PINDAR, OLYMPIAN 1
Translation by William Mullen

Strophe 1

Water is the finest of all, while gold, like a lambent fire,  
Shines through the night in pre-eminence of superb wealth.  
And if, my heart, you wish to tell  
Of prizes won in trials of strength,  
Seek no radiant start whose beams  
Have keener power to warm, in all the wastes of upper air, than the sun's  
beams,  
Nor let us sing a place of games to surpass the Olympian.  
It is from there that the song of praise, plaited of many voices,  
Is woven into a crown by the subtle thoughts of poets,  
So that they chant the praises of Kronos' son  
As they make their way to Hieron's rich hearth,

Antistrophe 1

Who wields his lawful scepter in Sicily's orchard lands,  
Culling the crests of every kind of excellence.  
The man is brilliant, above all,  
In blossomings of the Muses' matters,  
At which we poets often vie  
In friendly company around his board. So take from its peg your  
Dorian lyre,  
If victor's Grace at Pisa, of Victory Bearer there,  
Set your mind that day on the sweetest trains of thought,  
When the courser flaunted, hurtling down his lane of the tracks,  
A mettle that needed no touch of the lash,  
And twined his master thus into power's embrace,

Epode 1

The kind of Syracuse, a passionate horseman. His fame blazes  
In the man-proud daughter-city of Lydian Pelops -  
That youth with whom the mighty Poseidon fell in love,  
Because, as a babe, the goddess of fate had drawn him forth from the  
cleansing  
cauldron  
With a gleaming shoulder, wrought of ivory.  
Oh there is many a marvel, and doubtless often; the reports of men
Are tricked beyond the just account by lying tales of cunning workmanship.

**Strophe 2**

And Grace, that shapes for mortals everything that soothes them,
Can render believable something better never believed,
All by the sweet esteem it brings.
The truest of all witnesses
Is borne by days that are yet to come.
Seemlier for a man to speak well of the gods. You are less to blame.

    Tantalos' boy,
I shall speak against what earlier poets assert of you -
Shall sing how when, in return to his former hosts on high,
Your father invited the gods to his home at Sipylos,
To a friendly banquet, all decorum,
The god of the radiant trident snatched you away,

**Antistrophe 2**

His mind wild with desire, and on golden horses bore you
To the high halls of Zeus, who is worshipped far and wide -
To whom, on a second such occasion,
Ganymede was made to come,
For service every bit the same.
And when you were not to be seen - were not returned to you mother by men
    searching high and low -
Why then, some envious neighbor, in secret, framed the tale

That you had been chopped up by the gods with a cleaver, limb by limb,
Then had been plunged into a pot they brought to the boil on the fire,
And that they sliced you out, for the dessert course,
Set you forth on the board, and ate you up!

**Epode 2**

There is no way I will say that a god's belly could be thus crazed.
I recoil. Profit is rarely the slanderer's lot.
If ever mortal was honored by the gods who look down from Olympus,
Tantalus was that man. But his great good fortune he could not digest,
And surfeiting, he brought down a great curse,
In the form of a hideous stone the father of the gods hung just above him -
All ease of mind eludes him, in his vain incessant straining to get out from
under its shade.

trans. William Mullen

For further information on *Olympian 1*, see W. Mullen, *Choreia*, Princeton University Press, 1999.

http://www.rhapsodes.fll.vt.edu/PindarOlympia.htm
Type of Work and Critical Assessment

"Olympian 1" by Pindar (pronounced PIN der) is a choral ode, a poem sung by a chorus to musical accompaniment. Because the primary purpose of "Olympian 1" and other odes of Pindar was to express in elevated language his feelings about a person, a place, an event, or an idea, the odes are classified as lyric rather than narrative poems. However, his odes contain narrative episodes based on myths.

The consensus among scholars is that Pindar was the greatest lyric poet of ancient Greece (as opposed to the greatest narrative poet, Homer) and that "Olympian 1" is among the greatest of his surviving odes. In 1513, Venetian publisher Aldo Manutio il Vecchio (Aldus Manutius the Elder) printed the first book containing the collected odes of Pindar. British poet and essayist Abraham Cowley (1618–1667) introduced Pindar’s odes to England in 1656 in a translated collection entitled Pindarique Odes.

Subject: Athletic Victory

"Olympian 1" honors Hieron (alternate spelling, Hiero), ruler of the Sicilian kingdom of Syracuse, for his triumph in a horse race in the athletic games at Olympia, in southwestern Greece on the Peloponnesian peninsula, in 476 BC.

Odes for Athletes: Epinicia

An ode celebrating an athletic victory had a special name: epinicion (plural, epinicia). All of Pindar’s epinicia survive; the rest of his choral odes—including hymns extolling the gods, drinking and dancing songs, funeral songs, and dithyrambs (impassioned poems addressed to the god of wine and revelry, Dionysus) are lost except for fragments of them.

