PYTHAGOREANISM AND THE PLANETARY DEITIES:
THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND LITERARY MASTER-STRUCTURE
OF THE VITA APOLLONII

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The two main topics of the “old quest” in the literature on Apollonius—
comparisons of the Vita Apollonii with New Testament writings and the
source-critical search for the “historical Apollonius”—have gradually
been replaced by research that focuses on the role of Philostratus as an
author in his own right. This renewed interest in Philostratus has led
to a general rehabilitation of the Vita Apollonii: its literary qualities, its
political message, and its role in the cultural politics of Greeks under
Roman rule are only some of the topics that have received favourable
assessments in the recent Philostratus-Forschung. There is, however,
one area of research in which the reputation of both Philostratus and
the Vita seem to have remained relatively unchanged and thus quite
negative: its value as a philosophical text. In the introduction to the
most recent edition of the Life, Christopher Jones commented:

It is a feature of Philostratus’ text, however, that Apollonius’s philosophy
is merely sketched in a few superficial strokes. (…) The ‘philosophical’
Apollonius appears mainly in the conversations that he holds with Damis
and a few others. (…) Philosophically, these conversations are conducted
on a very amateurish level. (…) By contrast, Apollonius is made to act very
much like the public speakers whom Philostratus was later to describe in
his Lives of the Sophists.

This assessment can be virtually paralleled by the view expressed in
Ueberweg-Praechter’s Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie:

Weniger scharfe philosophische Prägung zeigt Philostratos, der im Anfange
des dritten Jahrhunderts nach Chr. auf Wunsch der Kaiserin Julia Domna
eine Biographie des Apollonios von Tyana verfasste. Das Bekenntnis
zum Pythagorasideal, das in diesem Werke enthalten ist, verbietet der

1 For cumulative overviews of the current scholarship on the Vita Apollonii since
the 80’s we can refer to Koskenniemi 1994, Francis 1998, Hägg 2004 and Schirren

Geschichte des Neopythagoreismus an Philostratos vorüberzugehen, so geringen Wert auch sein Abenteuerroman als Quelle für das Leben des Apollonios besitzt und so sehr sich in dem Verfasser dem philosophisch-theologischen Interesse das des Rhetors und Literaten zur Seite drängt.3

The appreciation of the *Vita* as a literary work has improved, but not the general assessment, that it is in essence “only” a literary work and not a text deserving a place in the history of philosophy. Its author is seen as a man of letters, as a sophist, but not as a philosopher, nor even as someone who had the intellectual ambition, *casu quo* capacity to give a serious account of Apollonius’ philosophy. On this the Philostratus-Forschung still seems unanimous.4 In this paper we shall argue against this dichotomy and try to show that Philostratus did manage to write a work of philosophy, a rather unique work of philosophy even, because

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3 Ueberweg-Praechter 1957:520.

4 That the *Life* does not contain any serious philosophy is repeated in many variations. Dillon 1977:341 refused to treat Apollonius in his chapter on "The Neopythagoreans" (pp. 341–382): "since he was much more of a prophet than a philosopher." Bowie 1978:1666: "...his aim was most plausibly that of a professional writer, to produce a well-rounded and entertaining piece of literature, rather than to further a propagandist interpretation of Apollonius as a Pythagorean sage. (...) Philostratus' other writings give no hint of enthusiasm for Neo-Pythagoreans or Apollonius." Knoles 1981:III writes that literary conventions are more important to Philostratus than Apollonius’ philosophy, on this topic the *Life* contains only a “somewhat shallow discussion” merely “symbolizing Apollonius’ commitment to philosophy” and p. 228: “not a substantial discussion of philosophical topics.” Anderson 1986:138 offers an echo of Meyer’s (1917:422) famous general assessment of the *Life* as “journalistisches Machwerk”: “His ‘philosophy’ could have come just as readily from any philosophic journalist; it is the property of any educated eclectic down to the mindless Maximus of Tyre.” Dzielska 1986 concluded that what Philostratus wrote on Apollonius’ philosophy (cfr. §4 "Apollonius’ philosophy", pp. 129–152) is “inadequate and strays from the historical truth” (p. 129) and p. 191: “Philostratus’ Pythagoreanism ...is very superficial.” Flinterman argued that Philostratus did want to present Apollonius as a Pythagorean philosopher (p. 60) but there is little philosophical content in the *Vita*, Philostratus’ attitude towards his subject is at times ambiguous and his main motivation for writing the *Vita*—apart from the imperial commission—was that he found the material “attractive for literary adaptation.” (p. 66) See also Hahn 2003:92 quoted in Van Uytfanghes contribution to this volume, note 73. The list could go on. An important correction has been made by Chiara Cremonesi 2005:10–12 and passim: she has argued that the definition of philosophy adopted by most Philostratus-scholars has too strong a focus on doctrine and theoretical discussions. She argues that we should be mindful of the work of Pierre Hadot and his view on ancient philosophy as first and foremost a way of life. See his *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. Collection des études augustiniennes. Série antiquité; 88. Paris, 1981 (translated by Michael Chase as *Philosophy as a way of life: spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Oxford, 1995) and *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?* Paris, 1995. In that sense the presentation of Apollonius’ way of life is ancient philosophy. We agree with Cremonesi but will argue that there is also more doctrine and theory in the *Life* than previously accepted.