

## From “Second Sophistic” to Imperial Literature?

Over the past three decades, study of the Second Sophistic has been a rapidly growing area within Classics, especially among researchers in Europe and the United Kingdom. One result is that field seems to have outgrown its original designation. Adopted from the third century CE writer Philostratus, the term “Second Sophistic” primarily describes the culture of oratorical performance in the Mediterranean world of the first three centuries CE, and the relationship with the classical rhetorical tradition cultivated by these educated, elite performers and their audiences. This performance culture, and the classical education that sustained it, influenced contemporary literature and society in a variety of ways. Yet, it is not the only point of reference, or framework for understanding the huge variety of literature produced in this period – from novels to narrative history, from fictional dialogues to philosophical treatises. Scholars often prefer now to speak of “Imperial Literature” more broadly, and there is growing interest in reading across traditional boundaries – between Greek and Latin, for example, or pagan and Christian. This panel aims to reflect the capacious variety of Imperial Literature, but also to engage some of the questions this raises about how to understand the relationships among various writers and traditions, and how to construct a picture of the literary and cultural history of the period.

The Panel will begin with a paper on Philostratus’ construction of the idea of the “second sophistic,” in relation to the classical “first sophistic.” The author argues that the picture Philostratus provides of the literary and cultural history of the first few centuries CE is a revisionist one, out of step with the professional self-image of most of the individuals whose biographies he writes. Questioning the traditional framework of the second sophistic, this first paper provides a frame for the remaining three papers which deal with Greek and Latin writers

who have traditionally been considered representatives of the “second sophistic.” Each of these papers examines one or more texts from the perspective not of the author’s engagement with the literary past, but rather his engagement with contemporary audiences and readers. The second paper argues that in two texts Dio of Prusa questions a naïve appeal to Homeric literary precedent on the virtues and responsibilities of kingship. The third paper likewise engages contemporary political discourse, arguing that at two key diplomatic moments Aelius Aristides figures the relationship between Greek cities and the representatives of Roman power in erotic terms, as a romance. Turning to the Latin sphere, the fourth paper offers a narratological reading of Apuleius’ Cupid and Psyche episode, arguing that the episode engages the reader’s aesthetic response in ways that echo programmatic remarks in the novel’s Prologue concerning the allure of literature. Collectively, the papers in this panel demonstrate that writers of this period were thinking not only – and perhaps not primarily – about their place in an intellectual tradition, but more importantly about their place in the contemporary imperial world, and about literature as a way of engaging contemporary concerns and contemporary audiences.