The Origins Of Rhetoric In Ancient Greece

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The scholarly myth of origin has it that rhetoric developed in Ancient Greece. Why Meyer does not challenge what he acknowledges as myth is unclear, but this implication of the Greek provenance of rhetoric is demonstrably false. This is not to deny the Greek's particular cultivation of rhetoric into a formal disputatious art suited to their emerging democracies, but there can be little doubt that the ancient Egyptians have a better claim to being the originators of rhetoric or what they called good speech. The Rhetoric first flourished in ancient Greece. The first mention of rhetoric as an art was in Homer's Iliad. Cicero is widely considered the finest rhetorician of the Roman Republic, based on his collected speeches and treatises. His On Invention was one of the most widely used texts on the art of rhetoric in the Middle Ages. Treatises on ancient rhetoric were being written before Cicero's time, however. The first treatise is recognized as that of Empedocles, in around 444 BC. He influenced the first actual texts dedicated to the subject that were compiled by Corax and Tisias. While a number of
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Before we can trace the origins of rhetoric we must first determine just what it is we are looking for. If by using the word "rhetoric" we mean the art of making speech persuasive as we find in Plato, Aristotle and their successors—which they called Greek ρητορική (the rhetorical art) or ρητορική for short—locates the birth of rhetoric in fifth century Sicily. Back in ancient Greece the term ρητορική was used most typically to refer to politicians who put forth motions in the courts of Assembly. Most scholars, nowadays, agree that the earliest surviving use of the term ρητορική is in Plato’s Gorgias, dating from the early fourth century, and its absence in important texts of the period concerning education a public speaking is striking. This book argues that it is not fair to judge early Greek rhetoric by the standards of Plato and Aristotle it should be seen, rather, as a series of largely unsystematic efforts to explore, more by example rather than by precept, all aspects of discourse. As artistic prose came to be disseminated in written texts and so available in a form that could be analyzed, evaluative approaches to rhetoric were fostered.