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INSTITUTE
Institut für Alte Geschichte und Altertumskunde, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz
Universitätsplatz 3, A-8010 Graz
Institut für Alte Geschichte und Alterorientalistik, Leopold-Franzens-Universität Innsbruck
Innrain 52, A-6020 Innsbruck
Institut für Sportgeschichte, Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln
Carl-Diem-Weg 6, D-50933 Köln

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Redaktion in Graz:
Werner Petermandl, redaktionelle Mitarbeit Barbara Mauritsch-Bein
Institut für Alte Geschichte und Altertumskunde, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz
Universitätsplatz 3, A-8010 Graz
Tel.: 0316 380-2349; Fax: 0316 380-9715
Email: werner.petermandl@kfunigraz.ac.at

Rezensionen:
Wolfgang Decker, redaktionelle Mitarbeit Barbara Rieger
Institut für Sportgeschichte, Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln
Carl-Diem-Weg 6, D-50933 Köln
Tel.: 02 21/49 82 3840; Fax: 02 21/49 82 8210
Email: w.decker@dshs-koeln.de

weitere Ansprechpartner sind:
Paola Angeli Bernardini, Istituto di Filologia Classica, Università di Urbino, Via S. Andrea 34, I-61029 Urbino, Italien
Hugh M. Lee, Department of Classics, 2407 Marie Mount Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA
Jean-Paul Thuillier, Département des sciences de l’antiquité, École normale supérieure, 45, Rue d’Ulm, F-75230 Paris Cedex 05, Frankreich
Inhaltsverzeichnis

Gedenkfeier zur Erinnerung an Joachim Ebert

Michael HILLGRUBER, Zur Einführung ........................................ 7
Wolfgang DECKER, Vorformen griechischer Agone in der Alten Welt ............................................................ 9
Stefan LEHMANN, Zwischen allen Stühlen? Zur Archäologie des antiken ‘Sports’ .................................................. 27
Ulrich SINN, Poseidon in Olympia ............................................. 45
Ingomar WEILER, Theodosius I. und die Olympischen Spiele ........ 53
H. W. PLEKET, Einige Betrachtungen zum Thema ‘Geld und Sport’.. 77
Wlodzimierz APPEL, Griechische Versinschriften aus der Sammlung des Archäologischen Museums in Odessa ......................... 91
Dieter TIMPE, Erinnerung an Joachim Ebert ............................. 103
Gunnar BERG, Erinnerungen an Joachim Ebert ......................... 107

Aufsätze

Jan TREMEL, Die Befragung des Orakels durch Athleten ............ 111
Konstantina GOGGAKI, The Athletic Victory as a Value in the Pindaric Odes .................................................. 123
Emm. MIKROGIANNAKIS, The Last Word of Pericles’ Epitaphios as Athletic-Political Signal .................................... 135
Luca BRUZZESE, Lo Schwerathlet, Eracle e il parassita nella commedia greca .................................................. 139
Jean-Paul THUILLIER, La nudité athlétique, le pagne et les Étrusques .......................................................... 171
Jean-Yves STRASSER, Les Antôninia Pythia de Rome ............... 181
Chris EPLETT, Anastasius and the Venationes ........................ 221
Bibliographien
Wolfgang DECKER/Andreas GRILL, Jahresbibliographie zum Sport im Altertum 2005 ......................................................... 233

Rezensionen
S. G. MILLER, *Ancient Greek Athletics*, London 2004 (Martin Bentz) ........................................................................... 275
N. Ch. STAMPOLIDIS/Y. TASSOULAS (Hgg.), *Magna Graecia. Ath- letics and the Olympic Spirit on the Periphery of the Hellenic World [Ausstellungskatalog]*, Athen 2004 (Wolfgang Decker) ......................................................................................... 300

Nachrichten
– 11. Europäischer Kongress für Sportgeschichte (CESH) .......... 309

Kurzfassungen (englisch) ............................................................ 313

Tafeln .................................................................................. 321

Hinweise für Autoren ............................................................ 333
The Athletic Victory as a Value in the Pindaric Odes

Konstantina Goggaki
Athens

The main purpose of this contribution to the history of ideas is to investigate the importance of athletic victories and their value in the Pindaric ἐπινικία. Here the term 'value' is used in an intellectual, spiritual, religious and political sense and in connection with personal honor and the honor of family heritage. Pindar creates a whole world of values which manifests itself in the various fields he touches on, including the gods, the heroic myths, the moral order, and his own view of the world. The poet, who does not speak about his own feelings, confines himself to stating objectively what in his opinion is worthy of being glorified and what has to be attributed to the gods.

