

THE BROKEN WALL, THE BURNING ROOF AND TOWER: PINDAR, *OL.* 8.31–46

Leonard Woodbury in memoriam

In the Eighth Olympian, for Alcimedon of Aegina, Pindar recounts a story (31–46) that, according to a notice in the scholia, is not found in earlier Greek literature.¹ Aeacus was summoned from Aegina to Troy by Apollo and Poseidon to help in the construction of the city's fortifications. Smoke, says the poet, would one day rise from the very battlements Aeacus built. The wall newly completed, a portent appeared: three snakes tried to scale the ramparts but two fell to earth while one succeeded in entering the city. Apollo immediately interpreted this sign: Troy would be taken 'owing to the work of Aeacus' hand' and would, moreover, be taken 'by the first and the fourth generations'.

If there is literary invention here,² it would seem that Pindar has drawn inspiration from three passages of our *Iliad*: (i) 7.452–3, Apollo and Poseidon toiled to build a wall for Laomedon; (ii) 6.433–4, there was one spot in the wall of Troy that was especially vulnerable; (iii) 2.308–29, the seer Calchas declares an omen involving a snake to signify the eventual destruction of Ilium.

The general import of the passage is clear enough – descendants of Aeacus play a prominent part in the Trojan war and in the capture of the city. But the details of the portent and of the prophecy have caused much perplexity, for they cannot easily be made to correspond to the history they prefigure. It is the numbers in Pindar's account that are the chief source of confusion.

On the model of the omen interpreted by Calchas (where a snake eating nine birds represents a lapse of nine years before the sack of the city) the three snakes in the Pindaric story might reasonably be expected to represent the lapse of three generations before Aeacus' great-grandson Neoptolemus played his conspicuous part in the final agony of Troy.³ But this interpretation of the portent forces us to explain away the fact that Troy was also destroyed by Aeacus' son, Telamon, as Pindar repeatedly insists in his Aeginetan odes (*Nem.* 3.37, 4.25; *Isth.* 6.26–31):⁴ if the snakes are taken to represent generations, one of the unsuccessful snakes in fact represents a successful conqueror. This is a disturbing inconcinnity.

A second expedient, adopted by many modern commentators, is to take the two unsuccessful snakes as representative of Achilles and Ajax, Aeacids who died before the final capture of Troy, and to take the third as Neoptolemus.⁵ The numbers no longer refer to generations; rather they count the unsuccessful and the successful Aeacids. But there are still problems. The successful Telamon is left aside; more

¹ A. B. Drachmann, *Scholia Vetera in Pindari Carmina*, I (Leipzig, 1903) ad 41a.

² Some commentators are unwilling to believe that Pindar's story is in any way original, despite the scholiast's claim: cf. L. Dissen, *Pindari carmina quae supersunt*, II (Gotha and Erfurt, 1830), 100; U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Pindaros* (Berlin, 1922), 405; L. R. Farnell, *The Works of Pindar*, I (London, 1930), 45.

³ So, e.g., A. J. Beattie, *CR* n.s. 5 (1955), 1–3.

⁴ Euripides in the *Andromache* (796ff.) says that Peleus was with Telamon and Heracles during the first sack of Troy, but Pindar nowhere mentions Peleus in this connection.

⁵ E.g., in addition to Farnell (above, n. 2), B. L. Gildersleeve, *Pindar: The Olympian and Pythian Odes* (London, 1885), 196; A. Boeckh, *Pindari opera quae supersunt*, II.2 (Leipzig, 1921), 182; C. A. M. Fennell, *Pindar: The Olympian and Pythian Odes* (Cambridge, 1879), 70. D. E. Hill, *CR* n.s. 13 (1963), 3, refers to this as 'the traditional view'.

important, the successful Teucer (Telamon's son, *Nem.* 4.46) is also ignored, though he was with Neoptolemus in the Trojan horse.⁶ Gildersleeve, though he accepts this interpretation, wryly notes that ἀτυζόμενοι (of the two dying snakes, 39) 'hardly seems applicable to the representatives of Achilles and Aias'.⁷ This reading of the passage about the three snakes derives its authority from the scholia, where it is mentioned three times.⁸

