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Beyond Philosophy:

Notions of Wisdom and Theosophy in the Second Sophistic

Pausanias’ praise of the Greek religious zenith of archaic and classical times contrasts with his saturnine account of the contemporary scene in the mid-second century CE, with its abandoned sites, neglected cult tradition and collapsed temple roofs in the very heart of Greece. His’ description of Greece as a land with divine presence manifest in the remains of the past, and his personal interest in cult, myths and traditions, are in itself a counterbalance to his own picture of contemporary Greece, as are texts by other authors who put revelation and epiphanies, gods and cults, religious movements and spiritual experiences at the very heart of their writings.

Christian authors had its first peak at the same time and the first heroic accounts of individual Christian martyrs, too, were published at this time, the second century. Some scholars have seen parallels between Christian narrative traditions and sophistic texts, both those that play with ideas of wisdom and thaumaturgy and those that yield parallels between the plots of Jesus’ or the Apostles’ lives and those of pagan heroes like Apollonius in Philostratus.

In her book The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire, Kendra Eshleman has recently underlined the common intellectual values, the shared features in the formation of identity and the shared intellectual habitus of sophists, philosophers and Christian authors.

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1 The first two paragraphs of this paper as well as few smaller parts (esp. on p. 6-7) and single sentences will be published as M. Horster, “Cults in the Second Sophistic”. In: D. Richter, W. Johnson (eds.) Oxford Handbook to the Second Sophistic, OUP (forthcoming 2014).
3 See Anderson 1993, 203-215; Goeken 2012, 318-334; Eshleman 2012; but see the opposing arguments by Whitmarsh 2009.
1. Traditions and Sophistic

One of the many topics and attitudes that formed part of the intellectual tradition of the imperial period was the practice of making references to the Classical past, including its intellectual and cultural achievements. Not only philosophical traditions, but also the validation of knowledge was linked more and more to a kind of natural sophia of those kissed by the Muses, those nearer to the heroes, to the gods, and to those in the mythical or historical past who were responsible for all the important political, literary and practical achievements of mankind, who had made life so agreeable for the wealthy in the imperial period. The use of local religious and mythographic traditions as arguments was reinforced by the growing role of embassies, and with it the relevance of oratory and sophistic performance for either competitive public display, or the pursuit of individual recognition and common or communal privileges. “Kata ta patria” (according to old tradition) was an easy and telling argument in these speeches. The second sophistic, the era of the intellectuals between the late first and early third century, seems to have been the climax in the production and circulation of cultural knowledge of all periods and of all regions, even those far beyond the Greek world. However, often the erudite collections and commentaries by grammarians, sophists and philosophers, and their rhetorical and performed presentation was not just a simple matter of ‘transferring’, ‘transmitting’ cultural knowledge: it was rearranged, transformed, mixed, abbreviated and adorned.

In Greece, the Aegean islands and Asia Minor, many rituals were reinstalled and literary traditions were revived, but in many such cases we may question whether this really had. We can observe that the recourse to ancient traditions at times created a completely new interpretation, as in the case of Herodes Atticus’ technical innovation of creating a mechanical means of transporting the Panathenaic ship (Philostr. VS 550), or his gift of fashionable, pure white clothes for the Eleusinian procession, replacing the traditionally black garments of the ephebes, which made them lose their traditional context of Theseus’ black sail, which was obviously already no longer understood. Hymnody “as a form of

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5 On meletai as the largest group of surviving speeches, cf. Whitmarsh 2005, 20f.
7 For the modern definition of the sophists, and the ancient terms used to denote the ‘intellectuals’ of the period (esp. sophists, philosophers, teachers), see Anderson 1990, Puech 2000 and the short introduction of Whitmarsh 2005, 4-10, 15-19 with references to further literature.
8 IG II² 2090, Philostr. VS 550, cf. Tobin 1997, 200-209 (Herodes’ benefactions for Eleusis) and Strauss 1993, 120 (a possible mythological context is Theseus’ black sail).
spiritual sacrifice” as Angelos Chaniotis (2003, 187) has called it, was another important means which did exist before the imperial period but which in that time received a more prominent place in the hierarchy of rituals and in the esteem of the wealthy and well-educated.⁹ Epigrams and poetry presented as hymns in sanctuaries underlined the exclusiveness of both the author and the reader, the performer and the listener, who understood the texts – in this case, the exclusive form validated the content.

