

For Hieron, ruler of Syracuse in Sicily, to celebrate the victory of his race-horse, Pherenikos. Since 478 BC, when he succeeded his brother Gelo, Hieron had been the richest and most powerful man in Sicily, the dominant partner in his alliance with Theron, the ruler of Akragas, and in full control of the eastern section of the island. With an Olympic crown, a man of such power had no match, which is why this song begins with a search for parallel superlatives; it is also why its mythic section contrasts a father who did not know how to receive a gift of immortality with a son who understood how to use divine favor.

To an audience who has been dining, the singers give a reformed version of a tale of divine cannibalism. The old story was that Tantalos, having been made immortal, had offered his son as a feast for visiting gods and that Demeter had taken a bite (lines 45–53), but the disappearance of Pelops is now given a more appetizing explanation (lines 40–44).

For other odes commissioned by Hieron, see Pythian 1, 2, and 3.  
476 BC

1. Water is best, but gold, like a blazing fire in the night,  
dominates all magnificent wealth and  
if, o my heart, you would speak of  
athletic trials

look for no star in the day's empty air that  
shines with more warmth than the sun—no other  
games shall we hail as

greater than those at Olympia,  
source of the many-voiced  
hymn that embraces the thoughts of  
singers who gather to celebrate Zeus at  
Hieron's rich and fortunate hearth!

5

10

His lawful scepter he wields in cattle-rich Sicily where,  
reaping the best of all that is fine,

he knows an increase of splendor in  
 song at its best, 15  
 such as we make at his table, like children at  
 play. So take down the Dorian  
 lyre from its peg if your  
 mind was enslaved to sweet thoughts by the  
 glory of Pisa, or  
 by Pherenikos when, unwhipped, he 20  
 ran beside Alpheos, lending himself to the course  
 while to his horse-loving lord, ruler of

ep. Syracuse, he brought triumph as mate! His  
 glory now shines in the  
 populous city of Lydian Pelops, he who  
 roused the desire of Poseidon 25  
 even as Klotho lifted him up from the one of the Fates, at his birth  
 cauldron of purity,  
 marked with a gleaming ivory shoulder.  
 Marvels are many and mortal reports  
 decked out with fanciful lies may sometimes  
 outpass the truth, to deceive a  
 wondering listener.

2. Charis builds all that is sweet among men; she brings Charis=grace/glor  
 honor and  
 often she renders believable what should be 31  
 past all belief, though following days  
 make wiser witnesses.  
 Men should speak well of the gods—  
 this brings less blame. O son of Tantalos, 35  
 spurning the old tales,  
 I shall recount how your father once  
 summoned the gods (as a  
 favor returned) to a tranquil  
 banquet at Sipylos, and how the  
 lord of the trident, mastered by lust, 40

carried you off, driving his golden team up to the high  
 palace of wide-ruling Zeus, where afterwards  
 Ganymede came, serving that lord in  
 similar fashion.  
 You disappeared, nor did men who made search bring you 45  
 home to your mother, and one of the  
 envious neighbors  
 whispered of fire, limbs chopped by a  
 sharp blade into a  
 bubbling pot, and of guests at  
 table who, when the first course was gone, 50  
 portioned you out and devoured you.

ep. I cannot libel a god as greedy of gut—  
 this I refuse to do!  
 Small profit comes to the man who speaks slander. If  
 ever the watchers of heaven  
 honored a mortal, that man was Tantalos, who 55  
 failed to digest such great  
 bliss. His appetite won him an  
 unending doom when, over his head,  
 Zeus hung a threatening stone, that he—  
 straining to cast it away—should be  
 exiled forever from joy.

3. Such is the weary perpetual pain of his life, with a fourth=immortality  
 fourth trial added to three, for he stole three=hunger, thirst, apprehension  
 from the  
 gods the ambrosia and nectar that 61  
 kept him from death, to  
 share it with drinking companions. He is in  
 error who thinks that a deed can ever be  
 hidden from god.  
 Tantalos' son was sent back by the 65  
 deathless ones, down among  
 short-lived men, but when puberty  
 darkened his chin the lad thought of marriage—  
 that he might take, from her Pisan father,

