Discussions about the classical sources attesting to the Essenes have generally focused on three first-century authors: Philo of Alexandria, Josephus and Pliny the Elder. Most importantly, in terms of the landscape of the Essenes, there has been special interest in Pliny. As is well-known, Pliny writes (Nat. 5.15, 4/73): ab occidente litora esseni fugiunt usque qua nocent, gens sola...socia palmarum, “in the west [of the Dead Sea] the Essenes flee all the way from the shores which are harmful, a people alone...in the company of palms;” infra hos engada oppidum fuit...inde masada, “below them was the town Engedi...from there Masada.”

However, it is less frequently noted that Pliny was not the only ancient author to make this association between the Essenes and the Dead Sea. This link was also made by Dio Chrysostom, in a lost discourse noted by Synesius (ca. 400 CE), in his essay on Dio. There are other relevant mentions of this association also, for example by Gaius Julius Solinus (late 3rd century CE) in his Collectanea 35. 1–12, and Martianus Capella (ca. 400 CE) in De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii (Satyricon) 6. 679, while Epiphanius (ca. 375 CE) places his Ἄσσαῖοι on the other side of the Dead Sea within the regions of Nabataea and Perea (Pan. 19. 1. 1; 19. 2. 2; cf. Pan. 53. 1. 1). Given the chronological priority of Pliny, the scholarly marginalisation of these other sources is due to an assumption that they must be derivative. In this chapter I will consider Dio again in terms of the evidence on the Essenes, arguing for his independence of Pliny, and will examine how he may contribute to our understanding of who the Essenes were and where they were located within the landscape of Judaea.

Dio was a contemporary of Josephus (37–ca. 110), and in Rome at about the same time. His death is usually given as around 115 to 120.1 Part of a movement dubbed the ‘Second Sophistic’—a group

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which included Lucian, Plutarch, Aristides and Galen—the bare details of his life may be reconstructed from what is written by Philostratus (Lives of the Philosophers 7.487–488) and in Dio’s surviving speeches. Suffice to say, Cocceianus Dio² was, like Josephus, from a wealthy and influential family, in Dio’s case from a Greek city, Prusa (modern Bursa), in the Roman province of Bithynia. Since the circumstances and environments of his life may have a bearing on how we assess Dio’s comments on the Essenes, it is important to review these briefly, though his ‘biography’ is not without controversy.

Dio was the son of a certain Pasicrates who had spent beyond his means on the city, receiving high honours in return, only to die early and leave Dio with the job of paying the debts. The brilliant young Dio at this point was a sophist—a practitioner of smart eloquence and rhetoric—and, when he was in a position to, he travelled to Rome—as well as to Rhodes, Alexandria, and elsewhere³—with a repertoire of speeches, sometimes on trivial subjects (exemplified by his eulogies on a gnat, parrot, or hair). Under the Flavian dynasty (69–96 CE), when Josephus was writing his histories, it was not an easy time to be a philosopher. Dio appears to have been a student of the Stoic Musonius Rufus (ca. 20–90 CE), and, in the reign of Domitian (81–96), Dio fled from Rome and avoided also his homeland. He then wandered, pennilessly, dressed in rags, doing manual labour when he could, in the region of the northern Black Sea and along the Danube River, until Domitian was assassinated and Dio’s exile ended. He returned to his home, and then headed an embassy back to Rome to express thanks. He was liked by the emperor Trajan. Secure, finally, Dio travelled to Alexandria and elsewhere in 102, then went


² Jones argues that this surname was not acquired as an honour from the emperor Nerva but from some local Cocceianus, on the basis of inscriptions showing this name in the region, see Jones, Dio, 7.

³ The Alexandria Oration is dated early by both Jones, Dio, 36 and Desideri, Dione, 68–70.