The rhetorical background of Galen’s “On the exercise with the small ball”

Galen’s essay “On the exercise with the small ball” (*De parvae pilae exercitio*) has been welcomed by scholars of ancient sports for its description of ball games and by scholars of ancient medicine for its discussion of the benefits of an exercise regimen. In his 1908 dissertation, W. Schaefer drew attention to the rhetorical nature of the essay, identifying it as an encomium (26-27). Schaefer’s argument seems to have had little impact. In the standard edition of 1938, E. Wenkebach all but denied the essay’s rhetorical nature, warning that it should not be “misunderstood as a rhetorical encomium by an Iatrosophist,” because although it does contain praise of the game, it is “not made up at the expense of the facts by false means” (296, tr. mine). J. König in 2005 seems to have considered the possibility that the essay is an encomium, but only of the adoxographical type, concluding that it is “not…a straightforward example of the common rhetorical exercise of praising objects which would not usually attract praise” (285). Most recently in 2008, S. Mattern briefly characterized the essay as “a lighthearted encomium of the exercise for which it is titled” (128), but she did not pursue the point.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I propose to extend Schaefer’s brief discussion of the essay as an encomium by interpreting its features in the light of the ancient theory and practice of two exercises in the progymnasmata: the encomium of a human practice or *epitêdeuma* (i.e. encomium of ball playing), and the thesis built on encomiastic headings (i.e. should one practice the small ball game?). Second, I intend to show that failure to appreciate the rhetorical origins and structure of the essay undermines König’s interpretation at several key points. My interpretation of this treatise will promote a better understanding of the influence of the progymnasmata on literary composition, the relationship between medicine and rhetoric in the Second Sophistic, and Galen’s own compositional background and practice.