

# Pindar's *Pythian* 8

Translation and Notes by Gregory Nagy

This song, composed by Pindar to be sung and danced by an ad hoc local *choros* in the island-state of Aigina, was commissioned by the family of an aristocrat named Aristomenes, as a celebration of his victory in the wrestling event at the Pythian Games of 446 BCE.

## *Strophe* 1

Hēsukhiā!<sup>1</sup> You whose disposition is kindly to *philoī*, you Daughter of Dikē, you ultimate greatness of every *polis*, you who possess the supreme keys to councils of state and to wars! Receive on behalf of Aristomenes [5] the *tīmē* of the victory at the Pythian Games. For you are the one who understands both how to give pleasure and how to make someone feel that pleasure—with an unerring sense of timing.

## *Antistrophe* 1

But whenever anyone drives harsh anger into the heart, [10] you fiercely confront such men of ill will, and with your power you drown *hubris*. Little did Porphyrion<sup>2</sup> know that it was you he was provoking. But *kerdos*<sup>3</sup> is most *philon* when one takes it as a prize from the house of one who willingly gives it.

## *Epode* 1

[15] He who boasts gets tripped, in the fullness of time, by his own violence [*bia*]. The hundred-headed Typhon did not get away. Nor did the king of the Giants. They were subdued by the thunderbolt and by the arrows of Apollo, who welcomed from Kirrha,<sup>4</sup> with kindly *noos*, [20] the son of Xenarkes,<sup>5</sup> crowned with the green of Parnassus,<sup>6</sup> and with a band of revelers.<sup>7</sup>

## *Strophe* 2

This island, this *polis* of *dikē*,<sup>8</sup> did not fall away from the Graces [*kharites*], connected as it is to the *kleos*-making achievements [*aretē* pl.] of the Aiakidai.<sup>9</sup> It has achieved a perfect fame, [25] going back to the very beginnings. It is a subject of song for many, as its nurturing earth sprouts the greatest heroes [*hērōes*] in victory-bringing contests and in violent battles.

## *Antistrophe* 2

And these things stand out, radiant, for men as well.<sup>10</sup> But I have no time to linger in putting up to view [30] the whole story in its full length, with lyre and pleasurable song, for fear that overindulgence [*koros*] may come and cause displeasure. No, let my sacred obligation to you get under way right now, my boy, which is speeding straight ahead in front of my feet, and which is the nearest, of all beautiful things, to the here and now, taking flight by way of my craft.

## *Epode* 2

[35] For you follow, at wrestling matches, in the footsteps of your mother's brothers. You did Theognetos proud, the one in the Olympics. Also Kleitomakhos, whose victory at the Isthmians gave proof to the boldness of his limbs. Making great the house<sup>11</sup> of the Meidulidai,<sup>12</sup> you win as a prize the words that once the son of Oikles<sup>13</sup> said [*ainissesthai*],<sup>14</sup> when he saw [40] the Sons<sup>15</sup> holding their ground at Thebes, by the power of the spear,

### *Strophe 3*

at the time when they, the Epigonoι,<sup>16</sup> had come from Argos, on the second expedition. Thus he<sup>17</sup> spoke about those who fought: [45] "By inherited nature, the noble purpose [*lēma*] shines forth from fathers [*pateres*]<sup>18</sup> to sons. I can see clearly Alkmaion,<sup>19</sup> wielding the patterned snake on his blazing shield,<sup>20</sup> in the forefront of the gates of Kadmos.<sup>21</sup>

### *Antistrophe 3*

But the one who had lost his strength in the earlier happenings<sup>22</sup> is now on solid footing, [50] with the announcement of a better bird-omen than before. He is the hero [*hērōs*] Adrastōs. At home, though, his fortune will be the opposite. For he alone of the army of Danaoi<sup>23</sup> will have to gather the bones of a son who died,<sup>24</sup> while the rest of the warriors come home unharmed, with their good fortune granted from the gods,

### *Epode 3*

[55] home to the public places of Abas,<sup>25</sup> with their wide spaces for song and dance." Thus spoke Amphiaraios. And I also take joy in casting a garland at Alkmaion. And I shower him<sup>26</sup> with song because he was a neighbor to me,<sup>27</sup> a guardian of my possessions,<sup>28</sup> and he came to meet me<sup>29</sup> as I was heading towards the Navel of the Earth,<sup>30</sup> that lasting subject for song, [60] putting me in touch with his inbred crafts of a seer.

