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Callimachean Aitiology

Recent developments in Hellenistic studies make renewed inquiry into the role of aetiology in this poetry more pressing than ever. For example, A. Cameron has reopened the debate about the original reception of Callimachus' poetry: Could his *Hymns* actually have been meant to be performed at religious festivals associated with the gods they celebrate? On another front, S. Stephens, among others, has accelerated interest in the role of Callimachus' poetry in the Ptolemaic project of integrating Greek and Egyptian culture. What role might the foremost poet of third-century Alexandria have assigned to aetiology, the most common means for earlier Greek poets to construct and perpetuate cultural ideologies?

In the hymnic tradition a poet's or performer's authority was tied to his ability to project the foundation of cults into his narrative, a strategy which allowed him to make connections between past and present that would have been true for a particular audience on a particular occasion. Through the use of performative strategies such as first-person verbs and other deictic references to the "here" and the "now" of the performance context, the group for whom the poet spoke was able actively to inhabit the same relation to mythical time that the poet/performer authoritatively proclaimed.

In his *Hymns* (and elsewhere) Callimachus noticeably exaggerates these performative elements. In the so-called 'mimetic' *Hymns* 2, 5, and 6, the speaker's intensive efforts at scene-setting, by describing the ritual atmosphere as though it were present to his own perception, seem to ground his mythological narrative in the audience's direct experience of cults associated with a particular time and place. A disjunction, however, between Callimachus' use of aetiological and descriptive representation in his *Hymns* and the use of these elements in earlier Greek hymn is worth noting. In neither of the 'mimetic' hymns that is also aetiological, either in part or as a whole (2 and 5), can the reader (or hearer) be a member of the group to which the aetiologies in the text would be relevant. Moreover, the 'mimetic' hymn in which the speaker may plausibly be referring to the atmosphere surrounding an Alexandrian festival (6) is pointedly non-aetiological.

In these cases and others, at least one performative condition for the successful accomplishment of the hymn's traditional effect is not met. Aetiological myths traditionally posit identities and boundaries for the group whose institutions they explain; this disjunction in Callimachus' poetry suggests that such boundaries, both religious and political, were relatively fluid for Callimachus' Greek audience. I will explore this claim against the background of contemporary Egyptian syncretism.