1. Introduction

Pindar is one of the most important representatives of Greek choral lyric poetry of the Archaic period. Even after the recovery of some of his colleague Bacchylides' work just over a century ago, Pindar remains the principal surviving exponent of the poetical celebration of victories in the sacred contests, or games, as his works on that theme have survived almost in their entirety. Thus, despite the fact that he was a professional poet working for payment,¹ his articulations of the athletic ideal are clearly based on a personal belief that the games are a continuation of the heroic past.²

This paper investigates the ideas influencing the way Pindar views the competitive, or athletic, victory as a value. The term 'value' is used here in the sense of intellectual, spiritual, religious and political value and also in the sense of personal honor and the honor of the family heritage.³

¹) There is a story in the Scholia (ΣΝ. 5.1 a, p. 89, Dr.) that when Pindar named his fee for that poem as three thousand drachmas, the relatives said that it would be a finer thing to order a bronze statue of the young man for the same money; but later they had second thoughts, and placed the order with Pindar. See The Olympic Games in Ancient Greece, Athens 1982, 142.

²) See Konstantina GOGGAKI, The opinions of the ancient Greeks for the Athletics, Athens 2003, 63 ff. See also Klaus KRAMER, Studien zur griechischen Agonistik nach Epinikien Pindars, Köln 1970.

2. Pindar's poetry

Only happiness can expel a mortal's cares. This is how Pindar once expressed the value of a victory for the winner; immense and heavy sadness is subdued and banished by the joy engendered by noble achievements. Victory is, for Pindar, a moral act capable of reversing painful misery. The winner of the games receives the crown of *aretē.* And truly happy is he who enjoys a virtuous and good reputation. The victory that brings the athlete such joy is god-sent. Besides, *aretai, virtues,* that is, excellence and success, are for Pindar not the work of man, but given by the god. Man is the shadow of a dream. But when that radiance comes from the god, he acquires bright glory and a sweet life. Destiny, or fate, decides the mortals' joy, just as it also decides ill fortune or destruction.

The Graces offer their flowers to the winner of the games, who has defeated his opponents, by his prowess. Participation and suc-


5) *Olymp.* 2.21.


15) *Pyth.* 8.78–82.
cess in the games eliminate any sadness and bitterness that had preceded. The victor enjoys all the honours. After being crowned as a victor, a young victor from Aegina is escorted by a a komos or band of singing revellers, and enjoys the distinction of a victor, the glorious fruit of his youthful endeavours. An Olympic victory occasions praise of a Sicilian tyrant as the outstanding scion of a noble lineage, the descendant who saves and distinguishes the city. Through his victory an athlete is said to have brought honor to his homeland, proving himself worthy of ancestors who had achieved the like before him. A city is praised for its heroes, not only as victors in great battles but also as victors in athletic contests. Victors in contemporary agonistic festivals are likewise seen as persons of real distinction in their own cities. The joy of victory, so ardently desired by an athlete, is also shared by the victor's homeland, which celebrates along with him. Pindar calls on Zeus to cause one victor to be respected and honored by fellow-citizens and foreigners alike, because he steers a straight course hostile to wicked arrogance (hybris), having clearly learnt what his own upright mind inherited from noble ancestors had declared to him. Through nature, likewise, noble courage is inherited from fathers and shines out in their children.

The poet accompanies one returning victor to the sound of woodwind and the lyre, singing in honor of the great man, the dauntless victor. A victor is deserving of inspired praise and accolades.