There are forty-five epinicia in all. They honor the victors of contests at the Olympic games, held every four years at Olympia, a plain on the Peloponnesian peninsula of southern Greece; the Nemean games, held every two years at Nemea, a valley in the Peloponnesian peninsula; the Isthmian games, held every two years on the Isthmus of Corinth, between the peninsula and mainland Greece; and the Pythian games, held every four years near the famous Temple of Apollo at Delphi, in mainland Greece northwest of Athens. (Pythian is an adjective meaning “of Apollo.”)

The number of odes in each category is as follows:

Olympian: 14 Pythian: 12 Nemean: 11 Isthmian: 8
Title of the Ode

"Olympian 1" received its title from Aristophanes of Byzantium (257-180 BC), a Greek editor, literary critic, and grammarian. His placement of the ode as number one in the list of Pindar's forty-five odes was based on the importance of its content, not on the year in which it was written. Its importance lay in the fact that it glorified the founder of the Olympian games, Pelops. (He won a horse race that inspired the Greeks to establish the games.)

The Olympian Games

Of all the athletic competitions in ancient Greece, the Olympian games were the most prestigious. Athletes vied in horse races, chariot races, footraces, wrestling and boxing matches, and other events. Each winner of an Olympian contest received a wreath woven from branches of the olive tree as his reward.

Significance of Victory

A victory in the Olympian games was one of the highest achievements a Greek citizen could attain. It demonstrated that the winner possessed the character, self-discipline, skill, perseverance, and resourcefulness to succeed. On his return home, he was hailed as a hero in a glorious celebration that included the presentation of a choral ode. But his victory burdened him with the task of living up to the promise of his Olympian feat in his everyday life.

Stanza Formats

Pindar's "Olympian 1" and other choral odes each contained three stanza formats: strophe, antistrophe, and epode. The strophe and antistrophe were similar in structure; the epode was different. The chorus sang the strophe (derived from a Greek word meaning to turn) while dancing across the stage and the antistrophe (derived from Greek words meaning to turn in an opposite direction) while dancing back across the stage. The chorus then sang the epode (derived from Greek words meaning to sing after—that is, to sing after the strophe and antistrophe) while standing still. Afterward, the chorus presented additional sets of strophes, antistrophes, and epodes with new wording. When a poet decided that an ode had sufficient development, he ended it with a concluding epode.

Musical Accompaniment and Dancing

Stringed and piping instruments, such as a kithara (a type of lyre) and an aulos (instrument resembling an oboe), were available to accompany the singers of Pindar's choral odes. The music itself was most likely monophonic rather than
polyphonic. Pindar is believed to have composed the music and choreographed the
dance steps in harmony with the meter of the poem.

Glossary of Characters, Places, and Terms in the Poem

Alpheus (or Alpheos): God of the river near the plain of Olympia.
Ambrosia: Food of the gods. It conferred immortality on them.
Charis: Generic term for any of three goddesses of fertility, charm, and beauty:
Aglai, Euphrosyne, and Thalia. The plural is Charites (or, in English, the Graces).
Clotho (or Klotho): One of the three Fates, goddesses who determined the fate of
each human. The other two were Lachesis and Atropos. Clotho was said to have
been the weaver of the thread of life. She was present at the birth of a human.
Cronus (also Cronos, Kronos): Former ruler of the universe. He was overthrown by
his son, Zeus.
Cyprian (or Kyprian) Goddess: Allusion to Aphrodite, the goddess of love.
Demeter: One of the chief goddesses residing on Mount Olympus. She was the
sister of Zeus and goddess of agriculture.
Elis: See Olympia.
Ganymede (or Ganymedes): Mortal youth whose beauty inflamed Zeus to lust after
him. Zeus abducted him.
Hellenes: Greeks.
Hieron (or Hiero): King of Syracuse, Sicily. "Olympian 1" celebrates his victory in
the horse race at the Olympic games of 476 BC.
Hippodameia: Daughter of Oenomaus, king of Pisatis (Pisa) in southern Greece, on
the Peloponnesian peninsula. Pelops won her as his wife after defeating
Oenomaus in the horse race that inspired establishment of the Olympic athletic
games.
Lydia: Kingdom in western Anatolia (part of present-day Turkey).
Lyre: Stringed instrument.
Nectar: Drink of the gods. Like ambrosia, it rendered the gods immortal.
Oenomaus (also Oenomaos, Oinomaos): King of Pisatis (Pisa) in southern Greece,
on the Peloponnesian peninsula.
Olympia: Greek plain on which were held the ancient Olympic games. Olympia is
about ten miles inland from the Ionian Sea on the western coast of the
Peloponnesian peninsula in southern Greece. Olympia is in a region known as Elis.
Olympia is not to be confused with Mount Olympus, near the Aegean Sea in
northern Greece.
Olympus, Mount: Mountaintop home of the gods in northern Greece. They lived
in palaces constructed by Hephaestus, the god of fire and metalwork, on the
summit of Olympus, the highest peak (9,570 feet) in a mountain range between
Macedonia and Thessaly near the Aegean Sea.
Pelops: Son of Tantalus, ruler of Sipylus, Lydia. Pelops won a horse race at Olympia
that inspired establishment of the Olympic games. Greece's Peloponnesian
peninsula was named after him.
Pherenikus (or Pherenikos): Horse that won an Olympic race for Hieron in 476 BC. Poseidon: God of the sea. He was a brother of Zeus. Syracuse: Kingdom and city on the island of Sicily. Tantalus (or Tantalos): King of Sipylus, Lydia. He was a favorite of the gods until he attempted to deceive them. For his offense, they condemned him to eternal punishment in Hades. Zeus: King of the gods on Mount Olympus.

