

## ATHLETIC *PONOS* IN PINDAR

The idea of athletic *ponos* is very common in Pindar; it receives a great deal of emphasis throughout the Pindaric odes, so that one could say that it is a distinctive aspect of the poet's approach both to athletics and victory ode. Pindar designates with athletic *ponos* the physical effort, which is devoted to training and athletic competition. Though the idea seems at first glance too simple to need any kind of explanation, the great scale of the Pindaric use and emphasis, and the integration of the idea with other notions and areas which also demand physical effort, point to a complex and broad theme. The purpose of this article is to discuss how the notion is used and evaluated by the poet each time and how it is broadened by its application from the athletic world to every human experience. The article also addresses the important issue of the definition of genre.

Pindar is a poet who has always had a reputation for being difficult. It has been argued by Bundy in his *Studia Pindarica* that the difficulty he presents is due to our ignorance of the conventions of the genre he writes in<sup>1</sup>. Bundy, and Schadewaldt before him, mapped out a number of conventional elements of Pindar's genre, which were found to occur systematically throughout the corpus<sup>2</sup>. *Ponos* has been recognised by scholars as a 'generic motif'<sup>3</sup>.

Each genre has its own rules and conventions. Generic convention and tradition are important for the understanding of the nature of every piece of literature. It is true that Pindar inherited a tradition from the

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1. See Bundy (1986) 2.

2. See Schadewaldt's *δέξις* — Motiv, *Koros-Motiv*, *Vater-Mutter-Motiv*, Bundy's *καίριος*-motive, the *θῶμα*-motive, the *πᾶσις*-motive.

3. See Pavese's *Labor*, Köhnen's *Mühe und Einsatz*; see also Kurke (1991) 98: 'Epinikion often represents athletic victory as pure, unrivaled expenditure, of both money and effort, on the part of the victor'.



earlier archaic and epinician poetry and uses a stock of common materials adapting them to the specific occasion. But, as Instone points out, it would be a mistake to think that he was operating within the terms of conventions that were fixed or that the nature of the victory ode was already firmly established before Pindar's time<sup>1</sup>. There was certainly room for the author's intervention in the tradition; the author's choice of emphasis, arrangement, and combination of the standard *topoi* point to a special originality and imagination. Many scholars have neglected Pindar's originality in his use of *topoi*, by understanding the poet's composition as a series of *loci communi* which occur in different poems always with the same function, implying thus a mechanical repetition rather than a selection and application to the immediate context of each ode. Moreover, Bundy's claim that everything in the Pindaric ode exists only for the sake of the victor's praise excludes other important functions of Pindar's poetry<sup>2</sup>. Victory occasioned the ode, but as the ethical generalisations make clear, the poet can reflect on more general issues, which have to do with the victor's position in the world and are shared both by the patron and the audience. Pindar's ethical approach, his tendency to draw lessons for human life and to communicate 'a distinctive vision of the world', according to H. Lloyd-Jones's phrasing, have been underestimated and this is true especially for the theme of *ponos*.

Victory ode as a genre had been established before Pindar with Simonides; Bacchylides has also composed many epinician odes and his work is better preserved than that of Simonides. There is only one way to grasp what is most distinctive in Pindar's poetry, and this must be a comparison with authors of the same genre<sup>3</sup>. A careful examination of Simonides' epinician fragments and Bacchylides' corpus reveals that the idea of athletic *ponos* does not play a significant role in either poet. In fact, one is surprised by Simonides' silence on this theme and Bacchylides' reference to it only once, in ode 13 (ll. 54-57):

... ἢ ποτέ φάμι  
 ταῖδε περὶ στεφάνοισι  
 παγκρατίου πόνον Ἐλ-  
 λάνεσσιν ἰδρῶεντ' ἔσεσθαι."

