

# At the Limits of Art

---

A Literary Study of  
Aelius Aristides' *Hieroi Logoi*

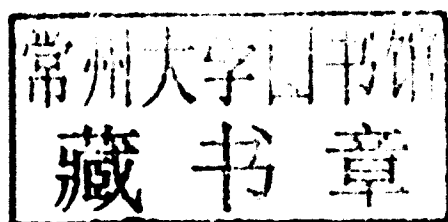
JANET DOWNIE

# AT THE LIMITS OF ART

---

A Literary Study of Aelius Aristides'  
*Hieroi Logoi*

JANET DOWNIE



OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research,  
scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi  
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece  
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore  
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press  
in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by  
Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

© Oxford University Press 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the  
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law,  
by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization.  
Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent  
to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Downie, Janet.

At the limits of art : a literary study of Aelius Aristides' Hieroi logoi / Janet Downie.  
pages. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-19-992487-5

1. Aristides, Aelius. Sacred teachings. I. Title.

PA3874.A7Z5 2013

885'.01—dc23 2012042481

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

# At the Limits of Art

## Preface and Acknowledgments

AELIUS ARISTIDES' *HIEROI LOGOI*—or *Sacred Tales*—is one of the literary oddities of the classical world. In a meandering narrative of illness and divine healing, Aristides enumerates at length, and with surprising frankness, his fevers and inflammations, as well as the purges, baths, and calisthenic exercises prescribed by the god Asclepius for their treatment. The pages of the *Hieroi Logoi* are also filled with dozens of dream narratives—by turns graphic and opaque, and very far from the polished style of the rest of his literary oeuvre. Because it seems so human and familiar, Aristides' first-person voice is disarming, and readers have mined this rich and intriguing source for insight into the history of medicine and the body, ancient psychology, and the phenomena of religious experience in the Greco-Roman world.

Although this is not immediately obvious from the *Hieroi Logoi*, Aristides was one of the high achievers of his age—a prominent rhetor among the educated elite of second-century imperial Asia Minor. He handed down to later generations a substantial body of works, including formal discourses, civic orations, declamations, and prose hymns. In contrast with these more conventional, polished texts, the *Logoi* have seemed to many readers to offer a reverse image of Aristides' professional persona—and thus to reveal a personality split between the competitive aspirations of the public orator and the anxieties of his private life. The work gives the impression, on the one hand, of being an idiosyncratic text. On the other hand, scholars have also read Aristides' *Logoi* as symptomatic of the kinds of social tensions that Gibbon, memorably, imagined working like “a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire” in the years of golden complacency sustained by Antonine Rome.<sup>1</sup> Emerging from the

---

1. Gibbon 1845, chap. 2, 70.

pages of the *Hieroi Logoi* as (in modern terms) a hypochondriac and a failed mystic, Aristides has sometimes seemed to embody the ailments of a culture in decline. Charles Behr, his English-language translator and biographer—and, indeed, one of his most assiduous twentieth-century readers—described Aristides as a “deeply neurotic, deeply superstitious, vainglorious man.” Yet, as Peter Brown has reflected upon the *odium psychologicum* animating many twentieth-century assessments: “the problem with Aristides lies mainly with ourselves; he puzzles us.”<sup>2</sup> And whether we are attracted or repelled by his personality, the puzzle is not merely psychological; it is also literary. In this book I set out to investigate Aristides as a rhetorical professional and literary craftsman—a figure who is, I suggest, as much at work in the *Hieroi Logoi* as he is in the rest of his highly polished oeuvre.

