HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Bacchylides (524 B.C.-451 B.C.)

Bacchylides was born on the island of Ceos, in an environment of high Ionian culture, one more of those extraordinarily rich island cultures which generated the lyrics of, for instance, Archilochos and Sappho. He was born of a distinguished literary family—his uncle was the more famed poet, Simonides-- and Bacchylides traveled widely throughout the Aegean, competing in poetry contests, participating at poetry festivals. While he composed in many genres and prosodies, he was remarkably skilled at choral lyrics, which he offered up in dance competitions throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Like his chief rival, Pindar (#22), Bacchylides was invited by Hieron of Syracuse, in Sicily, to create praise poems for competitors in the famed horse races of the island. It was for this kind of contest that Bacchylides produced the vivid lyric below, in which the challenge is to find an appropriate way to honor Hieron the regent:

> *...Quickly*
> *cutting the depth of air*
> *on high with tawny wings*
> *the eagle, messenger of Zeus*
> *who thunders in wide lordship,*
> *is bold, relying on his mighty*
> *strength, while other birds*
> *cower, shrill-voiced, in fear.*
> *The great earth's mountain peaks do not hold him back,*
> *nor the tireless sea's*
> *rough-tossing waves, but in*
> *the limitless expanse*
> *he guides his fine sleek plumage*
> *along the West Wind's breezes,*
> *manifest to men's sight.*
> *So now for me too countless paths extend in all directions*
> *by which to praise your [i.e. Hieron's] prowess...*

One notes above all the indirectness and sustained metaphorical power of the approach Bacchylides adopts, toward the celebration of Hieron.

We will shortly come to Pindar, the rival of Bacchylides, and comment on the syle differences between the two poets. We can for the moment settle for noting that Bacchylides is an occasional writer, in the highest sense, praising on public occasions. That he is also more than that, a writer in many forms, only came to light in the late nineteenth century, when a packet of his poetry was discovered in Egypt, and overnight Bacchylides became a major figure in the lyric canon. So it often is, in the formation of literary fames in antiquity; a chance papyrus, by a newly discovered Egyptian pyramid, may well vault an obscure Greek poet into front honors.