

Sophists and Philosophers in the Roman Empire: an interview with Tim Whitmarsh*

Sofistas e filósofos no Império Romano: uma entrevista com Tim Whitmarsh

Tim Whitmarsh

Interviewee

Esdra Erlacher

Interviewer

Timothy John Guy Whitmarsh, better known as Tim Whitmarsh, earned his PhD from the University of Cambridge. From 2001 to 2007, he taught at the University of Exeter. Subsequently, from 2007 to 2014, he served as E. P. Warren Praelector at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. In 2014, he was appointed A. G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture at Cambridge, a position he held until 2023, when he was named Regius Professor of Greek—one of the oldest and most prestigious academic chairs in the world. Whitmarsh is a specialist in Greek culture and literature, particularly that produced under the Roman Empire. He has authored dozens of academic articles and books, has lectured in various countries, and frequently contributes to newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *Times Literary Supplement*, and *London Review of Books*, as well as appearing on BBC radio and television programs. In 2020, he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy, a distinction that reflects the excellence of his scholarly work over the course of his academic career. His major contributions include the works *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire* (2001), *The Second Sophistic* (2005), *Narrative and identity in the Ancient Greek Novel: Returning Romance* (2011), *Beyond the Second Sophistic: Adventures in Greek Postclassicism* (2014), *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (2015), *Dirty Love: The Genealogy of the Ancient Greek Novel* (2018), *Achilles Tatius, Leucippe and Clitophon I–II: Edited with Commentary* (2020), and *Rome's Age of Revolution: Christians in a Classical World* (2024).

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1. *Esdra Erlacher: To start our dialogue, could you tell us what motivated your interest in studying the Ancient World?*

A. Tim Whitmarsh: My father was a French teacher, and for our holidays we would go camping in France. These could be quite dramatic holidays, involving heavy rain and high wind! But it gave me a taste for languages and adventure. I grew up in a village with a mediaeval castle, and I used to go there to walk the dog, and clear my head (there was little else to do). So I felt that antiquity was part of my childhood.

2. *In your work 'The Second Sophistic', published in 2005, you analyze the characteristics of the Second Sophistic, a cultural movement that thrived in the Roman Empire. How would you define this phenomenon for those who are not familiar with it?*

A.: In the period of the Roman principate, from the first century CE onwards, stark wealth gaps emerged in the Greek-speaking world, between the elite and the others. The elite were more likely to have Roman citizenship, and indeed citizenship of multiple Greek cities, and to have high-level education. This had a major impact at the cultural and linguistic levels: the elites became the self-proclaimed guardians of the classical past. They began to communicate in a form of the literary language that was modelled on the dialect of classical Athens, some 500 years earlier. This phenomenon is known as 'Atticism' (Attica being the wider region of Athens); it lies at the origin of Greek diglossia, which still persists in Greece today, to an extent. These elite intellectuals would also perform to each other extemporised rhetorical speeches, often in the guise of figures from the classical or mythological past: the aim was to stay *in persona*, and use only Attic terms. This practice was named by one ancient writer 'the second sophistic', meaning the second wave of sophistry (oratory) after that of classical Athens. It was a game, but it was taken very seriously; and it influenced also sorts of other literary forms, such as epic and the Greek novel, both aesthetically and linguistically.

3. *Those studying the trajectory of Greek sophists and philosophers in the context of the Roman Empire inevitably encounter discussions surrounding the so-called Second Sophistic. As much of your work in recent decades has focused on the study of Greek literature under the Empire, could you clarify the benefits and limitations of using the term 'Second Sophistic'?*

A.: As I mentioned, 'the second sophistic' is an ancient term: it was first used by Philostratus in the third century CE, in his collection of biographical portraits of the star sophists of

his time and a little earlier. For him it is a purely aesthetic term: he uses it to refer to a style of oratory with ancient roots, in the fourth century BCE (even if that style reached its pinnacle of success in his own times). Many modern scholars, however, have seen it as a term of periodisation, referring in general to the Greek literary production of the first three centuries CE. They have favoured the term because it suggests secondariness, which can suggest derivativeness, and lack of originality and invention. Or, alternatively, for more postmodern scholars it can suggest a (positive) preoccupation with mimicry and replication. Both are to my mind traps.

4. *The work 'The Second Sophistic', although published nearly two decades ago, remains a reference for those studying the topic. Since the publication of your work, have you observed the emergence of new approaches or trends that contribute to the study of the Second Sophistic?*

A.: Yes, a new wave of scholars have steered us away from thinking about the Second Sophistic as an expression of preoccupation with the past. William Guast has shown that many sophistic themes offer veiled ways of talking about the present. Estelle Strazdins has shown that sophists were also concerned with fame and self-commemoration: they were talking about the future too! There has also been a lot of interest in expanding the camera angle and looking at the broader Greek literary production of the time, including the poetic texts that have traditionally been relatively marginalised: major epic poems like Dionysius' *Description of the World*, Oppian's *On Sea Fishing* and Quintus' *Posthomerica*.

