

Classical Sophists in the Second Sophistic

A central puzzle of Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists* (*VS*) is that its history of sophistic rhetoric appears to have no precedent and to go nowhere. So far as we know, Philostratus was the first person to suggest that sophistic rhetoric as such had its own history, and Christopher Jones has shown that his "Second Sophistic" is almost completely ignored in later antiquity (Jones 2008). This paper focuses on the other axis of Philostratus' history, its premise that the imperial-era "second" sophistic is the successor of the first, "ancient" sophistic of classical Athens (*VS* 481). This link has largely been taken for granted, perhaps because the shared label "sophist" and Philostratus' subtle pruning of the ancient sophists to resemble his modern ones makes the link seem obvious and natural. In fact, I will argue, it was deeply eccentric. Unlike Philostratus — and many modern historians of Greek rhetoric — rhetorical writers of the imperial period rarely see any continuity between the classical sophists and oratory ("sophistic" or otherwise) in their own day. Aelius Aristides, for example, devotes two long speeches to rebutting Plato's *Gorgias*, but he barely mentions Gorgias himself, and certainly does not regard him as a predecessor; the forerunners championed in those speeches are men such as Demosthenes, Miltiades, Themistocles, Cimon, and Pericles, whom Philostratus excludes from his history. The Platonic sophists are nearly invisible as well in early imperial rhetorical handbooks and lexica; of Philostratus' nine "ancient" sophists, only the relative outliers — Antiphon, Critias, and Isocrates — are cited with approbation. In the fourth century, the writer most interested in modern heirs of the fifth-century sophists is Themistius, who is seeking to deflect the label "sophist" from himself and onto others. Self-professed "sophists" such as Libanius and Himerius occasionally lay claim to the classical sophists, but even they are more apt to identify with Socrates and against his sophistic opponents. This is typical: when imperial

writers draw a connection between the fifth-century sophists and contemporary rhetorical practice, the purpose is usually polemical.

This paper surveys the ways that authors of the (so-called) Second and Third Sophistics imagined the oratorical legacy of the “First Sophistic”, looking for antecedents and alternatives to Philostratus’ history of sophistic. Often, the classical sophists are simply absent, even from polemical passages where we might expect to find them, and where they have at times been written in by modern scholarship. At times, they are named as sources of current practices that the author dislikes: improvisation and fictive declamations, style that appears forceful but is not, profit-seeking and aggressive recruitment of students. Occasionally they embody the fame to which a modern sophist can aspire, but more frequently they are equated with the rivals against whom an author defines himself, a new Socrates beset by inferior and malicious opponents. Against this background, Philostratus’ choice to claim the fifth-century sophists as intellectual ancestors should be recognized as provocative revisionist history, at odds not only with the traditional Platonic and Aristotelian view, but with the professional self-image of most of his colleagues and subjects.

Bibliography:

Jones, C.P. 2008. “The Survival of the Sophists.” In *East & West: Papers in Ancient History presented to Glen W. Bowersock*, ed. T. Corey Brennan and Harriet I. Flower, 113-25. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.