I propose to read the *Hieroi Logoi* not as a record of personal anxiety, nor as symptomatic of an imperial culture in decline, but rather as Aristides’ calculated intervention in the contests of self-fashioning promoted by Antonine society. In this book, therefore, I focus on situating the text in its rhetorical context. I argue that the *Hieroi Logoi* constitute Aristides’ self-portrait as a divinely inspired rhetor and, indeed, his *apologia* for rhetoric as a vocation. Throughout his oeuvre, Aristides construes speech as a medium of communication between human and divine, elevating the rhetorical arts virtually to the status of a mystery religion and himself to the position of high priest. “Even if unbelievable things are heard,” he writes in one of his polemical orations, citing an epigram attributed to the ancient painter Parrhasius, “I make the following declaration: I say that the boundaries of this art have been discovered by our hand. An unsurpassable limit has been set—though nothing has come into being for mortals which is blameless” (*Or.* 28.88). Like the legendary Parrhasius, even in his acknowledgment of human weakness Aristides is deliberately provocative. He extends the limits of his art up to the boundary between mortal and divine—a kind of humility calculated to leave no room for his rivals in the zero-sum game of oratorical competition that engaged elite professionals. In the *Hieroi Logoi*, I suggest, Aristides makes his claim to divine proximity in the most egregious terms possible. In this text, woven

---

2. Behr 1981–1986, 2:425. Brown 1978, 41: “It is this puzzlement which has led so many scholars into precipitate psychiatric judgment on him. We obscurely resent the fact that a degree of intimacy with the divine which would make a saint or martyr of any of us should merely serve to produce a hypochondriacal gentleman of indomitable will.”

of symptoms and curative performances, fantastic dreams and their interpretations, Aristides incarnates his claim to divine inspiration. In the process, he experiments with literary form and tests the limits of rhetorical art in ways that modern readers have found consistently puzzling, and strangely compelling.

This book began as a dissertation at the University of Chicago, and I am grateful to my advisers—Christopher Faraone, Shadi Bartsch, and Elizabeth Asmis—for their guidance and generous patience, both in the dissertation phase of the project and during the revision process. I have been very fortunate to have them as readers, and their continued support and encouragement have meant the world to me. In the post-Chicago phase, other readers, too, have helped me see the shape the book might take. I would like to thank Clifford Ando, Peter Brown, Alex Gottesman, David Jenkins, and Robert Kaster, who all read full drafts at different stages and offered valuable feedback. I would also like to thank Maud Gleason, who read various parts of the manuscript and has offered writing advice and moral support from very early on. I am grateful to the anonymous readers for Oxford University Press for their constructive criticism, and to Stefan Vranka for his assistance in navigating the path to publication. I would also like to thank Sarah Pirovitz, Marc Schneider, and Marie Flaherty-Jones for their editorial work, as well as Amanda Gregory, for proof-reading assistance, and Joanna Luke, who prepared the index.

I completed much of the revision during a year of research leave supported by Princeton University and by its Program in Hellenic Studies. I am exceedingly grateful to the program's director, Dimitri Gondicas, for the Stanley J. Seeger Sabbatical Research Grant that made this extended leave possible. During that year I was a visitor at the Institute for Advanced Study, where I benefited from conversations with Christopher Jones, Glen Bowersock, Angelos Chaniotis, Heinrich von Staden, and Anton Bierl. Over several years, it has been stimulating to be part of a gradually widening conversation on Aristides, and I thank Ewen Bowie, Dana Fields, Pascale Fleury, William Harris, Trevor Luke, Laurent Pernot, Georgia Petridou, Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis, Gil Renberg, Allen Romano, Thomas Schmidt, and Verity Platt, who have at various times shared their interest and their work.

I was fortunate, upon leaving one home in Chicago, to find another in my extraordinary department at Princeton. It is a great pleasure to thank all my Princeton colleagues for their collegial support of my research and

teaching, and especially Yelena Baraz, Wendy Belcher, Michael Flower, Constanze G  thenke, Brooke Holmes, and Joshua Katz, for their friendship, good humor, and thoughtful encouragement. For another kind of sustaining energy, thanks to everyone who has played squash with me over the years in Chicago, Toronto, and Princeton. Finally, for their endless and unquestioning support my deepest thanks go to Todd Craver; to my parents, Bruce and Lindsay; and to my sister, Jennine.