All this attests the antiquarian interests of the educated elites, of course, but above all these phenomena form one of many links from the contemporary Roman reality to an idealised past, an element that helped to strengthen and assert local identity and importance within the empire.¹⁰ Thus, in the imperial period, the control, production and mastering of cultural knowledge had become the powerful province of the intellectuals, no matter whether they were labelled philosophers or sophists. These men made an essential contribution to the approval and importance of the Greek-speaking East of the Roman Empire. They were responsible for the appraisal of all the Greek cities and - they were responsible, specifically, for the acknowledgment of the hierarchies of regions, cities, and sanctuaries, and of a specific city’s privileges. They re-enacted, re-arranged, invented and ritually performed in variants again and again the stories of the past and by doing so created their own significance in the present. The virtuosos handling of cultural knowledge asserted the dignity of their respective topic and assured the relevance of the intellectuals themselves. Mythical origins and heroes, historical events and victories, protection by the gods, cult origins and specific local cult features thus become the ingredients for a convincing speech, e.g. in Dio Chrysostomus’s Olympian speech (or. 12) or Aelius Aristides’ Isthmian one in honour of Poseidon (or. 46).¹¹

2. Popularity and Sophistic

This traditional, religious-related conservative aspect of the intellectual (and socio-political) elite might bematched surprisingly well combined with contemporary popular taste. Especially the creation of more and longer festivals, one of the significant platforms for the sophists’ performances, had important economic side-effects for traders, pilgrims and cities,

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⁹ E.g. the hymn cited as a delicacy for the listener in Hel. 3.2.4; cf. Galli 2001, 47-48 with references.
¹⁰ E.g. Lafond 2005.
¹¹ On Dio’s Olympian speech and his conception of the gods, see Swain 1996, 197-206.
especially if they had an imperial permission for a fair.\textsuperscript{12} A good orator was the best guarantee for the success of an embassy’s request for the extension of festivals to include a fair and the grant of tax exemption. In addition, those of the elites who still preferred the Greek tradition with contests of musicians, tragedy- and comedy-performances, poetry-contests and battles of words, but also with ‘Greek’ athletic contests and weapon-dance performances, had also more occasions to celebrate, and occasional ‘Roman’ (gladiatorial) contests then demonstrated their closeness and familiarity with Rome and the Emperor.\textsuperscript{13} It goes without saying that for the followers of Pythagoras these ‘Roman’ festival-traditions were inadequate, even repellent. For many Pythagoreans even most of the ‘Greek’ traditions were too entertaining, and also not spiritual and ascetic enough. Laughter, excitement and a full stomach, especially if filled with meat, were far removed from the ‘right’ religious attitude. However, criticism concerning the entertaining aspects of the festivals and of simplistic religiosity was widespread and not restricted onto the followers of Middle- and Neoplatonism and Neopythagoreanism. Already Plato had already formulated the distinction between the credulous and naive religious Greeks to those who lead a responsible and wise way of life in the service of their respective polis (Pl. Laws 909e-910a). The earliest such treatise to criticise religious ‘naivety’ in the period of the second sophistic seems to be Plutarch’s \textit{On superstition}, in which he follows Plato in his critique and censures superstition as being as dangerous as atheism.\textsuperscript{14} Other objects of criticism in this field include, for example, the fact that those who lack the power of persuasion instead use the religious festivals to please the common people by gifts of money, banquets or gladiatorial shows to please the common people (Plut. \textit{mor.} 802 D; Dio Chrys. \textit{or.} 66, \textit{or.} 31.121; Ael. Arist. \textit{or.} 29.4.).

