

<i>ACTA CLASSICA</i> <i>UNIV. SCIENT. DEBRECEN.</i>	<i>LXII.</i>	<i>2026.</i>	pp. 133–143.
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PINDAR, PELOPS AND MYRTILOS RECONSIDERED

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Abstract: The main mythological narrative in Pindar's first Olympian ode was often taken in isolation and the poet's declaration about his intentions in modifying the traditional tale were also taken at face value. Based on the recent clarification of the famous mythological revision concerning the banquet of Tantalos, this paper offers a new overall interpretation of the poem and concludes that Pindar's handling of the myth did not derive from some personal desire or moral conviction of the poet but from the necessity to praise his patron appropriately. By ingeniously revising the banquet of Tantalos and by exaggerating a relatively small modification he made, Pindar managed to divert the attention of his audience and concealed another change of fundamental importance, i.e. the elimination of Myrtilus from the chariot race of Pelops and Oinomaos.

Keywords: mythology, Pelops, Pindar, Myrtilus, Hieron

The first Olympian ode by Pindar is certainly one of the most important surviving poems from antiquity, but at the same time it is not easy to understand and there is a vast amount of scholarly literature dealing with various kinds of problems related to it.¹ Its literary/artistic qualities have surely contributed to obscuring the fact that the poet actually had to celebrate a specific occasion, an Olympic victory and that his primary aim was to glorify his patron.

It is worth summarizing very briefly what we know about the poem. It was surely composed for an Olympic victory achieved by a jockey in the single horse race; the horse was called Pherenicus, its owner was Hieron I, the tyrant of Syracuse (7–23). There are two possible dates for the victory and therefore for the composition of the ode: 476 or 472 BC. Nothing else is known with certainty about the historical circumstances of the composition and the performance of the ode: it may have been performed first in Sicily, but Olympia is perhaps more likely.²

¹ Gerber 1982, Fisker 1990, Georgantzoglou 2016, Lundahl 2019.

² The date has been most thoroughly discussed (however without reaching conclusive results) by Stergiou 2017, 75–76 and *ead.* 2021, 165 n.3. For the place of the (first) performance see e.g. Krummen 1990, Athanassaki 2004, Pitotto 2014 and most recently Ciampa 2021, 83.

The poem³ deals mainly with the myths of Pelops and the poet obviously assumed a high degree of familiarity with them, since the whole poem would be absolutely incomprehensible without the knowledge of the traditional story and even those who are familiar with the myth cannot agree after two thousand years what he actually intended to say at certain points (most importantly in lines 24–27). At the same time, the poem excellently demonstrates the flexibility of the myth. Pindar explicitly and quite proudly called the attention of his audience to some changes he implemented and he declared them to be quite important (36). But it will be shown here that it is far from clear what may have been already known to his audience and what was new in his treatment. A related and even more difficult question is, why he made the changes, but this can only be answered after having clarified the first.

The poet was certainly able to connect the two most important episodes of Pelops' mythical career, and the divine assistance also enabled Pindar to characterize the mythical victory, similarly to the one achieved by his patron as something fully supported by the gods. But it would be *a priori* unlikely that this version was entirely invented by Pindar, even if he proudly declared to diverge from the established tradition. It is equally plain, however, that he did not call our attention to every single modification he made. E.g. Pindar does not signal any novelty in the second part of the story but the detailed presentation of Pelops' prayer is likely to constitute such a detail. Moreover, modification and novelty do not necessarily mean the addition of some new details; omitting something deliberately (i.e. *silentio praeterire*) can constitute a similarly or even more significant alteration of the tradition. E.g. by looking at the end of the myth, one can easily realize that Pindar describes the whole chariot race in a single line (88). Such a condensation is often used by Pindar and is usually employed to show that he does not want to add anything new to the myth.⁴ Although the same simple motivation might be assumed in the present case too, some other motivation for the extreme abbreviation of the story might be considered as well.

It has been assumed, correctly I think, that Pindar selected or altered the mythical subject because it was relevant to his patron, Hieron.⁵ It is, of course, possible to suppose a number of reasons for the changes made by Pindar, or indeed multiple reasons for each individual change. However, it is more economical to avoid postulating too many of them and it is important to acknowledge that there was one primary reason, which is arguably the most significant one. This reason is not hypothetical; it is the *raison d'être* of the poem: to glorify the

³ There are three recent translations to be mentioned here: Howie 1991, 117–120; Race 1997, 44–59 and Morgan 2015, 213–216.

