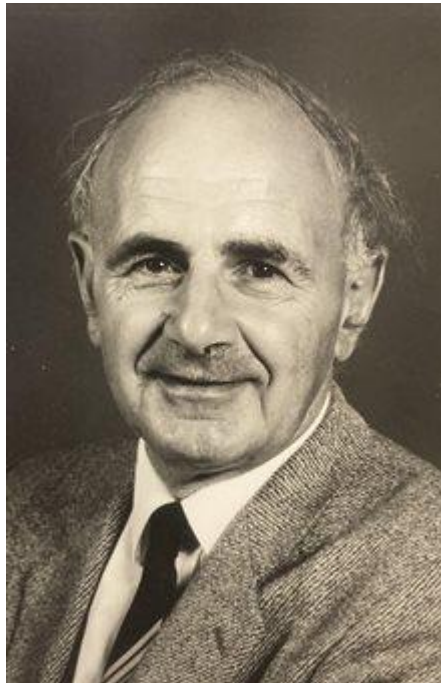


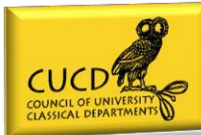
# Wolf Liebeschuetz (1927–2022)



*by* John Rich

John Hugo Gideon Wolfgang Liebeschuetz, known to everyone as Wolf, was an outstanding ancient historian who made a major contribution to the modern study of late antiquity. He was also one of the last survivors of the many Jewish refugees from pre-war Germany who so enriched British academic life.

Wolf was born in Hamburg on 22 June 1927 into a highly cultivated family which had for several generations belonged to the Liberal Jewish community. Both his parents were distinguished academics, his father Hans as a medieval historian and his mother Rachel as a research physiologist, but both lost their posts at Hamburg University after Hitler came to power. For a time, Wolf attended a local primary school, where the class

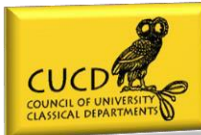


teacher sometimes wore his SS uniform and the pupils decorated the classroom with newspaper pictures celebrating the Führer's love of children. After two years, the teacher sent him home, and his education was only able to continue in a makeshift school for Jewish children started by his parents. All the ten or so pupils were to escape the Holocaust, but the teacher, Henriette Arndt, did not.

In 1938 the family decided to leave Germany for England, assisted by Rachel's brother Theodore, who had already settled there. However, before they could all leave, Hans was one of the thousands of Jewish men arrested on Kristallnacht (9-10 November) and imprisoned in concentration camps. He was released on 12 December, but the next day Wolf and his brother and sister set out on their journey to England, accompanied by an English woman sent by their uncle. Their parents and grandmothers followed later.

Wolf's father eventually obtained a lectureship at Liverpool University, but the family settled initially in south London. There the sound knowledge of English which he had already been taught stood Wolf in good stead, although he continued throughout his life to speak with a slight German accent (and, it is said, German with a slight English accent). At Whitgift School, Croydon, he was a keen rugby player (rather to the surprise of later friends), and studied Latin and some Greek, but in the sixth form he concentrated on science subjects, intending to follow his mother into the medical profession. However, his two years of national service, spent mostly in Egypt, convinced him that his incompetence at practical tasks meant that he was not cut out to be a doctor. Instead, he got a place at University College London to study History, and opted to specialize in ancient history, so determining the course of the rest of his life.

At UCL Wolf was taught by A.H.M. Jones, a great ancient historian, but a notoriously poor teacher whose students had to exert themselves to learn from him. Wolf was one of those who made the effort and found it very much worthwhile. Jones's methods, especially his insistence on the primacy of the ancient sources and the wide chronological and geographical range of his interests, had a huge influence on Wolf's

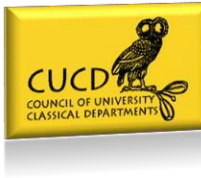


own work.

When Wolf went on to postgraduate research, he opted, following Jones's example, to specialize in the later Roman empire, then still a neglected period, and, at Jones's suggestion, he took as his research topic the celebrated rhetorician Libanius of Antioch, whose letters and speeches provide a rich source for the elite life of the time. By then, however, Jones had departed for Cambridge, and it was his successor Momigliano who acted as Wolf's supervisor. The thesis was ready for submission in December 1956, but the day of its submission brought what at the time seemed a devastating blow, the news of the publication of Paul Petit's major book on Libanius and the municipal life of Antioch, which appeared to leave no room for a second book on the same theme.

