

SIMONIDES' USE OF THE TERM ΤΕΤΡΑΓΩΝΟΣ

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It is hard to become a truly good man
fashioned foursquare without a flaw
in hands and feet and mind . . .
Nor does the saying of Pittacus ring true to me
though spoken by a wise man. He said
that it was difficult to be noble.
Only a god could have the privilege, but for a man
it is not possible not to be evil
when trapped by an overwhelming disaster.
...
Good enough for me
the man who is neither evil nor too unhandy,
a sound man who understands the justice
that benefits the city . . .¹

In this well-known fragment preserved in Plato's *Protagoras*, Simonides uses the term τετράγωνος ("square") as a figurative way of describing a "truly good man." It is natural to wonder about the provenance of that image. It occurs only here in archaic Greek literature, but it seems to have struck a responsive chord. It is quoted once by Plato (*Prt.* 339b) and twice by Aristotle (*EN* 1100b21, *Rh.* 1411b27). There is a scholarly tradition connecting the image with Pythagorean philosophy. In our opinion, such an

1 Translations are our own. For Simonides' text, see Campbell 1991.434–37.

association is not likely to have occurred to Simonides or to his original audience. It is more likely that Simonides drew the image from the world of archaic sculpture, specifically herms with their rectilinear shafts. We argue that unfolding that association greatly enhances one's understanding of the poem's original spirit and context.

In his 1906 commentary, H. W. Smyth mentions, apropos of Simonides' words, that the Pythagoreans considered the number four and the square to be symbols of divine being. Smyth did not assert that Simonides had this doctrine in mind when he composed his hymn for the Skopads, but the implication was there, and it was made explicit by a series of later commentators starting with C. M. Bowra.² Nothing in Simonides' fragment or its historical circumstances, however, reinforces the guess that he was referring to Pythagoreanism. In the lines in question, he says that it is difficult for a man to be "fashioned foursquare without a flaw in hands and feet and mind." The Pythagorean doctrine has to do with transcendent divinity. Neither hands nor feet nor the idea of being fashioned enter into the picture. Furthermore, the poem was written for the Skopads of Thessaly around 513–10 B.C.³ Plutarch (*Moralia* 15e) preserves the tradition that Simonides dumbbed his poetry down for the benefit of the Skopads, who were relatively unsophisticated. In any event, there is no evidence for the dissemination of the details of Pythagorean numerological doctrines at such an early date (Kahn 1974.162). Smyth connects the term τετράγωνος with the Pythagorean τετρακτύς, the numbers one through four viewed as a set totaling ten. The first extant use of the term τετρακτύς, however, occurs in the writings of the Pythagorean Philolaus (Cornford 1974.140, 148), who flourished in the latter half of the fifth century. Some have speculated that Polykleitos's theory of sculpture was indebted to Philolaus's theory of numbers (Stewart 1978.166), but such a connection, if it existed, would not cast any light on the associations of the term τετράγωνος in the days of Simonides.

Greeks of the archaic period were familiar with a much more transparent sense in which a well-formed figure might be said to be "square." Painters and sculptors used square grids to plan symmetrical, well-

2 Smyth 1906.312, Bowra 1934.326, Parry 1965.295, Donlan 1969.17 n. 1, Woodbury 1953.139, Carson 1992.118 n. 16.

3 Molyneux 1992.66, 76, 330, 342 thinks that Simonides was in Thessaly prior to 510/507. Westlake 1936.13, Morrison 1942.61, and Huxley 1978.236 place him there between 515 and 512.

proportioned presentations of the human body. As far as the evidence lets us judge, the use of such grids started in Egypt. Ernest Mackay described and illustrated (1917.74, 77 plate xv) the remnants of grid systems on the walls of tombs starting in the eighteenth dynasty in Thebes (1550–1300 B.C.). Guidelines were drawn by snapping a reddened cord against the wall to be decorated. Although the size of the squares varied from one painting to the next, the proportions of the human figures remained consistent in terms of numbers of squares. In eighteenth-dynasty tombs, for example, a standing man or woman was nineteen squares high. The top of the head was three squares above the level of the shoulders, and so forth. In the twenty-sixth dynasty, the standard proportions were revised. Henceforth, standing figures measured twenty-two and a third squares in height. A third of a unit was added to the head, two between the waist and the shoulders and one to the legs. Figures that adhere to these proportions are said to have been drawn according to the “second canon” (Mackay 1917.83–84). Three-dimensional statues also exhibit canonical proportions, which implies that grids were also used in designing them. In fact, the remnants of a grid on an unfinished freestanding statue were reported by Edgar early in the twentieth century.⁴