⁴ Howie 1991, 62, 66, 84.

⁵ Köhnken 1974, Griffith 1989.

victor, the patron of the poet, by demonstrating that the celebrated victory was achieved with the active assistance of the gods and not by any other illicit or questionable means. Consequently, if this motivation can be demonstrated to underlie every single change Pindar made to the traditional tale, there is no need to postulate any other motivation for them.

First of all, it is necessary to clarify what Pindar really wanted to say about the banquet of Tantalos, especially in his often discussed introductory remark (23–27) and what was new in this treatment:

λάμπει δέ οἱ κλέος
 ἐν εὐάνορι Λυδοῦ Πέλοπος ἀποικία:
 τοῦ μεγασθενῆς ἐράσσατο γαῖαοχος
 Ποσειδᾶν, ἐπεὶ νιν καθαροῦ λέβητος ἔξελε Κλωθῶ
 ἐλέφαντι φαίδιμον ὦμον κεκαδμένον.

“His (i.e. Hieron’s) fame shines in the virile colony of Pelops the Lydian with whom the mighty Earth-holder, Poseidon fell in love, when [or because]⁶ Klotho⁷ took him out of a pure cauldron distinguished by the ivory in his gleaming shoulder.” (transl. G. Howie)

I have already discussed all the previous attempts at elucidating this passage and concluded that instead of sophisticated scholarly readings one should take these words literally and seriously: Pelops was really taken out of the cauldron, i.e. he was cooked and he became more beautiful by this procedure.⁸ The boil-

6 The exact meaning of the word ἐπεὶ has been discussed at length and is usually considered a major problem (cf. e.g. Howie 1983, Nagy 1986), with serious consequences for the interpretation of these lines. If taken in the temporal sense, the infatuation of Poseidon had to occur immediately after the rebirth of Pelops, i.e. the hero had to be an adolescent boy; if causal, the rebirth with the ivory shoulder can be separated in time from the famous banquet where, according to Pindar, Pelops disappeared. This second possibility is advocated by those, who would like to interpret these lines as referring to a newborn Pelops (e.g. Köhnken 1983 and Howie 1983, 281–293 and most recently Vöhler 2004, 27–28). The question cannot be answered definitely and the interpretation of the text cannot exclusively depend on this single word, however important it might be. Nevertheless, I would call attention to a parallel which was not taken into consideration so far. In Bacch. 17. 121–124 the same word occurs in a similar context with a verb in aorist as in the case under discussion and a young hero reappears (this time emerging from the sea) miraculously before a distinguished and duly surprised audience; it is absolutely clear that the action described cannot be separated in time from the overall scene and therefore I take the meaning of ἐπεὶ to be temporal and think that the episode referred to here is taking place at the famous banquet of Tantalos.

7 According to the ancient scholia to this passage, other poets like Bacchylides credited Rhea or Hermes with a similar role. The participation of Klotho is often taken as a sign indicating that the scene takes place at the birth of Pelops or in his infancy, but if Pelops dies and is revived, then the scene is actually a rebirth and this is an equally appropriate occasion for the Moira to appear, irrespective of the age of the revived person. As correctly observed by Brillante 1991, 19, „la sua presenza ribadisce il carattere di rinascita e rinnovamento che il trattamento imposto all’eroe dovrebbe produrre.”

8 Patay-Horváth 2023, 10–14.

ing was carried out at the famous banquet of Tantalos, but no one intended to eat the boy. The chopping up and boiling was carried out only in order to render him more beautiful and this was achieved indeed since Poseidon fell in love with Pelops precisely because he became so handsome. Cutting and cooking without eating is also mentioned by Euripides' *Iphigeneia* (*IT* 386–390) and there are many folktales featuring similar episodes: the hero is cut into pieces and is cooked, but he is by no means eaten. The whole horrific procedure results in rendering him more powerful and more beautiful.⁹ Such a benevolent cooking of a living person was possibly well-known in ancient Greece as well since this is the culminating point in Aristophanes' *Knights* when Agorakritos, the Sausage-seller rejuvenates old Demos and presents him in the following way: 'By having boiled him, I turned his ugliness into beauty for you.'¹⁰ Something similar must have happened with Pelops as well. Even if Pindar does not give this detail explicitly, the effect is clearly indicated by Poseidon falling in love with the young hero (25–26), and other authors explicitly mention the enhanced beauty of Pelops following his resurrection.¹¹