Summary of the Poem

Strophe 1

In all the good things of nature, nothing is better than water; it brings and sustains life. In all the treasures of princes, nothing is better than gold; it shines with a fiery light. And in all the athletic contests, nothing is better than Olympic sport; it confers on the winner a crown as bright as the sun. Then the poets acclaim the victor, singing of his glory. Today, the name that rings out far and wide is Hieron (pronounced HY run).

Antistrophe 1

This is a man who rules with a righteous scepter as king of Syracuse, a land of many shepherds and flocks. And this is a man whose horse, Pherenikus, ran to victory on Olympian fields in southern Greece near the river sacred to Alpheus (also spelled Alpheos). Now at his victory banquet, Hieron will listen to the music of my words sung by a chorus to the accompaniment of a lyre.

Comment

Bernard Knox says a jockey in the service of Hieron rode Pherenikos, not Hieron himself (252). Apparently, Hieron reaped glory for sponsoring the horse and its rider, just as the owner of a modern professional football or baseball team reaps glory if his or her team finishes first.

Epode 1

The glory of Hieron’s name crosses the sea, even to the land of Pelops in Greece. In bygone days, Pelops was the first Olympic hero, winning glory in a chariot race that marked the beginning of the famed athletic games. When Pelops was born, it was Clotho (also spelled Klotho)—one of the three Fates charged with spinning the thread of human destiny—who presided at his birth and brought him forth from the washing basin. Unlike other humans, Pelops had an ivory shoulder, which reflected light from the hearth fire. His appearance pleased earth-shaking Poseidon, who became enchanted with him. Over the years, a false story about the
background of Pelops—about how he came to have an ivory shoulder—gained sway among the people.

Comment

Pelops was the son of Tantalus (also spelled Tantalos), ruler of Sipylus (also spelled Sipylos), a kingdom in Lydia in western Anatolia (part of present-day Turkey). Tantalus enjoyed the favor of the gods. In fact, they held him in such high regard that they even allowed him to dine with them. The “false story” to which Pindar refers in Epode 1 concerns one of these dinners. This story, with which Greeks of Pindar's time were familiar and which many of them accepted as true, is as follows:

Because Tantalus could sit at the same dining table as the gods, he began to believe that he was as great as they were. Perhaps he could even get away with playing a trick on them. Here is what he did. He murdered Pelops, cooked him to a turn, and served him to the gods, believing that they would not notice what they were consuming. But all the deities except Demeter—the goddess of agriculture—saw through the scheme and refused to eat. However, before the gods could act, Demeter had already eaten a shoulder of Pelops. The gods then brought Pelops back to life, and Demeter gave him an ivory shoulder to replace the one she had eaten. Tantalus was sentenced to eternal damnation in Hades.

Strophe 2

Pindar says he rejects the story that Tantalus cooked and served his son to the gods. He believes it is blasphemous to associate the gods with so grotesque an account, especially one in which a goddess is tricked into eating human flesh. He then begins to tell what he believes really happened.

After dining with the gods at their invitation, Tantalus decided to repay them with a feast at his own table in his Anatolian kingdom, Sipylus. Pelops was there. On that occasion, the sea god Poseidon—overcome with lust for Pelops—abducted him.

Antistrophe 2

Poseidon bore Pelops off in a golden chariot to the palace of Zeus. After a time, the mother of Pelops sent men to look for him, but they could not find him. It was at that time that a hateful neighbor began circulating a story that said the gods had boiled and eaten Pelops.

