

Aelius Aristides' Critical Encomium on Rome

It has long been the consensus of opinion that Aelius Aristides' twenty-sixth oration, *Encomium on Rome*, is either a genuine expression of the orator's admiration for the Roman Empire or an exercise in abject flattery—or both. Recently scholars have begun to question this interpretation. To be sure, even on a more nuanced interpretation, there is still plenty of flattery in the oration, but peeking out around the edges is a sense of ambiguity about the empire and the place of Greek elites like Aristides within it. Chief among those calling for a re-examination of the oration is Laurent Pernot. In a number of studies (e.g. Pernot 2008, 2015) he has argued that Aristides is employing the rhetorical technique of figured speech to soften his criticism and signal his discomfort to those with ears to hear.

Many ancient rhetorical treatises discuss figured speech. The technique was used when the orator wanted to say something unwelcome or unpopular without coming right out and saying it. The art was to disguise one's true intentions enough to avoid getting into trouble, while providing just enough clues so that perceptive members of the audience would divine the real message. Even if the clues were a bit too transparent, the orator would have the cover of plausible deniability. Of course, if it is done well, figured speech is very difficult to detect. (Ahl 1984 remains the classic treatment of the technique.)

Aristides delivered the speech in the presence of the emperor Antoninus Pius during a visit to Rome. Pernot has suggested that Aristides' use of figured speech in the encomium mostly shows itself in his eloquent omissions. Though the encomium is presented as a speech celebrating Rome's greatness, Aristides carefully avoids praising anything specifically Roman. The empire is reduced to a mere system that brought peace to the world and especially to the

Greek side of the empire, so that Greeks could flourish largely untroubled by Rome. In Pernot's eyes, the speech is not so much critical of Rome as dismissive.

This paper will argue that the speech is more critical than Pernot will allow. While Pernot sees Aristides' use of figured speech as taking a passive approach, I would argue that he is more active in his use. Most of his veiled criticisms come during his comparison of the Roman Empire with the empires of the past, especially the Persian Empire. On the face of it, Aristides' comparisons are favorable to Rome, but the attentive audience member who follows the implications of these comparisons will see a darker picture.

The figured use of Persia was another well-known feature of Greek engagement with Rome during the imperial period. This is to be expected, as the authors of the Second Sophistic were deeply rooted in the Greek past not just in regard to their use of language, but also in their choice of subjects to explore (Bowie, Connolly, Saïd, Spawforth). To take two examples, according to Philostratus, in his *Lives of the Sophists*, the rhetor Scopelianus of Clazomenae was famous for his treatment of Persian themes and figured speech. Secondly, in his *Praecepta reipublicae gerendae*, Plutarch counsels the aspiring statesman in the Greek cities of the imperial period to be liberal in his deployment of historical themes in speeches, but to avoid references to the Persian Wars, lest he face serious consequences. Aristides was operating in this tradition.

This paper is speculative, as studies of figured speech must be. Its purpose is to study Aristides' use of Persian material in his speech on Rome and to argue that the rhetorical technique of figured speech, which Aristides is known to have used elsewhere, helps us to divine a deeper—and darker—meaning to the speech beneath the mere flattery of the emperor.

Bibliography

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