### *Strophe 4*

But you, the one who shoots from afar,<sup>31</sup> who rules the sacred precinct that receives all, that has good *kleos*, in the valley of the Pytho,<sup>32</sup> [65] you granted in that place the greatest of all joys.<sup>33</sup> And in his own homeland, earlier, you had brought about the coveted gift of a pentathlon victory at your festival.<sup>34</sup> O lord, I pray to you with a *noos* that is ready and willing:

### *Antistrophe 4*

Look upon me as I fit my voice with whatever tuning you desire, as I travel down each path of song and back up again. [70] Dikē presides over the band of revelers,<sup>35</sup> with their sweet song. I ask for the unstinting regard of the gods, Xenarkes, on the occasion of your good fortune. For if one possesses good things without a lengthy ordeal [*ponos*], many think that he is *sophos*, that he is not one of the ignorant,

### *Epode 4*

[75] the way he arranges his life, they think, with straight-planned stratagems. But that is not ordained to be, in this world of men. It is the superhuman force [*daimōn*] who provides, exalting different men at different times, at other times bringing them down in due proportion. You have your prize that you won at Megara, and the one you got in the sacred recesses of Marathon, and you mastered, in manly feats, the local<sup>36</sup> contest [*agōn*] of Hera [80] in three separate victories, Aristomenes!

### *Strophe 5*

Four times did you come slamming down from above, with no kind thoughts, on top of bodies below. For all of them the outcome at the Pythian Games was no pleasurable *nostos*. [85] No sweet laughter was there to make an aura of *kharis* as they came back home to stay at their mothers' side. They lurk in byways, trying to avoid their personal enemies, stung as they are by their bad fortune.

### *Antistrophe 5*

But whoever has as his lot something beautiful in the here and now, in a time of great luxuriance [*habrotēs*], [90] such a man starts soaring, driven by his aspirations, lifted high in the air by his feats of manliness, with his ambition going beyond material wealth. The pleasure that mortals get waxes in a short space of time. And, just as quickly, it falls to the ground, shaken by adverse opinion.

### *Epode 5*

[95] Creatures of a day. What is a someone, what is a no one? Man is the dream of a shade. But when the brightness given by Zeus comes, there is at hand the shining light of men, and the life-force [*aiōn*] gives pleasure. Aigina! *Philē* Mother! Make a (naval) mission [*stolos*]<sup>37</sup> of freedom for this *polis* as you bring it back to light and life,<sup>38</sup> back to Zeus! May Aiakos the Ruler be there. So also Peleus. And noble Telamon. And especially Achilles.<sup>39</sup>

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## Key Passages Relevant to the Poetics of Pindar

Translated by Gregory Nagy

### 1.

The Lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither says nor conceals: he indicates [*sēmainein*].

Heraclitus 22 B 93 DK

### 2.

Of all the words of Homer, understand and apply the saying that I now tell you: the best messenger [*angelos*], he said, wins as a prize the greatest *tīmē* for everything. And the Muse too becomes greater by way of the correct message.

Pindar *Pythian* 4.277–279

### 3.

<sup>56</sup> Even when he [= Achilles] died, the songs did not leave him, <sup>57</sup> but the Maidens of Helicon [= the Muses] stood by his pyre and his funeral mound, <sup>58</sup> and, as they stood there, they poured forth a song of lamentation [*thrēnos*] that is famed far and wide. <sup>59</sup> And so it was that the immortal gods decided <sup>60</sup> to hand over the man, genuine [*esthlos*] as he was even after he had perished [*phthinein*] in death, to the songs of the goddesses [= the Muses]<sup>40</sup>. <sup>61</sup> And this, even now, wins as a prize the words of song, as the chariot-team of the Muses starts moving on its way <sup>62</sup> to glorify the memory of Nikokles the boxer.

Pindar *Isthmian* 8.56a–62

### 4.

You too, <sup>41</sup> Polykrates, <sup>42</sup> will have a *kleos* that is unwilting [*aphthiton*], in accordance with my song, my *kleos*.

Ibycus SLG 151.47–48

### 5.

It is said that *kleos* bloomed for Hector near the streams of Skamandros. And near the steep cliffs that rise above the river Heloros, [...] this light shone upon the coming of age of the son of Hagesidamos.

Pindar *Nemean* 9.39–42

### 6.

I am a *xenos*. Keeping away dark blame [*psogos*] and bringing genuine *kleos* like streams of water, to a man who is *philos*, I will praise [verb *aineîn*] him.

Pindar *Nemean* 7.61–63

### 7.

Indeed there are many wondrous things. And the words that men tell, myths [*mūthoi*] embellished by varied falsehoods, beyond wording that is *alēthēs*, are deceptive. But *kharis*, which makes everything pleasurable for mortals, brings it about by way of conferring *tīmē*, that even the untrustworthy oftentimes becomes trustworthy.

Pindar *Olympian* 1.28–32

### 8.

But the *kharis* of the past is asleep, and mortals are unaware [negative of *mnē*-] of whatever does not attain the cresting blossom of the art of songmaking by being wedded to the glory-bringing streams of sung words.

