A sampling of comments on Pindar Pythian 6

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:
Pindar’s Pythian 6 is one of the earliest attested compositions attributed to this poet. Highlighted in Pindar’s song here is the grand epic moment when the youthful hero Antilokhos gives up his own life for his father Nestor after the old hero gets entangled in his chariot—and is just seconds away from getting killed by the hero Memnon, whose onrush is now thwarted by the dutiful son. Antilokhos gets killed while rescuing his father, and the song of Pindar goes on to praise the young hero’s filial piety by holding it up as a model for Thrasyboulos, son of Xenokrates of Akragas. The father’s chariot team was winner of the four-horse chariot race in 490 BCE at the Pythian Festival in Delphi. In the comments that follow, we will see that the chariot driver may well have been Thrasyboulos himself, as signaled by way of a gesture: he is pictured as crowning himself with a garland of victory. A parallel gesture is noted by Malcolm Bell in his study of a most celebrated marble statue known today as the Motya Charioteer.

Motya charioteer. As noted by Bell (1995:22), “During the sack of Akragas in 406 [BCE], the Carthaginians will not have looked kindly at monuments glorifying the city’s former rulers, and “this may have been the moment when the face and the genitals of the sculpture were intentionally damaged.” Image via Wikimedia Commons.

It seems fashionable, I must add, for modern literary critics to doubt an ancient report about Thrasyboulos, transmitted in the scholia for Pindar (at Pythian 6.15 ed. Drachmann), where we read that some interpreters thought that this young man was actually the driver of the victorious four-horse chariot of his father, while others thought that the victorious charioteer was not Thrasyboulos but an Athenian named Nikomakhos, whom we see being praised elsewhere as the driver of the victorious four-horse team of Xenokrates, in Pindar Isthmian 2.22. Elsewhere in the scholia (at Pythian 6.13 ed. Drachmann), it is noted elliptically that Thrasyboulos was somehow in charge (ἐπιστατεὶ) of the chariot team competing in the Pythian chariot race (τῶν ἵππων ἄγων). [[GN 2018.04.13.]]
My comments on this song of Pindar, Pythian 6, which celebrates the victory of a four-horse chariot team sponsored by Xenokrates of Akragas in the chariot race of 490 BCE at the Pythian Festival in Delphi, will be tied to other comments, planned for further postings, on four other songs of Pindar: Olympian 2 and 3; Isthmian 2; and a skolion addressed to Thrasyboulos (Fragment 124). All five songs are relevant to the Emmenidai, a lineage of tyrants who ruled in various cities of Sicily in the early fifth century BCE. The figure of Thrasyboulos, son of Xenokrates, is of special relevance. Even the name of Thrasyboulos is relevant to the glory that is being conferred on him by the medium of Pindar. The element thra-s—‘bold’—of his name conveys the idea of impulsiveness in action, while the element boulos ‘planning’ conveys the idea of restraint by way of deliberation before taking action. I argue that the original naming of Thrasyboulos by his family had already programmed him from birth to be modeled on the epic hero Antilokhos, who once upon a time followed the advice of his father Nestor by acting in a way that combined impulsiveness and restraint on the occasion of driving Nestor’s chariot in the Chariot Race as narrated in Iliad 23: first Antilokhos acted impulsively by executing a reckless maneuver in overtaking the chariot team of Menelaos, but then he acted with admirable restraint by not losing his temper when the older man insulted him in anger over a loss that was rightly blamed on the recklessness of the younger man: instead, Antilokhos engaged in wise deliberation, resulting in a coming to terms with Menelaos. I have published in other comments an analysis of this narrative about Antilokhos. The poetic paradigm of Antilokhos as a model for Thrasyboulos applies also to the fatal occasion, narrated at P.6.28–51, when Antilokhos impulsively rescues the life of his own father by neglecting to deliberate within himself about his own safety. The death of Antilokhos, as narrated here, was also narrated in a part of the epic Cycle, the Athiopis, attributed to Arctinus of Miletus, as we read in the plot-summary of Proclus p. 106 lines 4–6 (ed. Allen 1912). (On the epic Cycle, see the Inventory of terms and names) And there is a passing reference to the death of Antilokhos in O.04.186–188. I have published elsewhere an analysis of the overall narrative about this heroic. The death of Antilokhos was narrated also in the visual arts. A most striking example is a battle scene depicted in the relief sculpture of the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi, where we see Achilles battling with Memnon and Aeneas over the possession of the dead body of Antilokhos. I show here a reconstructed version of that relief sculpture, featuring a close-up of the fighting over the dead hero’s body. In this particular reconstruction, an attempt has been made to restore the original colors painted on the stone.

