

SCRIPTA CLASSICA ISRAELICA

YEARBOOK OF THE ISRAEL SOCIETY
FOR THE PROMOTION OF CLASSICAL STUDIES

VOLUME XLIV

2025

ISSN 0334-4509 (PRINT)

2731-2933 (ONLINE)

The appearance of this volume has been made possible by the support of

Bar-Ilan University
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
The Open University
Tel Aviv University
University of Haifa

PUBLISHED BY
THE ISRAEL SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF CLASSICAL STUDIES

<http://www.israel-classics.org>

Manuscripts in the form of e-mail attachments should be sent to the e-mail address rachelze@tauex.tau.ac.il. For reviews, contact fassberg@tauex.tau.ac.il. Please visit our website for submission guidelines. All submissions are refereed by outside readers.

Books for review should be sent to the Book Review Editor at the following address: Book Review Editor, Dr. Teddy Fassberg, Department of Classics, Tel Aviv University, P.O. Box 39040, Tel Aviv, 6997801, Israel.

Price \$50

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Camera-ready copy produced by the editorial staff of *Scripta Classica Israelica*
Printed in Israel by Magnes Press, Jerusalem

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FOR THE
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OBITUARIES

David Konstan

1940–2024



In first thinking of a memorial notice for David Konstan, my mind immediately raced back to the time when the two of us were in Princeton for Michael Frede’s memorial. Several of Frede’s students spoke movingly as did his colleagues and the whole event was suitably grave and high-minded. At a certain point, however, the presiding moderator said “We will now all stand to observe a moment of silence in honor of Michael Frede”. David and I both started to get up and by the time we had straightened our knees the moderator said “We have now observed a moment of silence for Michael Frede. You may sit”. I turned to David and whispered, “Geez, if Frede gets five seconds, they are going to have to figure out how to count in nanoseconds for us”. David responded, “No, not really. Even if people stand for five minutes, what do you think is actually going through their heads, and how many would be able to concentrate even a few seconds at a time on anything about Frede himself.” On the long drive back to NYC we took up this question again and it turned into one of those wonderful Konstan discussions, including empirically testing each other to figure out how many different thoughts we each had per minute—I counted about 6 or 7 and he about 8 or 9, which adds up to over 9000 a day. I am not sure today’s neuroscientists with their imaging equipment would agree, but no matter, we were completely aware that our measurements were pretty crude and subjectively tainted. We continued, though, speculating about the extent to which those thoughts differed in the course of a day, how many were repetitive, ingrained, and pathological, how the internal flow of thoughts was influenced by external stimuli, etc., etc. And then David, of course, turned to the question of how any of our views about this inner Humean theater of impressions mapped onto minds in antiquity. Would the thoughts of those in oral cultures with a different language structure have a different internal rhythm—slower or faster, shaped by larger memory units? Marx, Freud, Jaynes, Descartes, Sextus, and Plotinus all made an appearance, after which I concluded by suggesting that David should follow up his just published book on the emotions of the Greeks with a study of consciousness. Unfortunately, he never lived to write that one, although he touched on elements of consciousness and the mind dozens of times in his more than five hundred articles.

The point of this anecdote, of course, is that what is liable to strike us in thinking about David is not some sort of carefully crafted narrative of an Aristotelian life—as one scholarly fad would now have us think about our lives—but instead, a jumble of floating memories of snippets of

hundreds of pleasant Epicurean conversations, puns of varying discretion and tact, acts of generosity, and pure madcap fun. This was certainly my experience over the course of the almost fifty years of our friendship, and although we almost never agreed about anything scholarly—in his last weeks we strenuously reaffirmed our disagreements about *amicitia* in *DRN 5*, *katastematic* pleasure, the import of Oedipus' failure to interrogate the only eye witness to the murder of Laius, and so on and so forth—he always relished my dogged hedgehog recalcitrance about his large-scale fox-like claims, and never showed the slightest frustration or impatience. He lived for the give and take of conversation and that is what in many ways most of all characterized him. One inevitably thinks here of the Epicurean gods—who David showed were not for ancient Epicureans merely psychological constructs, but real physical beings who spent eternity conversing in mutual friendship. Indeed, David averred that this would be the only kind of immortality that would not turn out to be boring.

