
Observations on the Reception of the Ancient Greek Sophists and the Use of the Term Sophist in the Renaissance

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Abstract: This paper presents some material for a history of the reception of ancient Greek sophistic in the Renaissance. First, it discusses what knowledge the dialectician and rhetorician Rudolph Agricola (1483-1485) may have had about the ancient Greek sophists by analysing two passages where Agricola explicitly mentions the ancient sophists. Second, it explores the meaning and use of the word ‘sophista’ in the context of the humanist-scholastic debate of the early 16th century and in the first comprehensive history of the Greek sophists in antiquity, Louis de Cressolles’ *Theatrum veterum rhetorum, oratorum, declamatorum quos in Graecia nominabant sophistas* (1620). It will be observed that Agricola’s views on the early Greek sophists, in so far as they can be reconstructed, stand in strong contrast with those of Cressolles.

Keywords: ancient Greek sophists, Rudolph Agricola, Louis de Cressolles, dialectic, rhetoric, ‘sophista’ in the Renaissance.

1. Introduction¹

Since the landmark essays of Hannay Gray and Paul Oskar Kristeller it is well known that the study and reception of the ancient Greek and Roman rhetorical theory and practice by the humanists constituted a major contribution to the intellectual culture of the Renaissance.² Nevertheless, this is still an area of studies where much is left to be explored. In this essay I will look into the question what knowledge the Frisian scholar of dialectic and rhetoric Rudolph Agricola, whose work has attracted much attention in recent decades, may have had about the early Greek sophists and their place in the ancient history of dialectic and rhetoric.³ This discussion will lead us to explore the wider context in which the word ‘sophista’ was used in Agricola’s time and later in the Renaissance. In this connection, we will look at Louis de Cressolles’ view on the ancient sophists in his *Theatrum veterum rhetorum, oratorum, declamatorum quos in Graecia nominabant sophistas* (1620).

2. Ancient Greek sophists

‘Sophist’ was a term used in antiquity for a number of wandering scholars in the ancient Greek city states during the second half of the fifth and the first part of the fourth century BCE. These scholars, among whom Protagoras of

Abdera, Gorgias of Leontini, Prodicus of Cos, and Hippias of Elis were prominent, taught eloquence and the art of debating, but also linguistics, esthetic, moral philosophy and other branches of knowledge. Although the sophists never formed a coherent group or movement, their biographer Flavius Philostratus (c. 165-c.250 CE) labelled their art with the generic term ἡ ἀρχαία σοφιστική (‘ancient sophistic’), which he says must be considered as ῥητορικὴ φιλοσοφοῦσα (‘philosophical rhetoric’) because, as Philostratus explains, the sophists discoursed about general and philosophical subjects such as courage, justice, the heroes and the gods, and the universe. This distinguishes them, according to Philostratus, from the sophists of his own time, because these sophists dealt only with specific subjects such as the types of the poor man and the rich, princes and tyrants, and historical subjects; in other words, they did not discuss philosophical subject matter.⁴ The original meaning of the word ‘sophist’ (σοφιστής) is ‘sage’,⁵ but it obtained a pejorative force as a result of Plato’s and Aristotle’s criticism of the logical tricks and the relativism of some sophists, Protagoras and Gorgias in particular.

3. Agricola and the ancient Greek sophists

Rudolph Agricola (1443-1485), born in Frisia, was trained in the late-medieval arts curriculum at the universities of Erfurt and Louvain, where he graduated as *magister artium* in 1465. He became thoroughly acquainted with Italian humanism during a lengthy stay in Northern Italy between 1469 (perhaps earlier) and 1479. For several years he was active at the university of Pavia and contributed to the humanist movement there. In 1475, he went to Ferrara, where he learnt Greek and translated several Greek texts into Latin, among which (ps.-)Isocrates’ *Paraenesis ad Demonicum* (1478), about which more below. In Ferrara he also started working on *De inventione dialectica*, which he finished shortly after he left Italy in the early months of 1479. In this treatise Agricola blends dialectic with rhetoric, which had previously been separate disciplines. Not long before his untimely death in 1485, he wrote a brief pedagogical treatise in the form of a letter, that was often printed in the sixteenth century with the title *De formando studio*. None of Agricola’s writings were published during his lifetime, but several of them, in particular *De formando studio* and *De inventione dialectica*, went through numerous printings during the sixteenth century.

Agricola's writings contain two explicit references to the ancient sophists, one in the letter in which he dedicates his translation of the Isocratean *Πρὸς Δημόνικον* (*Paraenesis ad Demonicum*) to his elder (half-)brother Johannes, the other in *De formando studio*. First, the letter dedicating his translation of *Πρὸς Δημόνικον* to his brother. This text, erroneously attributed to Isocrates in Agricola's time, is a brief pedagogical treatise, which was very well received among Italian humanist pedagogues. Agricola recommends it with great enthusiasm to Johannes:

(4) Quum sint autem permulta, que ad uite pertineant institutionem Grecis Latinisque litteris conscripta, egregia inprimis et admirabilis Isocratis ad Demonicum paraenesis mihi uidetur. (5) Ea enim suauitas est dicendi, is ornatus et (ut ita dicam) sculptura orationis, tanta preterea maiestas utilitas decor preceptorum, ut, si, quemadmodum pugiles meditato quosdam nodos nexusque habent, quibus inter certamina subito et uel non cogitantes etiam utantur, ita nos quoque oporteat certa quedam et ad manum posita uitae habere precepta, que omnes nostras uelut ad filum dirigant acciones, quorumque tenax infixata mentibus nostris memoria recti nos limitem egredi unice uetet, hic libellus aptus uel maxime ad hanc rem atque accomodatus mihi uideatur. (6) Eum itaque tibi in Latinum sermonem e Greco conuertit, me rem scrupulosam conatus, ut numeros quoque, quorum ille fuit obseruantissimus, et scemata uel (ut nos dicimus) exornationes orationis, quoad possem, imitaret. Per similiter enim cadencia et desinentia et equata et contrapposita et reliquos id genus ornatus uoluit oratio. Quorum ut studiosus precipue Gorgias Leontinus preceptor eius alique etatis illius sophiste fuerunt, ita diligencior iste, ut secuta eum, non affectata uiderentur. Hunc ego legendum tibi etiam atque etiam, sed ad uerbum quoque ediscendum censeo semperque uelut ante oculos tamquam regulam quandam uitę prescriptum habendum. (Letter 15, ed. Van der Laan and Akkerman, 102-104)

A great many things dealing with how to arrange one's life have been written in Greek and Latin literature. It seems to me, however, that Isocrates' *Exhortation to Demonicus* is particularly outstanding and commendable. Its wording is sweet, its style beautifully carved, as it were; moreover, its teachings are particularly impressive, useful and appropriate. So if we are to learn certain things that come in handy at all times, that guide and direct all our actions, and that we firmly implant in our minds so as to remind us of the path of righteousness that we ought never to stray from (just as boxers have certain holds and grips that they practice and then automatically use during a match), then this booklet seems to me to be perhaps the most comprehensive and appropriate for the job. I have therefore translated it from Greek into Latin. I have even tried to do something which requires particular skill, that is, to also include Isocrates' rhythms (to which he paid great attention) as far as I could, and also his figures of speech or (as we call them) stylistic embellishments. For his text picks up words in like cases, words with like endings, parallel clauses, opposite clauses, all that kind of embellishment. Gorgias of Leontini, his [i.e. Isocrates'] teacher, and other Sophists of the time eagerly used these stylistic figures, and Isocrates made particular use of them himself, making sure that they were naturally incorporated into his text instead of forced upon it. I think that you should read this booklet over and over again, but also learn it by heart, word for word, holding it in front of you as though it were a rule and guideline for life. (Van der Laan and Akkerman, 103-105)

Agricola's remarks on the style of Isocrates and the sophists reflect his reading of several ancient testimonies. The *suauitas* of Isocrates' style comes from Cicero, *De ora-*

tore 3.28 ("Suauitatem Isocrates [...] habuit"). Isocrates' use of rhythm ('numerus') is attested in *De oratore* 3.173 and *Brutus* 32-33, and one of these passages, or both, is probably Agricola's source.⁶ Agricola does not follow Cicero's observation in these two passages that Isocrates was the first to apply rhythm. This may be due to the fact that Agricola was aware that Cicero had corrected himself in *Orator* 174-175, where he says that it was claimed by Isocrates' admirers that he was the first to introduce rhythm into prose, but that Thrasymachus was the inventor of it.⁷ Agricola may also have in mind *Orator* 165, where Cicero mentions that Gorgias was the first to apply the skilful connection of words and clauses by means of symmetry and antithesis, though he does not use the technical term *concinntitas* that Cicero uses in this passage ("It is said that Gorgias was the first to strive for this sort of symmetry"; "In huius concinnitatis consecratione Gorgiam fuisse principem accepimus"; Trans. Hubbell 1939, 443-445). Agricola's observation that Isocrates' use of the Gorgianic figures of style was moderate, reflects the general praise for Isocrates' style in the classical testimonies, and perhaps in particular Cicero's observation in *Orator* 176 that Gorgias made excessive use of rhythm ("But Gorgias is too fond of this style, and uses these "embroideries" (his own word for it) too boldly"; "Gorgias autem auidior est generis eius et his festiuitatibus – sic enim ipse censet – insolentius abutitur"; Trans. Hubbell 1939, 455).

The second text in which Agricola mentions the ancient sophists is his letter to Jacob Barbireau, written in Heidelberg on June 7, 1484. The letter is a response to Barbireau's request for advice about the approach he should take to his studies. Agricola begins by discussing the different subjects one will choose depending on one's talent and financial means. If one has both, and if one aspires to follow a study which is honorable in its own right, then one must choose to study philosophy, which Agricola divides into ethics, including the study of the bible, and natural sciences. He then discusses the methods one needs to follow in order to achieve good results. This includes recording and memorizing systematically everything one has read in order to acquire knowledge and have it ready at hand, so to speak. This skill is acquired by using a mnemonic system of juxtaposed headings such as virtue/vice, life/death, learning/ignorance, friendliness/hatred. Second, one must acquire the ability to make the knowledge one has acquired productive, by expertly composing new, original texts. This, Agricola says, can be achieved by means of the topics of invention, for which he refers Barbireau to *De inventione dialectica*. The essence of the method of learning Agricola mentions here is discussed in book 2, chapters 28 and 29 of *De inventione dialectica* and consists of two steps. First, the topics are used to collect data (facts, sayings, anything one knows or has found in one's readings) about individual things (Agricola uses the Latin word 'res', which includes both abstract concepts and concrete things situated in place and time); these data subsequently form the material for arguments both for and against any proposition in which the 'res' in question is taken up, either in a philosophical debate or in an oratorical discourse intended to instruct or persuade an audience.