\textbf{3. The personal encounter with the divine}

The elitist philosophical and purist-religious pseudo-Greek attitude is partly a new, sophistic way to express a deep personal religiosity, which is often combined with adoration of one universal highest divinity.\textsuperscript{15} Apart from satiric instances by some of Lucian’s protagonists and a few other such literary allusions, we hear for example from Aelius Aristidis in his \textit{Hieroi

\textsuperscript{12} The little evidence available is presented by De Ligt 1993, 253-255.
\textsuperscript{13} See e.g. Bowersock 1973, Van Nijf 2001.
\textsuperscript{14} Plato is not the only literary and philosophical model, Brenk 1987: 260-262.
\textsuperscript{15} See e.g. Anderson 1993, 200-215, Chaniotis 2010.
Logoi - Sacred Tales - that he favours Sarapis, the Saviour (3.48), and Asclepius, the true physician (1.45, 57), both in his texts assimilated to Zeus, the creator and father of all things (1.43.6, cf. 3.46). In addition, Aristides claims that his oratory had made him an initiate into the Mysteries (of and by the *logos*), through which he had become a true philosopher, a wise man.¹⁶ Such mystical or spiritual experiences and personal relations to the gods are one of the strongest means that are used to create authority in the texts of the period, and thus to validate their contents. Many texts of the late first to early third century discuss with a more or less philosophical approach divine qualities, the supernatural and superstition, mystery and Orphism, or integrate descriptions of cults and (real or ‘fictive’) rituals into literary texts and speeches. The epiphanies of heroes and gods and the sophists’ personal talk with the divinities enables the orator to gain an insight into deeper truth, in a similar way to initiation.

And yet, even though we have the Jewish and Christian literary traditions of the authentic logoi from the highest god as well as those of the literary tradition of divine inspiration like in Hesiod, the second century added the authority of the ‘real’ and personal contact of author and divinity, of the personal interlocution — most often a dialogue — between the author and the god. Aristides’ *Sacred Tales* thus originated from Asclepius, whom he met again and again in the sanctuary at Pergamon. And the wisdom in Philostratus’ *Heroicus* stemmed from his character’s conversation with Protesilaous, the divine hero.

In the 2014-CRASIS-Masterclass and again in the CRASIS-2014 conference, you have heard more such examples, starting from the Hellenistic period (with Jewish and pagan text and their narrative strategies) and continuing well into the Byzantine tradition. In 12th-century Byzanz, the authors Eustathius and John Tzetzes both took recourse onto Homer and his divine inspiration. At that period, education was the initiation ritual and Homeric poetry the gate to true wisdom. This is not in Homer, but such an interpretation transports adopts literary schemes and cultural knowledge off from the Second Sophistic, which was rooted in the philosophical fashions and the discourses of their time.

Philosophy, especially that of the Epicurean and Stoic school, had long become a way of life. After the death of Drusus, when Livia needed consolation in her grief over the death of her son — philosophical thoughts were the appropriate companions, Seneca would have

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been the right man.\textsuperscript{17} Seneca’s and Marcus Aurelius’ so-called philosophical thoughts in the first and second century CE are just another example of this new lifestyle-oriented focus of philosophy and the simple style of philosophical reasoning, simple in relation to Platonic Dialogues and similar treatises.

However, the other side – so to speak, serious philosophy – still existed, but it was most often the sophists who became the important intellectuals of their time, though at their best they were well trained in the texts of one or more philosophical schools. But this seems to be well hidden in many of the speeches and other texts that have survived from the Second Sophistic. Religious experiences and the search for truth through the divine, like initiation, epiphanies, divinations or oracles, or through the encounter with educated men – whatever the waypath, the gate is words, – written or spoken. From the relevance of the words and the texts, it is obvious that the ‘genre’ of text determines both the possible range of interpretations and the attitudes that were acceptable towards the ways of acquiring the various stages of knowledge.