Epode 2

Pindar refuses to believe that the gods could stoop to such barbarity. To spread a lie that accuses them of doing so is to invite their wrath. Keep in mind, too, Pindar says, that the gods had held Tantalus in high esteem. Surely they
would never have killed his son. As for Pelops's ivory shoulder? He had had it since birth. But what of Tantalus? The gods turned against him for committing an unforgivable offense and condemned him to hell. What could he have done to offend them?

Strophe 3

Tantalus had stolen the food and drink of the gods, ambrosia and nectar, and shared them with his drinking friends. These are the staples of immortality, and they gave Tantalus eternal life. But the gods discovered the theft, for it is impossible to hide such a deed from them. They then returned Pelops to earth and condemned Tantalus to eternal suffering in Hades. Beneath him was a pool of water. Above him were tree branches bearing various fruits, such as figs and pears. When he stooped to drink water, it would recede. When he reached for a fruit on a branch, the wind would blow the branch out of reach. Meanwhile, after Pelops grew to young manhood, he was ready to marry.

Antistrophe 3

His thoughts turned to a famous beauty, Hippodameia, daughter of Oenomaus, king of Pisatis (or Pisa). Pisatis is on a river bank in southern Greece in a region known as Elis. (It is the same locale where Hieron was later to win his horse race.) Because Oenomaus lusted after his own daughter, he wanted no one else to have her. So it was that he slew with his spear every suitor who tried to win her hand—thirteen in all. Pelops went to the sea and stood on the shore in the darkness. There, in the name of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, he called upon mighty Poseidon to assist him.

Epode 3

Pelops acknowledged that wooing Hippodameia would invite her father to make Pelops his fourteenth victim. But Pelops told Poseidon that he did not wish to spend his life shrinking from danger. Rather, he wished to face it—to risk his life—to get what he wanted. His prayer did not go unanswered, for Poseidon provided him all that he needed for victory, including a golden chariot drawn by winged horses.

Strophe 4

And so Pelops defeated Oenomaus and married Hippodameia. Over the years, she gave him six sons, all of whom became powerful military leaders. After he died, he was entombed near the river of Alpheus, where many travelers stopped to pay him homage. But his glory lived on in the athletic games at Olympia, near the same river and in the same place where Pelops drove to victory. Today, as the
winner of an Olympic horse, Hieron may look forward to unending joy and contentment.

**Antistrophe 4**

Yea, sweet is the fruit of victory in the hour of challenge. And now the time has come to crown the victor. Let it be known that on all the earth there is no man more deserving of this honor than Hieron. May the god who watches over him never have reason to abandon him, Pindar says.

**Epode 4**

As long as that god remains with you, an even sweeter victory will come your way. Even now the Muse is fashioning for me an arrow that will sing through the air another song of praise for your deeds. Be aware, though, that presiding as a king is the highest honor you can attain on earth. Desire nothing beyond this achievement but do continue to walk a monarch's path. As for me, may I be the one who will walk with you to serve you with the power of my poetry.

**Work Cited**


**Mythological Tale Reveals Themes**

In "Olympian 1," Pindar briefly retells the story of Pelops, a legendary Greek hero who won a horse race that inspired the establishment of the Olympian games. Recounting this tale enables Pindar to compare Hieron to Pelops and thereby present the central theme: the greatness of Hieron. Pindar first points out that Hieron is a worthy and honorable ruler, as Pelops was, then notes that Hieron won a competition in the same place that Pelops won his, on the plain of Olympia near the river of Alpheus.

Pindar then recounts the story of Pelops. However, he says one version handed down over the centuries contains an untruth: that one of the gods unwittingly ate human flesh. A malicious rumormonger concocted the lie, he says, which was an insult to the gods. Pindar’s purpose in reporting this version is to present two other themes: first, that one must always tell the truth and, second, that one must always respect the gods.

Pindar next recounts what he believes is the correct version of the Pelops story, one in which the father of Pelops, Tantalus, steals from the gods. When the gods discover his wrongdoing, they confine him to Hades, there to suffer never-ending thirst and hunger. This version of the story again emphasizes the
importance of respecting the gods. It also introduces another theme: inability to escape divine retribution for wrongdoing.

**Other Themes**

"Olympian 1" also presents these themes: the importance of traditions such as the athletic games and the happiness that an honest, hard-won victory can bring.

**Texts of the Poem**

Translating any of Pindar's odes into a worthy version in English or any other language is extremely difficult. On the one hand, the translator must work with an ancient language and ethos and with Pindar's complex versification system. On the other, the translator must be able to present his rendering in the form of outstanding poetry that captures the essence of Pindar's spirit. Nevertheless, many translations of Pindar's odes are available. Following are links to four translations and the complete text of another translation. [Access from Cummings study guide page; three of the translations are reproduced here.]