In the course of the passage describing the method of study to be followed, Agricola mentions the early Greek sophists:

(54) Quisquis ergo prius id recte et cum cura tractauerit, presertim si rationem dialectice inuentionis illi adiunxerit, ingens illi paratissimaque de omni fere proposita re disserendi facultas continget, modo ea ulla ex parte as eas pertineat, quas didicit, artes. Hoc quoque pacto veteres illos professores artium, quos Graeci sophistas, id est doctores, uocabant, exercuisse se deprehendo, quantum ex Aristotele et Platone coniciere licet, atque ad eam eruditionem promittuntinque dicendi peruenerunt, ut, de qua re audire quis uellet, proponi iuberent dicerentque, quamdiu quantumque uideretur de eo, quod esset propositum. Sic Gorgias Leontinus, primus tam audacis cepti auctor, sic Prodicus Chius, sic Protagoras Abderites atque Hippas Eleus et instituti sunt et alios docuere. (Letter 15, ed. Van der Laan and Akkerman, 216)

So whoever has practised that first point of mine [i.e. the mnemonic system of headings; the second being the analysis of texts in order to range the material they contain under the appropriate headings] correctly and with care, especially if he has combined it with the dialectical invention method, that person will attain an enormous and most readily available capacity to treat almost any matter that is suggested, provided it is related in some respect to the arts he has learned. I have found that this is also the way in which those ancient teachers of the arts whom the Greeks called sophists, which means instructors, practiced their skills, as far as I can figure out from Aristotle and Plato. And they reached such a degree of learning and such ease in speaking that they would ask anyone to suggest any matter they wanted to know something about, then would speak on what had been suggested as long and as much as they saw fit. In this way Gorgias of Leontini (he was the first to engage in such a bold practice) and Prodicus of Cos, Protagoras of Abdera and Hippas of Elis were trained and taught others. (Van der Laan and Akkerman, 217)

In this passage, Agricola states that his method of study, the art of memory combined with topical invention, was also applied by the early Greek sophists. He only gives a vague reference to Plato and Aristotle to support this claim, but he does mention the feat of speaking extemporaneously for which Gorgias was famous in antiquity. Agricola probably has in mind here Cicero, *De finibus* 2.1, where Cicero labels Gorgias' habit of speaking extemporaneously as an *audax negotium*.⁸ In addition, Agricola's observations probably reflect Cicero, *De oratore* 3.126-129, a passage about the rhetoric of the sophists and especially their skill in speaking about any subject, where not only Gorgias, but also Hippas of Elis, Prodicus of Cos, Thrasymachus of Chalcedon and Protagoras of Abdera are mentioned. Agricola's reference to Plato and Aristotle may suggest that he systematically collected information about the sophists and their work, but in fact he only mentions a well-known practice of the sophists about which many ancient testimonies exist.⁹

Peter Mack has mentioned that Juan Luis Vives, in *De instrumento probabilitatis* (1531), cites Agricola's belief that the ancient sophists had drawn their *copia* and facility from the topics.¹⁰ Vives says this in a passage in which he discusses the description of 'man' by means of various topics, such as substance, conjugates, actions, causes, things that relate to man, such as God, parents, teachers, and so forth. Vives continues by listing things which may be adduced as arguments:

pro argumentis adducantur maiores, exempla priorum, historiae, fabulae, proverbia, si quid praedictum de illo, aut praemonstratum, quid dixit, aut significavit quis, nomen, cognomen, appellatio: ex his apparet non solum ad arguendum valere hanc copiam, sed ad dicendum de quacunque re uelis, ut non absurde videatur Agricola Rodolphus existimare Gorgiam, Hippas, Prodicum, et alios Graecos sophistas, qui in conuentu hominum paratos se esse profitebantur ad dicendum de quacunque re quis uellet audire, ex his fontibus ubertatem illam et redundantiam eorum, quae dicturi essent, haurire, ut nunquam dicendi materia deficerentur (*Opera omnia*, vol. 3, 116-117).

As arguments one may use ancestors, examples of previous generations, historical narratives, fictional stories, proverbs, anything said or predicted about the individual who is subject of the discourse, what someone has said or indicated, name, surname, title. From these things it is clear that this supply not only serves towards arguing but also towards speaking about any subject you might wish. Hence it does not seem contrary to reason that Rudolph Agricola thinks that Gorgias, Hippas, Prodicus and the other Greek sophists, who claimed that they were skilled at speaking in an assembly about any subject anyone might ask for, derived their famous abundance, and even excess, of things to say from these sources, so that they would never be short of material to speak about. (my trans.)

Because Vives makes a clear distinction between arguing and speaking about any subject, it is possible that he thinks that Agricola had in mind particularly discussions of illustrious subjects¹¹ or commonplaces, which Protagoras and Gorgias were the first to treat, according to Quintilian (*Inst.* 3.1.12) and Cicero (*Brut.* 46). Agricola, however, does not cite or refer to these testimonies. And even if Agricola believed more generally that the sophists used topics as their sources, it is unclear from this passage on the basis of which texts or testimonies he had concluded this. In fact, it seems rather unlikely that Agricola supposed that the ancient sophists already had a fully developed system of topics such we know it from later handbooks of rhetoric. This may be inferred from *De inuentione dialectica* 2.25, an important chapter in which Agricola argues that the method of topical invention, which is common to all arts and sciences, belongs to dialectic, and that there are no topics of invention proper to rhetoric. This raises the question why so many teachers of eloquence wrote about *inuentio*. Here is Agricola's answer to this question:

Cum veniant autem tales plerunque quaestiones in forum, de quibus nihil perpetuum praecipere possit, sed contentione dicendique vi trahantur in quamvis partem, fuit idcirco tradenda communis quaedam inueniendi ratio, conueniens omnibus quaestionibus. Quae quidem rectissime peteretur a dialectico, si tradita iam tum fuisset. Sed multo post secutus est Aristoteles, qui primus eam in artis formam cogere adorsus est. (*De inuentione dialectica* 2.25, ed. Mundt, 382)

However, since usually questions come up on the forum about which one cannot give any general precepts, but which are twisted and turned in any direction in the course of the dispute and by the force of speaking, it was necessary for that reason to formulate some general method of invention, suitable for all questions. If this method had been formulated already at that time, it would have been demanded most properly from the dialectician. But Aristotle, who was the first to have undertaken to compress it [i.e. a method of invention] into the form of an art, came much later. (my trans.)

