

## True in Hindsight: Truth and Selective Memory in Pindar's *Olympian* Odes

The first *Olympian* ode famously questions the truth of the traditional myth of Pelops. So it is perhaps surprising that most scholarship assumes that Pindar's relationship with the truth is unproblematic; the poet, it is argued, presents himself as entirely honest, as opposed to other poets who are both less truthful and therefore also inferior (see e.g. Nagy 1990: 60-61, 65-66). Pindar is, of course, intimately concerned with ἀ-λάθεια, the lack of concealment or forgetfulness which for the Greeks constitutes truth, first because he is a poet inspired by the Muses, daughters of Memory, and particularly because he is an epinician poet, whose aim is above all to commemorate and perpetuate the κλέος of his *laudandi*. But also as an epinician poet, Pindar must be careful in his handling of the truth: it is not always advantageous for him to tell the whole truth about a victor's family or city. The danger of honesty can be seen, for example, at *N.* 5.16-17, when after refusing to tell how Telamon and Peleus (heroes associated with Aegina, the victor's home) murdered their half-brother Phocus, Pindar breaks off by saying: “στάσομαι· οὐ τοι ἅπασα κερδίων / φαίνοισα πρόσωπον ἀλάθει' ἀτρεκές· / καὶ τὸ σιγᾶν πολλάκις ἐστὶ σοφώτατον ἀνθρώπῳ νοῆσαι” (“I will halt: it is not more profitable for the whole truth to show its exact face, and silence is often the cleverest thing for a man to take heed of.”) In this passage, Pindar stops before telling the scandalous truth; however, as scholarship on the Pindaric *Abbruchformel* has shown, far from diverting attention from the broken-off story, the poet's abrupt turn away in fact focuses attention on the break-off, and, I would argue, on the incomplete story, while simultaneously absolving Pindar of responsibility for slander or excess (see e.g. Mackie 2003: 10-14). The effect is to draw the audience's attention both to the truth of the story and to Pindar's refusal to tell the entire truth of the matter. The poet himself thus

problematizes ἀλάθεια—a word which elsewhere in Greek poetry signifies the whole truth (Cole 1983: 12)—suggesting that not every truth should be an exact (ἀτρεκής) truth.

This paper argues that one way in which Pindar mediates the tension between honesty and praise is through the lens of time and memory. In two of the *Olympian* odes (1 and 10), Pindar explicitly links ἀλάθεια with memory or hindsight. At *O.* 1.28-34, he first expresses caution about the truth of what people say about the story of Pelops, hinting that the traditional myth is a story that goes beyond the true account (“φάτις ὑπὲρ τὸν ἀλαθῆ λόγον”) before concluding that “ἀμέραι δ’ ἐπίλοιποι μάρτυρες σοφώτατοι” (“future days are the cleverest witnesses.”) Although the entire passage is rather cryptic, the general scholarly consensus considers that Pindar is claiming truth for his own version of the myth. Even those who hold this view, however, admit that “Pindar provides little explicit assurance that his own poetry does not also espouse persuasion and artistry at the expense of truth” (Park 2013: 28). This passage in *O.* 1 is already connected by Gildersleeve in his commentary to *O.* 10.53-5, where Pindar claims that Time alone has the ability to determine what is really true (“ὅ τ’ ἐξελέγχων μόνος / ἀλάθειαν ἐτήτυμον / Χρόνος.”) Focusing on these two odes, this paper argues that, far from making the simple equation of praise with truth and blame with falsehood, Pindar recognizes and preserves the tension between uncomplimentary truth and poetic fiction. Ultimately, he claims that it is only memory, already etymologically encoded within ἀλάθεια, and the poetry which preserves that memory, that can determine what is true. Pindar’s own poetry, by virtue of being commemorative, is ἀλάθεια and excludes forgetfulness, even when it avoids telling the whole truth. For Pindar, poetic truth is not the whole truth; even ἀλάθεια involves an element of λήθη.

## Bibliography

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