9 Goldberg 2013, 1314–17 with a list of several tale-types featuring this episode. A striking parallel, already noticed by Cook 1925, 224 n.1, is the Hungarian hero Vas (i.e., Iron) Laci, who was chopped into hundred pieces by the twelve-headed dragon. All the pieces were put into a sack by the dragon and the horse of the hero brought it to the serpent-king, who assembled the pieces and revived Laci with magical herbs. As a result of this ordeal he became seven times as handsome as before, but his right shoulder blade had fallen out of the bundle on his horse's back and the serpent-king replaced this bone with a new one made of gold and ivory.

10 Aristoph. *Knights* 1321 (already mentioned in this context by Brillante 1991, 23 n.20). I thank Prof. Zsigmond Ritoók for reminding me of this passage. This parallel may be regarded, however, as not entirely appropriate, since the rite Demos undergoes is commonly referred to as a rite of rejuvenation. But Aristophanes emphasizes the beauty of Demos and not his youthfulness. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that Demos does not simply become more handsome, but he becomes beautiful just because he becomes young from old and Pelops is by no means old at the time of the banquet. But young heroes may become more beautiful before their decisive contest as well, even if not necessarily by cooking (and of course the cauldron and the cooking are just accidental details which can be replaced by other means to achieve the same effect): Theseus leaps into the sea and emerges shining with the gods' gifts as θαῦμα πάντεσσι, (*Bacch.* 17.123–124) and Iason was made „radiant with manifold graces” (*Apoll. Rhod.* 3.919–927) before entering the shrine of Hecate. (Here it is said that Hera transformed the hero and the episode is separated in space and time from the episode when Iason anoints himself and his weapons to become invulnerable, but Hecate is central to both scenes of magic and it is extremely likely that they belonged together and were removed from each other only by the poet for dramatic reasons.) Both Theseus' and Iason's adventure belong to the same type of folk-tales, i.e. ATU 313, 'The magic flight or Girl the helper' (for details see Patay-Horváth 2023, 139–142), so the similarity is most probably not incidental. Both Iason and Theseus need to be very handsome to arise the love of the helping girl and the enchanting beauty of Pelops was also mentioned in a similar function by Sophocles (*fr.* 477), so an episode of his beautification is fully justified. Moreover, beauty is usually not vitally important for the heroes, so it is obviously mentioned only sporadically and only in cases where we have very detailed accounts.

Following an excellent discussion of the ancient sources, especially the scholia, a similar conclusion has been reached recently¹² and it is therefore necessary to point out the differences compared to the idea presented here. Acerbo correctly stated that there is no clear and early evidence for a double boiling of Pelops. I also agree that the single cooking of Pelops was not a cruel act performed by a malevolent father in order to provide some food and/or to deceive the gods but a form of rejuvenation. The claim, however, that besides the cannibalistic version there was another coexisting tradition referred to by Pindar, according to which the boiling of the hero “leads him to grow up and from childhood immediately reach the bloom of youth, in which state he is ripe for abduction by the god Poseidon” is hardly acceptable. Apollodorus’ ὠραιότερος can be perhaps argued to mean ‘more ripe’ or ‘mature’ instead of ‘more beautiful’ but assuming that Pindar had something like this in mind and that he merely advocated an existing version involving the love of Poseidon is plainly contradicted by the proud profession of novelty in line 36, which can hardly be understood “as a statement of the absolute difference between the two versions.” The winged horses of Pelops on the chest of Kypselos (Paus. 5.17.7) only show that divine favor was a traditional element of the story but they do not necessarily imply the involvement or the love of Poseidon, which was clearly stressed and most probably invented by Pindar.