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16) Olymp. 2.51–52.
17) Pyth. 8.5, Olymp. 7.7–10 a.
19) Pyth. 8.32–34.
21) Pyth. 8.37.
22) Pyth. 8.35–38.
24) Olymp. 2.102, see also Olymp. 2.7, Olymp. 5.9, Olymp. 8.20, Pyth. 8.38, Pyth. 9.69–75, Nem. 2.8, Nem. 3.66–69, Nem. 4.8, Nem. 11.20–21, Isthm. 3.12. See K. GOGGAKI, The opinions of the ancient Greeks for the Athletics, 63 ff., 79 ff.
25) Pyth. 8.65 (ἀρσαλέαν).
26) Olymp. 7.95.
27) Olymp. 7.90.
28) Olymp. 7.91 ff.
30) Olymp. 7.15.
31) Olymp. 2.46–47, see also Olymp. 1.100–105, Olymp. 3.6 ff., Olymp. 4.14–16, Olymp. 7.7–10, Olymp. 7.15–17, Olymp. 7.88, Olymp. 11.4–8, Pyth. 5.104 ff., Pyth. 9.93–96, Nem. 3.6–9, Nem. 7.11–16, Nem. 9.6–7, Nem. 10.21–22, Nem. 11.17–21, Isthm. 5.53–56, Isthm. 7.20.
the victors in the Olympic (and Pythian, Nemean and Isthmian) games, the poet offers pure nectar, the gift of the Muses and sweet fruit of his mind. The victory, flying on the wings of the poet’s songs, will be made known everywhere. With his commendation of the victor’s achievements and the exquisite grace of his music, the poet will crown the victor of the games and adorn him with harmonious and immortal praise.

3. The athletic event in Pindaric odes

The poems composed by this fifth-century (518–438 B.C.) Theban mainly for victories in one of the four major games were a kind of choral ode, the *epinikion*. The victor’s return to his homeland had long been accompanied by triumphal manifestations and great honors, including extempore songs. But no reference to a chorus performing a song specially composed for a particular occasion appears before Simonides. With that development in choral lyric, the athletic life of the Hellenes, became associated with a sublime art. Thus, despite the

---

33) Olymp. 7.8–10.
34) Pyth. 8.34.
36) Olymp. 1.15.
37) Olymp. 1.100.
fact that these poems were “ordered” and “paid for”, they are, by any criteria, entitled to be classed as “poetry”, created, as they are, with a bright vision of reality.41

Competitive zeal united the Hellenes into a thriving community, inspired by a desire first put into words by Homer: αἰτέν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείρον ἐμεναι άλλων, always to be the best and superior to others.42 The great importance of the games and victory, for the Hellenic national sentiment, has justifiably been extolled many times.43 The choral lyrical poetry, however, with the epinikion, elevated the athletic event to a great art. This accolade for the victor proved a most felicitous literary expression of the athletic ideal, marrying it with a sublime art-form in a brilliant and unprecedented alliance. In their odes for athletic victors, however, both Pindar and his colleague Bacchylides are generally more concerned with the mythological origin of the victor’s family and the glories of his native city than with the details of his own athletic achievement, though, paradoxically, Pindar does draw on athletics for comparisons exalting his own poetical prowess.44 Instead, certain aspects of it are touched on fleetingly and as part of a world dominated by a spiritual element fostered by the traditions of the myth. Pindar’s approach here reflects his general concern that everything covered in these poems, including the athletics, should be placed in a direct and meaningful relationship with the fundamental problems of human existence.

The surviving fragments of Pindar’s predecessor Simonides do not afford a clear picture of the latter’s epinikia, but they evidently contained certain elements that would not accord with the all-pervasive


41) BOWRA, Pindar, 401. See also Ingomar WEILER, Der Sport bei den Völkern der Alten Welt, Darmstadt, 1978, 82.


strictly religious character of Pindar's. In Pindar, the epinician ode raises the victory itself to a whole world of values created by the poet. This world of values manifests itself in the various fields he touches on, including the gods, the heroic myths, the moral order, and his own world-view. The unity of these poems lies in the universal relevance of their elements to a world of aristocratic values, to which the poet's own adherence is unshakeable. A trainer can raise an athlete up to great glory, but only if his charge is born with areta (and there is also a god's help). The figures of the mythical heroes and all their achievements are exemplars of that high ethos, which is also exemplified the hard-won success of the victors at major games. In several poems, such as those for Aeginetan victors, the heroes of the myth are are heroes of the victors' own cities.