Pindar *Isthmian* 7.16–19

### 9.

About the other kings they [the Egyptian priests] had no public statement [*apodeixis*] to tell of their deeds, since there was nothing distinguished [literally 'bright'], except for the last [king].

**10.**

[The hero Pelops is asking the god Poseidon for the gift of a chariot-team and declaring to the god his desire to risk death in his quest for the hand of Hippodameia:] Great risk does not take hold of any cowardly mortal. But if it is destined for humans to die, why should anyone sit around in the darkness and boil away his life to a futile old age without a name, having no share in all the beautiful things of the world? I will undertake this ordeal [*āthlos*] at hand.

Pindar *Olympian* 1.81–85**11.**

And it [= the name of the lineage of the Aiakidai, especially the name of Achilles] leapt at the Ethiopians, now that Memnon would not be coming back safely [to his troops]. Heavy combat fell upon them [= the Ethiopians] in the person of Achilles hitting the ground as he stepped down [*kata-bainein*] from his chariot. That was when he killed [Memnon] the son of the luminous dawn-goddess, with the tip of his raging spear.

Pindar *Nemean* 6.48–53**12.**

Blessed [*olbios*] is he who has already seen those things when he goes below the earth.

Pindar Fragment 137

**12.**

Poseidon *Petraios* [‘of the rocks’] has a cult among the Thessalians ... because he, having fallen asleep at some rock, had an emission of semen; and the earth, receiving the semen, produced the first horse, whom they called *Skuphios*. ... And they say that there was a festival established in worship of Poseidon *Petraios* at the spot where the first horse leapt forth.

Scholia for Pindar *Pythian* 4.246**Notes**

[ [back](#) ] **1.** The word *hēsukhiā*, designating the feeling of serenity that comes with the successful accomplishment of an ordeal, is here divinely personified as a goddess.

[ [back](#) ] **2.** Porphyron was king of the Giants, mentioned later on as such.

[ [back](#) ] **3.** The word *kerdos* ‘gain’ designates the benefits to be won through the craft (in positive contexts) or the craftiness (in negative contexts) of the poet.

[ [back](#) ] **4.** Kirrha is another name for Delphi, site of the Pythian Games.

[ [back](#) ] **5.** Aristomenes is the son of Xenarkes.

[ [back](#) ] **6.** The “crown” bestowed on victors at the Pythian Games is a wreath of laurel.

[ [back](#) ] **7.** The word *kōmos* ‘band of revelers’ is used in Pindar’s songmaking tradition to refer to the chorus, that is, the singing and dancing ensemble that performs the composition of Pindar.

[ [back](#) ] **8.** The island Aigina, native land of the victor Aristomenes and setting for the performance of Pindar’s *Pythian 8*, counts as a city-state or *polis*. This island-state is described as a ‘*polis of dikē*’ on the basis of the myth of Aiakos, the prototypical hero of Aigina who was worshipped as the originator of the human population in Aigina. This hero was considered by all Greeks to be an ultimate exponent of *dikē*. Further details in the next note.

[ [back](#) ] **9.** Aiakidai = ‘descendants of Aiakos’; the hero Aiakos was also considered *by the people of Aigina* to be the ancestor of the human population *in Aigina*. Two of Aiakos’ sons were Telamon and Peleus. Telamon was father of Aias [= Ajax], Peleus was father of Achilles. Thus Aiakos is not only the stylized ancestor of the population of Aigina (by way of being considered the ancestor of the elite of the *polis*, who presumably claimed to represent the whole population): he is also the “real” ancestor of some of the greatest epic heroes of Homeric poetry, which was considered the shared cultural heritage of all Hellenes in Pindar’s era. Pindar’s words seem to be intentionally blurring the distinction between the two types of ancestry. More on the Aiakidai at the final note to Epode 5.

[ [back](#) ] **10.** Pindar’s wording modulates from the world of heroes who had struggled in ordeals and battles of old to the world of latter-day athletes who have achieved victory in the pan-Hellenic Games. I take it that the *men* here are being juxtaposed with the *heroes* just mentioned.

[ [back](#) ] **11.** The word *oikos* ‘house’ refers to the victor’s ancestral lineage or “clan.”

[ [back](#) ] **12.** Meidulidai is the name of the victor’s ancestral lineage.

[ [back](#) ] **13.** Amphiaraios, one of the Seven Against Thebes, was the son of Oikles. The heroes known as the Seven Against Thebes had failed in their expedition against Thebes. Myth has it that Thebes had Seven Gates, each attacked by one of the Seven Against Thebes and each defended by a corresponding Theban hero.

