

Undisciplined Reflections: Hellenistic Studies and the APA

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"In the new ecosystem the one thing guaranteed is the potentially infinite proliferation of new disciplinary and subdisciplinary fields..."

K. W. Hoskin, "Education and the Genesis of Disciplinary," in *Knowledges: Historical and Critical Studies in Disciplinary*, ed. Messer-Davidow et. al.

Last winter, Mary Depew, Kathryn Gutzwiller and the two authors posted a survey to assess interest in a formal organization within the APA for those interested in Hellenistic studies. The history of the survey and its results both illustrate current disciplinary issues within the APA which may well be of interest to others.

The survey emerged from informal discussions at two APA meetings by a group provisionally named the "Friends of Hellenistic Studies." Interest in forming such a group and convening at the APA arose largely because Hellenistic papers were scattered in different sessions, making it difficult to locate and speak with colleagues. For example, the tendency of the APA to organize sessions generically has the effect of severing the four major Hellenistic poets from each other (Menander in comedy sessions, Apollonius in epic, Callimachus and Theocritus in various catch-alls).¹ The generic 'grid,' which emphasizes inquiries in literary history, excludes a horizontal 'grid' which surveys groups like the Hellenistic poets together. (Compare the situation for e.g. Republican drama or Augustan elegy, where traditional historical and formal contexts coincide in defining sessions.) While different program committees use different grids each year, adapting them as best they can to the current papers, there is no predictable place to find Hellenistic poetry. Occasionally, there is no Hellenistic poetry at all, doubtless a reflection of submissions, but the submissions in turn must be influenced by the image the program projects.

¹A problem already noted by R. Pfeiffer, "The Future of Studies in the Field of Hellenistic Poetry," *JHS* 75 (1955) 73, who complains of the isolation of Hellenistic epigram from contemporary poetry.

As soon as we began inviting colleagues to the first, informal meetings, however, these literary problems were revealed to be only one manifestation of the limitations of traditional disciplinary grids. Historians, philosophers, philologists, critics, scholars of religion, archeologists, and art historians were all interested in communicating with others working on the Hellenistic world.² Finding each other would entail not only scanning the entire APA program paper by paper, but obtaining the AIA program as well (or vice-versa). Many members of these groups already have a double identity in disciplinary terms—a synchronic self and a diachronic self, represented by membership in both a classical and a disciplinary association. Historians often attend both the AHA and APA, scholars of religion both the AAR/SBL and the APA. The current structure of the APA/AIA meetings tends to reproduce the categories represented by these other national learned societies, grouping historians with historians, philosophers with philosophers, etc.

The preceding observations require acknowledgment of the difficulties of organizing the APA program. The meetings are not a hypertext; choices must be made, and those choices always involve minimizing some connections and emphasizing others. In some circumstances, the structure of the meetings may not offer a good fit with current trends in the field—perhaps only a minor inconvenience, but perhaps something more, a reflection of a gap between the organization and the current activities of its members. Our feeling was that in the case of Hellenistic studies the gap was worth investigating. Thus, following the 1993 meetings, we conducted an electronic survey to discover how others saw the situation.³ We received twenty-four responses, many quite lengthy and eloquent.

Although the survey results represent only the opinions of a subset of a subset of the field (those who chose to respond out of those who are regular users of electronic mail), we found that they agreed with sentiments expressed during discussion at the first two meetings of the “Friends of Hellenistic Studies.” We asked first, whether there was a need for a formal organization to sponsor sessions on our topic, second, whether the APA should more regularly include sessions devoted to Hellenistic studies, third, what projects respondents

²The 1988 Berkeley conference “Images and Ideologies: Self-Definition in the Hellenistic World” (whose proceedings have just been published by the University of California Press) whetted this interest and provided a model for defining “Hellenistic studies.”

³The exact text of the survey is available in the archives of the Classics list, found on LISTPROC@U.WASHINGTON.EDU. Send the command “get classics classics.log9401d.” The posting is in part 2 for January 24, 1994.

were pursuing, and finally, whether they could identify trends or desiderata in Hellenistic studies.

On the first and second questions, respondents overwhelmingly saw a need for a formal society of some kind, sponsoring a regular Hellenistic session at the meetings. Several, however, noted the fragmentation described above in the epigraph to this piece: "I feel a certain reluctance to support yet one more sub-group," wrote one. Others worried that such a session would be too strict, excluding interesting comparative material outside the Hellenistic period—the flip side of the current coin, so to speak. One person suggested that the group sponsor a bulletin-board as well as APA sessions, a suggestion which would presumably please the four overseas respondents who wished to be included.

The answers to the third and fourth questions confirmed our sense that a shift in research and teaching interests was taking place. While some were engaged in projects which observed the traditional disciplinary subdivisions described above, more than half were not. Literary critics were eager to use documentary sources to broaden their view; a social historian was interested in examining how formal artistic and literary productions affected less formal 'sub-literary' texts; a political historian mentioned an increasing reliance on archeology.

Most striking was the number of responses which mentioned other ancient Mediterranean societies and their place in Hellenistic culture. Two respondents are looking at relations between Egyptians and Greeks (in at least one case using Egyptian as well as Greek documents). Another colleague is looking at Jews, Greeks, and Romans. Rome figures largely in several studies of the Hellenistic kingdoms (not surprisingly), but Achaemenid Persia is also invoked. Two New Testament scholars responded, reporting that they and their colleagues are very interested in exploring early Christianity in its Hellenistic cultural setting.

The same emphasis emerged in the responses to our last question, about trends and desiderata. Any new group should include not only classical philologists and historians, said one, but colleagues in archeology, Egyptology, Hebrew Studies, and other relevant fields. There were calls for more work on Persia, on Rome: "studies of the cultures underneath the Hellenistic superstructure." As one senior philologist observed, "the fascination of our field, and its timeliness, is partly due to its interdisciplinary, multicultural nature." Even within traditional disciplines, delight in the mixtiform is prominent. Several reported increasing interest in Hellenistic philosophy and literature on the part of both classicist and non-classicists, attributable in their eyes to the experimental combinations for which the period is noted.

At the 1994 meetings in Atlanta, our group plans to convene again to consider a metamorphosis into a more formal organization. But the issues raised in response to our survey suggest that the APA as a whole might want to think more self-consciously about its own organizational identity, and take advantage of the unique nature of Classics by promoting and expanding boundary-crossings at the annual meetings.⁴ This would involve not only rethinking the shape of some of the paper sessions, but more active collaboration with the AIA (the joint meetings are a sadly under-utilized opportunity) and with other learned societies. As the Hellenistic kings learned, syncretism can pay big dividends in the modern world.

⁴At the moment, interdisciplinary sessions are almost entirely in the hands of individual entrepreneurs organizing panels on a one-time basis. The new three-year "special topics" colloquia seem a move in the right direction, but the prevailing author- and genre-centered definition of the field neglects opportunities to use the resources and prestige of the APA as a whole to sponsor different types of sessions.