

Second Sophistic Accounts of Religious 'Experts'

Sara Merker - ARIA Summer Project 2019

Plutarch

Cleombrotus: "But there is set before us for general use a bowl of myths and stories combined, and where could one meet with more kindly listeners for testing these stories, even as one tests coins from foreign lands? So I do not hesitate to favour you with a narrative about a man, not a Greek, whom I had great difficulty in finding, and then only by dint of long wanderings, and after paying large sums for information. It was near the Persian Gulf that I found him, where he holds a meeting with human beings once every year; and there I had an opportunity to talk with him and met with a kindly reception. The other days of his life, according to his statement, he spends in association with roving nymphs and demigods. He was the handsomest man I ever saw in personal appearance and he never suffered from any disease, inasmuch as once each month he partook of the medicinal and bitter fruit of a certain herb. He was practised in the use of many tongues; but with me, for the most part, he spoke a Doric which was almost music. While he was speaking, a fragrance overspread the place, as his mouth breathed forth a most pleasant perfume. Besides his learning and his knowledge of history, always at his command, he was inspired to prophesy one day in each year when he went down to the sea and told of the future." (Plutarch, *Moralia. Obsolescence of Oracles*, LCL 306 pp. 410-411)

Apuleius

"You hear that magic, which you thoughtlessly charge me with, is an art pleasing to the immortal gods, thoroughly expert in worshiping and honoring them, unquestionably pious and skilled in divine lore, famous from the time of the originators, Zoroaster and Oromazes, and priestess of the gods in heaven; and hence magic is among the first lessons of kingship, and no Persian is readily permitted to be a magician any more than be a king. Plato again in another dialogue has written about a certain Zalmoxis, who though Thracian by origin was distinguished in this same art, that "his charms are words of beauty." If that is so, why may not I know Zalmoxis' "words of beauty" or Zoroaster's priestly lore? But if those people have the commonplace idea that "magician" strictly means someone able to fulfill his every wish by spells that have some kind of extraordinary power, I am very puzzled why they are not afraid to accuse someone who they say is so powerful." (Apuleius, *Apologia*, LCL 534 pp. 72-73)

Lucian

Lucian: "As you might have expected of two consummate rascals, greatly daring, fully prepared for mischief, who had put their heads together, they readily discerned that human life is swayed by two great tyrants, hope and fear, and that a man who could use both of these to advantage would speedily enrich himself. For they perceived that both to one who fears and to one who hopes, foreknowledge is very essential and very keenly coveted, and that long ago not only Delphi, but Delos and Clarus and Branchidae, had become rich and famous because, thanks to the tyrants just mentioned, hope and fear, men continually visited their sanctuaries and sought to learn the future in advance, and to that end sacrificed hecatombs and dedicated ingots of gold. By turning all this round and round in conference with one another and keeping it astir, they concocted the project of founding a prophetic shrine and oracle, hoping that if they should succeed in it, they would at once be rich and prosperous—which, in fact, befell them in greater measure than they at first expected, and turned out better than they hoped.

Then they began planning, first about the place, and next, what should be the commencement and the character of the venture. Cocconas thought Chalcedon a suitable and

convenient place, close to Thrace and Bithynia, and not far, too, from Asia and Galatia and all the peoples of the interior. Alexander, on the other hand, preferred his own home, saying—and it was true—that to commence such a venture they needed “fat-heads” and simpletons to be their victims, and such, he said, were the Paphlagonians who lived up above Abonoteichus, who were for the most part superstitious and rich; whenever a man but turned up with someone at his heels to play the flute or the tambourine or the cymbals, telling fortunes with a sieve, as the phrase goes, they were all agog over him on the instant and stared at him as if he were a god from heaven. (Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, LCL 162 pp. 186-189)