A more satisfactory solution is to take the number three as pointing to the number of collaborators in the building of the wall. The chthonic snakes are opponents of the Olympian order, whose construction they cannot overset. The participle ἀτυζόμενοι (39) becomes appropriate, for it explains the impotent rage of the two creatures confronted with the work of the gods: in the First Pythian this same verb (13) expresses the frustration of the enemies of Zeus and introduces a description of the serpent Typho and his unavailing rebellion against divine dispensation. The wall is impregnable where gods laboured; where a mortal laboured Troy will be taken. This reading frees us from having to try to reconcile the numbers of the portent with the numbers of Apollo's prophecy. What it leaves unexplained is Apollo's precise knowledge of the time when Troy will fall. But I think there is another way of understanding why the poet has Apollo append to his prophecy information not gleaned from the omen, and I shall suggest it below. The interpretation of the portent outlined here is to be found in the scholia too.⁹ Among modern Pindarists only two explicitly associate the three snakes with the three workers on the wall.¹⁰ It is not, I think, a serious objection that the numbers in the omen no longer correspond to the lapse of time before the taking of Troy as do the numbers in the omen interpreted by Calchas in the *Iliad* – Pindar is not bound by all the details of the Homeric passage.

The god, speaking to Aeacus, tells him that Troy will fall by reason of his work (42). Aeacus' responsibility is incontestable. But Apollo goes on to add that Aeacus' descendants will be involved too (οὐκ ἄτερ παίδων σέθεν, 45, in emphatic position at the beginning of a triad), and this comes as a surprise. Apollo further specifies the generation that will collaborate with Aeacus in the destruction of Troy. In computing time and indicating the joint responsibility Apollo includes Aeacus as part of his own family. By a method of reckoning that must seem somewhat strange to us, Aeacus is the first generation of his own descendants. There are, however, excellent analogies in Pindar. In the Fourth Pythian, a poem that is concerned more than any other in

⁶ It is almost universally assumed by modern commentators that Pindar is including in the prophecy Epeius, artificer of the Trojan horse (the lineage would be Aeacus–Phocus–Panopeus–Epeius). This is not impossible: Asius, the 7th- or 6th-century author of genealogies and epic poet, apparently made Epeius a descendant of Aeacus (cf. Pausanias 2.29.4). But it involves identifying Aeginetan Phocus, son of Aeacus (this Phocus died prematurely on Aegina, *Nem.* 5.12), with a different Phocus (see *RE* 20.497–8) who along with Panopeus is an eponym in Phocis. I am not convinced that Pindar made this identification. Intent as he is on illustrating the number and glory of the descendants of Aeacus, he never mentions Epeius.

⁷ See Gildersleeve (above, n. 5) 196.

⁸ See Drachmann (above, n. 1) *ad* 51 (with apparatus), 52a, 53e.

⁹ *ad* 49b, 53b.

¹⁰ Dissen (above, n. 2) 100; M. Fernández-Galiano, *Pindaro: Olímpicas* (Madrid, 1956), 242. L. Lehnus, *Pindaro: Olimpiche* (Milan, 1981), 139, claims that this is the commonly accepted interpretation, but he does not refer to specific commentators. It appears to be problematic for him because he senses a necessity of reconciling the one and two of the snake-prodigy with the one and four of lines 45–6. He entertains the possibility that the two falling snakes symbolise the two times that the wall would fall (in the first generation after Aeacus and in a later generation). But what are we then to make of the successful snake? That it represents the *building* of the wall? This seems quite strained, and the correspondences would be inexact, for if the wall falls twice, it is also built twice (by Aeacus and the gods, and after the first sack by Heracles and Telamon).

the corpus with reckoning generations, Medea (likewise prophesying) includes the Argonauts as the first part of their own descendants (47–8),¹¹ Jason refers to himself and Pelias as the third generation sprung from their grandparents (143–4), and the poet addresses Arcesilaus of Cyrene, seventh (for us) in line from the Battus who founded the city, as eighth of the first king's descendants (65). The portent that Apollo interprets points to a single sack of Troy; his interpretation also refers to a single conquest.¹² The taking of the city will be a work of *συνεργία*, as was the building of its wall. When Neoptolemus breaches the wall of Troy, Aeacus will be collaborating through his handiwork.¹³