# Contents

<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction: An Author in Search of a Character	3
1. <i>Hieroi Logoi</i> : The God in the Text	37
2. Dream Description and Dream Hermeneutics	57
3. <i>Salvum Lotum</i> ! A Rhetor's Improvised Baths	87
4. A Prose Hymn for Asclepius?	127
5. "Immunity" and Aristides' Literary Afterlife	155
Conclusion	183
<i>Bibliography</i>	189
<i>General Index</i>	209
<i>Index Locorum</i>	219

# At the Limits of Art



# Introduction

## AN AUTHOR IN SEARCH OF A CHARACTER

WRITING FROM ANTIOCH in 365 CE, the orator Libanius addressed Theodorus, governor of Bithynia, to thank him for sending a portrait of one of his most beloved and admired rhetorical models, the second-century writer Aelius Aristides:

I have the Aristides, something I've long desired, and I am almost as grateful to you as if you had resurrected the man himself and sent him to me. I sit by his portrait, reading one of his works and asking him if he was really the one who wrote it. Then I answer myself: "Yes, he wrote that."<sup>1</sup>

Libanius was not alone in his admiration for this great representative of Greek learning: to proclaim oneself *philaristeides*, a "lover of Aristides," in the late antique and Byzantine world was to aspire to a place in a long Hellenic tradition, one in which imperial-era writers and classical masters alike were considered worthy of study and imitation.<sup>2</sup> Yet as he conjures up his illustrious predecessor almost in the flesh, Libanius has a more pointed reason for his attraction. For Libanius, a tenacious defender of pagan

---

1. Libanius, *Ep.* 1534. The translation is slightly adapted from Norman 1992, letter 143. On the letter and Libanius's interest in Aristides, see Criboire 2007, 22–24 and Swain 2004, 362–373. See also Pack 1947, who discusses Aristides' influence on Libanius's *Or.* 1. Boulanger suggests "*influence tyrannique*," and links a phrase in Libanius *Or.* 5 (*Hymn to Artemis*) to *HL* III.4 (1923, 454, with n. 2). Bowersock 2008 discusses Libanius's engagement with Aristides' lost speech on the pantomimes, *For the Dancers*.

2. The adjective *philaristeides* comes from the Byzantine epigrammatist Thomas Scholasticus: *Anth. Gr.* 16.315. On Aristides' reception in late antiquity and Byzantium, see Jones 2008a, Robert 2009, Quattrocchi 2008. On Aristides' literary afterlife in general, see Jones 2008b.

learning in a world increasingly dominated by Christian interests, Aristides offered not just a literary exemplar, but also an ethical model. Aristides approached oratory—*logoi*—as a solemn vocation, and his visual image likely reinforced this point: after Hadrian, portraits of intellectuals typically figured charismatic *paideia* through the iconographical details of a full beard and flowing robes.<sup>3</sup> In the harmony between Aristides' words and his countenance, Libanius found an image of the role traditional literary culture should play in the life of the Greek-speaking Roman Empire.

For Aristides, oratory was everything: the highest pleasure, the greatest obligation, the sweetest reward. It took the place of children, of parents, of *eros*: "this is my play, this is my work. In this I rejoice, this I admire, its doors I haunt." Oratory was "the sum of life," the origin of all human endeavors, and the fundamental enabler of human community, making political and social life possible.<sup>4</sup> It was, in its deepest and most comprehensive sense, a gift of the gods, and throughout his extensive oeuvre Aristides portrays his professional engagement as a divine vocation. Like Socrates, who was driven to philosophical inquiry by the Delphic oracle's injunction "Know thyself," and admonished and directed in his daily decisions by a divine sign, Aristides suggests that he, too, works under divine compulsion. Every speech is an obligation, an offering rendered in thanks to the gods who have initiated Aristides into the mysteries of *logoi*, a high honor he would not betray.<sup>5</sup>

It is easy to see why Aristides' rhetoric—capitalizing on religious metaphors of inspiration and mystery initiation—appealed powerfully to Libanius, who, in the fourth century, found himself fighting a culture war on behalf of Hellenic learning. As restrictions were imposed on pagan teachers, and as ancient temples were closed and sacrifices ended, it seemed to Libanius that Greek culture was threatened simultaneously on

---

3. See Zanker 1995, 202 on the visual iconography of the "cult of learning" and charismatic *paideia* in this period. See also Zanker 1995, 262 and 230 with n. 42 on the extant statue that has been identified as Aristides. Cf. Richter 1965, 3:287, figs. 2051–2053.