On a par with the victor's achievements is the contribution of the poet, who lends the victory permanence. The poem lifts the victor into the realm of the sublime and the imperishable. Yet the victor's inherited prowess, his success, and the poetic word victorious over time, are all dependent on the basic condition of all success: the blessing of the god, from whom all human prowess and achievement emanate. The poet himself is aware of man's feebleness in the face of the power of the gods, but he believes that man's strength of spirit and nobility of nature, still count for something in the face of the gods and fate.

Pindar accepts the truth of established tradition, but with his own particular magnificence of style, he gives the traditions a fresh direction, as Bruno Snell observes. In the epinikia he associates the victor at the sacred games with the splendor of the gods and demigods and

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45) See more in E. THUMMER, Die Religiosität Pindars, Innsbruck 1957. On the religious nature of Pindaric poetry, see BOWRA, Pindar, 42 ff.
46) Olymp. 10.20.
49) Pyth. 1.41–42.
50) Nem. 6.1–4.
hence with important traditions respected by all Greeks.\textsuperscript{52} He uses the
Greeks’ rich legacy of myth with dexterity and expresses his own
thoughts in a distinctive and impressive manner. A central role is
assigned to the element of praise; great achievements, such as victory
in a contest, need a bard if they are not to fall into oblivion. For
Pindar, meeting that need is a duty. An outstanding achievement
deserves an equally outstanding poem of praise; and that, in turn, makes
the victor’s efforts all the more worthwhile.\textsuperscript{53} By raising up such a
poetical monument, man renders pain painless.\textsuperscript{54}

Agonistic success has its own value and belongs with the mighty
feats preserved in a tradition stretching back to the heroic past. It
completes, and confirms, Pindar’s view of the world. Within his spir-
Itual world success of that kind has a place alongside his respect for
the gods and the importance of heredity.\textsuperscript{55} When a victory is achieved,
it affects not only the standing of the individual victor but also that of
his city. Hence Pindar’s frequent emphasis on such ‘excellences’
shared in by the victor’s whole community (the ἔνωσ 
 ἀρετῶι of
Pythian 11.52) and achieved by his individual efforts.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, given
the the god-given nature of such success and the general good it
brings, it is almost a sin, as A. J. Podlecki puts it, for someone with
exceptional abilities not to develop them to the full.\textsuperscript{57}

Unlike most other lyric poets, Pindar does not bring in his own
personal feelings. He does not usually discuss which values he accepts
and which he rejects (though for a striking exception see §4 below)
but confines himself to stating objectively what, in his judgement, is
worthy of being glorified, what has to be attributed to the gods, and
how a given matter accords with general truths. And because his pur-
pose is not to create new values, but to promote the traditional ones,
thus accepting the world as it is. What is of importance to him is to
express the beauty that abundantly surrounds his life. Which is wha he
sees as the real value of the poet.\textsuperscript{58} Pindar recognizes the presence
of the divine in simple things, which he considers as the most precious,

\textsuperscript{52} See C. M. Bowra, “Gods, Heroes, and men”, in: Pindar, 42–98, Kepfali-
dou, Nikitis.

\textsuperscript{53} Anthony J. Podlecki, The Early Greek Poets and Their Times, Vancouver
1984, 243.

\textsuperscript{54} Nem. 8.47–50. See Podlecki, The Early Greek Poets, 243.

\textsuperscript{55} Pyth. 1.11 and Olynp. 13.13 respectively.

\textsuperscript{56} Pyth. 9.93, Isthm. 6.69, Isthm. 7.29, Isthm. 1.46, Nem. 5.47. See Podlecki,
The Early Greek Poets, 241. See further Chr. Mann, Athlet und Polis im archai-

\textsuperscript{57} The Early Greek Poets, 242.