1. See Instone (1996) 9.

2. See Bundy (1986) 35.

3. See H. Lloyd-Jones (1990) 67, 71.



The unidentified speaker watches Herakles as he is engaged in struggle with the Nemean lion. Clearly, in Bacchylides, Herakles is seen as the archetypal *pankratiast*. The passage effectively combines the precondition of pain with that of sweat for victory, to denote the exhaustion, which awaits every athlete in the near future. A link is, thus, established between the victor and the hero whom Pindar chooses to make more prominent in his odes by returning repeatedly to him and his toils in his mythical narratives. The element of toil recurs implicitly in the myth, in the material exploits of the Aeakidai. This is the only passage in Bacchylides where athletic *ponos* is clearly stated. The passage reflects the poet's recognition of toil as 'indispensable' cost which the athlete had to pay for the victory; and the introduction of Herakles together with the choice of the Aeakid-myth implies a continuity between the values of heroic past and those of the present. Where Pindar, however, differs from Bacchylides is in explicitness and emphasis. Bacchylides seems to take athletic *ponos* for granted, where Pindar chooses to make it a core theme in his poetry.

Pindar's choice of emphasis clearly shows the difficulty of defining the genre and its rules as something fixed and raises the point of the audience's expectations. In other words, Pindar's elevation of the implicitness of athletic *ponos* into explicitness raises the questions of what is 'conventional' in an ode and, consequently, what the audience would expect to hear.

Pindar's emphasis on athletic effort can be seen clearly by the vocabulary he uses to describe this aspect of athletic experience: *ponos*, *kamatos*, *athlos*, *mochthos* are some of the various terms by which the poet designates athletic toil. The need for variety is itself an indication of the frequency of the concept. The distinctiveness of Pindar's use of terms, which elsewhere have a negative value, has rightly been emphasised by Dornseiff<sup>1</sup>. The application of this negative experience to the athletic area is a clear indication of Pindar's wish to present athletics as a painful business. Pindar never regards athletic *ponos* as pleasant and easy. Pindar certainly would not have approved of victories won either *ἀπονητί* or *ἀχονίτι*<sup>2</sup>.

1. Dornseiff (1921) 59 ff.

2. The word *ἀπονητί* is found in Eurip. fr. 755N<sup>1</sup>; for *ἀχονίτι* (without the dust of the arena, and thus without effort), see Thuc. 4. 73.



The exhaustion and the pain which the victor suffers is greater in the hard disciplines; sports, such as wrestling, boxing and *pankration* require greater physical effort and endurance than the others, since the athlete was engaged into a face to face conflict. The poet speaks of the painful physical blows of the *pankration* at *Nem.* 3. 16-17, where the strong terms *καματωδέων πλαγᾶν* ('fatiguing blows') refer to the injuries the victor had to suffer. The term also indicates the violent nature of the sport. The seventh *Nemean* also includes a passage, which gives effectively the exhaustion of a wrestling match (ll. 70-74):

Εὐξένιδα πάτραθε Σώγενες, ἀπομνύω  
 μὴ τέρμα προβαίς ἄκονθ' ὥτε χαλκοπάραιον ὄρσαι  
 θοᾶν γλῶσσαν· ὅς ἐξέπεμψεν παλαισμάτων  
 αὐχένα καὶ σθένος ἀδιδαντον,  
 αἰθωνι πρὶν ἀλίωι γυῖον ἐμπεσεῖν,  
 εἰ πόνος ἦν, τὸ τερπνὸν πλέον πεδέρχεται.

The poet uses here an athletic image to give vividly the exhaustion of a wrestler. The description has a special effect on the victor, since it refers directly to his experience. In both passages, the poet makes clear that *ponos* is something which the athlete has to go through for the sake of victory and compensation in song.

The need for hard work is stressed even in odes, which celebrate non-combat sports. In *Pythian* 5, an ode composed for a chariot-victory, the theme of *ponos* becomes prominent: in line 54 the poet gives the inevitability of *ponos* in human life. The gnome concludes a long description of the difficult circumstances of Carrhotus', the charioteer's victory. This example clearly shows that Pindar applies the idea of *ponos* not only to the athlete-victor but also to those involved in the victory, such as charioteers, trainers or the victor's family.

The reference to *ponos* also seems strange in *Pythian* 12, which celebrates a victory in musical competition. However, in lines 28-29 the poet states the need for endurance of pain for the final happiness. This agrees with Pindar's tendency to reshape the idea from context to context and apply it to many experiences. The *aulos*-playing also demands effort concerning the method of blowing with the mouthpiece. Every kind of achievement has its own difficulty and demands sacrifice of energy but for the successful compensation comes immediately after.