It was always obvious on stylistic grounds that archaic Greek kouroi were influenced by Egyptian art. In the late seventies, the computer-assisted research of Eleanor Guralnick demonstrated that a group of surviving kouroi were, in fact, constructed according to the second Egyptian canon (1978.466). It is noteworthy for our purposes that this group includes the kouros designated as Athens 12, which is dated to 540–20 B.C. (Guralnick 1978.465–66, 470). Guralnick's general conclusion was that Greek artists were adaptors and innovators as often as copyists. Having gained knowledge of the Egyptian canon, some retained it while others revised it. What they were likely to change, however, were the proportions of their figures as measured in squares. There is no reason to suppose that they abandoned the use of grids.⁵

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1100b21), Aristotle quotes Simonides' line in a way that makes the figurative meaning of τετράγωνος quite clear. He says that a virtuous man “will bear changes of fortunes in the fairest manner (κάλλιστα) and quite suitably in every regard (πάντη πάντως ἐμμελῶς) insofar as he is truly good (ἀληθῶς ἀγαθός) and square without

4 Edgar 1906 no. 33409; cf. Edgar 1905.137–50, cited by Guralnick 1978.463 n. 1, 467.

5 Stewart 1997.45 takes the use of grids by the Greeks for granted.

flaw (τετράγωνος ἄνευ ψόγου).” The critical term is ἐμμελῶς, which corresponds to τετράγωνος in Aristotle’s paraphrase just as κάλλιστα corresponds to ἀληθῶς ἀγαθός. Ἐμμελῶς is literally “in tune,” but is used in an extended sense to mean proper or suitable. The suitability of a musical note is determined by its place in the composition of which it is a part. Its intensity and pitch fit the other notes around it. Hence the term comes to mean generally suitable to circumstances. It is easy to see how square would acquire the equivalent associations in the world of visual arts where square grids were a basic planning tool. Thus Stewart’s translation, “to be four-square, an ashlar cut without flaw,” seems to capture the original idea perfectly.⁶

A symmetrical, well-proportioned figure was not literally square but square in the sense that the size and location of its parts was governed by square guidelines. On the other hand, some statues were partially square or, more accurately, rectilinear in a literal sense. We are referring to herms, busts of Hermes on top of rectangular shafts rounded on the top. The term τετράγωνος is applied to them by Thucydides (6.27) and frequently by Pausanias.⁷ Thucydides’ passage also tells us that herms were common sights in classical Athens. Plato’s *Symposium* (215b) shows that ἐρμογλυφεῖον (hermcutter’s place) was the generic term for a statuary shop. This suggests that the herm was *the* prototypical statue, the kind that would first come to mind in the absence of further qualification. So many herms were erected in the northwest section of the classical agora that it was called Hermai and a stoa was set aside to house herms (Furley 1996.13).

The Platonic *Hipparkhos* invites the inference that herms first achieved this great popularity under the influence of the tyrant’s son. He is

6 Stewart 1997.11. Τετράγωνος may have eventually acquired a pejorative connotation when used of statues. At *NH* 34.56, Pliny writes of Polykleitos: “proprius eius est, uno crure ut insisterent signa, excogitasse, quadrata tamen esse ea ait Varro et paene ad exemplum” (“It is his achievement to have devised a way in which statues might stand on one leg; nevertheless, Varro says that they are square and almost uniform”). The meaning of Varro’s words has been much discussed. *Quadrata* is agreed to be the Latin equivalent of τετράγωνος. Here it may be derogatory, suggesting a lack of pleasing torsion or a heavy appearance that was not offset by the statues’ weight being shifted to one foot. In this case, its evolution from term of approval to one of abuse was like that of “square” in American slang. On the other hand, Varro’s words can be understood as praise, implying that Polykleitos’s statues retained a pleasing proportionality and idealism despite their pose. Cf. Pollitt 1974.267.