Hippodameia, a girl much admired. He went down one  
 night to the edge of the white-flecked sea and  
 standing alone hailed the thunderous  
 god of the trident, who  
 faced him at once. Then the youth spoke: "If  
 love-gifts from Kypris brought pleasure to  
 you, o Poseidon, then  
 ground Oinomaos' bronze spear and  
 send me to Elis  
 driving the swiftest of cars—  
 equip me with strength! He has already slain  
 thirteen bold suitors to hold off the day of  
 70  
 Poseidon  
 75  
 father of Hippodameia  
 80

ep. his daughter's wedding. Never do great risks  
 seek out a coward.  
 Why should a man who must die ever huddle in shadow,  
 nameless and nursing a useless  
 old-age bereft of fine deeds? This  
 contest awaits me—  
 give it the end I desire!" So he spoke,  
 nor were his words without fruit for the  
 god offered fame in the form of a chariot  
 all made of gold, with horses both  
 winged and tireless.  
 85

4. He overtook the bold Oinomaos, bedded the girl and  
 by her engendered six sons, each eager for  
 valiant deeds. Now, reclining at  
 Alpheos' ford,  
 he knows the blood of glorious sacrifice  
 there in his visited tomb close by the  
 altar that strangers seek.  
 Fame from Olympia, taken in  
 contests of swiftness and  
 painful endurance where Pelops once  
 raced, is seen from afar, and through all his  
 life the victor knows honey-sweet calm,  
 90  
 the great altar of Zeus  
 95

thanks to these games! Bliss that returns with each day is man's  
 finest possession. My given task is to  
 garland this man with Aiolic song  
 cast in equestrian  
 mode, for I know that no host of our  
 time is more lordly in strength and fair deeds, more  
 fit to be wrapped in the  
 folds of elaborate fame-bearing  
 hymns. O Hieron, a  
 god takes charge of your every ambition!  
 Let him not leave you and soon I shall sing  
 even more sweetly of your flying car,  
 100  
 105  
 Hieron's chariot won at Olympia in  
 468 but Pindar did not make the ode

ep. finding a friendly pathway of words as I  
 move beside Kronos'  
 sun-covered hill! The Muses' most powerful shafts are  
 nurtured for me. Men achieve  
 splendors of various sorts but ruling kings  
 stand at the peak. Look no  
 further! I beg you may walk on the heights through  
 all of your days, and that I, in my  
 time, may move among victors as  
 poetry's manifest light, visible  
 throughout all Hellas.  
 110  
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## Introduction

Pindar's songs for victorious Greek athletes often surprise the modern ear with the complexity of their magnificence but also with their lack of immediate involvement. We know that these works were proudly commissioned and sung before audiences made up of present, past, and future contenders, but on first acquaintance it is hard to understand the songs' success with such listeners. They list places and prizes, and they sometimes employ figures of speech derived from the cast of a discus or the course of a lance, but athletic matters are not their immediate concern. Their words do not revive a particular winning ploy, the moment of the opponent's fall, or the saving swerve of a clever charioteer. Even the victor's chosen event may be left obscure—was he a runner, or perhaps a boxer? Instead, though they were commissioned to honor boys and men distinguished for muscle and skill, Pindar's victory odes entertain their listeners with local nymphs and heroes, with bits of legend and myth, and with self-regarding discussions of their own purpose and style. To enjoy them, a present-day reader needs only a slight knowledge of ancient sport but a somewhat fuller sense of the society that chose this mode for celebrating its champions.

In the Greece of Pindar's time (the first half of the fifth century BC), foot soldiers had replaced cavalry as the decisive force in battle, and in consequence, the power of the old landed families was diminishing. As horse-rearing aristocrats, these men had traditionally been responsible for the survival of all who lived around them, dealing with common friends and enemies, but their alliances and actions no longer determined a city's external policies. Nor did men of this class continue to be the only effective representatives of the community as it arranged for protective support from gods and daimonic powers, for temples could now be built and elaborate civic rituals organized by commercial wealth. Nevertheless, one spectacular approach to divine favor was still controlled by the nobility, for at the festivals where formal strife was dedicated to heroes or gods, they alone were prepared to make the expenditure of force and daring that was required if the immortals were to be pleased.

The Hellenic contender in an athletic competition offered his inher-

ited strength, his acquired training, and his own concentrated courage, as well as his blood, his bones, and possibly his life, for the delight of supernatural spectators who might in return bestow favor upon the athlete, his family, and his community. Lesser contests honored local deities everywhere, but there were four great festivals—two dedicated to Zeus (at Olympia and at Nemea), one honoring Apollo (at Delphi), and one for Poseidon (at the Isthmos, near Corinth). In any given year, at least one of these would be held, always with much the same schedule of events, as the athlete, boy or man, either faced a field of like competitors (in running, jumping, casting spear or discus, riding a horse, driving a mule-cart or chariot) or met a single opponent (in wrestling, boxing, or the rough mixture of these called the *pankration*). The so-called pentathlon, a late development (Isthmian 1.26), included trials of both sorts.