At any rate, the introductory lines are in perfect harmony with the following part of the poem and there is no need to assume with most modern commentators that the traditional story of the banquet of Tantalos is declared by the poet as a fabrication concocted by an envious neighbor (47–51). The traditional narrative was not completely replaced by an absolutely different new version of the myth, but the abduction of Pelops by Poseidon simply followed the cooking and is not introduced *instead* of the beautifying resurrection from the cauldron but as an addition to it.¹³ Pelops in his prayer on the seashore (71–85) referred

11 Pelops’ beauty is referred to e.g. by Philostr. *Imag.* 1. 30 and (ps.) Lukian *Charid.* 7, but Ael. Arist. 22.10 is perhaps the most elaborate. Here a parallel is drawn between the enhanced beauty of Pelops following his cooking and that of Smyrna following its rebuilding after a great earthquake. Consequently, there is no need to assume with Acerbo 2022, 14–15 that the cooking of Pelops would mean a sudden coming of age.

12 Acerbo 2022. The passages cited below are from pp. 23–24.

13 There seem to be only three modern authors, who did not follow this mainstream interpretation: Kerényi 1964 Book 1. chapter V (obviously following the account given by Apollod. *Epit.* 2.3 where the cutting and boiling is followed by the abduction), Brillante 1991 and most recently Acerbo 2022. Kerényi accepts the serving of the boy’s flesh for eating, Brillante and Acerbo eliminate (correctly in my view) this episode and retain just the cooking. In this way, however, they also reject (without any justification, I think) the chopping. Nagy 1986 also rejects substitution of the old myth for a new one and assumes a ‘poetic expression of a preexisting fusion of two myths’. This theory reduces, however, without proper justification, the role of the poet to a minimum, accuses him of taking pride in a substantial innovation which is essentially not his own achievement and does not take in account the specific occasion the poem is celebrating.

to this love affair when he asked for and indeed received some winged horses to win Hippodameia. The divine help played a central part in the revised version of Pindar but was almost certainly included in the traditional myth as well since the few artistic representations we have from the archaic period, (i.e., before Pindar), all depict winged horses, clearly belonging therefore to the traditional version of the tale. Even if some explanation may have been known for them previously, the details of the relationship between Pelops and Poseidon were most probably added by Pindar.¹⁴

It is much more difficult to determine whether the trick of manipulating the chariot wheel attributed to Myrtilus was also known at the time of Pindar, because there are no explicit testimonia on this. One could simply assume that the motif of treachery did not play any part in the myth and was therefore naturally not mentioned by the poet. It was already observed, however, that a trick or even unfair behaviour in general might have been regarded as acceptable means to achieve victory in myth and traditional tales.¹⁵ And it can be added that later on the two explanations for Pelops' victory, i.e. the divine help and the bribery involving Myrtilus were not regarded as alternatives mutually excluding each other but were typically mentioned together.¹⁶

The preserved fragments (#37 a and b) of Pherecydes, where Myrtilus is mentioned for the first time in our record, give considerable detail about him and thus suggest that the treacherous charioteer was already well-established in the 5th century BC.¹⁷ That Myrtilus and the story of the treachery was widely known is also suggested by Plato (*Crat.* 395c) and by the tragedies referred to

14 It cannot be determined, if the relationship between Poseidon and Pelops already existed before Pindar and if so, what kind of relationship it was, but the divine help may have had different reasons (earlier services of the hero to the god or goddess are known in the case of Iason and Admetos) and pederastic relations between Olympians and mortals were not very common (apart from Zeus and Ganymedes mentioned by Pindar in this context one can refer e.g. to Apollo and Hyacinthus cf. Sargent 1986). It was surely a normal practice to refer to various services offered previously to the gods when praying for some kind of help in return (e.g. Hom. *Il.* 1. 39f, 503f) and Pelops may have been thought to have done the same without any pederastic relationship with Poseidon. Already Kakridis 1928, 421–423 argued in detail (following Willamowitz) that the pederastic relation was invented by Pindar and I think no one refuted this hypothesis. The motif of Pelops' sexual appeal may have existed previously, but as the parallels show, it was probably directed towards a female character (see above n. 10).

15 Howie 1991, 66–69.

16 Euripides makes Elektra sing in lamentation of the winged horses and mentions the death of Myrtilus at the same time (*Orestes* 988ff), while in Sophocles (*Electra* 504–514) the chorus likewise mentions Myrtilus, who was thrown from the golden chariot, given according to Pindar by Poseidon and clearly indicating divine favour.