However, sceptics did exist who resisted the temptation to follow the rising mysticism and the theosophical way of achieving knowledge and gaining access to wisdom. The text-genre in Plutarch’s case is short conversations. In the \textit{Obsolescence of oracles} the lightweight and short answer to the question of why so many oracles no longer operated in Imperial Greece is demography: fewer people proportionally need fewer oracles. As already stated above, his philosophical answer is the different and very critical one given in \textit{On Superstition}. The cynic Oenomaus of Gadara wrote \textit{On the exposure of charlatans}, in which he denies the possibility of prediction and the value of oracles,\textsuperscript{18} and the two ‘biographies’ of Apollonius of Tyana (by Philostratus) and Alexander of Abounouteichous (by Lucian) are filled with allusions to the ongoing discussion over the value and efficacy of prophecy and oracles. The appreciation of and search for spiritual experience (like dreams, prophecies, and oracles, or through with Orphism, or mysticism, or with the help of Neopythagoreanism and Middle- and Neoplatonism) are one important intellectual trend at that time, but another one is scepticism, with satirical overtones especially when criticising everything connected to superstition, mysticism and belief in miracles.

\textsuperscript{17} Cf. \textit{Sen. cons. ad Marc}.

\textsuperscript{18} Hammerstaedt 1990.
4. Period atmosphere

It is the Greek novel of the Imperial period, with its digressions and romantic contexts, that anecdotes that offers insights into the emotional and religiously charged atmosphere of the literary (and perhaps the real) world of the wealthy and educated classes in the period. The novel's main subject, love and passion, with the necessary obstacles which the lovers must overcome so they can finally come be together, are interwoven with miraculous salvations in the contexts of cult-settings, but without too obvious interventions by deities.¹⁹ Often a setting in a sanctuary, at an initiation or other mystery-ritual, or at cult-events like processions, forms the background for surprising turning points: in Xenophon's Ephesiaca (1.2), the Artemis festival in Ephesus with its many bystanders provides a lively background for the moment when Anthia meets her Habrocomes; in Achilles Tatius, the two lovers Leucippe and Clitophon are rescued, after a decisive intermezzo in the Artemision in Ephesus (7.12.2-4); and in Heliodorus most of the male and female protagonists are priests or pretend to be priests and, further, Theagenes and Chariclea fall in love at the ceremony of a torch-ritual of a mystery-cult (3.1-6).²⁰ In addition, exotic settings add to the already charged atmosphere in the novel.

5. The peregrine world and Greek superiority

In such a context, non-Greek gods, and the staging of their cult and the ‘otherness’ of their rituals and priests and cult personnel are given some importance. Egyptian gods, Egyptian and Ethiopian priests, Indian gods and the Indian or Ethiopian wise men – these are also the intellectual and religion-connected religious competitors to who, in whom the literary world, are matched against the hero of Philostratus’ Apollonius of Tyana and other Greek philosophers and sophists of the second and early third century searching for wisdom and inspired enlightenment. The true philosopher or sophist, that is the wise man, is backed by divine support, likewise by Greek and foreign divinities equally.

A clear advantage for the Greeks! The Greek educated man is superior to all others; however, morally good men, certain aspects of wisdom and powerful gods may be found in various civilisations and cultures. Thus Isis is introduced into the Greek literary world with

¹⁹ See Zeitlin 2008 for the limited role of divine interventions.
²⁰ See Billaut 2012 on cult and rituals in Achilles Tatius; Morgan 2003, 446-54 on religion and morality and sexual codes in Heliodorus.
Xenophon of Ephesos and Apuleius: she flavours a novel with period atmosphere.\textsuperscript{21} Because of the initiation, mystery-cults have some exclusivity,\textsuperscript{22} but Isis seems to be rather (socially) wide-spread. The educated reader probably looked more after for remote divinities like Melikertes-Palaimon, who, receives a kind of intellectual prominence in Philostratus’ \textit{Imagines}, in his \textit{Heroicus} and in one of Aelius Aristides’ hymns.\textsuperscript{23}