At the games athletes put themselves and their kin on trial as a gift to a deity—Zeus, Apollo, or Poseidon—and that power signalled his pleasure by touching a winner with the magic of success. Divine contact would in an instant give decisive control to one contestant, and this return gift was then reified in a crown (of olive, bay, dried parsley, or celery leaves) that was placed on the victor's head in the final prize-giving ceremonies. Such a crown was proof of a special relationship between the victor and the god from whose festival it came, one that would endure and would include as well the athlete's family and those who lived near him. All this was made clear when at the close of a particular contest the herald announced not just the name of the victor but also those of his father and of his city. That voice, sounding in the sacred precinct, fixed an indestructible prestige (*kudos*) upon victor, house, and community, but if this endowment was to be reflected in their worldly condition, it needed to be transformed into the fame (*kleos*) that lived on men's tongues. Only the gods could ensure an ultimate remembrance of mortal achievements, but they could be influenced by hymns and petitions, and meanwhile, men, by combining names and deeds with music and motion, could confer a kind of permanence:

Noble deeds we can mirror only when  
garlanded Memory joins us in chanted  
fame-bearing song, due ransom for toil (Nemean 7.14–6)

One who took a crown at the great games, whether boy or man, was that night joined by his friends in a wild fire-lit revel that took place on the spot

(at Olympia, “the whole sacred glade feasted and sang,” Olympian 10, 76–7). When, weeks or months later, he and his party brought the prize back to his city, the athlete's household staged a formal celebration through which the victor shared his success with his community. Friends, neighbors, and relatives (all male) would be invited to a victory banquet, but this was no ordinary symposium with entertainment by acrobats and flute-girls. Instead, when the tables had been removed but wine still circulated freely, a group of free-born boys or young men—the best and handsomest of local singers—would burst in with a version of the rowdy victory-night revel. The singers represented the athlete's companions, but, though they brought something of the victory night into the banquet, they also spoke for the entire community as a public chorus might when engaged in a cult celebration. These two strains, one of spontaneous disorder, the other of formal convention, are reflected throughout Pindar's epinician songs in language that can be at one moment familiar, proverbial, even teasing, at the next solemn and consciously elegant.

A citizen of Thebes, Pindar, was—in his own time and ever since—the most famous of the poets who designed victory performances. Sometimes he travelled to the victor's city, sometimes he sent a messenger, but however they were conveyed his odes were produced in spaces private or public, simple or palatial, in locations as far apart as Tenedos in the east, Akragas in the west, Thrace in the north, and Cyrene in the south. Some odes were short, some long, and while some were addressed to beardless boys, others hailed experienced athletes or offered their commissioned praise to rulers who gave the reins of their horses into the hands of professionals. Yet in spite of this disparity, all of his victory songs show certain regular features. To begin with, all are strongly traditional, their melodies taken from a common stock known to all men of education, with answering choreography defined by the particular performance space. The performers sang in unison as they danced—six, eight, or twelve of them, unless this was a palace—sometimes murmuring, sometimes shouting as they “stepped light” (Olympian 14.17) to the sounds of a lyre or the “breath of Aiolian pipes” (Nemean 3.79).

The words that Pindar provided for such performances emphasize the solemn formality of these festive occasions, for they were marked by the vowel sounds that characterized most songs meant for a plurality of voices (the so-called Doric dialect). The length of each Greek syllable was fixed—to some a dancer could take just one step, to others he might take two, or

pause for an instant—and short patterned phrases were gathered into larger rhythmic units, which would be repeated once or many times, as the sense of the song evolved. As a rule the sequence of such stanzas took a triadic form, as exactly responding pairs called *strophe* and *antistrophe* were marked off by a third stanza of slightly different form called an *epode*. There might be only one such triad (as in Olympian 12) or there might be several (Pythian 4 has thirteen), but since repeating rhythms indicate movements and musical phrases that likewise repeat, an ode of any length was evidently filled with its own echoes, both of sound and of gesture. As one group of dancers put it, “the voice of loud celebration” was made to wear the “Dorian sandal” of traditional choral modes (Olympian 3.4–6).

