#) who is best known for his characteristic [tongue-in-cheek](#) style, with which he frequently ridiculed superstition, religious practices, and belief in the paranormal. Although his native language was probably [Syriac](#), all of his extant works are written entirely in [ancient Greek](#) (mostly in the [Attic Greek](#) dialect popular during the [Second Sophistic](#) period).

Everything that is known about Lucian's life comes from his own writings,^[1] which are often difficult to interpret because of his extensive use of sarcasm. According to his oration *The Dream*, he was the son of a [lower middle class](#) family from the city of [Samosata](#) along the banks of the [Euphrates](#) in the remote Roman province of [Syria](#). As a young man, he was apprenticed to his uncle to become a sculptor, but, after a failed attempt at sculpting, he ran away to pursue an education in [Ionia](#). He may have become a travelling lecturer and visited universities throughout the [Roman Empire](#). After acquiring fame and wealth through his teaching, Lucian finally settled down in [Athens](#) for a decade, during which he wrote most of his extant works. In his fifties, he may have been appointed as a highly paid government official in [Egypt](#), after which point he disappears from the historical record.

Lucian's works were wildly popular in antiquity, and more than eighty writings attributed to him have survived to the present day, a considerably higher quantity than for most other classical writers. His most famous work is *A True Story*, a tongue-in-cheek satire against authors who tell incredible tales, which is regarded by some as the earliest known work of [science fiction](#). Lucian invented the genre of comic dialogue, a parody of the traditional [Socratic dialogue](#). His dialogue *Lover of Lies* makes fun of people who believe in the supernatural and contains the oldest known version of "*The Sorcerer's Apprentice*". Lucian wrote numerous satires making fun of [traditional stories about the gods](#) including *The Dialogues of the Gods*, *Icaromenippus*, *Zeus Rants*, *Zeus Catechized*, and *The Parliament of the Gods*. His *Dialogues of the Dead* focuses on the [Cynic](#) philosophers [Diogenes](#) and [Menippus](#). *Philosophies for Sale* and *The Carousal*, or *The Lapiths* make fun of various philosophical schools, and *The Fisherman or the Dead Come to Life* is a defense of this mockery.

Lucian often ridiculed public figures, such as the Cynic philosopher [Peregrinus Proteus](#) in his letter *The Passing of Peregrinus* and the fraudulent oracle [Alexander of Abonoteichus](#) in his treatise *Alexander the False Prophet*. Lucian's treatise *On the Syrian Goddess* satirizes cultural distinctions between Greeks and Syrians and is the main source of information about the cult of

[Atargatis](#).

Lucian had an enormous, wide-ranging impact on Western literature. Works inspired by his writings include [Thomas More's Utopia](#), the works of [François Rabelais](#), [William Shakespeare's Timon of Athens](#) and [Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels](#).

Life[[edit](#)]

Biographical sources[[edit](#)]

Lucian is not mentioned in any contemporary texts or inscriptions written by others[2] and he is not included in [Philostratus's Lives of the Sophists](#). [2] As a result of this, everything that is known about Lucian comes exclusively from his own writings. [3][4][2] A variety of characters with names very similar to Lucian, including "Lukinos", "Lukianos", "Lucius", and "The Syrian" appear throughout Lucian's writings. [2] These have been frequently interpreted by scholars and biographers as "masks", "alter-egos", or "mouthpieces" of the author. [2] Daniel S. Richter criticizes the frequent tendency to interpret such "Lucian-like figures" as self-inserts by the author [2] and argues that they are, in fact, merely fictional characters Lucian uses to "think with" when satirizing conventional distinctions between Greeks and Syrians. [2] He suggests that they are primarily a literary [trope](#) used by Lucian to deflect accusations that he as the Syrian author "has somehow outraged the purity of Greek idiom or genre" through his invention of the comic dialogue. [5] British classicist [Donald Russell](#) states, "A good deal of what Lucian says about himself is no more to be trusted than the voyage to the moon that he recounts so persuasively in the first person in True Stories" [6] and warns that "it is foolish to treat [the information he gives about himself in his writings] as autobiography." [6]

Background and upbringing[[edit](#)]

[Lucian is located in Turkey](#)

[Samosata](#) Background or type unknown

Map of [Anatolia](#) showing locations associated with Lucian

Lucian was born in the town of Samosata on the banks of the Euphrates on the far eastern outskirts of the Roman Empire. [7][4][8][9] Samosata had been the capital of the kingdom of [Commagene](#) until 72 AD when it was annexed by [Vespasian](#) and became part of the Roman province of Syria. [10][9] The population of the town was mostly [Syrian](#) [7] and Lucian's native tongue was probably Syriac, a form of [Middle Aramaic](#). [7][11][12][9]

During the time when Lucian lived, traditional Greco-Roman religion was in decline and its role in society had become largely ceremonial. [13] As a substitute for traditional religion, many people in the Hellenistic world joined [mystery cults](#), such as the [Mysteries of Isis](#), [Mithraism](#), the cult of [Cybele](#), and the [Eleusinian Mysteries](#). [14] Superstition had always been common throughout ancient society, [14] but it was especially prevalent during the second century. [14] [15] Most educated people of Lucian's time adhered to one of the various [Hellenistic philosophies](#), [14] of which the major ones were [Stoicism](#), [Platonism](#), [Peripateticism](#), [Pyrrhonism](#), and [Epicureanism](#). [14] Every major town had its own 'university' [14] and these 'universities'

often employed professional travelling lecturers,[\[14\]](#) who were frequently paid high sums of money to lecture about various philosophical teachings.[\[16\]](#) The most prestigious center of learning was the city of [Athens](#) in Greece, which had a long intellectual history.[\[16\]](#)

According to Lucian's oration *The Dream*, which classical scholar [Lionel Casson](#) states he probably delivered as an address upon returning to Samosata at the age of thirty-five or forty after establishing his reputation as a great orator,[\[3\]](#) Lucian's parents were [lower middle class](#) and his uncles owned a local statue-making shop.[\[7\]](#) Lucian's parents could not afford to give him a higher education,[\[3\]](#) so, after he completed his elementary schooling, Lucian's uncle took him on as an apprentice and began teaching him how to sculpt.[\[3\]](#) Lucian, however, soon proved to be poor at sculpting and ruined the statue he had been working on.[\[3\]](#) His uncle beat him, causing him to run off.[\[3\]](#) Lucian fell asleep and experienced a dream in which he was being fought over by the personifications of Statuary and Culture.[\[3\]\[17\]](#) He decided to listen to Culture and thus sought out an education.[\[3\]\[18\]](#)

Although *The Dream* has long been treated by scholars as a truthful autobiography of Lucian,[\[3\]\[19\]](#) its historical accuracy is questionable at best.[\[20\]\[19\]\[6\]](#) Classicist [Simon Swain](#) calls it "a fine but rather apocryphal version of Lucian's education"[\[20\]](#) and Karin Schlapbach calls it "ironical".[\[17\]](#) Richter argues that it is not autobiographical at all, but rather a *prolalia* (προλλάλία), or playful literary work, and a "complicated meditation on a young man's acquisition of [paideia](#)" [i.e. education].[\[19\]](#) Russell dismisses *The Dream* as entirely fictional, noting, "We recall that [Socrates](#) too started as sculptor, and [Ovid](#)'s vision of *Elegy and Tragedy* ([Amores](#) 3.1) is all too similar to Lucian's."[\[6\]](#)