Agricola says here that in the time before Aristotle, rhetoricians developed a method of invention suitable for all questions that were disputed for and against on the forum. It seems likely that, if Agricola believed that this method was based on the topics, and if he thought that this method had been developed by the sophists, he would have said so explicitly in this passage. He highlights the practice of reasoning for and against on the forum because this is the essence of dialectical reasoning, of which he maintains that it is applied not only in philosophy, but in oratory and in all branches of knowledge. However, there is no indication, here or elsewhere, that Agricola thought reasoning for and against had been invented by the sophists, for instance on the basis of the testimonies that Protagoras was the first to maintain that there are two sides to any issue (Diogenes Laertius IX, 50; cf. Seneca *Ep.* 88, 43). Vives' remark in *De instrumento probabilitatis* thus seems to be an overstatement.

The passages discussed above offer no evidence to conclude that Agricola has made a thorough study of the contribution of the sophists to the early Greek art of reasoning. What he says about the early sophists amounts to not more than traditional knowledge handed down in antiquity from generation to generation and recorded in a handful of testimonies, several of which are cited by Agricola.

4. 'Sophista' in the Renaissance, the humanist-scholastic debate of the early sixteenth century and Cressolles' *Theatrum veterum rhetorum, oratorum, declamatorum, quos in Graecia nominabant σοφιστάς* (1620)

It is noteworthy, however, that Agricola's judgement about the sophists is entirely positive. He highlights that they were teachers and good writers, makes no mention of Cicero's remark that Gorgias was excessive in his use of rhythm (*Or.* 175-176), and, although he says that he read about the sophists in Plato and Aristotle, he never raises their critical stance on the sophists, for instance Aristotle's criticism that the sophist is one who makes money from apparent and not real wisdom, and therefore aims at apparent, not real proof (*SE* 165 a 22), Plato's critical discussion of Protagoras' homo-mensura thesis in *Theaetetus* (151 e – 171 a 4), or of the sophists' logical fallacies in *Euthydemus*. This is remarkable, because contemporary readers of Plato, for instance Marsilio Ficino, did bring up explicitly Plato's negative attitude towards the sophists.¹² Likewise notable is the fact that Agricola never uses the word sophist ('sophista'), commonly used in his time to denote a student in the Faculty of Arts,¹³ as a nickname for scholastic dialecticians. This practice seems to have been common among humanist critics of scholastic dialectic, both before and after Agricola. For instance, Lorenzo Valla, referring to the use of unclassical words in contemporary dialectic, speaks of the traps and tricks of the sophists ("laquei et captiones sophistarum"),¹⁴ and in the early days of the Reformation, 'sophista' was frequently used by humanists to discredit scholastic dialecticians and theologians, and by university theologians to discredit humanists as loquacious orators who wrongly

connect rhetoric with theology,¹⁵ or worse, as dishonest or even heretical theologians. Erasmus was a famous victim of this practice of framing in his polemic with university theologians about his *Declamation on the praise of marriage*.¹⁶ A similar fate struck Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, when theologians from the universities of Paris and Louvain condemned his *Declamation De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium* as heretical, and expurgated certain passages from it.¹⁷ The condemnation did not put Agrippa's work out of circulation, but from the middle of the sixteenth century onward his work was systematically presented as a literary paradox written without serious purpose, and Agrippa was stigmatized as a deceitful and insincere scholar.¹⁸

The clash between humanist and scholastic theologians in the early days of the Reformation and the stigma that was subsequently fixed on humanist theologians such as Erasmus and Agrippa suggests that the notions of sophistry and sophist were applied specifically to scholars and theologians who were critical of the Roman Church. The first comprehensive history of Greek sophistic, the *Theatrum veterum rhetorum, oratorum, declamatorum, quos in Graecia nominabant σοφιστάς* (Paris, 1620) by the French Jesuit Louis de Cressolles, published some fifty years after the Council of Trent had reinforced the established doctrine of the Roman Church, confirms that even the art of the early Greek sophists was seen entirely from this contemporary perspective.

