

Mount Helikon and the Valley of the Muses: the production of a sacred space

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Introduction

Two Greek mountains, Helikon and Parnassos, have become synonymous with inspiration and genius in Western tradition. Parnassos, like Delphi, was a famous precinct of Apollo, while Helikon was long associated with the Muses. This paper chronicles the development and ornamentation of a sanctuary of the Muses — a *hieron* to Strabo (9.2.25: ἱερόν), a grove to Pausanias (9.29.5; 9.31.3: ἄλσος), and a *temenos* to Kallistratos (*Descrip.* 7: τέμενος) — from the 3rd c. B.C. through the 3rd c. A.D.; I will henceforth refer to it as the Mouseion of Helikon. The same period saw Mt. Helikon, its divine inhabitants, and their favorite haunts become *topoi* in Alexandrian and Roman poetry and art, with parallels in wall-painting and garden design. Artifacts and literature define a period characterized by change and diverse protagonists. Even as the Mouseion and its sacred art, games, and other rituals were attended by mortals, the mountain and its locales came to symbolize divine inspiration, a tradition that would outlive the sanctuary.

No study has paid due attention to the fact that the centerpiece of the Mouseion was an impressive, sacred gallery of art, dominated by legendary poets, their Muses, human benefactors and some *theoi* (θεοί), as well as trophies and victor lists. Though unsystematically excavated, the remains of the Mouseion of Helikon have been well studied by epigraphists, while the first-hand accounts of visitors like Pausanias and Plutarch have received some attention from philologists.¹ A synthesis of these complementary (and only occasionally overlapping) classes of evidence with an eye to the assemblage of sculpture in the valley remains to be made.² Works of literature and art that refer to Helikon reveal a sanctuary as rich in art as it was poor in architecture, and an institution that ratified and reified the divine charisma of the place, while also commemorating human fortunes. This paper represents an attempt to envisage the sanctuary in its heyday, relying on ancient testimonia and modern works, especially the proceedings of a conference, *La Montagne des Muses*.³

Most previous studies have focused on the sanctuary's Hellenistic development and its games, material to be reviewed here for the purpose of setting and populating the stage. My main interest, however, lies in the Imperial age. While the evidence is more suggestive than definitive, a picture emerges of a burst of activity in the Early Imperial period and the

1 For Pausanias in Boiotia, Frazer (1895) remains extremely useful; now see also Moggi and Osanna 2010. For Plutarch, see Lambertson 1988.

2 For overviews, see Schachter 1986, 150-79; Fossey 1988, 234-65; Hurst and Schachter 1996. Such comparative study has been made possible by P. Roesch's authoritative work of Thespian inscriptions, posthumously edited and published online in 2009 by G. Argoud, A. Schachter, and G. Vottéro: *Inscriptions de Thespies* (hereafter *IThesp*): <http://www.hisoma.mom.fr/thespies.html>. The corpus is nonetheless daunting, and "the area has become inevitably one for experts and specialists in inaccessible material, like so much else in epigraphy", as W. J. Slater (2010) laments. The survey by Manieri (2009) is extremely valuable; like her, I have worked through inscriptions and prosopography and have tried to make reasonable judgments where the experts disagree.

3 Hurst and Schachter 1996.