The expression ἀρχήν ἃρωπον, ‘treasury [θēsauros] of songs [humnoi]’ at P.6.7–8, referring to the songs that glorify Xenokrates and the whole lineage of the Emmenidai, is surely relevant to the relief sculpture of the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi, as which we have just seen accentuates the death scene of Antilokhos. Just as the verbal art of song memorializes this heroic death in Pythian 6, so too the visual art of relief sculpture memorializes it on the exterior surface of the Siphnian Treasury. A ‘treasury of songs’, revealing a poetic architecture of its own, corresponds to the songs that are visualized in the relief sculpture of the Siphnian Treasury. On this point, I recommend the article of Kenneth D. Shapiro (1988) about the relief sculpture adorning the Treasury of the Siphnians at Delphi. [[GN 2018.04.13.]]

P.6.5
subject heading(s): olbios ‘blessed’

The lineage of the Emmenidai is described as olbios ‘blessed’: this word, in the context of Pindar’s songs of praise, is to be taken in a transcendent sense, referring not so much to wealth as to a state of ‘blessedness’ conferred by way of mental contact with the world of heroes. [[GN 2018.04.12 via PH 213 = 7518; further commentary on the transcendent uses of olbios in [H24H Chapter 11].]]

P.6.14–27
subject heading(s): Thrasyboulos as charioteer; the Motya Charioteer

In these lines, P.6.14–27, Thrasyboulos is pictured as a charioteer for his father Xenokrates; in the lines that follow, P.6.28–51, the chariot team of Xenokrates is linked with the chariot team of Nestor, who is rescued by his charioteer son Antilokhos. At a later point in the comments here, I will be translating those
lines literally. As we will see at the end of those lines, at P.6.50–51, the picturing of Thrasyboulos as a charioteer is repeated and enhanced: the young man is described in those lines as someone who is most pleasing to Poseidon in that god’s function as lord of chariot racing. The earlier picturing of Thrasyboulos at P.6.14–27 as a charioteer is reconstructed in an incisive article by Malcolm Bell (1995) on the basis of a comparison he makes with a gesture made by the marble statue known as the Motya Charioteer. Bell (1995:9) argues persuasively that the Motya Charioteer is pictured in the act of placing a garland of victory on his head:

"The position of the missing right forearm and hand should therefore be associated with the four bronze nails in the cranium, the placement of which in a tilted plane shows that they were intended to hold in place a circular object around the head at the point of its greatest diameter. This missing object can best be explained as a wreath, held or touched by the raised right hand."
Bell (again, 1995:9) goes on to argue that the same gesture is pictured in the verbal art of Pindar at P.6.19: οὐ τοιχόθεν νῦν ἐπὶ δεξιόν κεφᾶς. The wording here can be interpreted this way: ‘but you [= Thrasyboulos], holding it [viv] in your right hand’, where the pronoun viv would refer to a garland of victory that is indicated earlier at P.6.17 by way of the wording ἐδύοβον ἄρμον χιλιόν ‘glorious victory-by-chariot’. In the light of Bell’s explanation, I now distance myself from the interpretation I preferred in PH 208 = 7§10, where I took the pronoun viv as referring to the father of Thrasyboulos, indicated earlier at P.6.15 by way of the wording πατρὶ τε γενετὸς ‘your father’: thus ‘but you [= Thrasyboulos], keeping him [viv] at your right hand’, as if the charioteer were standing together with his father on the platform of the chariot. (Elsewhere too in Pindaric diction, viv can refer to an inanimate antecedent, as for example at P.4.109, P.4.242, P.5.6, P.9.80). In sum, I now agree with Bell’s argument that the verbal art of Pindar shows Thrasyboulos in the act of crowning himself with a garland of victory—just as the Motya charioteer is crowning himself. I should add, however, that Bell refrains from arguing that the marble statue of the Motya charioteer is a representation of Thrasyboulos himself. [[GN 2018.04.12.]]

P.6.23

subject heading(s): paraîneîn ‘advise’ (by way of song/poetry)

The genre of paraîneis ‘advice’ (by way of song/poetry) applies not only to the moral lessons directed by the Centaur Cheiron at the hero Achilles but also to the moral lessons in song/poetry as directed by Pindar at those who are patrons of his songmaking. [[GN 2018.04.13 via PH 149 = 6§7.]]