[ [back](#) ] **14.** The verb *ainissesthai* ‘say in a riddling way’ is derived from *ainigma* ‘riddle, enigma’, which is derived from *ainos*. Since Amphiaraios died in the failed expedition of the Seven Against Thebes, what he says here is obviously meant to be understood as if spoken from the grave. There is historical evidence for a hero-cult of Amphiaraios, located at the very spot where myth says that the earth had engulfed him, chariot-team and all, as he was riding away from Thebes after the expedition failed. Worshippers would come to consult Amphiaraios, who was believed to have the power of communicating with them from the dead.

- [ [back](#) ] **15.** The Sons are the Sons of the Seven Against Thebes. Whereas the original Seven Against Thebes had failed in their expedition against Thebes, the Sons of the Seven Against Thebes were successful.
- [ [back](#) ] **16.** Epigonoi 'The Descendants' is another way of referring to the Sons of the Seven Against Thebes.
- [ [back](#) ] **17.** Amphiaraos.
- [ [back](#) ] **18.** The "fathers" here are *ancestors*, that is, a succession of fathers through time, not a collection of fathers at one time. The word *patro-* 'ancestor, father' is found in the first part of the name Patroklos *Patroklēs*), which means 'he who has the *kleos* of the ancestors'.
- [ [back](#) ] **19.** The hero Alkmaion is the son of Amphiaraos.
- [ [back](#) ] **20.** In traditional Greek poetry, the image represented on a shield, in this case a snake, would be called a *sēma*.
- [ [back](#) ] **21.** Kadmos was known as the primordial founder of Thebes.
- [ [back](#) ] **22.** The original expedition of the Seven Against Thebes.
- [ [back](#) ] **23.** In Homeric poetry, Danaoi is the synonym of Akhaioi (Achaeans) and Argeioi (Argives).
- [ [back](#) ] **24.** The son of the hero Adrastos was called Aigialeus.
- [ [back](#) ] **25.** Abas was a primordial ruler of Argos. So the "public places of Abas" is a reference to Argos.
- [ [back](#) ] **26.** It is not clear to us (though we may be sure that it was to Pindar and his audience) whether this is Alkmaion or Amphiaraos.
- [ [back](#) ] **27.** To say that the hero was a "neighbor" is a conventional way of saying that a cult-hero showed favor to the one who worshipped him.
- [ [back](#) ] **28.** The word *phulax*, pl. *phulakes* 'guardian(s)' describes cult-heroes in Hesiod *Works and Days* 253 (and 123).
- [ [back](#) ] **29.** He appeared to me. The voice of the poet goes on to say that he "met" the hero on the way to Delphi (*Pythian* 8.56–60): that is, he experienced an epiphany of the hero, which is the inspiration, as it were, of Pindar's words. The theme of epiphany is relevant to the expression 'the will of the ancestors [*pateres*] shines through from them, in what is inborn in the nature of their sons' (43–44). It is also relevant to what the voice of the poet is about to announce at lines 95–97.
- [ [back](#) ] **30.** Delphi.
- [ [back](#) ] **31.** Apollo.

[ [back](#) ] **32.** Delphi.

[ [back](#) ] **33.** Victory to Aristomenes in the Pythian Games at Delphi.

[ [back](#) ] **34.** The reference here is to a local athletic event at a feast of Apollo in Aigina.

[ [back](#) ] **35.** Again the word *kōmos* 'band of revelers'.

[ [back](#) ] **36.** Local to Aigina.

[ [back](#) ] **37.** This fleeting reference serves as a nostalgic reminder of the glory days of Aigina, when its navy was still a major power, as in the Sea Battle of Salamis in the Persian War, described by Herodotus 8.40–97; note especially the role of the Aiakidai in 8.64 and 8.83–84.

[ [back](#) ] **38.** I translate *komizein* here as 'bring back to light and life' in view of the traditional correlation of this verb with the noun *nostos*.

[ [back](#) ] **39.** Compare Herodotus 8.64: "At sunrise ... there was an earthquake on land and sea, and they resolved to pray to the gods and summon the Aiakidai as allies. When they had so resolved, they did as follows: they prayed to all the gods called Ajax and Telamon to come straight from Salamis, and sent a ship to Aigina for Aiakos and the other Aiakidai [besides Ajax and Telamon]."

[ [back](#) ] **40.** As I argue in *Best of the Achaeans* 176–177, the phraseology here implies that Achilles was destined to have a *kleos* that is *a-phthi-ton* 'unwilting', as explicitly formulated at *Iliad* 9.413.

[ [back](#) ] **41.** You as well as the heroes just mentioned in the song.

[ [back](#) ] **42.** Polykrates was Tyrant of Samos, patron of the poet Ibycus.

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