Most Renaissance scholars will know Cressolles' work from Marc Fumaroli's *L'âge de l'éloquence* from 1980, in which Fumaroli studies the rhetoric and the culture of eloquence in France from the second half of the sixteenth century (beginning after the Council of Trent) until the beginning of the period of classicism, which started around the middle of the seventeenth century. In this period of the late Renaissance, epideictic rhetoric flourished intensely. During the first decades of the seventeenth century, the Jesuits in particular played a key role in what Fumaroli has called 'the sacred sophistic' ("la sophistique sacrée"). Cressolles wrote two important works, the *Theatrum*, and the *Vacationes autumnales*, a work in which he discusses *actio*, the fifth task of the orator, and how courtesy is a reflection of a good character. In his examination of the *Theatrum*, Fumaroli focuses on Cressolles' discussion of the so-called second sophistic in books 3 and 4,¹⁹ and especially on what he sees as Cressolles' fascination with – I quote literally – 'these heathens whom he wants to naturalize as christians' ("ces païens qu'il veut naturaliser chrétiens").²⁰ The focus on this aspect of Cressolles' work is entirely appropriate in the context of Fumaroli's book, but it is equally illuminating to see what Cressolles has to say about the early Greek sophistic. Cressolles offers the first ever systematic and critical discussion and interpretation of all the surviving sources about the notion 'σοφιστής' and its uses in pre-classical Greece, and of the ancient and the second sophistic following Philostratus' conception of the terms (*Vitae sophistarum*, Book 1, p. 480-481 Olearius), starting from the note in the pseudo-Platonic dialogue *Minos* (319 c 3-7) on verses 178-179 in book 19 of the *Odyssey*, where Zeus is called a sophist, and ending with the era of the sophists after the reign of Constantine the Great, whose biographies were written by Eunapius. This im-

pressive work of Jesuit scholarship offers a huge collection of testimonies that is still useful for modern students to consult.²¹

In book 1, Cressolles discusses the notion σοφιστής in ancient Greece and Rome and presents a brief history of the first and second sophistic following Philostratus' division at the beginning of his work. In book 2 he focuses on what Philostratus had called ancient sophistic, i.e. the sophists of the sixth and fifth century BCE. Cressolles begins with the division of the ancient sophists proposed by Adrien Tournebus (or Turnèbe, after the Latinized form Turnebus, 1512-1565) in his *Adversaria*. It consists of two groups, the sophists who are like orators, for example Gorgias, and those who are like the dialecticians who were called 'Eristici' because they used the contentious arguments (ἐριστικοί λόγοι) discussed by Aristotle in his *Sophistical Refutations*.²² It is the activity of this latter group which, according to Tournebus, seems to have produced the art of dialectic (Cressolles, book 2, chap. 1, pp. 104-110).²³ Cressolles continues by explaining that the vast majority of the ancient sophists, beginning with Gorgias, professed to be not only orators but also philosophers, and were experts in what Cressolles calls the great arts, the *magnae artes*, including civil science (Book 2, chap. 1, p. 105). In chapter 2 (pp. 111-115), Cressolles uses Gellius' portrayal of Protagoras as an untruthful philosopher (*Noctes Atticae* 5.3.7 'Protagoras insincerus philosophus') as the start of a thirty-six pages long diatribe against the early sophists and their relativism and fallacies.²⁴ According to Cressolles, these sophists were corrupted philosophers, for two reasons. First, they used their knowledge to satisfy their greed and other shameful desires,²⁵ and second, they aimed at probability instead of truth. Cressolles develops this second point in great detail, starting as follows:

Altera causa fuit, quod in scholis explicandis, & disputationibus eruditus, probabilitatem sequerentur, atque omnia sic oratione colorarent, ut quae falsa essent, illa homines non nimis docti nec arguti, & credibilia, & verissima putarent: ex quo necesse fuit prauitatem opinionum, & foedos errores turbulentosque generari. Hinc δοξόσοφοι olim nominati, de quibus Clemens Alexandrinus ita scribit: οἱ μὲν οὖν, δοξόσοφοι καλούμενοι, οἱ τὴν ἀλήθειαν εὐρηκέναι νομίζοντες, &c. (Book 2, chapter 2, p. 112)

The other reason was that in their courses and disputations, they sought to attain probability, and in their speech they presented everything with a bias, so that not so very learned and clever people saw as credible and even as simply true what in fact was wrong; from this arose necessarily misguided opinions and abominable errors; for this reason these sophists were called in antiquity 'δοξόσοφοι' ('wise in their own conceit'), about whom Clement of Alexandria wrote: "Those, then, who are called wise in their own opinions, who think that they have found the truth, etc." (my trans.)

This passage reflects Plato's and Aristotle's defamation of the sophists as men who have only apparent knowledge,²⁶ but Cressolles' immediate point of reference are the Church Fathers who used similar language in their disputes with dissenters. Cressolles' use of the notion δοξόσοφοι ('pretenders to wisdom') is particularly revealing in this respect. Both Plato and Aristotle use it referring to sophists,²⁷ but Cressolles quotes it from a passage

in the seventh book of Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata*, in which Clement replies to the objections asserted against the Christians by Greeks and Jews. He argues that many sects have emerged among Jews and Greek philosophers, which hold views that are opposed to the Christian truth. Among the people who hold such views, many deceive themselves in thinking that they have found the truth, and are therefore called δοξόσοφοι ('wise in their own opinions').²⁸ Clement continues by making the point that, while those who are δοξόσοφοι only deceive themselves because they avoid testing their views for fear of rebuttal and refuse instruction for fear of censure, others malevolently deceive those who come to them and willingly darken the truth with arguments calculated to persuade.²⁹ Cressolles elaborates this point by means of a set of testimonies from pagan authors and church fathers, and concludes that the philosophy of the early Greek sophists was impure and phoney.³⁰ Cressolles clearly misrepresents the historical facts because he randomly combines negative judgements of the early Greek sophists by philosophers and rhetoricians with criticisms directed against non-Christians by church fathers, and pretends that the early Greek sophists were accused of preferring their own opinions above the established truth.