The compensative character of victory for the toil the athlete has gone through is conveyed by its description as a 'sweet reward for toils' at *Nem.* 5. 48-49 or a 'breathing-space after toil' at *Ol.* 8. 7. What such expressions show is that *ponos* involves the loss or expenditure of something of value. Moreover, the pain is balanced clearly by the relief of victory and celebration in song. Pindar includes his own song in this system of toil-compensation, by offering it as reward for *ponos*. This reward is closely associated with the posthumous renown of the patron in *Ol.* 11. 5. The power of song to immortalise is an old idea firmly established in arhaic poetry and the epinician genre<sup>1</sup>. Pindar alone, however, uses this traditional idea about the power of song to secure remembrance, as an exemplification of its skill to heal the pains of the athletic competition. This becomes clear in the opening lines of *Nemean* 4:

"Ἀριστος εὐφροσύνα πόνων κεκριμένων  
 ἰατρός· αἱ δὲ σοφαὶ  
 Μοισᾶν θύγατρεις ἀοιδαὶ θέλξαν νιν ἀπτόμεναι.  
 οὐδὲ θερμὸν ὕδωρ τόσον γε μαλθακὰ τεύχει  
 γυῖα, τόσον εὐλογία φόρμιγγι συνάορος.

The first line of the ode gives the therapeutic dimension of *euphrosyne*, which eases the pains suffered by the victor during the training and the competition. The implication is that the joy is increased by the toil that preceded it. This joy is further elaborated in the next lines (4-5), where the poet speaks of the relief that praise brings, and compares this relief to that of hot water on limbs. It is evident that the negative effects of athletic *ponos* are balanced by the relief that victory and celebration bring<sup>2</sup>. As with the case of *Nemean* 7, discussed above, the poet's words apply to the recent experience of the victor.

The endurance of athletic *ponos* is seen in many places in Pindar as a confirmation of one's *arete*. Participation in athletics is a kind of testing for display of *arete* by success. Hence *arete* becomes in many places in Pindar a synonym to victory. Victory is also regarded by Bacchylides as judge of the *arete* both of gods and men, in ode 11. 6-7.

1. See Ibycus' claim in fr. 282. 47b ff., and Bacchylides 3. 95-98, 9. 82-87, 13. 63-66.

2. For the scheme, *ponos* -compensation by victory and song, see *Nem.* 10. 24, *Nem.* 3. 18-19, *Ol.* 8. 5-7.



Pindar, however, broadens the scope by setting athletic *arete* in the context of warlike and heroic excellence, and, what is more, by asserting that *arete* depends on hard work. That victory in athletics is a testing and confirmation of *arete* is made explicit at *Nem.* 7. 7-8. One's excellence is proven only by participation in deeds, which involve risk (*kindynos*) and pains, as is asserted by the poet at *Ol.* 6. 9-11.

Pindar often links war and athletics, and presents them as fields which one can prove his valour and gain fame:

Θάξαις δέ κε φύντ' ἀρετᾶ ποτὶ  
 πελώριον ὀρμάσαι κλέος ἀ-  
 νήρ θεοῦ σὺν παλάμαις·  
 ἄπονον δ' ἔλαβον χάρμα παῦροί τινες,  
 ἔργων πρὸ πάντων βιότῳ φάος. (*Ol.* 10. 20-23).

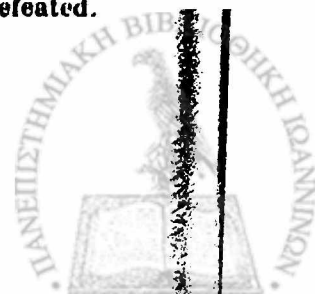
The gnome concludes a mythic section devoted to the difficulties of Herakles in overcoming Kyknos. The implication is that the heroic life requires the same risks and labours with the athletic in the 'public realm of competition, for which the reward is fame'<sup>1</sup>. This ethical approach to athletics is related to the idea of *kleos*, and so to the ethics of the Homeric hero, especially in the connection between risk and fame. Behind the attitude of the Pindaric athlete, one can see the attitude of the Homeric hero in battle<sup>2</sup>.