4. For oratory as play, work, and the object of Aristides' "pure" and familial love, see *Or.* 33.19–21 (33.19: ἐρασταὶ καθαρῶς; 33.21: στέργειν). Oratory is the "sum" (κεφάλαιον) of life at *Or.* 42.3. He orients the myth of Prometheus's allotment of gifts to humankind around oratory at *Or.* 2.394–399.

5. For Socrates neglecting human affairs and living in the service of the gods, with the guidance of his *daimonion* (2.80), see *Or.* 2.77–83, with the comments of Puiggali 1985. For the metaphor of mystery initiation, see especially *Or.* 34, *Against Those Who Burlesque the Mysteries (of Oratory)*. Cf. Gigante 1990 on Socrates as a "modello di vita" in the *HL*.

two fronts, for, as he writes, “there is a close kinship between these two things, cult (*hiera*) and oratory (*logoi*)”—literally, between holy things and words (Lib. Or. 62.8).<sup>6</sup> Libanius was not, for his part, particularly interested in religion per se, but he recognized that religious practice, by giving *logoi* a tangible presence in the world, in some sense anchored the cultural and intellectual life he valued so highly.<sup>7</sup>

Libanius grasps a point that is fundamental to Aristides’ writings: religion and rhetoric are intimately entwined. This crucial idea inspires the language and the images of his oeuvre, and I argue in this book that it motivates his most eccentric text: the *Hieroi Logoi*—“Sacred Discourses” or “Sacred Tales,” as the title is often translated in English.<sup>8</sup> Aristides’ extant works comprise fifty-three discourses that illustrate the range of ways in which rhetorical training and oratorical performance functioned in the cultural economy of the high imperial period. From traditional declamations to polemical orations; from prose hymns to civic and occasional speeches; and including the pièces de résistance—the *Panathenaic Oration* (Or. 1), *Regarding Rome* (Or. 26), and a set of discourses *To Plato* on the status of oratory (Or. 2–4)—most of these texts are crafted in fine Attic Greek, many are self-conscious about the rhetorical arts, and all reflect Aristides’ deeply serious conception of his vocation.<sup>9</sup> The language of the sacred echoes in text after text, but it finds unique expression in his *Hieroi Logoi* (HL). Here, in five discourses and a fragmentary sixth, Aristides describes his professional challenges and triumphs over several decades, framed by the illness that brought him into an intimate relationship with

---

6. Libanius also writes of “a disease besetting *logoi* and the world” (Or. 1.84). Cf. Or. 1.154.

7. On Libanius’s lack of interest in religion, see Festugière 1959, 233–235, especially 235. In a letter to Bachius (Ep. 710), he rejoices over a sacrificial ritual to Artemis, but mostly because the ceremony provides the occasion for a festival speech.

8. The English translation “Sacred Tales,” current since Behr 1968, emphasizes the marvelous at the expense of the rhetorical, but any translation obscures the allusion to a wider tradition of texts of divine revelation—*hieroi logoi*—on the margins of Greek cult (see chapter 1). To preserve both the religious and the rhetorical resonance, I retain the Greek title in this book, usually abbreviated HL.

9. Behr 1981–1986 presents the whole corpus in English translation, including inscriptions attributed to Aristides, fragments, and attestations to works that are not extant. There is also a Spanish translation of the entire corpus in five volumes, edited and introduced by Gasco et al. 1987–1999, and the HL have been translated as a group into French, German, and Italian (Festugière 1986; Schröder 1986; Nicosia 1984). Throughout the book, translations from Aristides’ orations are my own, but I have always consulted Behr 1981–1986 and, where possible, Festugière 1986 and 1969.

the god Asclepius.<sup>10</sup> In this first-person narrative, dominated by dream accounts that convey the support of his divine patron, the metaphor of *logoi* as *hiera* is made incarnate: Aristides presents the god as the sponsor of his life and his speaking.