This distortion of historical facts is brought home in chapter 3 on the ancient sophists' method of philosophizing ('sophistarum propria philosophandi ratio', p. 116). In this chapter, Cressolles again presents a combined list of testimonies of pagan authors and church fathers that stigmatize sophists and dialecticians as debaters who wanted to show off their brilliance rather than search for the truth. He then says in the same breath that this attitude is typical of all heretics:

Hoc proprium est haeticorum ingenium, haec ingenita malitia, in impiis opinionibus tuendis hoc ἐριστικῶν genere impotenti animi impetu gloriari, & omisso rationis lumine, apud indoctam multitudinem inutili σκιαμαχίᾳ dicta impia ventilare; hinc fraus et pertinacia, et in susceptis erroribus animi elati et superbi obstinatio. (Book 2, chapter 3, p. 120)

This is typically the mindset of heretics, this is their inborn malice, to pride themselves with uncontrollable desire on this kind of contentious debate when they defend their impious opinions, and, having renounced the light of reason, to bring up for discussion among the unlearned public impious views in a useless fight against a shadow. This is the source of error and stubbornness, and the obstinacy of a haughty mind that has accepted false doctrines. (my trans.)

Cressolles concludes this chapter with the observation that it was the sophists' unscrupulous practise of reasoning which caused their ill repute throughout antiquity.³¹

Cressolles' discussion of early Greek sophistic in chapters 2 and 3 of book 2 clearly stands in the tradition of the Platonic debate and is therefore quite negative. However, his survey also highlights that the Platonic tradition was very strong among early Christian intellectuals. His testimonies illustrate that church fathers commonly used the term sophist to stigmatize their non-Christian opponents as dishonest intellectuals who opposed the Christian doctrine and deliberately preferred probability above the truth.³² In fact, one might say that Cressolles uses the ancient testimonies to almost redefine

the notion ‘sophist’ as a term to stigmatize people considered to be opponents of the Roman Church.

In the course of chapters 2 and 3 Cressolles occasionally also refers to authors from the medieval period, when the possible conflict between faith (*fides*) and reason (*ratio*) as sources of justification of belief was a much debated issue. Thus, he quotes in chapter 2 a sentence from a tenth-century commentary on the *Acts of the Apostles*, attributed to Oecumenius, in which it is said that sophists are called impostors because they obscure the truth with deceit and fallacies (p.114), and in chapter 3 he cites Peter Damian who categorically rejects rhetoricians with their stylistic embellishments and enthymemes, and dialecticians with their syllogisms and sophistries (p.117).³³ Cressolles does not specifically mention any later testimonies that stem from the debate of faith versus reason nor does he refer to the early sixteenth-century university theologians who condemned humanist theologians. However, his framing of intellectuals judged rightly or wrongly to be opponents of the official church doctrine appears to be similar to the way early Christian, Medieval and Renaissance champions of Church orthodoxy approached their opponents. In each case, an opponent is denied the right to debate by claiming that the subject presented for discussion cannot be discussed by means of dialectical reasoning, because it represents a truth which may not be called into question. The sole motive for such an attack on dialectical reasoning was to prevent discussions that were judged by conservative theologians to be detrimental to the Church.

For Agricola, however, dialectic is not questionable because he assumes that its users properly apply it to subjects about which arguments for and against can legitimately be defended, even if they concern subject matter pertaining to the Christian faith. As a typical humanist, Agricola accepts that belief in God and religious truth, as revealed in the Bible or established by either church dogma or binding council pronouncements, were the cornerstone of human existence.³⁴ This fundament of human existence cannot be a subject for debate, while everything else belongs to the realm of uncertainty and is therefore by definition disputable. Hence, assuming that a debater has good faith, reasoning for and against cannot by itself imply a fundamental denial of the Christian truth, and dialectic cannot be discredited categorically as a source of corruption. Accordingly, when Agricola explains that dialectic is an *ars*, he is remarkably mild about sophistical reasoning and he does not emphatically impute it to dishonesty of its users:

Fallit tamen nonnunquam dialecticus, et pro veris falsa tradit. Evenit id quidem, sed et navem gubernator evertit, et medicus aliquando perimit. Hominum sunt ista, non artium. Atque vel eo magis fatendum erit, utilem esse dialecticem, cum et qui oratione seducunt, astu id persaepe, nulla etiam instructi arte faciunt, et qui fallitur, si artem calleret, vel nequaquam id vel minus utique pateretur. Sane sicut reliquae artes, quae remedio sunt inventae humanis necessitatibus, non potuerunt succurrere incommodis, nisi prius ea detegerent, sic dialectice, cum magna ex parte in eo sit posita, quo pacto laqueos captionum fraudumque in dicendo vitemus, necesse habuit aperire insidias et ostendere quam varie quis capi posset. Quae si quis inde deprompta utenda sibi putavit, non artis haec est culpa, vitare fugienda monstrantis, sed improbitatis, sectari vitanda cupientis. Aperienda enim sunt, ut

caveantur, mala et nemo artifex tantum remedia novit. Relictum ergo nobis sit, artem esse dialecticem. (*De inventione dialectica* 2.2, ed. Mundt, 208)

But the dialectician sometimes misguides and teaches false things instead of true ones. This happens indeed, but sometimes a steersman sinks a ship and a doctor causes a patient to die; that is the fault of human beings, not of their arts. Besides, one must admit all the more that dialectic is useful, since those who mislead by means of speech very often do so without any instruction, and the person who is being misled would either not at all or at least less likely allow this to happen, if he were to know the art. Indeed, as the other arts that are invented to a remedy against the needs of mankind cannot relieve misfortunes if they do not first uncover these, so dialectic, which is for the most part concerned with means to avoid the traps of sophisms and deceit in reasoning, must necessarily explain first the treacheries and show in how many different ways one can be deceived. If someone thinks he has to use the insights gained from these rules, this is not the fault of the art that shows to avoid things that must be shun from, but the responsibility of the wicked person who wishes to chase what he must avoid. For bad things must be disclosed so that one may guard against them, and no craftsman knows only the remedies. Our conclusion therefore is that dialectic is an art. (my trans.)