7 Pausanias 1.19.2, 1.24.3, 2.10.7, 4.33.3, 10.12.6. See also *AP* 6.333, 8.32.2, 35.6, 39.6, 84.6.

said to have erected them with uplifting inscriptions at midway points between the Altar of the Twelve Gods and each of the Attic demes.⁸ The archeological record is broadly consistent with this picture. Twenty fragments of archaic herms have been catalogued, nine from Attica (Triante 1977.121–22). The earliest are dated to the last quarter of the sixth century.⁹ IG 1² 837 is an inscription on an archaic herm from Koropi, sixteen kilometers from the Acropolis. It reads: “Splendid Hermes midway between Kephale and the city.” It is not known why Hipparkhos placed his herms at midway points en route to locations in the countryside. Perhaps the idea was that Hermes, as the best of guides, would meet travelers at least half way. In any event, the author of the *Hipparkhos* got this detail right, which greatly enhances his credibility.¹⁰

A famous red figure cup by Epictetus (ARV 2.75.59) is also helpful. The inscription is Ἱππαρχος καλός. The illustration shows a youth carving a herm, which he holds on his lap. H. A. Shapiro dates the vase on stylistic grounds to 515 B.C., which implies that its honoree is *the* Hipparkhos (1989.126). Hence the cup is further evidence for the connection of Hipparkhos with the proliferation of herms and their importance in the cultural life of Athens at this juncture. Further, to judge by the way it is being held, the herm in the picture is wooden. A wooden herm is mentioned in Plato Comicus (fr. 188).¹¹ If Hipparkhos's herms were often made of wood, archeological evidence would understate their prevalence.

According to the *Hipparkhos* and to Aristotle (*AP* 18.1), Simonides was, in effect, the poet laureate of Peisistratid Athens, constantly in the company of the herm master, Hipparkhos. The inference is unavoidable that Simonides played a role in composing the epigrams inscribed on his patron's sculptures. Simonides' interest in civic education is indicated by his apothegm πόλις ἄνδρα διδάσκει (Plutarch *Mor.* 784B).

8 In keeping with this statement, Crome 1935–36.307 conjectures that there were 150 herms, a figure accepted by Shapiro 1989.125. We are inclined to think that the statement in the *Hipparkhos* is anachronistic in its assumption that each deme had a herm. There is no evidence that Attica was systematically divided into demes before Kleisthenes. In our view, a somewhat smaller number of herms marked half way points between the Altar of the Twelve Gods and various important villages on the outskirts of Attica.

9 Harrison 1965.113, 147. The head of herm Acropolis 642 may be contemporary with Hipparkhos.

10 Friedlander 1948.122, 125–27 considers *Hipparkhos* to be an early work by Plato and cites the herm IG 1² 837 as the best evidence of its authenticity.

11 Cited by Furley 1996.16–17.

In our view, then, there is ample evidence for the conjecture that the image of a herm would occur to Simonides and his audience in connection with the statement that it was difficult for a man to be “fashioned four-square.” The metaphor makes good sense when referred to the world of sculpture. Herms were increasingly common, and they were literally rectilinear in part. They were probably called τετράγωνος in Simonides’ day, just as they were in Thucydides’ and subsequently. A large number of them had recently been erected by Simonides’ patron with inscriptions that he probably helped compose.

A final detail, Simonides’ reference to hands and feet, seems to make this association certain. The most obvious, distinctive trait of the herms was precisely the absence of hands and feet. What better symbol for the difficulty of becoming flawless in hands and feet than a statue that conspicuously lacks them? In fact, the symbolism of the herm is somewhat richer than this formulation suggests, since the shaft accommodates conflicting interpretations. On the one hand, it suggests the guidelines that govern the creation of a well-proportioned figure and thus brings to mind the abstract ideals that animate human endeavors. On the other hand, it represents an unfinished body. Hence it is simultaneously a symbol of the ideal and of the failure to reach it. It is difficult, says the god, to be fashioned perfectly square like my shaft, i.e., to be perfectly suitable in every way for every occasion. Most men are as I am represented here: incomplete and still striving.¹²

In our opinion, this evidence for an allusion to herms in Simonides’ lines fits into a general pattern of facts and reasonable hypotheses that point towards a pivotal role for the worship of Hermes in Peisistratid Athens. We will conclude by sketching a picture of this role.

It is generally agreed that Hermes was originally worshiped primarily by herders.¹³ In land-poor areas like Attica, herders commanded less wealth and prestige than the owners of grain lands, vineyards, and olive

12 Wrede 1985.7 argues that the shape of the herm embodies the ideal of the “square man.”

This seems to us to be correct as far as it goes, but does not do justice to the imperfection of a herm’s shape when compared with a complete man’s. Furley 1996.26 finds humorous references to the herms’ lack of feet in Aristophanes’ *Ploutos* and Plato Comicus (fr. 204). Simonides’ poem accommodates both ideas: respect for the ideal and sympathy for the failure to realize it.