Pindar's tendency to link war and athletics is seen, not only in the modification of the heroic, epic ideal in the athletic activity, but also in the application to war and battle of the same effort and hardship of the athlete-victor, by the use of similar terms (*ponos*, *kamatos*, *mochthos*). In *I.* 6. 54, for example, the word *ponos*, used elsewhere for athletics, describes the toils of war that await Aias. The poet is interested here in establishing the parallel between the toils of war and those of athletics, between military and athletic action<sup>3</sup>, and Pindaric

1. See Race (1990) 67; Herakles is explicitly seen as a case of testing and recognition of *arete* by the great deeds he accomplished at *Nem.* 1. 33-34.

2. For this link between war and athletics, see Bowra (1964) 183-185, Carey (1995) 88-89; for the idea of *kleos*, applied by Pindar to the athlete, and the parallel with the warrior, see Perysinakis (1990) 46-47.

3. The opposite of the high value and glory attributed to the victor is the disgrace which accompanies a failure, the *Eleghos* which Aristokleidas has avoided, because of his endurance of the blows of the *pankration*, as is stated in *Nem.* 3. 15-16. Pindar speaks elsewhere in the odes of the grim fate, which awaits the defeated.



myths often serve this purpose, with their special emphasis on heroic struggle.

The discussion of *Olympian* 6 has made clear that Pindar places *ponos* and *kindynos* together in a system that concerns *arete* and its manifestation. That the scheme *ponos*-testing of *arete*-success and glory works in the same way in the case of *kindynos* is seen clearly in *Ol.* 1. 81-85:

ὁ μέγας δὲ κίν-  
δυνος ἀναλκιν οὐ φῶτα λαμβάνει.  
θανεῖν δ' οἷσιν ἀνάγκη, τὰ χέ τις ἀνώνυμον  
γῆρας ἐν σκότῳ καθήμενος εἶποι μάταν,  
ἀπάντων καλῶν ἄμμορος; ἀλλ' ἐμοὶ  
μὲν οὗτος ἄεθλος  
ὑποκείσεται.

Pelops speaks here in general terms of the benefits of a life involving action and risk in contrast to an inactive life: the first one brings glory whereas the second the approach of old age in ingloriousness. The hero's final choice shows, as in other cases, a resolution to accept the hard way<sup>1</sup>. The common end of death becomes the ground for taking risks for the sake of *kleos*<sup>2</sup>. This is a heroic, epic ideal expressed in Sarpedon's speech at *Il.* 12. 310-328. That Pindar applies this model to the area of athletic competition points both to an adoption and adaptation of these traditional ideas.

Apart from *kindynos*, there is also another idea often linked with *ponos*; there is a tendency for the athletic victory to be presented as the result of both money and effort, and *dapana* is also viewed as a risk undertaken for the sake of glory. The need to spend for the sake of victory is also stressed by Bacchylides, who presents Hieron's victory in ode 3 as a result of the kings' generosity. But, unlike Bacchylides, Pindar lays a special emphasis on *dapana* and links the idea with other notions. At *I.* 1. 42 ff., Pindar speaks clearly of the need for spen-

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Athletic success was seen as something important by the rewards the community offered to the victor, but defeat generally viewed as a misfortune, which brings shame. Cf. *Ol.* 8. 68-70 and *Pyth.* 8. 81-87.

1. Cf. also Polydeuces' choice in *Nem.* 10. 90.

2. The link between taking risks and gain of glory is also clear in *Pyth.* 4. 185-187.

3. For a combination of *ponos* and *dapana*, see also *Ol.* 5. 15-16 and *I.* 5. 56-57.



ding together with effort for victory and glory<sup>3</sup>. The victor sacrifices effort and money, and then as recompense the poet offers him ungrudging praise. This poetic praise becomes a *ξυλὸν καλὸν* (line 47). Clearly *ponos* and *dapana* are regarded as self-sacrifice for the good of state and the poet's praise of them establishes a lesson for the whole community. In the concluding lines of the ode, the poet gives the opposite picture of a man who keeps his wealth hidden in his home and instead of labouring, laughs at others. This kind of man dies 'without glory'. Spending money is clearly a reality shared by the aristocratic majority of the participants in athletic games, and Pindar's audience was aware of athletics as an expensive enterprise. Chariot racing was particularly expensive, since the rearing of horses demanded the possession of wealth. But again, as in the case of *ponos*, *dapana* is not limited only to odes, which celebrate equestrian events, but also in odes which celebrate hard disciplines. The case of *I. 6. 10-14* is a clear example:

εἰ γάρ τις ἀνθρώπων δαπάνᾳ τε χαρεῖς  
καὶ πόνῳ πράσσει θεοδμάτους ἀρετὰς  
σὺν τέ οἱ δαίμων φυτεύει δόξαν ἐπήρατον, ἐ-  
σχατιαῖς ἤδη πρὸς ὄλβου  
βάλλετ' ἄγκυραν θεότιμος ἑών.

The additional element of delight comes from devotion to athletics and the determination to accept the cost of *ponos* and *dapana* for the sake of victory and glory<sup>1</sup>. Pindar applies these ideas to Lampon, the victor's father, in lines 16 ff., referring to his disposition to accept the cost of *ponos* and *dapana* for final achievement. Lampon shows a moral outlook, similar to Hieron's high moral attitude in *Pyth. 1. 89-90*, where Pindar urges the latter to maintain this attitude by continued expenditure. Furthermore, this reference to Lampon's disposition agrees with Pindar's tendency, already discussed above, to apply the ideas of *ponos* and those related to it, not only to the victor-athlete, but also to those personally interested in the victory.

Pindar's admonition to the victor to continue labouring and spending is seen as the necessary prerequisite for more future victories. The poet often stresses that it is because of this attitude that the victor has gained, and that only a continuation of this can bring more successes. The victor reveals himself and his *ethos* through the way of

1. Cf. *I. 4. 29*, where the poet makes clear that spending is necessary for fame.





his life, and particularly his choice of *ponos*. This is apparent in *Nem.* 10. 30, where the poet uses the theme of *ponos* to imply that the victor deserves an Olympic victory, and to enhance his presentation of Theaios' good qualities.

What the discussion so far has shown is that *ponos* is not a narrow theme describing only the athlete's work, but rather a broad idea, which is interconnected with other notions. The poet deepens the context of the idea and sees *ponos* as a basic approach both to life and victory ode. This is clear in Pindar's tendency to link song and athletics because both presuppose certain expenditure. Pindar not only presents his song as compensation for *ponos*, but also speaks of the poetic *ponos* during the actual composition of the ode. The poet displays a certain *ethos*, by presenting himself as one who can recognise and accept the need for pain in his own job. This is clearly stated at *Nem.* 3. 12, where he describes his task as a 'pleasant pain', and links thus implicitly his own painful job with the toil of the victor, as is described in lines 16-17. This is part of Pindar's effort to establish a bond of *philia* between himself and the victor. The poet includes himself in this morally decent category of the men who labour, and at the same time establishes his proximity to the victor. Pindar is, in what survives of the victory ode, alone in stressing the difficulty of the poet's job by his use of athletic imagery in his odes. What Pindar offers is a realistic portrayal of poetry which is not seen simply as divine inspiration and natural talent, but as result of the poet's hard work.

The tendency to explore *ponos* not in isolation but in the context of human life in general can be seen in Pindar's practice of presenting victory in games as compensation from earlier misfortunes. Bacchylides also presents Alexidamus' victory in ode 11 as compensation from an earlier defeat. Pindar, however, broadens the idea by 'utilising victory to offset political and non-athletic personal disasters'<sup>1</sup>, and relates the idea with athletic *ponos*: athletic *ponos* is necessary and rewarded by success, non-athletic *ponos* is also compensated by success. The apparent interchangeability of the two notions is part of Pindar's tendency to insist on the element of vicissitude in human life. Victory in athletic games is not something stable just as the joy in life is brief. The poet in many places speaks of the instability of human life and its alteration between joy and suffering, by using the

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1. See Carey (1995) 87.



