Suggested project
Dr. Georgia Petridou

Resonating Mysteries in the Second Sophistic. An exploration of the mystic language and iconography in Lucian’s Alexander the Pseudo-Prophet and Galen’s On the Usefulness of the Parts

This PhD project sets out to unravel the ways the body and healing rituals were conceived in the second century AD and revisit these connections through a resonance-focused spectrum by investigating how **medicine became a religiously imbued and resonant type of knowledge** about the body. The main aim is to move beyond prevalent ideas about the ‘Greek miracle’ and the juxtaposition of rational and irrational medicine (e.g. Jouanna 1992; Longrigg 1993) and explore for the recurrent presence of a new kind of physiology, a conception of a body that is both ritually experienced and expressed. The PhD project intentionally brings together two literary genres that have traditionally been kept apart: medical writings (Galen’s *De usu partium*) and biographical writings with distinct polemical overtones (Lucian’s *Alexander*). The student undertaking this project is encouraged to consider carefully why religious imagery and terminology drawn from mystery cults were employed to describe bodily knowledge in these two narratives dating roughly to the second century AD. By way of comparative work, the PhD candidate conducting this research will engage in an in-depth linguistic analysis of the two texts and compare them to other literary texts roughly dating to the second century AD, where mystery terminology and iconography are used extensively: e.g. Aelius Aristides’ *Hieroi Logoi* or Lucian’s *Podagra*. Equally useful will be a comparison with other authors dating to an either slightly earlier or roughly the same period: Dion of Prusa, Plutarch, Maximos of Tyros and Hippocratic writings dated to the Imperial period. Can we really dismiss every single mention of mystic language as purely metaphorical?

Admittedly, the mystery language and in particular the allusions to the *mysteria* of Eleusis in authors of the second century AD have attracted some scholarly attention (e.g. Benedum 1986; Humbel 1994; Cox-Miller 1994, Van Nuffelen 2007, etc.), but in many cases, this resonance of mystery language and imagery is dismissed as purely metaphorical (Behr 1986).

In terms of methodology, the project draws on Sullivan’s (1990) socio-anthropological studies, and argues that in the second century AD knowledge about the body is transmitted through culturally shaped experiences of the body. In socio-anthropology, ‘critical knowledge of the body is frequently related to critical experiences that are religious. Such critical experi-
ences are envisaged as crises’. In a similar vein, the student undertaking this doctoral project should look at the body as construed, fragmented and reassembled in ritual processes that were determined by ritual contact with prominent healing deities, such as Asclepius of Pergamum and neos Asklepios Glykon (‘the Gentle One’) at Abonouteichos in the Black Sea. No matter how popularised medical knowledge was in the Second Sophistic (Paz de Hoz 2014; van Nuffelen 2014), there is little doubt that only a limited number of people would have had access to it. Most people’s knowledge of how their bodies worked would have been a unique and peculiar amalgam of personal experimentation, hearsay, family upbringing, experiences with health care providers (magicians, astrologers, root cutters, herbalists, wandering healers, household or family members, etc.) of various degrees of success and efficiency, and, most importantly, of religious practices that marked important changes in their bodily status (e.g. rites of passage, initiatory rituals, etc.).

In the same vein, the study of Galen’s *De usu partium* is very important. Most of the previously done scholarly work has focused on the bodily knowledge as defined by Galen and his colleagues in the second century and pigeonholed Galen’s work among the so-called ‘scientific’ approaches to medicine. The PhD candidate will be strongly encouraged to dig deeper into the Galenic corpus for indications of Galen’s very unique relationship with Asclepius (Legras 2011; Brockmann 2013, Pietrobelli 2013, etc.).

In the dominant conceptual framework, the body is given central stage in the literary and cultural production of the Second Sophistic due to the emergence of this very vague and often methodologically illusive concept of the ‘self’ (e.g. Perkins 1992). The highlighted role of charismatic medical experts of the calibre of Rufus, Soranus, and Galen in the societal workings of their time is considered to be the most significant tell-tale sign of an era that for the first time devoted so much time to the care of the ‘self’ and the care of the body. Seen in this light the pre-eminence of the healing cults of that period, with extra emphasis on the popularity of the Asclepian cults in the second century AD, is considered to be another side of the same coin (Perkins 1992). However, as Sullivan among others has proved, the knowledge of the body in many cases can be a religious affair. This notion puts the close correlation of medicine and mystery cults into a wholly new perspective. Medicine is, in a sense, embodied knowledge that can only be experienced and expressed in religious terms. Illness is experienced as a major crisis that challenges the foundations of the previously established identity and, thus, evokes ritually rehearsed crises the individual had to undergo as part of earlier initiatory rites.

**Collaborations:** The IGDK presents itself as the ideal hub for research activity of this sort, since the student undertaking this project will benefit from collaborations with several specialists of Imperial literature and history of religions both at Erfurt and Graz, such as Kai Brod-
ersen, Christoph Heil, Jörg Rüpke, Peter Scherrer, Wolfgang Spickermann, and Katharina Waldner.

Literature

- **NUFFELEN, PIETER VAN** 2014. “Galen, divination, and the status of medicine”, *Classical Quarterly* 63. 337-352.