Now, I often like to say that I knew David Konstan, before he became the **DAVID KONSTAN**, probably the most prolific, most cited, most traveled, and most widely beloved member of our profession for the past several decades. It is hard to meet a scholar David has not touched in some way, if only through correspondence or his work. But when I first met him, he was a professor at a small liberal arts college who had received tenure on the basis of his book on Epicurean psychology (1973) and a full professorship with a revised version of his PhD on Catullus 64 (1977). This was in the late '70s, when there was an unspoken hierarchy between those who taught at the few select universities with major research libraries and those who did not, and the demands for tenure were fixed accordingly. He himself loved to tell the story about taking his first book to proudly show it to his mother Edythe who responded, "Eight years of work to write on 'some aspects of Epicurean psychology'? The topic was so big you couldn't do the whole thing?" This is a book of 92 pages that I admire very much and it was his initial pass at thinking about the emotions before he was to become a doyen of research into the emotions, but its reach was almost exclusively to Epicurean specialists. His Catullus book and subsequent studies of the sociology of Roman and then Greek comedy and the novel were firmly rooted in his Trotskyite past. As he quipped, if you are a communist, half the world hates you; but if you are a Trotskyite, the whole world hates you. Be that as it may, I think one of his most impressive publications from that period was his magisterial review (1986) of Geoffrey de St. Croix's *The Class Struggle in the Ancient World*. David had had a crisis in his Marxism because however much he believed in its social and political ideals, in class struggle, etc., he had been dissuaded about the mathematics underlying the economic theory and could not understand how academic Marxists could just carry on without addressing the math. Having been a college math major this was supremely important to him and he always kept his hand in. Indeed, when David talked about why he somewhat regretfully left the study of mathematics for Greek and Latin, he resorted to the following rather prophetic witticism. "The definition of a gregarious mathematician is someone who stares at *your* shoes while he is talking to you."

In any case, the first thirty years of his career were certainly that of an admirable scholar, but it was in the mid-90s that David really exploded onto the international scene and I attribute this to a conjunction of three factors connected to his own famous gregariousness. First, his appointment at Brown University brought him into one of the liveliest and most important centers for Classics in America and this was followed by his marriage in 1994 to Pura Nieto Hernández, the distinguished Hellenist, which essentially forced him to become more of a Hellenist and also to perfect his Spanish, which was to open up a whole world of scholarly connections to him. But perhaps most of all was the growth of the use of email in academia which allowed David to be everywhere at once. He was on email continually and managed to respond to all sorts of things with unmatched speed. Several times a week he managed to trade quips and bad puns with me and David Sider, his friend of more than seventy years, about something in the news, some passage in a text, etc., while commenting nonstop on a myriad of papers and projects, writing hundreds of recommendations, etc. The day before he died, he participated in a departmental Zoom meeting about the graduate students,

and characteristically spoke in favor of a student who was floundering. Indeed, at NYU, we called David “the graduate whisperer” because of his talent for bringing along students who were having trouble.

David’s virtual omnipresence was also augmented by the exponential growth in academic travel, something for which he was renowned, both through his many visiting positions, but also in over a thousand talks. If one compares his last thirty years in the profession, from his mid-fifties to his death, to his first thirty, he published at least four to five times as much and on a dazzling array of topics. Perhaps as Chrysippus said, the good runner speeds up as he nears the finish line, but David’s final years were absolutely astounding in the range and quantity of publications, beginning with his influential *Friendship in the Classical World* (1997) which was the fruit of his Guggenheim fellowship, and then his large scale studies of pity (2001), forgiveness (2010), beauty (2014), love (2018), and sin (2022), interspersed with another thirty monographs and edited books on the emotions, philosophy and literature, Xenophon, translations of Greek and Latin texts, etc., as well as some four hundred articles.

David’s scholarly influence was remarkable, of course, in all the standard ways, but a recent incident brought home for me the more particular tenor of David as a scholar and human being. As I was making my way across Washington Square Park between my apartment and office at NYU, a homeless man approached me, filthy, unkempt, pants held up by a rope, displaying just a few teeth, and said “Hey man, can I ask you a question?” As I thought to myself, why does every stroll in NYC have to turn into a moral dilemma, he continued, “Aren’t you a friend of David?” “David?” “Yeah, the little bald dude. Is he back from Spain yet?” I responded, “Well, I am afraid to say he is not returning because he recently died.” “Really, that is hard to believe. I am really sorry, man, I loved that guy. Maybe I can ask you about what I wanted to ask him?” I thought to myself, ah here it comes. “About?” “About Cleomedes.” Now that was unexpected, but apart from feeling a bit sheepish for my initial bias, I remembered how David would often sit on a bench in the park when he stayed with me and would soon have gathered around him all sorts of people talking about whatever he happened to be working on at the moment. I won’t detail all the ins and outs of my new friend’s solution to an arcane question about Cleomedes and what exactly lies beyond the Stoic universe, but suffice to say, after briefly fumbling around in my memory not very convincingly I hurried up with an excuse to leave in order to go check out my Todd in case I bumped into our friend with his questions again. But that was quintessential Konstan and his influence—a homeless man in the park worrying about Cleomedes—and the kind, I imagine, that would have most delighted him.

David’s funeral was presided over by a Rabbi who was used to dealing with families that would warn him that the deceased was non-religious, which was true of David, even though his grandfather on his mother’s side had been an orthodox Rabbi. He began by being somewhat stiff and pro-forma, but after hearing the hilarious stories from David’s brothers, the moving accounts of him as a husband, father, and grandfather, and the words of his colleagues, he himself really warmed up and seemed moved. He concluded that David had indeed lived a quintessentially Jewish life: he had spent his days interpreting the wisdom of ancient texts for the benefit of others and with the hope of making their lives happier and better. May his memory be a blessing.

Phillip Mitsis