Paradoxically enough, another convention that Pindar embraced with evident pleasure was that of a pretended spontaneity. The victor’s community knew that a troupe of young men were rehearsing the work of a famous poet, but in performance the dancers presented themselves as spurred by the moment. Speaking as one or as many, they repeatedly described themselves as a *komos*, a disorderly drunken group that bursts into the house of a friend. Sometimes they pretended to come straight from the victor’s triumph (“I come with a musical message!” Pythian 2.3), or to be still collecting themselves at his gate (Isthmian 8.1–5), and they repeatedly insisted on the impromptu nature of their performance. In this character they may give themselves encouragement (“Wild shouts suit Aristokleidas!” Nemean 3.67) or boast of their skills (“I know a short-cut!” Pythian 4.247–8); they might scold themselves (“but, o my mouth, spit out this tale,” Olympian 9.35–6) and seem to engage their listeners directly (“Friends, did I stray from the plain path I followed before?” Pythian 11.37–8). Yet even as with well-rehearsed phrases they claimed to be acting on impulse, Pindar’s performers would also describe their work as orderly and measured (“My given task is to garland this man with Aeolic song cast in equestrian mode,” Olympian 1.101), sometimes speaking for the professional poet who had created their songs (“since my voice has been hired for a wage,” Pythian 11.40, cf. Isthmian 2.6–11). Theirs was a polished performance derived from a rough original, and this double fact was plainly stated at the opening of Olympian 9 (lines 1–5):

The Archilochos chant—  
 “Victor triumphant!”  
 shouted three times—could

open the revel when Epharmostos  
 danced with his friends close by the  
 Kronian hill, but today a volley of  
 far-flying shafts like these must  
 sweep from the bows of the Muses . . .

at Olympia

While they pretend to be improvisations, Pindar’s odes show a set of common characteristics that reflect the essential nature of the great games. The victory that the singers honor was an offering made to a god, and all of these songs are sanctified through their use of the sonorous Doric dialect that flavoured certain cult chants. The dancers, moreover, like sacred celebrants, often marked their own actions with ritualizing self-commentary, like the Aiginetan boys who chant, “I stop my light feet and take breath,” as they do exactly that (Nemean 8.19). And in almost every song, the singers call upon otherworldly powers—Graces, Muses, local nymphs, heroes or heroines, or Panhellenic gods, most often Zeus—with prayers and invocations. Communication with eternal forces is established early or late in each song, while the singers’ voices pursue their central task of causing certain names and deeds to resound through time—brothers, uncles, fathers, grandfathers are announced along with the victor, as are lists of contests attended and prizes taken (golden cups, tripods, or woolly cloaks), all given permanence by effective gestures and musical phrases. Often totals are calculated—Olympian 13 counts more than sixty familial crowns, then concludes that it would be “easier to number the sands of the sea” (line 46).

Sung praise gave the athlete’s success an enduring glory that illumined the entire community. Nevertheless, if this new status was to be immediately experienced by all, the celebrating guests needed access to the magical instant when victory was determined, and it was this ultimate requirement that let Pindar exercise his special talents to their fullest. For every major ode, he composed a passage, brief or extended, in which the *komos*, like a cultic chorus, recreated a mythic marvel so that the immediate festivity was invaded by a timeless event. The audience witnessed a moment in which a daimonic force entered the human scheme, but the singers did not narrate their episode like a bard, nor did they separate to take individual voices, like actors in the theater. Instead, a formal rhetorical figure, or perhaps a list of some sort, would suddenly produce a scene from a particular legend. There might sometimes be a rough summary of

a tale, followed before long by a focussed presentation of a fragmentary episode, but these mythic sketches were usually without beginning, middle, or end. (The exception is at Pythian 4.70, where a beginning is explicitly sought, but all is exceptional in that enormous song.)

In Pindar's mythic passages, minimal allusions are brought together so as to produce an image sharp enough to mark the listener's immediate sensory experience, and then the story is abandoned. Sometimes the moment becomes actual by way of a visualized object, as with the golden bit that Athena leaves for Bellerophon (Olympian 13.65–72), or the elaborate cup that Telamon hands to Herakles at his wedding celebration (Isthmian 6.40). A like effect may be wrought by more complex means, as with the colored patches of light that play over the newborn Iamos, and the honeyed flavor of his "venomous" food (Olympian 6.55–6 and 47). Sometimes the sense of immediacy derives from creatures imbued with perceived vitality, like the three silvery snakes that attack the new-built walls of Troy (Olympian 8.37), the roaring lions that flee from Battos (Pythian 5.57–62), or the panting bestial corpses that a six-year old Achilles carries to Chiron (Nemean 3.46–9). At other times listeners may seem to hear a voice from another realm as singers pronounce the words of a divinity in action—those of Apollo as he strides through flames to rescue the unborn Asklepios (Pythian 3.40–2), those of Themis as she decides the outcome of strife between Zeus and Poseidon (Isthmian 8.38–49), or those of Zeus as he offers Pollux the power to revive his brother (Nemean 10.83–90). Each mythic reconstruction works its own momentary magic, then quickly dissolves, but hosts and guests have all felt a brief daimonic presence while at the same time the victor's achievement has been associated with an action that defies both space and time. The light of the victor's glory, reinforced by the light of the mythic moment, now rests upon all as a "god-given splendor" (Pythian 8.97).