13 Cp. *Homer Hymn to Hermes* 491–92, and the comments of Hodkinson 1988.36, 51, Jameson 1988.98, and French 1959.53.

plantations.¹⁴ Peisistratos's original supporters were drawn from the former group, the Διόκριοι or "men of the hills" (Herod. 1.59). It is not surprising that his family had friendly relations with the lords of Thessaly, Greece's premier herders. The evidence is that one of Peisistratos's sons was named Thessalos and that Hippias was nearly saved from the Spartans and Alkmaionids in 510 by Thessalian cavaliers (Herod. 5.64).

Simonides' visit to the Skopads of Thessaly is a further indication of such links. Skopad wealth was based on herds and flocks (Theokritos 16.34–36), and they viewed Hermes as their special patron. Herodotos (6.127.4) mentions that a certain Diaktorides ("Son of the Messenger") represented the Skopads in the courtship of the daughter of Kleisthenes of Sikyon. Furthermore, as Grace Macurdy has shown, the Skopads probably derived their family name from Hermes Euskopos, so called because he kept good watch over herds and flocks.¹⁵

The rapid evolution of the archaic Attic economy gave herders an opportunity to escape the relative poverty of their traditional position.¹⁶ The new traders and artisans for which the developing economy created a demand were drawn more from them than from the well-to-do landowners who were content with their traditional occupations. Hence Hermes evolved together with his worshipers into a god of craft and business acumen. This evolution is nicely represented in the *Hymn to Hermes*, in which the infant demonstrates his skill as a herdsman, with a chisel, and in the trading that he does with Apollo.¹⁷

On this view, Hipparkhos's herms were rich in socio-political significance. Before they appeared on the scene, the most prominent statues dotting the Attic landscape were the monumental kouroi used as grave markers and athletic memorials. They were advertisements for the virtues of the aristocratic clans, the source of opposition to the Peisistratid regime. The finest extant example, the Anavyssos kouros (530 B.C.), was discovered *in situ* in an Alkmaionid region and is thought to represent a member of that

14 French 1959.242, 1964.43, and Hammond 1961.86 commenting on Dio Chrysostom 7.107, 25.3.

15 Macurdy 1921.181, *Hymn to Hermes* 73.

16 Casson 1925.6, French 1956.11–12, French 1959.53. Pleket 1969.43 argues that struggling pastoralists turned to the crafts; French 1964.44 n. 27 identifies them as supporters of the Peisistratids.

17 Hermes' use of ἐπαμοίβια (barter) is emphasized by Nagy 1981.195, 204 n. 8.

clan who had died in battle.¹⁸ The association is strengthened by the inscription that gives the youth's name as Kroisos. We know from Herodotos (6.122) that the Alkmaionids traced their wealth to that Lydian king's generosity.

In contrast, there is nothing aristocratic about the herms. Their bodies are comically incomplete, and their faces are silenoi-like, good natured but roughly hewn, the face of a peasant, not a lord—men of the hill, not the plain. In other words, the herms were art for and about the masses. As they pointed the way towards a particular deme, it would be natural to think of them as spirits of the deme, not of an aristocratic clan but of a region containing a cross section of the population—of whom the majority were commoners. The edifying sentiment on the herm would be taken variously as the voice of Hermes, of Hipparkhos, of the people, or of all three together. The populist associations of the herms were evidently strong enough to obliterate their connection with the Peisistratids when they fell from favor. Thucydides (6.54–60) tells us that their mutilation in 415 by parties unknown gave rise to fears that a cabal of aristocrats was planning to overthrow the democracy.

What is left of Simonides' poem suggests a composition that is very much in accord with the populist or egalitarian attitudes embodied by Hipparkhos's herms. Defenders of the aristocracy like Theognis held up ideals of nobility by which *hoi polloi* would always be found deficient. The *kouroi* were embodiments of this nobility. Simonides asserts that such perfection does not really exist. Under the force of circumstances, everyone falls short of such an ideal. In view of this, Simonides says that he refrains from censuring any man who is not "too unhandy" (*ἀπάλαμνος*) and retains a sense of the justice that benefits cities. Earlier in the dialogue, of course, we heard from Protagoras that it was none other than Hermes who distributed that sense of justice equally among all men.

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18 Stewart 1997.64 n. 15, figure 38; Jeffrey 1961.57; Richter 1961.116.

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