\textsuperscript{58} See Nem. 8.35–39.
but he also recognizes it also in the beautiful and exceptional examples surrounding him. 59

Pindar’s criteria for determining what constitutes true virtue at the same time also determine the values in which the poet himself believes. 60 From the frequency with which the idea of ‘virtue’ appears in his work, it is clear that he lays particular stress on a special combination of physical and psychological properties that results in the harmony, so beloved of the Greeks, of the word and deed. 61 The victors, the poet celebrated generally had not only physical strength but also a handsome appearance. 62 Pindar’s emphasis on heredity and the fact that many of his patrons were rich appears to indicate what has been called an “aristocratic” political view. 63 However, notwithstanding his praise of exceptional physical qualities and moral qualities, Pindar was well aware that no matter how great the advantages a man inherits from his aristocratic forebears, it is far from certain that success will be his. 64 Because athletic victory and human achievements in general depend on an additional factor, the grace of the god. 65

Pindar considers the fate of the victor not only enviable, but also grand. 66 Lewis W. Farnell observes that the term used to characterize songs (of praise) in Olymp. 3.10 theomoroi apportioned by a fate dispensed by God, serves to reconcile the principle of fate with that of theism. 67 It is this fate that brings glory, happiness, fame, a broader sense of being, and a kind of survival after death via memory. This is the most that any human being can hope for, and when he has it, he truly enjoys the beneficence with which the gods look upon him. 68

59) Olymp. 1.1 and Olymp. 1.3–7, Olymp. 1.97–99, Olymp. 3.43–44.
62) Pyth. 10.22–24, Nem. 1.62–30, Nem. 11.12, Isthm. 7.22 b. See Podlecki, The Early Greek Poets, 238–9, J. B. Bury, The Nemean Odes of Pindar, xii. The less than big or impressive-looking victor of Isthmian 4 still has a family heritage of courage; see Isthm. 4.49–50.
64) Isthm. 4.31–35.
65) Isthm. 3.4–5, Olymp. 10.20–21, Olymp. 9.103–4, Pyth. 10.10, see Podlecki, The Early Greek Poets, 241.
66) See Bowra, Pindar, 191, Farnell, Critical Commentary to the Works of Pindar, 14 note 21.
67) Farnell loc. cit.
68) Bowra, Pindar, 191.
According to the poet, the victor of the Olympic and other major competitions has consequently been elevated to one step below the god, conquering all the joy that mortals may have, to its extreme boundary.\(^69\) This must be sufficient for him, and he must not ask for anything more.\(^70\)

### 4. Conclusion

Consequently, although Pindar is emphatically a poet of joyous celebration, he sees the occasions of his poems against a wider background,\(^71\) and regards his own work as a field of moral actions, and in that light as having a value for himself far above material wealth:

\[
\begin{align*}
May \text{ I never have such a disposition} \\
\text{as to indulge in Slander],} \\
\text{father Zeus, but let me travel} \\
\text{the straightforward paths of life,} \\
\text{so that when I die I may leave my children} \\
No \text{ such disreputable fame. Some pray for gold} \\
\text{others for land} \\
\text{without end, but I pray to find favor with my townsmen} \\
\text{until I cover my limbs with earth,} \\
\text{praising things praiseworthy, but casting blame on evildoers.} \\
\text{Nemean 8.35–39 (tr. W.H. RACE)}
\end{align*}
\]

This poet – whose work, according to J. B. Bury, reflects the authentic quality of the Greek intellect – moves between the world of religion and that of myth, using graphic descriptions in such a way as to create a vivid mental picture, thus giving new character to a theme.\(^72\) In composing these victory odes and idealizing the victors, Pindar is expressing and promoting the athletic ideal.\(^73\) At the same time, by uniting

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\(^{70}\) Isthm. 5.14–16. See Bowra, Pindar, 191.

\(^{71}\) Bowra, Pindar, 316.


all Greeks around their sacred games through poems that sometimes explicitly aspire to a wide, Panhellenic, circulation, he becomes in effect a national poet of Greece. His poetic voice, inspired, as I have said, by a bright vision of reality, as well as a profound, resounding tone, emerges as vision-depicting poetry, that, according to C. M. Bowra, may be considered the earthly correlative of the music of Apollo and the song of the Muses on Mt. Olympus which for Pindar himself were the archetype of music for those supreme moments when all differences are resolved and all guilt is expiated by the power of the life-giving word.

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