Introduction

The prosperous civic life of the Greek East under Roman rule may be seen as the most complete development of Greek civilization in antiquity. In this context the so-called Second Sophistic played a crucial role, and its cultural, social and political dimensions continue to attract the attention of contemporary scholars.¹ Beyond its literary interest, the rich and brilliant virtuoso prose of the Greek sophists, together with the evidence of coins, inscriptions, and archaeology, provides historians with invaluable material for the study of civic life. The connections between higher education and social power, rhetoric and politics, central and local power, rulers and subjects, are becoming more and more evident. On the surface, the subjects approached by the orators were escapist (although perhaps no more escapist than a conference of classical scholars today), but on many occasions the sophists’ speeches were closely connected to the time and place of their delivery, thereby opening the door to historical analysis.

In this context, Aelius Aristides rightly ranks among the most interesting and intriguing personalities: apart from the fascinating Sacred Tales and the solemn Encomium To Rome, other writings of his appear worthy of careful study. Having examined the Smyrnean Orations elsewhere, I will focus in this paper on two speeches about the ancient city of Rhodes that are included in the Aristidean corpus.² They are good case studies for examining the impact of natural disasters on the Greek

---

² These texts ‘can only be understood when read in conjunction with other speeches in praise of cities’ (Bowersock 1969, 16).
cities in the Roman Empire, as well as the social tensions that these disasters revealed. The size and beauty of those poleis were sometimes darkened and challenged by serious crises. But it was precisely in such emergencies that the educated discourse of the orators played a pivotal role. Leaving aside the momentous problem of the sophists’ political efficacy, we may claim that their speeches met above all the emotional needs of the cities: lamenting the disaster and preaching moral values, the orators tried to restore mutual confidence and concord, thereby preserving the deepest values of ancient civic life.3

The Rhodiakos

In modern critical editions of Aristides’ works, the sequence of the two Rhodian speeches reverses their chronology: Oration 24, To the Rhodians on Concord, was apparently delivered more or less five years after Oration 25, the Rhodiakos. In order to examine those texts from a historical point-of-view, it is expedient to observe their proper chronological order by considering the Rhodiakos first.4

Oration 25 was delivered in Rhodes some time after a tremendous earthquake, which razed the city in 142 AD. It is at once a commemoration of the ruined city, a memorial of the catastrophe, and an exhortation to the survivors.5 After an exordium, which laments the total loss of Rhodes’ former greatness and beauty (Or. 25.1–10), there is a heartfelt exhortation to endure the disaster (11–16). The earthquake and its effects are vividly described in the central section of the speech (17–33), which goes on to reassess the importance of Rhodes and the duty of endurance (34–49). The oration then turns to a consolation, with an empathetic narration of the most ancient traditions of Rhodes and a forecast of the reconstruction (50–56). After a series of historical examples (57–68), it ends with the appropriate peroration (69).

In his 1898 edition of Aristides’ works, Bruno Keil asserted, primarily on stylistic grounds, that the speech was not written by Aristides.

---

3 Leopold 1986, 818.
4 The speech has been often disregarded because of its similarity with Oration 23: according to Reardon, ‘Il n’y a aucunement lieu d’analyser le discours Aux Rhodiens’ (1971, 134). The Rhodiakos is not considered at all, following Boullanger 1923, 126 n. 14.