

What Kind of Books Did the Sophists Write?

The question, what kind of books did the sophists write, points to a larger question about the nature of the sophists' activity and in particular, how the gradual transition from an oral culture, which still largely prevailed in the first quarter of the fifth century, to the use of writing. My paper is a preliminary and to some extent speculative exploration of two aspects of this question. First, I will suggest that most of the material we attribute to the sophists was created orally and was only later recorded permanently, probably by others probably after their death. The one likely exception to this is Gorgias' *On Not Being*, which was probably created as a written text. I will discuss this text if I have time. Second, I will suggest that a book (*biblion*) like Protagoras' *Truth (Alētheia)* was a short papyrus roll, perhaps just a couple of pages.

Briefly, I will suggest that the four main sophists, Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, and Prodicus, all created mythological stories which they recited orally to others. Protagoras created his version of the Prometheus myth, which is preserved in Plato's *Protagoras*; Gorgias created at least two mythological speeches, *Helen* and *Palamedes*; Prodicus created his version of advice on how to live one's life, known as the *Choice of Herakles* (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.1.21 and 34); and Hippias presented his own advice about how a young man ought to live, which he put in the mouth of Nestor (Plato, *Hippias Major* 286b). All four sophists were also remembered for various sayings, like Protagoras' man-measure saying or Prodicus' distinctions between near synonyms. My (speculative) suggestion is that most books by these sophists contained a combination of mythological speeches and short, memorable sayings, all of which were originally created orally. These were simply assembled, perhaps in some logical order, but without elaboration or extended argument of the sort that we think of as philosophical.

The conversation between Socrates and Theaetetus in Plato's *Theaetetus* provides support for these suggestions. In examining Protagoras' views about knowledge, Socrates first (152a) cites the man-measure saying – “a human being (*anthrōpos*) is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are and of things that are not that they are not” – and then asks Theaetetus if he has read this, to which Theaetetus responds, “Yes, often.” After this the man-measure saying is quoted in full or in part nine more times, each time in exactly the same words or with a variation that parodies the saying (e.g., “Protagoras should say that an ape is the measure of all things”). And in five of these cases there is an explicit mention that the saying was written or that someone read it –clear evidence that the saying was, in fact, written in Protagoras' book.

By contrast, Socrates follows the quotation of the man-measure saying by saying that Protagoras “puts it something like this (*houtō pōs legei*), that as each thing appears (*phainetai*) to me it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you.” One might be tempted to see this elaboration as a continuation of what was written in Protagoras' book, but there is no reference here to writing or reading nor is there any such reference in any of the other follow-up discussions of Protagoras' meaning. Moreover, the follow-up statement is never presented twice in exactly the same words. Sometimes it is “what seems (*dokei*) to me is for me,” or what seems to me is true for me,” and there are several other variations. This clearly indicates that unlike the man-measure saying, which was written in Protagoras' book and could thus be quoted verbatim, none of the follow-up explanations were written in the book. And this strongly suggests that the man-measure fragment was written in Protagoras' book without elaboration.

My suggestion, then, is that Protagoras' book *Truth* began with the man-measure saying and was followed not by any explanation but perhaps by other shorter memorable sayings, such

as that on every matter there are two opposed *logoi*, or that one should try to make the weaker *logos* stronger, and that similar books existed for the other sophists.