P.6.28–51

subject heading(s): Aithiopis; noêma ‘mind, thought, thinking’; pherein ‘win as a prize’; kōmide ‘rescue, saving’; nóos ‘mind, thought, thinking’

In-the-past [proteron] as well [as now, in the present time of Thrasyboulos], there was a man, Antilokhos, a man of violent-strength [biâ], 129 who won as his prize this mind [noêma]. 130 He died for his father, standing up to the man-killer, 131 the war-lord of the Aethiopians, 132 Memnon. Blocking Nestor’s chariot was the horse struck down by the arrows 133 of Paris, while he [= Memnon] was attacking 134 with his powerful spear. 135 The old man from Messene [= Nestor], 136 was stung in his mind [phrēn], and he shouted for his son. 137 The wording that shot out from him did not fall, useless, to the ground. 138 This godlike man [= Antilokhos] made his stand, right there, 139 and he paid the price of death for the rescue
He had a glory, it had been shown to that generation of long ago, once he accomplished a deed so enormous also for younger generations to see—a glory that made him manifestly the foremost when it comes to an achievement regarding parents. He has clearly measured up to his father's brother [Theron of Akragas] in every manner of excellence. But those things are in the past. As for the present, Thrasyboulos stands up to the standard of the ancestors [patrōio] better than anyone else. He has reaped the benefits of a youth that is neither without-justice nor overweening. Rather he reaps a skill to be found in the recesses of Pieria [the abode of the Muses]. O Earth-Shaking Poseidon, you who rule over the racings of horses, he is close to you with a mind that is very pleasing to you, he stays close to you.

The relevance of this death scene to Pindar’s song of praise for the chariot victory celebrated by his patrons, Xenokrates and Thrasyboulos, is signaled the expression νόημα του φέρων ‘who wins as a prize’ here at P.6.29, which applies both to Thrasyboulos as patron and to that young man’s model Antilokhos as hero, just as the expression λόγον φέρεις ‘you win as a prize the wording’ at P.8.38 applies both to Aristomenes as patron and to his model Alkmaion as hero (PH 193–196 = 6§86–88). The thinking of Thrasyboulos is also expressed by way of the related word νόος ‘mind, thought, thinking’ at P.6.49 and P.6.51. So, the thinking of the hero Antilokhos and the thinking of the patron Thrasyboulos are fused in the medium of Pindar, and, in this way, the patron of Pindar can be “channelling,” as it were, the identity of the hero who is his model even by way of the name Thrasyboulos, the meaning of which replicates, as I have been arguing, the heroic nature of Antilokhos. The name of the patron Thrasyboulos, which signals implicitly the heroic idea of matching boldness and restraint as exemplified by Antilokhos, comes to life in Pythian 6, where the patron is explicitly praised in song for following the example set by the hero Antilokhos. And, by following such a heroic example, he fits into an ancestral paradigm that is politically as well as poetically constructed by the lineage of the Emmenidai. In general, the paradigm of heroes who are celebrated in epic is connected in Pindar’s songmaking with the paradigm of ancestors who are venerated by the patrons celebrated in his songmaking. This way, Pindar’s medium celebrates the heroes as well as his own patrons and their ancestors. (PH 206–214 = 7§8–19.)

P.6.49

subject heading(s): plouton again ‘bring wealth’

We may compare πλοῦτον ἄγει ‘he brings [again] wealth’ here with ψυχὰν κομίξαι … δέρμα τε κριοῦ … ἄγειν ‘to rescue [comfort] the life-force [psûkhê] and to bring [again] the fleece of the ram’ at Pindar Pythian 4.159. The materialism here is of the transcendent kind, as noted in the comment at P.6.5. (PH 213 = 7§18.)

Bibliographical Abbreviations

DGE = Schwzyer 1923.
GMP = Greek Mythology and Poetics, Nagy 1990b.
H24H = The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours, Nagy 2013
HC = Homer the Classic, Nagy 2009/2008
HPC = Homer the Preclassic, Nagy 2010/2009
HQ = Homeric Questions, Nagy 1996b
HR = Homeric Responses, Nagy 2003
MoM = Masterpieces of Metonymy, Nagy 2015
PasP = Poetry as Performance, Nagy 1996a
PH = Pindar’s Homer, Nagy 1990a

Bibliography

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Inventory of terms and names

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