Aristides was not the only orator in the second century CE to cultivate a demeanor of religious authority. The educated elite who competed in rhetorical performance converted the trope of inspiration into valuable cultural capital, and religious metaphors for oratory and rhetoric were common in Aristides' period. In that sense, he seems to be fully integrated into his Second Sophistic context. Yet, as far as we can see, no one developed this metaphor with the intensity that Aristides did, and no one explored the stylistic consequences of merging *logoi* and *hiera* as creatively as he did in the *HL*. In the opening lines of *HL* VI, Aristides dreams that a companion encourages him with words borrowed from Musonius Rufus: "What are you waiting for? For the god himself to stand next to you and give you a voice? Cut out the dead part of your soul and recognize the god."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in Aristides' account of his life as a rhetor, the god speaks through him. This is the claim he mounts in the *HL*, in the curative performances that mark his healing narrative, in the dreams he describes in meticulous detail, and ultimately in the speeches he gives and the texts he writes. In this book I seek to recover an understanding of his authorial endeavor in the *HL*, illuminating the style and substance of this idiosyncratic and experimental set of texts by exploring its points of contact with the rest of Aristides' rhetorical oeuvre and with his professional engagements as a rhetor in the imperial context.

In the introductory pages that follow, I begin by establishing the coordinates of Aristides' biography, drawing on his extant orations and several inscriptions associated with him to highlight the degree to which he integrated a narrative of divine favor into his public and professional persona.

---

10. The six *Hieroi Logoi* (I–VI) correspond to *Orations* 47–52 in Keil's 1898 edition (Keil 1958), on which all the modern-language translations are mainly based, including Behr 1968 and 1981–1986. In this book I follow recent scholarly convention in referring to the *HL* by *Logos* and paragraph (e.g., *HL* II.6 [= *Or.* 48.6]), and referring to Aristides' other works by *Oration* and paragraph (e.g., *Or.* 2.6). Keil 1958 provides the Greek text for *Orr.* 17–53, while *Orr.* 1–16 can be found in the edition of Lenz and Behr 1976–1980. These editions have largely replaced Dindorf's 1829 edition (Dindorf 1964).

11. *HL* VI.2: τί μένεις; ποῖ βλέπεις; ἢ μέχρι αὖν αὐτὸς ὁ θεὸς παραστάς σοι φωνὴν ἀφίη; ἔκκοψον τὸ τεθνηκὸς τῆς ψυχῆς, καὶ γνώσῃ τὸν θεόν. Cf. Muson. fr. 53 Hense. Because of losses in the manuscript tradition, only the first several lines of *HL* VI are extant.

I then compare this sketch with the brief portrait drawn by Philostratus in his third-century *Lives of the Sophists* (VS)—the earliest extant biographical account of Aristides as a professional figure. When we set Philostratus's account next to Aristides' own orations—and certainly next to the *HL*, with which we will be concerned over the course of the book—it is immediately striking that Philostratus omits any mention of Aristides' religiosity. Because Philostratus has strongly conditioned modern readings of the second-century world of rhetorical education and performance oratory, juxtaposing his portrait with Aristides' own self-presentation will make it possible to map the sight lines of recent scholarship on Aristides' oeuvre in general, and the *HL* in particular. The dissonance between Philostratus's biography of Aristides and Aristides' own rendition is also key to the argument of this book: in the *HL*, I suggest, Aristides pushes the rhetoric of religion to its limits. At the vanishing point, in the pages of his first-person memoir, *logoi* and *hiera* merge.

## Publius Aelius Aristides Theodorus

When Publius Aelius Aristides was born, so he tells us in *HL* IV, the “star of Zeus split the mid-degree of the midst of heaven” (*HL* IV.58).<sup>12</sup> Collating this horoscope with other temporal cues in the *HL*, Charles Behr assigned Aristides' birth date to November 26, 117 CE.<sup>13</sup> The horoscope itself, however, tells us more about the nature of Aristides' ambition: the point of the story is to confirm that Aristides enjoyed “the manifest care” of the king of the gods—and the god of eloquence, for Hermes also appears in the geniture (IV.58).<sup>14</sup> Certainly, in practical and material terms,

12. *HL* IV.58: τὸν τοῦ Διὸς ἀστέρα . . . σχίζειν γὰρ αὐτὸν μέσου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ . . .

13. See Behr 1994, 1141–1151, where he emends the date put forward in his 1968 monograph, *Aelius Aristides and the Sacred Tales*. For the biographical sketch of Aristides in the following pages, I rely on these two publications, as well as on Behr's presentation of Aristides' works in his two-volume translation of the complete oeuvre. See also Wilamowitz 1925, and, for an engaging overview, Phillips 1952.

14. The horoscope is mentioned in one of Aristides' dreams, by an unnamed figure, as the explanation for Aristides' good fortune (*HL* IV.58): “he gave the star of Zeus as the reason for these dreams and for the manifest care of the gods.” (ἤτιᾱτο τῶν ὀνειράτων τούτων καὶ τῆς ἐναργοῦς τῶν θεῶν ἐπιμελείας τὸν τοῦ Διὸς ἀστέρα). Aristides has just recounted a dream in which he saw Plato sitting at a writing desk, working on his letter to Dionysius, and was told in the dream: Plato is “your Hermes.” Cf. the reference to “Hermes *Logios*” in *Or.* 37.21.



Aristides was born into favorable circumstances. His was, apparently, a wealthy, landowning family of the Mysian region near Hadriani in the Roman province of Asia. From his father—known as Eudaemon, according to tradition—he received the benefits of Roman citizenship, a landed inheritance, and an excellent education.<sup>15</sup> He maintained a close connection to Mysia throughout his life, and to the regional centers of Smyrna, Cyzicus, and Pergamum, but his rhetorical career also took him to the major cities of the Mediterranean world: Alexandria, Athens, and Rome. Divinely favored, indeed, in his birth, education, and inheritance, he ultimately made his own way in the cosmopolitan world of the educated elite, as a member of a wide imperial network of teachers and students, rhetors and audiences, and their imperial and provincial supporters. The stature Aristides claimed for himself in this social and professional world is signaled by a fourth name—Theodorus—that, as we will see, he added to those his father had given him.

Although Aelius Aristides scarcely mentions his family, he does write about his family estates and about the foster fathers (*tropheis*) who nurtured him in his youth.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, several inscriptions, all of them religious dedications, mark his presence—and his investment—in the Mysian landscape. He dedicated a statue of Hera in the vicinity of what he describes in the *Hieroi Logoi* as his “ancestral hearth” (*HL* III.41: *archaia hestia*)—the temple of Olympian Zeus near Hadriani.<sup>17</sup> Two briefer dedications to divinities were found in the same area, not far from the Laneion estate that he acquired in 141–142 with money he inherited when his

---

15. These basic biographical details about Aristides' family are not given by Aristides himself, but come rather from the *Prolegomena* by Sopater, a notice in the *Suda*, and the biography in Philostratus's *Lives of the Sophists*, supported by some inscriptional evidence. Behr 1968, 142–147 outlines and discusses the various sources for Aristides' *Vita*, and Lenz 1959 provides an edition of the *Prolegomena*.

16. He refers to his father once in the *HL*, in a dream from the mid-160s (*HL* II.40), and mentions his mother briefly when he describes an illness that assailed him when he was residing on his ancestral estate in the late 140s (*HL* III.16).

17. Behr 1981–1986, 1:425: “And this [statue of the] Argive spouse of aegis-bearing Zeus/Aristides erected in the plain [of the god].” See Magie 1950, 1477, and Puech 2002, 138–139. On the Mysian inscriptions attributed to Aristides, see Robert 1937, 207–222. Behr 1981–1986, vol. 1, appendix 2 provides translations for all the inscriptions either confidently or doubtfully attributed to Aristides, with some notes. Puech 2002, 138–145 provides text, translation, and commentary for the five most securely linked to him, with further discussion.