\section*{6. The way to the sophistic top}

There are changes in the use and description of the religious setting that can be traced in the language and atmosphere of the various literary works of the Second Sophistic, from novels to orations to short or long treatises. It would be too restrictive to assume that the sophists, philosophers, wise and religious men of the time are eager to transfer cultural knowledge in oral performance and various literary forms, they pursue other goals as well, be it personal, political or economic.

Philostratus’ \textit{Lives of the Sophists} does not have not much to say about the contents of knowledge transfer apart from the mechanisms of education and the opportunities of knowledge-display. He tells us about the motivations of all these \textit{pepaidoumenoi}. He names occasions (school, banquets, embassies, festivals) and it seems that most careers began as a pupil of a famous sophist. The pupil himself then starts to earn his living by teaching and oratory; thanks to the recognition of the city he lives in (and also of his fellow-sophists) he receives more pupils, earns more, gets exemptions from liturgies and taxes, receives invitations to competitions, and is selected to deliver a speech in front of the Roman governor or even the emperor and – the peak of it – becomes a friend of the emperor and is awarded the chair in rhetoric in Rome or Athens.

\section*{7. Conjugality with the Divine}

However, the many other texts that we have, do not place the intellectual, his career, his intentions and interests in the centre, but speak of contents, contents which is sometimes rather astonishing. One topic is related to what some have called the “new intimacy” or the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Isis does not hint to an esoteric meaning encoded in the text, cf. Beck \textsuperscript{2} 2003, 131-2, Zeitlin 2008, 95.
\item For the philosophical interpretation of mystery cults in the Imperial period, see Van Nuffelen 2011, 27-47.
\item Reflexes of this cult and its rituals are studied by Piérart 1998. The deity Melikertes-Palaimon and some rituals of the cult are present in Philostr. \textit{Imagines} (2.16), Philostr. \textit{Heroic}. 52.3-54.4, Ael. Arist. \textit{Hymn to Poseidon} (or. 46.40-41).
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“ethics of conjugality” of the Antonine period. Conjugality does not refer to human social relations alone but also to the relation between gods, heroes and humans. Philostratus’ Heroicus is a good example of this emotional and social interaction between humans and a deity: divine epiphany, dialogues between humans and deities, and, finally, the real presence of the gods are part of the world created by literature and oratory. Aelius Aristides often describes his relation to Asclepius in terms of a personal relationship: he has conversations with him, he feels his presence and understands his messages both while awake and in dreams. Epiphany, therefore, is ‘real’ is created in the literary world but creates a new reality. The hero communicates with the gods in a specific setting, a talk in front of a temple, a walk through a grove. This has a physical aspect and not only an intellectual or religious one. In his analysis of Philostratus’ meta-textual gestures, Tim Whitmarsh has underlined how the physical aspect described in the text is compared to the intellectual one: “the beauty of topography is connected with the beauty of language and knowledge” in the Heroicus. Nature – in this case the vinegrower’s harmonious and divinely inspired new life and attitude outside the city – is true philosophy (Hero. 2.5-6) compared to what one may learn from educated philosophers in the cities (Hero. 4.6). The hero Protesilaous is able to share his true wisdom, and enables the vinegrower as well as the reader to feel and understand the true beauty of nature and the true physis, to feel the heroic energy and power. The words in the texts are fixed by a physical chain in reality. In consequence the knowledge acquired is more than just part of the virtual, the literary world. It is also more than just urban philosophy, the best a man may think on his own, or than two men by disputing may be able to discover in the classical philosophical discourse. No, the exchange between an educated man (a sophist or philosopher) and a deity is more, this is true knowledge, this is wisdom.