17 Pherecydes is the Athenian mythographer active in the 5th century BC (his floruit was given by Eusebius as the 81st Olympiad, i.e. 456 BC). He might have been younger than Pindar but can hardly have invented the character of Myrtilus. Most probably, he just summarized what was generally known at his time, i.e. the tradition suppressed by Pindar. See Fowler 1999.

above; they do not give much detail about Myrtilus' role but briefly mention his death and its consequences thus presupposing common knowledge of the plot. Admittedly, all of these sources originated from Athens and it might be thought that the charioteer of Oinomaos was invented or elaborated only there.¹⁸ But the name was widespread according to the *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* and it was intimately connected to the Myrtoan sea especially to Cape Geraistos on Euboea. Moreover Myrtilus the charioteer was known in regions which are otherwise not connected to each other, most notably in Arkadia (Paus. 8.14.10–12) and in Lesbos (Schol. Eur. Or. 990) where the mythical chariot race was most probably told and used already in the Archaic period.¹⁹ Moreover, in comparable folktales (ATU 313) the fleeing couple always employs some kind of treachery to escape and the pursuing father/king/witch/devil usually has a servant, so a charioteer and some kind of treachery can be assumed to have belonged to the tale from a very early stage. This assumption may be corroborated by the observation that apart from the single famous poem under discussion here, no victory ode celebrating an equestrian event has ever tried to make use of the mythical chariot race of Pelops, although the choice would have been quite natural, especially at Olympia. The reason for the general avoidance of this tale in victory odes might be sought in the fact that its most widespread version definitely contained the motif of treachery, and therefore the story was simply unsuitable for an encomiastic purpose.

It is very likely therefore that Myrtilus was known to most contemporaries of Pindar and that Pindar deliberately suppressed this unpleasant part of the myth. If this assumption turns out to be true, the choice of the poet appears as a logical or almost inevitable one, since the whole poem celebrated a victory won in the Olympic Games, and it would surely have seemed absolutely inappropriate to hint at some trick or bribery in achieving the mythical victory which he used as a parallel to the real one.²⁰

18 Moreau 1987 has argued that Myrtilus was added to the tale only in the 5th century by the Athenian tragic poets in order to denigrate Pelops, the ancestor of the Peloponnesians, because the Athenians at this time were continually fighting Sparta and its allies on the Peloponnese. Later on (Moreau 2004, 32 n. 84), he modified this view by admitting that the trick involving Myrtilus may have been part of the mythical story even at an earlier stage, but assumed that it was not meant to discredit Pelops, since cheating one's adversary could be connotated positively in certain circumstances both in myth and in fairy tales, implying that there is absolutely no reason to doubt that Myrtilus was part of the story before Pindar. For another kind of reasoning leading to the same conclusion, see Kakridis 1928, 419–421.

19 It was even assumed (first by Robert 1881, 187) that the entire myth of the chariot race originated from Lesbos. While this is quite unlikely, the early connections to Lesbos seem to be beyond doubt. For details see Patay-Horváth 2023, 78–81.

20 This central importance of the episode for the entire revision of the myth was already succinctly stated by Köhnken 1974, 203 'It may well be that this element of a bribe, which is certainly not quite fit for an encomiastic presentation of Pelops' and Hieron's achievements, was the original motif, which in Pindar's account is replaced by Poseidon and his divine gift of horses.'

The elimination of Myrtilus might seem a small alteration today, but actually it was a major change for anybody who was acquainted with the mythical tradition, especially the curse uttered by Myrtilus and its severe consequences for the entire house of Pelops.²¹ The contemporary audience would therefore have expected a mentioning of Myrtilus, and anybody who wanted to tell the story without him had to face and to counter this expectation. Pindar was certainly aware of this fact and took the necessary precautions.

