Teaching by soundbites: ancient Greek proverbial philosophy
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While the ancient Greeks are renowned today for their elaborate philosophical theories and their sophisticated development of dialectic, by authors such as Plato or Aristotle, it is seldom appreciated that the earliest Greek philosophers communicated their advice through brief maxims. These maxims often take the form of only one sentence or line of verse, which is carefully constructed to convey an 'eternal truth' or moral injunction. Masters of this style were the so-called Seven Sages of Greek culture, a notional group of wise statesmen and thinkers, whose philosophy was circulated and respected widely in Greco-Roman antiquity. Similarly individual lines with moral messages, selected from the works of the classical Greek comic playwright Menander, were studiously copied out by young ancient Greek boys and girls in school as part of their basic education. This presentation will illustrate the ways in which the Seven Sages and others condensed their philosophy into easily memorable and almost timeless educational 'soundbites'. It will also examine how these 'soundbites' are quoted, used, and preserved by an impressive range of ancient and modern authors.