Agricola presents his theory of the topics as a reform of its medieval counterpart and his discussion of it is embedded in the medieval tradition of philosophical debate in the universities. But, similarly to the ancient Greek sophists, he is not only a dialectician who focuses on philosophical debate, but also a rhetorician who teaches how to use the art of reasoning in the public sphere. He knows the power of language,³⁵ and explains that, in order to convince an audience, it is not enough to instruct (*docere*), but also to inspire (*movere*). Thus, when he introduces topical invention and its uses, he explicitly mentions deliberative oratory and the art of preaching, and in his discussion of the shortcomings of medieval dialectic, he points out that university theologians study physics, metaphysics and dialectic, but prove inadequate in teaching common people and stimulating them to the observance of the Christian virtues.³⁶ Early sixteenth-century humanists, such as Cornelius Agrippa and Erasmus in their declamations, adopted a similar view and promoted the use of rational argumentation and emotional persuasion to stimulate Christians to live in accordance with the moral standards of the Gospel. In the circumstances of their time, however, such liberty could not exist, and their opponents silenced them using the same technique of framing which had been used to discredit the ancient Greek sophists and the early Christian dissenters.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the texts and testimonies discussed in this essay have shown that the fifteenth-century humanist Rudolph Agricola appears to have had a more positive view of the early Greek sophists and their art of dialectic and oratory than the Jesuit Louis de Cressolles, who was a champion of post-Tridentine Catholic orthodoxy. Furthermore, the texts reviewed suggest that there was a strong tradition, going back to the times of the Church Fathers, of using the term ‘sophista’ in debates between

theologians as a nickname to frame opponents of official church doctrine as dishonest and misguided intellectuals. In the Renaissance, this practice was continued by a typically conservative theologian of the Roman church such as the Jesuit Cressolles in his history of the ancient sophists. In his discussion of the early Greek sophists, Cressolles followed Turnebus' division of the sophists in those who practised oratory on the one hand and those who practised eristic and invented dialectic on the other. This division implies a negative judgement about the early Greek sophists and dialectic in general, which stands in stark contrast with Agricola's positive view of both dialectic and the early Greek sophists.

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Notes

¹ This paper is a revised version of a keynote lecture presented at the conference 'The Sophistic Renaissance. Authors, Texts, Interpretations', Venice, September 26, 2016. I thank the organizer, professor Katinis, and the participants for their comments.

² Gray, 497-514; Kristeller, 242-259.

³ This interest was initiated by the international conference on Agricola organized by Fokke Akkerman and Arjo Vanderjagt in Groningen, 1985. The proceedings of the conference were published in 1988.

⁴ Philostr., *VS*, Book 1, p 480-481 Olearius. Loeb edition, 4-6.

⁵ Herodotus uses the word for the followers of Solon (1.29), Melampus (2.49), Pythagoras (4.95).

⁶ *de Orat.* 3.173: "Idque princeps Isocrates instituisse fertur ut inconditam antiquorum dicendi consuetudinem [...] numeris astringeret" ("And it is said that Isocrates first introduced the practice of tightening up the irregular style of oratory which belonged to the early days" Trans. Rackham 1942, 139); *Brut.* 32: et cum cetera melius quam superiores tum primus intellexit etiam in soluta oratione, dum versus effugeret, modum tamen et numerum quendam oportere servari" ("He was in other respects superior to his predecessors, and particularly he was the first to recognize that even in prose, while strict verse should be avoided, a certain rhythm and measure should be observed" Trans. Hendrickson 1939, 41).

⁷ *Orat.* 174-175: "Nam qui Isocratem maxime mirantur hoc in eius summis laudibus ferunt, quod verbis solutis numeros primus adiunxerit. [...] Quod ab his vere quadam ex parte, non totum dicitur. Nam neminem in eo genere scientium versatum Isocrate confitendum est, sed princeps inveniendi fuit Thrasymachus, cuius omnia nimis etiam exstant scripta numerose" ("The enthusiastic admirers of Isocrates extol as the greatest of his accomplishments that he was the first to introduce rhythm into prose. [...] Their claim is only partly true. We must grant that nobody showed greater skill in this style than Isocrates, but the inventor was Thrasymachus. All his work shows even an excess of rhythm" Trans. Hubbell 1939, 453-455).

⁸ Cf. Van der Laan and Akkerman's note ad loc.: "Agricola's wording is remarkably similar to Cicero's" (p.362).

⁹ Van der Laan and Akkerman's list various other testimonies in their notes to letter 38, p. 362.

¹⁰ Mack, 316; see also Van der Laan and Akkerman, 362.

See Mack 1993, 316, and Van der Laan and Akkerman, note ad loc., 362.

¹¹ *rerum illustrium disputationes* are the terms used by Cicero to denote the commonplaces of Protagoras (*Brut.* 46).

¹² Marsilio Ficino, 'In divinum Platonem Epitomae, seu Argumenta, Commentaria, Collectanea et Annotationes', in *Opera omnia*, vol. 2, fol. 1129 ff. Translation in Farnell, see for relevant passages the Index, s.v.: Sophists.

