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Atticist-Asianist controversy. The terms *Atticist* and *Asianist* were employed over a period of several centuries (starting probably in the third century bce) in a debate that was concerned as much with ideology and literary identity as it was with style and language. Developed in the Greek world, the terminology was taken up by the Romans at a critical point in their literary history. It would be a mistake to look for unity in a debate that spanned so many centuries and two different literary cultures.

In the second half of the first century bce, we find at Rome a bad-tempered argument among writers and orators over how the appellation *Attic* was to be employed. This purely Roman debate, like much of the literary and intellectual revolution at Rome, was conducted in terminology taken over from Greek. Insofar as *Attic* had any meaning, it denoted a plain and unadorned style of composition; but its more important function was evaluative. It was used by the self-proclaimed Atticists as a term of approbation for the Roman heirs of the great figures of the classical Greek tradition (particularly Lysias, Demosthenes, Xenophon, and Isocrates): Attica is the region of Greece in which Athens is located. The antonym of Attic, on this view, was *Asianist*, a term best defined negatively; it denoted all the bad qualities that a dedicated Atticist should avoid. The principal object of this needling was Cicero (106–43 bce), the most famous orator of his day. Roman Atticism was thus in part a normal literary reaction to a familiar and prestigious style, described by Quintilian as “full” (Cicero’s sentences are often long and complex, characterized by attention to balance, rhythm, and rhetorical effect). Much of our insight into this ephemeral dispute comes from Cicero’s *Brutus* and *Orator* (both composed in 46 bce), in which he discusses style and replies to his opponents. He argues, with some justification, that it is absurd to restrict the term *Attic* to a single style (it was identified with the simple and unaffected style of Lysias by the Atticists), since a whole range of styles and registers are found in the Athenian orators. Part of Cicero’s irritation seems to stem from the implicit threat by the Atticists to deny him the title of the Roman Demosthenes. Since Demosthenes was generally held to represent the acme of Athenian rhetoric, Cicero would become ineligible for this position if he were proven to be un-Attic. The name most associated with the Atticists is G. Licinius Calvus (82–47 bce), and it is unlikely to be a coincidence that Calvus was a friend of the neoteric poet Catullus: both men championed the Callimachean literary aesthetic, which rejected the swollen and the large-scale in favor of the “slender Muse”—in other words, a smaller-scale and restrained style of composition.

The debate in Rome seems to presuppose an argument using the same terms in the Hellenistic schools of rhetoric. There is, unfortunately, a gap in our Greek sources between the end of the fourth century bce and the time of Cicero, which makes it difficult to understand what exactly the debate was and what force the terms

Atticist and *Asianist* may have had. After the end of the fourth century, the Greeks seem increasingly to have looked back to the “classical” period as a literary and linguistic high point, deviation from which could only mean decline. The establishment of a classical canon led to a conception of stylistic and linguistic norms, which affected almost the entire subsequent history of the Greek language (this linguistic insecurity coincided with the collapse of Greek political autonomy following the Macedonian conquest). It is likely, then, that Atticism had its roots in a Hellenistic tradition of declamation that looked back to the great masters of classical rhetoric and insisted on rigid adherence to the lexicon, syntax, and style of a period of the language that was increasingly remote. The requirement for “correct Greek” (*Hellēnizein*) is laid down in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and was reiterated by Stoic writers. At this early stage, the emphasis seems to have been on clarity, for which correct diction (grammar and syntax) was necessary: the choice of vocabulary is, of course, a gray area between diction and style. The Attic movement during the Hellenistic period was probably marked by an increasing emphasis on stylistic conformity.

The antonym *Asianism* is more difficult to unravel. There is some evidence that at the end of the fourth century, a separate tradition of rhetoric evolved in the eastern Mediterranean. This tradition to some extent loosened the stranglehold of classicism and encouraged a greater degree of creativity and innovation in composition. To this extent, the term had a geographical content, and its most famous exponent was Hegesias of Magnesia in Lydia. By the first century bce, however, the terms *Attic* and *Asianic* denoted the style that a speaker adopted rather than his geographical provenance, and even from a stylistic perspective were often devoid of useful descriptive content about a particular orator's technique. Cicero mentions two different rhetorical techniques, which he calls *Asianic* (he is talking of Greek, but then moves without a break to talking of Latin): one was “pointed and epigrammatic,” and the other was “passionate and rapid.” Cicero's attitude toward Asianic style is ambiguous: while he does not condemn it outright (just as he refuses to endorse a simplistic view of Atticism), most of the orators to whom he applies the designation are criticized for their excesses. Much of the point of the opposition was in fact ideological, stemming from a long tradition of viewing Asia Minor and the East as a repository of anticlassical values: corrupt, barbarian, and effeminate. This favored the eventual disappearance of the term *Asianic* (since there was reluctance to apply it to one's own side); but it does not mean that the Asianic style (as defined, and perhaps occasionally exemplified, by Cicero) was uninfluential in the subsequent development of prose style in Rome.

In the Greek world, the aspiration to Atticize enjoyed a new vogue in the period known as the Second Sophistic (c.60–230 ce), in which the ability to reproduce the Greek of the Athenian masters was a hallmark of education that was indispensable for civic prestige and political power.

[See also Classical rhetoric; and Style.]

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—Stephen C. Colvin

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