

*Training athletes and interpreting the past in
Philostratus' *Gymnasticus**

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INTRODUCTION: PHILOSTRATUS' *GYMNASTICUS*
AND THE ATHLETICS OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

The human body, and especially the male, athletic body, was an object of specialised care in the Roman empire (as it had been for hundreds of years before), care which was masked by competition between rival specialisms. On the one hand, educational experts of many sorts wielded their influence over the bodies of young men of the elite in the *gymnasion*, teaching them how to perform in competition, and how to carry themselves in life. On the other, medical men taught the best ways of caring for the body, for the achievement of physical, and sometimes philosophical, well-being. Philostratus' *Gymnasticus* – a defence of the art of the athletic trainer – is as near as we get to a full instruction book for specialists in the first, athletic, type of care.¹ It is also interested, however, in constructing a discipline which to some extent unifies these two spheres, combining athletic and physiological expertise. In this sense it is in line with the use of the word *gymnastēs* (trainer), as far back as Plato, to describe men whose knowledge of bodies was on a more theoretical, medical plane than the *paidotribai* who did most of the practical instruction in the *gymnasion*.²

¹ For a longer discussion of *Gymnasticus*, see König (2005) 301–44; some of the material in this chapter is adapted from there, see also König (2007b). I assume, following de Lannoy (1997), esp. 2.404–10 (and also Flinterman (1995) 5–14 and others), that the author of *Gymnasticus* is the same as the author of *Lives of the sophists* (VS), *Life of Apollonius* (VA) and *Nero*, and probably also of *Heroicus* and the first *Imagines*. The repeated interest in athletic subject matter which all of these works share (see de Lannoy (1997) 2.407–8), is one convincing argument for common authorship (or at the very least for deliberate correspondence between the work of different authors, especially between *Gymnasticus* and *Heroicus*, whose subject matter is often strikingly close). Certainty about that is impossible, however, and I have therefore aimed for a reading of *Gymnasticus* which is valid independently of any precise connections with other Philostratean texts, which I will discuss towards the end of this chapter. The precise date of *Gymnasticus* is unclear, but it is likely to have been written in the AD 220s or 230s; for a summary of debate, see de Lannoy (1997) 2.405–7; Müller (1995) 317.

² See Jüthner (1909) 3–8.

