CHAPTER ONE

AELIUS ARISTIDES AND THE SACRED TALES

Introduction

Aelius Aristides composed the Sacred Tales in the early 170s, during the sixth decade of his life, and despite their unusual contents, the Sacred Tales are, in many ways, a work representative of an educated member of the Greek upper class in the province of Asia in the second half of the second century CE. The Sacred Tales have been read by modern scholars as reflecting some general trends of religious change that occurred during this time.¹ Half a century ago André-Jean Festugière recognised in Aristides’ Tales evidence for the widespread existence of private religions among the Greeks and a decade later Eric Dodds used the testimony of the Sacred Tales to describe the latter years of the reign of Marcus Aurelius as an age of anxiety.² More recent scholars, such as Wolf Liebeschuetz, have tended to accept the verdict of Festugière and Dodds, at least when it comes to the ability of Aristides’ work to mirror the religious climate of his age.³ The Sacred Tales can

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² Festugière (1954) 85–104; Dodds (1965) 41–45 and passim. Similar views to Dodds’ can be seen in his contemporary Phillips, who professed that the Sacred Tales are ‘unique in surviving literature as a [record of] a nervous hypochondriac and lifelong devotee of Asclepius’ Phillips (1952) 23; Lane Fox, loc. cit. is more critical of the use of the term ‘anxiety’ for describing this era. His preference is ‘an age of anger’. The grounds for this disagreement are, however, mainly poetic and do not challenge the picture portrayed by Dodds.

³ Liebeschuetz (2000) 1004; see also MacMullen (1976) 37. Aristides’ belief (i) that divination is possible; (ii) that dreams often include messages from a deity and (iii) that the gods send remedies to their sick worshippers via dreams and other forms of divination was shared by none other than Marcus Aurelius himself. The emperor himself actually received a remedy from the gods by a dream, as we learn from his own testimony: ‘that by the agency of dream I was given antidotes both of other kinds and against the spitting of blood and vertigo’ (τό δὲ ὄνειράτων βοηθήματα δοθήσαι ἄλλα τε καὶ ὡς μὴ πτέειν σχῆμα καὶ μὴ ἀλγηγίαν) M.Ant. Med. 1.17.9. Similar views to those of Marcus are found in the letters of the emperor’s friend and former tutor, Fronto, who wrote to the future emperor in 143–144 CE that the gods ‘give their aid and show their power in dreams or mysteries, or healing, or oracles’ (Fronto, Ep. 3.9 Naber, p. 47). Both these examples demonstrate that the belief in divination was widespread during Aristides’ lifetime and that the connection between dreams and medicine, and between medicine and religion, was held to be valid by the most respectable people.
also be seen as representative of their times on other grounds. Their pure Attic dialect reflects a general inclination amongst Greek authors during the high empire, generally known as Atticism. The overall understanding of how dreams work and their use in the practice of divination, much like Aristides’ religious habits and beliefs, were also typical of their age. In addition, Aristides’ focus on the body, which was analysed by Judith Perkins, Brooke Holmes, and Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis has been shown to be representative of this period. In the following chapter I will assess the contribution the Sacred Tales can make to the history of medicine, religion and the interconnection between the two in the Graeco-Roman world.

Before one can proceed with such a study of society, medicine and religion in the Sacred Tales, some questions concerning the text itself must first be raised. In addition to the work’s content, the form of the Sacred Tales is also pertinent. Aristides’ choice of genre, his preference for a first-person narrative and his use of highly personal source materials such as his own medical history and dreams all have a distinct effect upon the reader which has to be acknowledged and addressed. Holmes’ study of Aristides illegible body has demonstrated that one cannot take Aristides’ narrative in the Sacred Tales at face value for tracing the author’s medical history and that the theme of suffering, particularly when compared with that of Odysseus was consciously employed by a highly skilled author for self promotion. Likewise, Aristides’ avoidance of a systematically chronological narrative and the alternation between past and present events eliminates any sense of tension or suspense. The reader of the Sacred Tales is told at the beginning of both the first and second Tales that Aristides was saved by Asclepius. The only gaps which the narrative therefore has to fill are those of detail; it

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7 For a stimulating and authoritative discussion of the effects of the various forms of narrative sequences, and their ability to create a sense of tension and suspense see Sternberg (1977). More general works about narrative and narratology which are relevant here are: Bakhtin (1981); Genette (1980); Ricoeur (1984); Bal (1984); White (1987) and Cohan and Shires (1988). Prince (1987) and Cuddon (1991) provide useful dictionaries to the terms of literary theory and narratology. De Jong and Sullivan (1994) discuss the use of literary theory in the field of classical studies. Hornblower (1994) exemplified the usefulness of modern theories of narratology to the study of Thucydides and a recent book by Schmitz (2006) summarizes the major schools of critical theory and is aimed specifically at classicists.