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Behind Aspect: Glimpses of a Pre-Aspectual Stage in the Development of the Greek Verb

Verbal aspect in Ancient Greek has been the subject of several recent studies. Major advances in its understanding have resulted--though by no means secure consensus or a resolution of its many mysteries (the main lines of the developing debate, as yet largely anglophone, may be followed in S.E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* (New York 1989); B.M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford 1990); the papers of Carson, Porter, Fanning, Schmidt, and Silva in S.E. Porter and D.A. Carson, *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research* (Sheffield 1993); and C.M.J. Sicking and P. Stork, *Two Studies in the Semantics of the Verb in Classical Greek* (Leiden 1996)). Given the rapid pace of progress and the still-open status of the relevant questions, anyone now wishing to discuss the grammatical category of aspect is obliged to begin with the definition of terms. Accordingly, definitional issues will be the preliminary focus of this paper. Its primary purpose, however, is to consider a sphere of evidence to some extent overlooked in contemporary theory.

'What is Aspect?' has been the central question of recent discussion. This is fair enough and has yielded significant progress. Of particular importance is the distinction between aspect as a viewpoint feature and Aktionsart as referring to the procedural characteristics of verbal occurrences. Pursuit of the 'What?' question has, however, involved an unfortunate tendency to portray aspect in Ancient Greek in overly synchronic terms. In authors and works as disparate in period and dialect as Homer, Herodotus, Plato, and the New Testament, the feature is often discussed as if its manifestation is identical in each. It becomes easy to assume that aspect is the unchanging bedrock of the verbal system. Yet verbal systems do not spring, like Athena, fully formed from our brows. In Greek we are, of course, dealing with a language recorded over many centuries, even if we restrict our attention to the earlier periods of its history. It is possible to observe clear developments within the structure of the verbal system over this sweep of time. An example is the rise of the future tense form out of a mixture of subjunctives and present indicatives. Similarly, it seems possible to catch glimpses in our ancient authors of the development of the aspectual structure itself. My argument is that these glimpses of aspect history offer valuable clues for solving the major puzzles of the Greek verbal system.