It is not necessary, then, to emend *τετράτοις* in line 46 to *τερτάτοις*. *τερτάτοις*, first proposed in 1860,¹⁴ has been accepted by, *inter alios*, the current Teubner editors, presumably because they think that the prophecy refers to two sacks of the city (by Telamon and by Neoptolemus). But since the portent contains no reference to Telamon, the prophecy should not be understood as including him either. There are other difficulties as well – *τέρτατος* is an unattested form,¹⁵ and the exclusive reckoning that does not include Aeacus in his own family is anomalous too.

There is another remarkable instance of *συνεργία* in the myth of the poem. Apollo is depicted not as an omniscient god but anthropomorphically as a seer. It is not uncommon to find mantic Apollo as *Διὸς προφήτης* (Aesch. *Eum.* 18–19), mouthpiece of his father (cf. *Hymn Hom. Ap.* 132, *Herm.* 471–2). But it is unusual to see him functioning as a human seer who must interpret signs. In this he is like the *μάντιες ἄνδρες* of the beginning of the poem (2) who seek to understand the will of Zeus and to predict the future through divination by means of the altar flames at Olympia. Zeus is the source of the greatness of the Aeacids as of the addressee's family (15–16, 83–4), and generally of the truth that his seers declare (3). But here Apollo's prediction shows some independence, for as a mantis interpreting a sign he goes beyond what may

¹¹ Medea refers to the 'blood' or offspring of the fourth generation. This is the fifth generation by her reckoning though it would be the fourth by our (exclusive) reckoning, since she is in fact referring to great-great-grandsons of Argonauts (the generation of the returning Heraclids; cf. Herod. 6.52).

¹² Beattie (above, n. 3) understands that Aeacus and Neoptolemus are referred to, but his interpretation is very difficult to accept: he emends *ἄρξεται* to *ἀέξεται*, which is supposed to have double meaning and to refer to 'building' by Aeacus and 'sacrifice' by Neoptolemus. His case is further weakened by his wishing to introduce Telamon and Peleus into the portent. Hill (above, n. 5) likewise correctly understands the reference to Aeacus and Neoptolemus, but his statement is marred by his acceptance of the numbers of the omen as referring to Aeacids between Aeacus and Neoptolemus (i.e. Achilles and Ajax). I cannot make sense of C. M. Bowra's claim (*Pindar* [Oxford, 1964], 299) that Troy 'will be captured *first* by Aeacus, and *later* by his descendants' (italics mine).

¹³ Though we might expect *ἄμα* (45) to be a preposition, parallel to the *ἄτερ* that precedes it, it is, I believe, more likely adverbial, the datives being datives of agent (cf. 30). *ἄμα* when accompanied by *καί*, is not normally a preposition: cf., e.g., *Isth.* 2.11, *κτεάνων θ' ἄμα λειφθεῖς καὶ φίλων*; *Od.* 3.111, *ἄμα κρατερὸς καὶ ἀμύμων*. The words imply close conjunction, often with a sense of simultaneity. This is what we want here, for Aeacus' contribution to the fall of Troy will be manifest at the time of Neoptolemus' victory.

If *πρώτοις* and *τετράτοις* are datives of agent, the case for a strong passive verb is made more likely. *ράξεται* was suggested independently by Gildersleeve (*loc. cit.*, above, n. 5) and Wilamowitz (above, n. 2, 404 n. 3) and has been defended by P. Von der Mühl (*MH* 21 [1964], 51–3). This seems preferable to the weak *ἄρξεται* of the codices, for which no convincing translation has been offered (Aeacus and Neoptolemus can scarcely be said to have 'ruled' in Troy). It is, moreover, a satisfactory eponym for *ἀλίσκεται* (42), to which it is parallel in this passage.

¹⁴ L. Ahrens, *Philologus* 16 (1860), 52.

