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Pindar (522 B.C.-443 B.C)

The *Odes.* Epic, in a sense, the vision of Pindar certainly is. This Theban poet (522-443 B.C.), born well over a century after the writings of Hesiod, and perhaps twice that since the 'Pisistratean recension' that recorded the works of Homer at the end of the eighth century, is in one sense the new individual of the Athenian fifth century, a distinctive stylist, a praiser of glory in the individualist games and races that focused the attention of his contemporaries, and yet at the same time a celebrant above all of the heroic commitment to excellence, and of the heroic male ideal underlying that commitment. The in-between position of Pindar is illustrated by the use he makes of myth in his poetry.

The texts and performance of Pindar. The remaining texts of Pindar have come to us from many manuscripts and palimpsests, and though what remains to us constitutes work carried out over a long period (498-444 B.C.), the totality of what is left is only a fragment of Pindar's huge 'output,' work firmly lodged in the age of writing and parchment replication, and continuously expanding through Pindar's life-role as an invited praiser-poet at games, races, and regal celebrations. (His work was largely occasional, and devoted to praising the *arête*/excellence of victors in contests; doing so for audiences of the educated and wealthy, who were the ones able both to support his creativity and to read and understand his difficult work.) It will not be a surprise, given this performative nature of Pindar's work, on-the-spot and admirative, that the language structures of that work differ profoundly from those required for Homer and Hesiod, who were (very differently from one another) retailing the epic perspective to audiences far removed from the events or ideas about which they were hearing.

The conditions of production*.* We have mentioned the dactylic hexameter as the vehicle of epic in its initial phase, but in Pindar we face a complex metrical world suited to the music and dance which (we gather) were the production-setting of Pindar's work. The melding of that distinctive metrical world with the thematics of a Pindaric ode represents a new societal world, in which not only were great tales told, but were told in a manner germane to a discursive and democratic society.

First Olympian Ode of Pindar. The language of this performance, first of all, is not based on a single kind of 'foot,' like the dactyl, but on a counterpoint of iambs with anapests. This counterpoint is distributed by a dance chorus according to the dance steps performed by the presenters of the ode, which is designed to celebrate the victory of Hiero's chariot in a major chariot race. (It is not the charioteer but the chariot owner who receives the praise here.) The distribution of the contrasting metrical patterns is coordinated with the moves of the dance—during which the ode in question is recited. Those moves are triadic, consisting of three different turns—*strophe* (meaning *turn*), *antistrophe* (meaning *a turn in the opposite direction*), and *epode*, a *stationary summative choral move* in which the tale being narrated/presented is advanced to a new theme.

The Content of Pindar's First Olympian Ode. In the case of Pindar's First Olympian Ode the challenge is to celebrate the victory of Hiero in a major chariot race at Olympia—one of the first Peloponnesian sites at which the greatest games and festivals of Archaic Greece were held. The ode consists of four triads—four combinations of the three dance modes—

and moves through them with a daring brilliance of allusion, which—*please note this carefully*—refers extensively to the nature and fate of the divine Pelops, name giver to the Peloponnesus, whose ivory shoulder is explained in detail, in such a fashion that the divine background of Pelops is brought to an explanation of his own astounding gifts as a charioteer, gifts which, we are given to understand by the end of the ode, apply equally to the charioteer of Hiero, on whom the implications of more than human skill rub off. The conclusion of this ode, noble praise of both King Hiero and of the poet himself, raises the mortal events of a horse race to an epic level--celebrating human greatness which intersects with the immortal. What requires attention here is the elaborate embedding of the victor-praise in a myth setting in which the mortal and the 'divine' bleed into one another. Byzantine allusive references tie together the parts of this verbal tapestry; a complex brilliance peculiar only to the greatest lyric poets, like William Butler Years.