In the course of an ode, Pindar's singers led a victor and his gathered friends into a state of common exaltation as they shared in an experience of direct divine favor. This revelation was the ultimate aim of the victory performance, but such bliss had its dangers, since all men also shared something of Tantalos's inability to digest too much happiness (Olympian 1.55–6), something of Ixion's tendency to overreach (Pythian 2.26–9). Extreme joy might lead to impious presumption, and this is why the victory songs were liberally sprinkled with pithy sayings about mortal limitations. Proverbs turn up at any point, with an air of relevance or of total

inconsequence, as they cap victory lists, introduce or cut off mythic reconstructions, or simply interrupt. Again and again, the crowned athlete and his celebrating friends are reminded that all men, whether they enjoy leisure or are forced to work, are alike in facing death. They are told that "No man is or ever will be without his due share of trouble" (Pythian 5.54), that "the gods ever provide two evils with each single good" (Pythian 3.81–2), and that "Rich and poor together move towards death's boundary" (Nemean 7.19–20). Human success is always open to reversal from higher powers, just as winds will always change (Olympian 7.94–5, Pythian 12.31–2), and victors like all others must remember that "the mortal limbs that today are wrapped in splendor will in the end be clothed in earth" (Nemean 11.15–6). Even a man who, victorious himself, sees his son crowned at Delphi, "will never walk the bronze floors of heaven, though among mortal joys he may visit the furthest ports" (Pythian 10.22–9).

With dancers, guests, and hosts gilded by the "undimmed radiance" of victory (Isthmian 3/4.59–60) but at the same time made conscious of their own mortality, the Pindaric ode could come to an end. It might close with a prayer for further glories ("let him take garlands from Pytho and Elis . . .!" Isthmian 1.66), or with mention of some detail of the immediate ceremony (Olympian 9.111–2 places a crown on the altar of the local hero). If it praised a boy, the song might end with recognition of his trainer's skill. Nemean 4 ends by imagining an ode for Melesias. Whatever their final syllables, however, the singers would finish by standing for a moment in fulfilled silence. Then the entire company, their noble courage reaffirmed, would enter the state of radiant joy that Pindar called *euphrosyna*, "best healer after a trial" (Nemean 4.1, cf. Pythian 4.129, 10.40, 11.45, Isthmian 3/4.10), as the unrehearsed part of the celebration began.

At the end of his own century, Pindar was lampooned by Aristophanes as tedious and parasitic because he worked for pay (*Birds* 939), but he was soon recognized as one of the greatest of Greek poets. His house in Thebes was preserved into Roman times, and at Delphi visitors were shown a throne in which he was said to have sat while singing hymns to Apollo. Alexandrian scholars collected and edited what could be found of his work, classifying individual pieces according to function, grouping the victory hymns by festival, and adding commentary. In this form the odes came into the hands of Horace and other Roman writers, who judged

them pompous but admirable and worthy of imitation. Forgotten in the Middle Ages, Pindar was rediscovered in the Renaissance, and in mid-sixteenth-century France, Ronsard, the “prince of poets,” mimicked the “glorious fury” of his exclamations and digressions and boasted that he had “Pindarized.” As time went on, this “divine Pindar” began to be criticized for being “led rather by the demon of poetry than by reason” (Boileau, “Discours sur l’Ode,” 1693), but in the eighteenth century Goethe, Hölderlin, and Schiller continued to be enthusiastic, and Schlegel, at the conclusion of his “On the Study of Greek Poetry” spoke of Pindar’s “intense sensibility, nobility of thought, magnificence of imagination, dignity of language, and authority of rhythm.”\* The reaction of Victorian England was mixed and Tennyson found in the odes “long tracts of gravel, with immensely large nuggets embedded.”† Nevertheless, distinguished scholarly studies of Pindaric text, metrics, dialect, compositional conventions, mythic traditions, images, and favorite concepts have come continuously from Britain, the continent, and North America throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the present moment the odes are studied principally for their reflections of the politics and society of early fifth-century Greece, but they are enduring examples of how poetry can impose a transforming experience upon its listener.

\*F. Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, tr. S. Barnett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 94.

†Quoted by Halam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson, a Memoir*, ii (New York: Macmillan, 1897), 499.

## ODES FOR VICTORIOUS ATHLETES