¹⁵ *τέρτατος* would be an Aeolic form of *τρίτατος*. But Pindar's regular word for 'third' is in any case *τρίτος*.

legitimately be extracted from the portent by his prediction of the exact timing of the fall of Troy. There is nothing in the omen, on the reading suggested here, that indicates *when* the wall will be breached – this information is, as a recent commentator has put it, a ‘precisazione autonoma’.¹⁶ If the prophecy is a work of concerted effort, with Zeus providing the *φάσμα* (43) and Apollo interpreting it, there is a virtuoso cadenza in the concerto.

Apollo is variously presented in Pindar’s odes, always in a manner that is harmonious with the poem as a whole. In the First Pythian, a poem celebrating the close bond between father and son in the earthly dynasty of the Deinomenids, Apollo and Zeus provide a divine paradigm of this union. In the Third Pythian, a meditation on human destiny and on the possibility of mortal knowledge (possible because Apollo, the god of truth, guides human fortunes), special care is taken to emphasize the god’s independence and omniscience: the raven that in the Hesiodic account¹⁷ told of Coronis’ infidelity is eliminated, presumably as unnecessary to a god whose grasp of truth is immediate and total. Apollo in the Ninth Pythian is portrayed as a well-bred youth on the eve of marriage; he is like the other suitors of the poem, including the addressee Telesicrates, who has wooed and won victory. The brief glimpse of Apollo in the Eighth Olympian is a glimpse of a humanised Apollo whose performance is in part dependent on co-operation, in part an individual achievement. He is in this not unlike the ultimate conqueror of Troy, Neoptolemus, whose feat is his own, though possible only because of the assistance of Aeacus.

To recognise this motif of co-operation or assistance is to grasp an important key for understanding the poem. Aeacus is, of course, important as progenitor of the race that made Aegina so dear to Pindar’s heart. But this is a general consideration, relevant to virtually any one of the Aeginetan odes, where stories of the Aeacids may be told to remind the audience of the past glories of the island race whose scions in the poet’s time are winning victories in the Panhellenic games. The general appropriateness of the brilliant exploits of the Aeacidae in Aeginetan odes does not explain why Pindar tells any individual story as he does.¹⁸ But if we note the repeated insistence in the myth on the theme of collaboration, we may also note the surprising prominence accorded in the poem to the victor’s trainer. Though Pindar elsewhere (*Nems.* 4–6) mentions trainers, he nowhere else devotes so much of a poem to direct eulogy of a trainer (including a catalogue of that trainer’s victories). So important is Melesias, in fact, that a scholiast could consider him a co-dedicatee of the ode.¹⁹ Melesias has experience and foreknowledge (59–60) and so is an important contributor to the *ἔργα* (63) that are at the heart of the poem (cf. 19, 32, 42, 85). The *γέρας* of Alcimedon (11) is the *γέρας* of Melesias as well (65).

Pindar elsewhere shows that he is interested in the *διδασκαλία* of youth. His regular position, as is widely recognised, is that mere learning or training can accomplish nothing if native ability be not present. In the Third Nemean we hear that

ὅς δὲ διδάκτ’ ἔχει, ψεφεννὸς ἀνὴρ
ἄλλοτ’ ἄλλα πνέων οὐ ποτ’ ἀτρεκεῖ
κατέβη ποδί, μυριάν δ’ ἀρετῶν ἀτελεῖ νόω γέγεται

(41–2).

But this very poem, which appears to denigrate *διδασκτά*, contains a myth given over to the *διδασκαλία* of Cheiron’s pupils Jason, Asclepius, and Achilles. Under the

¹⁶ Lehnus (above, n. 10) *loc. cit.*

¹⁷ R. Merkelbach and M. L. West, *Fragmenta Hesiodica* (Oxford, 1967), fr. 60.

¹⁸ ‘Il est clair que ce mythe n’a aucun rapport avec Alcimédon personnellement’, says A. Puech, Pindar: *Olympiques* (Paris, 1930), 104.

¹⁹ Drachmann (above, n. 1) 236.

tutelage of the centaur Asclepius learned the *φαρμάκων* . . . *μαλακόχειρα νόμον* (55). And the training of Achilles was undertaken that he might make proper use of his hands in the slaughter before Troy (62; cf. 44). *διδασκαλία* is, we see, a matter of *χειρουργία*,²⁰ and so it is not surprising to find that Melesias himself is described by Pindar as *χειρῶν* . . . *άνιοχον* (*Nem.* 6.66), ‘guiding to a proper use of hands’,²¹ while the triumph of Alcimedon is a *χειρῶν ἄωτον* (*Ol.* 8.75), ‘the flower of his hands’.