word *ponos* and its synonyms to denote sorrow or general misfortune, and reflects on the ignorance of man about his future<sup>1</sup>. This is not something new but agrees with the traditional view about the nature of human life as characterised by a mixture of good and evil, whereas gods alone are free from cares and pains<sup>2</sup>. Pindar, however, gives a realistic and positive twist to this reality: pain and sorrow are inevitable in human life, but there are 'God-given moments' (*Pyth.* 8. 98) which bring light upon life and make one forget the past suffering. Thus, at *Isthmian* 1, Asopodorus' political exile, which is stated by the metaphor of shipwreck in lines 35-37, is recompensed by his son's victory (lines 39-40), and in the twelfth *Olympian* Ergoteles' exile from Cnossus is a past grief which has been balanced by his present victories.

To conclude, what emerges from the discussion is that Pindar's use of *ponos* raises the question of the definition of genre. Since Pindar and Bacchylides differ so much in their treatment of the subject, this makes one wonder whether there are objective rules in a genre. It is clear that that the genre allows room for poetic freedom. Though there are some predictable elements, generic conventions are not always fixed, but the result of negotiation between poets and audiences. It seems that Pindar's composition is a combination of fixity and flexibility; the author tries ideas upon the audience, whereas the audience accepts the variation and the individual emphasis on certain issues. Thus, genre is flexible, a sort of convergent expectations between poet and audience. The discussion of the idea also shows the great degree of Pindar's experimentation with the limits of the epinician genre.

The case of athletic *ponos* shows also that conventions are flexible even within the work of the same poet. Pindar's reshaping of the theme of *ponos* from context to context, in other words his tendency for variety, demonstrates that we have to do with a flexible element, which is fixed only on the level of concept, not that of expression. As a concept, however, *ponos* is difficult to separate from other ideas, since when one speaks of it inevitably touches on other notions, such as those of *arete*, glory, or the power of song. This agrees with H. Lloyd-Jones's view, already stressed in the beginning, that Pindar communicates a 'distinctive vision of the world'. The poet creates this world by using

1. See, for example, *Nem.* 10. 78-79.

2. See Achilles' words at *Il.* 24. 525 ff., Simonides frs. 520, 521, Archilochus fr. 130 West, Bacchylides fr. 13.



material from the audience's perception of athletics and its experience of *ponos* in their lives. *Ponos* does not refer simply to athletics, but covers every aspect of human experience. Athletics is the microcosm through which the poet sees the macrocosm of life in general. That Pindar does not wish to isolate the idea is clear from the form of passages we have discussed; every statement is made on general grounds and has a moral content, which points also to Pindar's *ethos* and establishment of general lessons for human life. Victory is seen as a paradigm for human achievement in general. This didactic dimension which has been neglected, expresses athletic experience in view of other human experiences. Pindar's process of selection and repetition of similar ideas in different forms communicates a coherent ideology about life in general: warriors, athletes, poets and heroes share the same ethics, qualities and demands in their life<sup>21</sup>.

### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Το άρθρο αυτό αναλύει την ιδέα του αθλητικού πόνου στον Πίνδαρο. Η προσπάθεια και ο κόπος που καταβάλλει ο αθλητής για την επίτευξη της νίκης τονίζονται από τον ποιητή σε πολλά σημεία στις ωδές. Η ιδέα του πόνου του αθλητή συνδέεται επίσης με άλλες ιδέες και θέματα (δαπάνη, κίνδυνος, αρετή, κλέος). Μ' αυτό τον τρόπο ο ποιητής δίνει μια συγκεκριμένη ιδεολογία ζωής, που δεν αναφέρεται μόνο στον αθλητή, αλλά γενικά στην αναγκαιότητα του πόνου στη ζωή του ανθρώπου. Η έμφαση που δίνει ο Πίνδαρος στην ιδέα και η διαφορετική πραγμάτευσή της από ωδή σε ωδή δείχνουν ότι ο ποιητής δεν υπακούει πάντα στις συμβάσεις του ποιητικού είδους που γράφει, αλλά έχει τη δυνατότητα της προσωπικής παρέμβασης και των ποικίλων παραλλαγών.

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