¹³ See, e.g., Clasen, 263, quoted from the 1457 statutes of the Cologne Faculty of Arts.

¹⁴ Valla 1982, vol. 1, 277; Trans. Valla 2012, 208-209.

¹⁵ Rummel, 21-24.

¹⁶ Van der Poel 2005.

¹⁷ Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa*, 116-152.

¹⁸ Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa*, 160-166.

¹⁹ In Book 5, pp. 437-528, Cressolles discusses the *vitia* for which the sophists were criticized in antiquity, such as their self-exaltation (*tumidi animi elatio*), their greed displayed in their tuition fees (*avaritia in docendo*), their lust ('impura libido'), and other bad character traits.

²⁰ Fumaroli, 302.

²¹ C.J. Classen lists Cressolles' work in his Bibliography included in the volume 'Sophistik', published in the 'Wege der Forschung'-series published by the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (vol. 187, 1976).

²² Cressolles, book 2, chapter 1, p.104. "Duo enim genera Sophistarum fuerunt olim, unum simile oratoribus, qualis Gorgias Leontinus fuit, alterum simile dialecticorum, eorum qui Eristici vocabantur, unde ἐριστικοὶ λόγοι apud Aristotelem in Topicis et in Elenchis, a quibus Eristicis dialectica profecta videtur" (Turnebus, *Advaersaria*, Book 4, chapter 2, ed. 1604, col. 100. "For there were in times past two kinds of sophists, one similar to orators, such as Gorgias of Leontini was, the other similar to those dialecticians who were called eristics, whence ἐριστικοὶ λόγοι in Aristotle's Topics and Sophistical Refutations; it seems that dialectic originated from these eristics" my trans.).

²³ Turnebus quotes Diogenes Laertius 2.106 as the authoritative testimony on this matter: "καὶ οἱ ἅπ' αὐτοῦ Μεγαρικοὶ προσηγορεύοντο, εἴτ' ἐριστικοί, ὕστερον δὲ διαλεκτικοί" ("And his [i.e. Euclides'] followers were called Megarians after him, then Eristics, and at a later date Dialecticians" Trans. Hicks).

²⁴ Gellius calls Protagoras an insincere philosopher because he affirmed that he could teach how the weaker cause could be made the stronger; cf. Aristotle, *Rh.* 2.24, 1402 a 23-5. Cressolles' discussion of the ancient sophists covers book 2, chapters 2 to 7, 111-147. In Books 3 and 4, 148-436, Cressolles discusses the Second Sophistic or, in Cressolles' words, the sophists of the second kind.

²⁵ "Nam ad sordes inanis avaritiae, aliaque flagitia, cognitione abutebantur" (Cressolles, book 2, chapter 2, p.111).

²⁶ For instance Plato, *Sph.* 233 c sqq., Aristotle, *SE* 165 a 20ff.

²⁷ Plato, *Phdr.* 275 B; Aristotle, *Rh.* 2.10, 87 b 32, and see the commentary by Cope ad loc., vol. 2, 125, and the commentary by Grimaldi ad loc., p.167.

²⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.15, 92.5: "οἱ μὲν οὖν, δοξόσοφοι καλούμενοι, [οἱ] τὴν ἀλήθειαν εὐρηκέναι νομίζοντες, οὐκ ἔχοντες ἀπόδειξιν οὐδεμίαν ἀληθῆ, ἑαυτοὺς οὕτοι ἀπατῶσιν ἀναπαύσθαι νομίζοντες" (ed. Stählin, 65, lines 23-24: "Those, then, who are called wise in their own opinions, who think that they have found the truth, but have no true demonstration, deceive themselves in thinking that they have reached a resting peace" Trans. Wilson, 550).

²⁹ Clement, *ibid.* 92.5-6 (ed. Stählin, 65, lines 25-30).

³⁰ "Atque ex his clarissimorum hominum testimonijs constat Sophistarum philosophiam, insinceram, quod initio dicebamus, & inanem fuisse, vmbra tantum, larvam & effigiem, non veram germanamque philosophiam" (Cressolles, Book 1, chapter 2, p.113-114). "And it is certain on the basis of the testimonies of these most famous men that the philosophy of the sophists was not genuine and, as we said at the beginning, empty, merely a shadow, a specter, an image, not true and real philosophy." (my trans.)

³¹ In chapters 4-5 Cressolles discusses a number of classical testimonies about the fallacies of the sophists, in chapter 5 he presents a number of these, and in chapter 7, the final chapter of book 2, he discusses the question who was the inventor of eristic.

³² In the course of chapters 2 and 3 Cressolles quotes or mentions John Chrysostomus, Clement of Alexandria Origenes, Jerome, Augustine, Lactantius, Tertullian, Basil.

³³ The text quoted by Cressolles is slightly different from the text found in the modern edition of Peter Damian, edited by K. Reindel, letter 28, p. 251, line 14.

³⁴ In *De formando studio*, for instance, Agricola states that education in the humanities should lead to the study of the Bible, because it contains the precepts to arrange our lives and leads to salvation (ed. Van der Laan-Akkerman, 204-206. See also Van der Poel, *Rodolphe Agricola. Écrits sur la dialectique et l'humanisme*).

³⁵ Agricola may have known the famous passage on the power of words in Gorgias' *Praise of Helen*, of which several manuscripts existed in fifteenth-century Italy; see the history of the manuscript tradition in Donadi's recent Teubner-edition.

³⁶ *De inventione dialectica*, Prologus (ed. Mundt, 10) and book 2, chapter 1 (ed. Mundt, 198).