Aeacus’ place in the poem is especially interesting. His own *χειρουργία* ensures (42) the triumph of his race, and so he may be seen as assisting in the fall of the city he helped build. Mortal weakness (to which the snake-portent calls attention) establishes the vulnerability of Troy, but this weakness is hardly reprehensible since the fall of Troy is fated (33–6) and, moreover, the weakness is the direct cause of the success of one of Aeacus’ descendants. Aeacus assists Neoptolemus to victory; he is also the collaborator of Apollo and Poseidon in much the same way. For Apollo and Poseidon built the walls of Troy as an *athlos* (cf. *Il.* 7.453, *ἀθλήσαντε*), in thrall to King Laomedon, and the garland of battlements is the crown of their labour. Homer refers to the towers of Troy as its *κρήδεμνα* or veil (*Il.* 16.100); Pindar has made the towers (38) a *στέφανος* or crown (32). The image is perhaps not original – the scholiast on this passage quotes Anacreon (*PMG* 391) as speaking of a *στέφανος πόλεως*.²² But it is most effectively employed here, for the coronation of Troy, result of the labour of building, is like the *στεφανοφορία* of the athlete and his rejoicing *komos* (10). Aeacus is the *συνεργός* of Apollo and Poseidon in the placing of the crown as he is later the *συνεργός* of Neoptolemus in its destruction. And as burning entrails are the source of the prophecies mentioned at the beginning of the poem, burning battlements (36) are the substance of Apollo’s vision in the myth.

The poem, if read as I suggest, is not a curious amalgam of badly co-ordinated elements, but an exquisite tribute to a boy-victor and to the *τέκτων* of his success. The myth is limpid and appropriate, and there is in it something of great importance to the poet. The execution of noble deeds requires the contribution of God and of inborn nature: Pindar regularly stresses the decisive role of *θεός* and *φύα*. He stresses too the exertion (*πόνος*) and the expense (*δαπάνα*) necessary for the achievement of greatness. But Pindar also honours – and this may too easily be overlooked – the part played by a mentor or trainer in the *παιδεία* of the young – of gods, heroes, and mortals alike. The Eighth Olympian is a joint tribute to Alcimedon and Melesias. The myth of the poem, in keeping with this, is a tale of co-operation.²³

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²⁰ So too Jason’s education: see *Phoenix* 29 (1975), 205–13. Asclepius perverts his teaching (*χρυσός ἐν χερσὶν φανείς*, *Pyth.* 3.55); Zeus takes the matter in hand with the thunderbolt (*χερσὶ δι’ ἄμφοιν*, *Pyth.* 3.57).

²¹ See Farnell (above, n. 2) II (London, 1932), 287–8.

²² Sophocles twice uses the image of the garland of towers that crowns a city, at *Ant.* 122 and at *O.C.* 14–15 (reading *στέφουσιν* with Wakefield and Dawe).

²³ In the poem we learn that the Blepsiads (Alcimedon’s family) are descended from Zeus (16). There is thus some analogy with the Zeus-descended Aeacids: both families are guided and protected by Zeus. We do not know whether Alcimedon’s family was descended from Zeus through Aeacus or traced its line back to Zeus independently of Aeacus. It is interesting, however, to note that Melesias is an Aeacid. Pausanias (2.29.4) tells us that the family of Cimon and Miltiades was descended from Aeacus, Telamon, and Ajax. H. T. Wade-Gery, ‘Thucydides the Son of Melesias’, *Essays in Greek History* (Oxford, 1958), 246, has traced the descent of Melesias from Cimon. I do not wish to press this point, but I think it a sobering counter-consideration to the common belief that Melesias, as an Athenian, was *persona non grata* in 460 in Aegina. I find no foundation in the poem for this view; it is certainly not supported by line 55, which is perfectly intelligible as normal Pindaric preoccupation with *φθόνος* in a passage of eulogy.