5. *We know the difficulties in classifying an individual as a sophist, philosopher, or rhetor in the Roman Empire. In this sense, some cases are emblematic, such as Dio Chrysostom, defined sometimes as a sophist and sometimes as a philosopher, or even Aelius Aristides, included by Philostratus in his list of sophists, although the author himself defines as a rhetor. What is your opinion on this matter?*

A.: Yes these terms are all slippery! Or at least there are grey areas. A 'philosopher' would usually develop the doctrines of one of the major philosophical traditions (in these times Stoicism, Epicureanism and Platonism), and teach in small groups; his publications would be relatively technical, and would sometimes be published by his students. Someone declaiming *in persona*, as described above, would be a sophist. But the word 'sophist' could have negative connotations, thanks to Plato, so some (like Aristides) tended to avoid it and call themselves rhetors (the Greek version of the Latin 'orators') instead. (I am using masculine pronouns as the vast majority of the individuals were men, even if

we have occasional inscriptions referring to a female sophist.) But there were people who crossed boundaries too, like Dio. He was a public performer, which put him closer to the category of the sophist; but he always distances himself from sophists, and styles himself (particularly in his later years) as a philosopher in the Stoic-Cynic tradition.

6. *In your work 'Beyond the Second Sophistic: adventures in Greek postclassicism', published in 2013, you propose the concept of "Jewish sophistic" to describe Jewish literary production in the Hellenistic and Roman contexts. Could you explain, in general terms, what this concept means?*

A.: Jews didn't engage in sophistry in the sense outlined above. But during the Hellenistic period they did find similarly creative ways of interacting with their own 'classical' past. I was speaking particularly of Greek-speaking Jews. Once the Bible had been translated into Greek it became a 'classic' text, and Jews began to find literary ways of making it talk to the present. For example, we have a Greek tragedy built around the story of Moses and the Exodus, and fragments of epic poems on biblical themes. It is clear too that the strange and distinctive Greek language of the Jewish Bible had an immediate impact (as it later impacted on the writers of the New Testament). It is very suggestive that this phase of Jewish 'classicism' predated the Greek phase. It is possible, for example, that the Greek novel or romance, typically seen as a product of the Greek culture of the first century CE onwards, found its roots in a Hellenistic Jewish romance called Joseph and Aseneth. The dating of that text is controversial, though.

7. *In your opinion, how can the study of sophistry, philosophy, and rhetoric expand our knowledge of Greco-Roman society in antiquity?*

A.: The Greeks and to an extent the Romans are widely associated in the modern era with philosophy. But that is not always seen as a socially embedded phenomenon: the usual view is simply that these were clever folk who came up with clever ideas that still challenge, enlighten and frustrate today. There is nothing wrong with studying philosophy in this 'timeless' way, but it is not the only way of looking at things. If we take a broader view we start asking *why* Greeks and the Romans embraced these high-level skills of philosophy and rhetoric, and why they did so in this particular way. My own position is that it has to do with the Greeks' acquisition of 'literary' writing late (relative to near-eastern cultures and Egypt), and in a dynamic phase of expansion. Writing never had time to become monopolised or sacralised in Greece; there was never a scribal class as such. As a result

this powerful technology was co-opted by intellectual improvisers in 'unofficial' fields like philosophy, rhetoric and indeed medicine.

8. In your research practice, professionals in Ancient History often encounter challenges related to documentation or, more specifically, the lack thereof. We know you have dedicated several decades to the study of Greek literature, especially that which falls under the so-called Second Sophistic. In this regard, could you comment on what has been, in methodological terms, the greatest obstacle you have faced in your research practice?

A.: Well evidence is certainly an issue, especially for a primarily oral form like sophistic performance. We do have some written texts, but as usual one never knows what the relationship is between the written and the oral versions. And of course the oral version would have been accompanied by all sorts of bodily performance —dress, gesture, intonation — that is now lost forever. But when it comes to Greek literature of the Roman period we are in a sense spoiled, especially relative to earlier periods. We have more surviving words by one Roman author — Galen —than we do of Hellenistic literature as a whole.

9. For some time now, the necessity of interdisciplinarity in historical research has been proposed. In Brazil, we have witnessed an increasing dialogue between History and disciplines such as Geography, Archaeology, Literature, and Anthropology, among others, which has provided valuable intellectual exchange. Could you tell us to what extent interdisciplinarity has contributed to your research?

A.: In my earlier research I was very influenced by cultural anthropology: by figures like Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz. I also read a lot of poststructuralist theory. More recently I have found the Amazonian anthropologists very interesting, especially: Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Philippe Descola. I have always read widely in literary theory in general, and continue to do so. I have become more eclectic over time, as my own sense of how the world works has become more fixed; I have tried to absorb theory rather than be dictated to by it. In particular I have found dogmatic versions of cultural constructionism frustrating, and have found more continuity in human culture.

10. To conclude, what advice would you give to young people who wish to begin research in ancient sophistry, philosophy, and rhetoric?

A.: Be committed, brave and adventurous; try to find new things to say; look to surprise your readers, rather than telling them what you think they want to hear!

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