

The Sophists from Oral to Written

The sophists lived in the fifth century BCE, a time when culture evolved from a predominately oral stage to one when writing was being used for intellectual communication. My intent is to try to locate some of their works along this timeline and identify stylistic characteristics of those composed for oral performance vs. those composed for a reading audience.

During most of this period a large part of the sophists' activity was giving oral performances, often in competition. Gorgias' *Helen* and *Palamedes* clearly were composed for oral performance, whereas *On Non-Being* seems to have had no rhythmic qualities and is too complex for oral presentation; it must have been written. Protagoras' Great Speech (as recreated by Plato in the *Protagoras*) was probably an oral presentation, and even his two most famous sayings ("man-measure" and "on the gods") have rhythmic qualities that suggest an origin in oral sayings.

I will then look more briefly at the next generation of sophists. Hippias seems to have specialized in giving extemporaneous oral performances, and Prodicus probably began developing his distinctions between near synonyms orally, as in the *Protagoras*, before they were collected into a written work (*Orthoepia*). Thrasymachus composed a speech for the assembly (though he probably did not have deliver it himself) and there is no good evidence that he wrote anything about justice along the lines of his assertions in the *Republic* (where Plato may be drawing on his reported views). Besides *On Non-Being*, the only other surviving work from this period that was clearly written to be read is the fragmentary *Truth* of Antiphon, whose written qualities I will examine in some detail.