First of all, he condensed the tale of the chariot race as much as possible. The poem celebrates a victory in an equestrian contest and is defined by the poet (101) as a *hippios nomos* (an otherwise absolutely unattested term); the patron is mentioned as lover of horses (23) and there are some lines (106–110) devoted even to his victories in similar, more prestigious equestrian contests which can only be expected, but there is only a single line (88) devoted to the part of the myth dealing with an equestrian contest. Instead of the mythical chariot race, it is only the nocturnal meeting with Poseidon, one would say the top secret preparations almost resembling a conspiracy which are told in some detail and the childhood of the victor which is not immediately related to the chariot race, certainly receives an unproportionately accurate discussion. This cannot be explained simply by the fact that the chariot race was well-known and could therefore be dealt with so briefly.

There must have been some more profound reason to condense the narrative of the chariot race and one can easily understand that this was related to the problematic character of Myrtilus. It was not enough to simply omit him from the story but the poet had to make the audience totally forget about him. And this required a great deal of sophistication. The preparations for the race, i.e. the nocturnal prayer and the story of Tantalos' banquet were presumably told not simply in order to fill the poem with something else than the chariot race, but they were most probably told to make the divine aid appear as a sufficient reason for Pelops' victory.

The poet diverted the attention of the audience and he deliberately did not emphasize the main change but instead focused on another point and elaborated the earlier part of Pelops' life. This strategy of diverting the reader's interest worked extremely well not only in antiquity but even with modern scholars: almost everyone discussed the feast of Tantalus in isolation²² and different motivations were supposed to have influenced the poet in making the changes, but the obvious reason deriving from the elimination of Myrtilus has not been realized.

21 On the curses see the excellent discussions by West 1999 and Fowler 2013, 432–434.

22 This holds true for the most recent and otherwise excellent treatment of the banquet (Acerbo 2022) as well, the most important exception being Adolf Köhnken (cf. n. 20 above), who has, however, fundamentally misinterpreted the mythical revision by Pindar in 1983.

It must be acknowledged that attributing such an intention to Pindar is a perilous endeavour, as the poet has explicitly provided ethical and religious justifications for the alterations he made to the conventional narrative of Pelops (35) and these changes have even been interpreted as originating from an underlying theological concept.²³ However, the veracity of the poet's assertions in this regard are open to doubts. The overtly proclaimed intentions can also be considered as a component of the poet's elaborate encomiastic strategy, or alternatively, a simple 'poetical pretence',²⁴ which contributes to the success of his red-herring manoeuvre. The detailed presentation of the banquet is likely to derive from the motivation to direct the attention of the audience towards the beauty of Pelops and thus the divine favor resulting from this beauty. By exaggerating a relatively small modification he made, Pindar managed to divert the attention of his audience and concealed another change of fundamental importance, i.e. the elimination of Myrtilus from the chariot race of Pelops and Oinomaos. One has to admit that despite the authority of the poet and the popularity of the poem, the carefully devised new version of the divine banquet did not have a lasting effect: the abduction of Pelops from Mount Sipylus to Olympus and the divine aid in the chariot race were largely forgotten while Tantalos' sin and the eating of Pelops' flesh by the gods continued to be remembered similarly to the central role played by Myrtilus. These episodes remained the key points of the story and were elaborated by subsequent generations for a long time. So Pindar did not succeed in popularizing his version at all, but if the above considerations come close to the truth, this was by no means intended by him, either. The poet certainly managed to adapt a well-known panhellenic myth to the praise of his patron and did so in an extremely efficient and elegant way excellently concealing his main intention in manipulating the mythical tale. It is not absolutely sure whether he was materially remunerated for his service but it can be assumed that he was.²⁵ Pindar not only fulfilled the expectations of his patron but at the same time he may have used the occasion to educate his audience/readers about the proper relationship between gods and humans in general and it is quite understandable that this kind of reading became dominant after the celebrated occasion faded out and the *laudandus*, Hieron passed away.

23 Gostoli 1999 and Ciampa 2021.

24 The phrase is borrowed from the final sentence in Köhnken 1974.

25 It is a very difficult question, whether the praise was motivated by the hope for financial remuneration and should be termed flattery or if there was some other more sublime or honest personal motivation for the poet, but in the present context this problem is not especially relevant. For excellent detailed discussions see e.g. Bowie 2012 and Morgan 2015, 115–123.

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DOI 10.22315/ACD/2026/8

ISSN 0418-453X (print)

ISSN 2732-3390 (online)

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