Another aspect may be added to this rather esoteric or theosophic picture of knowledge transfer: the literary setting of many of the disputes in the biographies and discourses as well as the novels. Here we see the importance of sanctuaries and of cult-

25 For the Heroikos, see Pache 2004 and Rutherford 2009; for Lucian’s Peregrinus see Jones 1986, 129. On epiphany in general, see Platt 2011, who includes art as well but has a focus on texts from the archaic to the late antique period.
26 Bowersock’s 1973, 182 devotion to “occultism” among the Antonine elites goes too far.
27 Whitmarsh 2009 [in Bowie/Elsner, Philostratus], 213.
contexts as a setting for intellectual life in the late first to the early third century. Especially by Pausanias, Plutarch, Philostratus and Aelius Aristides the educated reader learns that sanctuaries, as the most important monumental reference points of the past, can be read and understood only with the help of antiquarian knowledge and paideia.

According to C.P. Jones, someone like Apollonius of Tyana, was similar to many other “itinerant Pythagorean philosophers”, “a religious and moral preacher, with a predilection for staying in temples and issuing advice to the personnel”, as well as “an advisor to cities” and “a spiritual counsellor” to some of the “highly placed Romans”. Sanctuaries guarantee the historical and cultural continuity, but so do the names of deities and heroes, or local myths and histories, which may explain the specific forms of commemoration in festivals, processions, and sacrifices.

In the mind of Apollonius and his intellectual friends the extensive, sophisticated and sumptuous celebration of the panegyris, the festival at Olympia, is not just the result of successful orations (concerning e.g. matters of financing and imperial permissions): it is also the result of a long history, it is composed of a setting of famous buildings, of elaborated older and newer rituals. Only those with wisdom and antiquarian knowledge will be able to apprehend the festival’s complexity, to decode all the layers of the centuries in the monuments, colours, texts, stories, rituals etc.

Divine inspiration is but for the happy few. For many people education is the most important way to get to the essence of Greek culture (and religion), then and only the (intellectual) elite can engage in that field. Verity Platt has established that the literary narrative of a biography or novel may even match the religious process with an intellectual journey (Platt 2009, 133 on the Life of Apollonius of Tyana). Sophists and philosophers become the guides on such tours. Apollonius, the divinely inspired and true philosopher, is wise and therefore has knowledge superior to that of any priest on matters concerning cult

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28 See Korenjak 2000, 27-33 (places of speech), Galli 2001 (intellectual life in sanctuaries) and id. 2002 (benefactions and buildings).
29 For the function and social context of Greek paideia in the Roman empire, see e.g. Bowersock 1969; Swain 1996, Schmitz 1997 and Whitmarsh 2001.
30 Jones 2005: 11
31 Alcock 2013 passim; Bowie 2013.
32 Philostr. VA 8.18.
33 Alcock 1993, 210-212.
34 Platt 2009, 133 on the Life of Apollonius of Tyana.
and religion, because he already had the necessary natural and intellectual disposition and was, during his journeys, open for all kinds of intellectual and religious experiences.

8. The Greeks take it all

Much of what I have discussed had been subject ofaddressed by Jaś Elsner, Ian Rutherford, Alain Billaut, Johann Goeken and many others of whichwhom I have named but a few. However, I would like to give the last word to Ewen Bowie, who wrote about our subject – the validation, production and circulation of knowledge. According to Bowie, Philostratus gives Apollonius the sage “greater authority by constructing him as a pilgrim to holy places and a traveller bringing wisdom from afar”.

Cultural knowledge thus presented combines the physis with the logos, the superiority of a profound knowledge without a ‘proof of origin’, taken from everywhere and thus deeply rooted in the whole oikoumene as a real, and not only a textual world. The Second Sophistic takes it all, but only in the Greek language and with the notion of the Greek intellectual, no longer a philosopher, but now a wise man.

Bibliography


35 Miles 2006.
36 Bowie 2013, 47.