Wolf accordingly turned to school teaching, at which he spent the next six years, mainly at Heanor Grammar School in Derbyshire, where he taught Latin and German. Later he modestly insisted that he 'was an adequate, but not particularly good teacher', but in 1963 a lectureship appointment enabled him to transfer to Leicester University, where he found stimulating company both within and beyond the Classics Department.

Wolf published articles on late antiquity while still a school teacher, as well as undertaking the heroic task of compiling the index to Jones's monumental *The Later Roman Empire 284-602* (1964). At Leicester he published widely, not only on late antiquity, but also on topics arising out of his teaching, including Livy, Lucretius and Thucydides. He now felt able to publish a book based on his thesis, and the result, *Antioch: City and Imperial Administration in the Later Roman Empire* (1972), remains one of the most highly regarded studies of a major late Roman city and how it fitted into the Empire. Next, prompted by his study of Livy's religious position and teaching on the Christian persecutions, as well as his own longstanding interests in religion, Wolf turned to Roman religion. His *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (1979) presents a remarkably ambitious overview of Roman religious developments and attitudes from the first century BC to the triumph of Christianity in the fourth century AD. The book was ahead of its time, rejecting the then conventional view of traditional



Roman religion as in decline and drawing on anthropology to illuminate practices like divination.

In 1979 Wolf moved to the neighbouring University of Nottingham as Professor of Classics and Ancient History and Head of the Department of Classical and Archaeological Studies. He succeeded Edward Thompson and so maintained Nottingham's special expertise in late Roman studies, which Thompson had initiated and which continues to this day. The minutiae of departmental administration were not Wolf's forte, but he worked hard to defend the department in the harsh economic climate of the 1980s, helping to develop new courses and making the most of the opportunities provided by the closure of classics departments elsewhere. Valuable colleagues were imported from Lancaster and Sheffield, and by the time of Wolf's retirement in 1992 the Nottingham classics and ancient history staffing, which at one point had dropped to four, had increased to eleven.

At Nottingham Wolf's research interests were now again mainly focused on late antiquity, and, despite his other commitments, he produced a steady stream of articles and conference papers and another major book, *Barbarians and Bishops* (1990). This combined together two of his leading concerns: the nature of barbarian societies and their role in the Roman army, and the turbulent relations between leading bishops and the imperial government. In the year of his retirement, he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

Wolf's long retirement proved extraordinarily productive. He continued to keep fit by cycling between his home and the university (with only occasional mishaps). Having previously been dependent on the departmental secretary, he now acquired effective, if sometimes erratic, word-processing skills, and he continued to be a regular conference-goer, not least for the sightseeing opportunities (he had long been keenly interested in art and architecture). Publications continued to pour out, with his final article appearing in 2020.

Wolf now returned to his early interest in urbanism. Numerous papers on the late



antique city led up to a grand survey, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (2001), which synthesizes enormous and complex sets of data – literary, documentary and archaeological – from across the Roman empire in support of a controversial thesis. As the Gibbonian echo in the book's title indicates, Wolf argues for the traditional view that urban changes from the third century on constituted the decline and fall of the ancient city, and not, as many other scholars now hold, just its transformation. Also in this period, he contributed extensively to the publications of the Transformation of the Roman World Project, run by the European Science Foundation, although taking a rather more traditional view of the barbarian peoples' origins and impact than the project leaders. Wolf next returned to bishops, producing first a valuable selection of Ambrose's writings for the Translated Texts for Historians series (*Ambrose of Milan, Political Letters and Speeches*, 2005) and then his last monograph, *Ambrose and John Chrysostom: Clerics between Desert and Empire* (2011). His third and last collection of papers, *East and West in Late Antiquity: Invasion, Settlement, Ethnogenesis and Conflicts of Religion*, which followed in 2015, opens with a charming personal memoir.

In his final years Wolf focused on writing and collating his family history. Despite his early experiences, he felt deep love and respect for Germany and the German people and culture, visiting as often as he could. From 2012 he was invited several times to visit schools in and around Hamburg to speak as an Augenzeuge ('eyewitness') about his experiences as a Jew in Hitler's Germany.

For all his eminence as a scholar, Wolf remained modest, unassuming and kind. Numerous younger scholars were grateful to him for the generous interest with which he read and discussed their views and the time and patience he devoted to it. Above all, he was a family man, much loved by his four children and five grandchildren. He and his wife Margaret met as students at UCL, and their devoted partnership lasted until her death, three years to the day before his own on 22 June 2022.