

Olympian 12 and the Politics of Athletic Victory

Stasis, expulsion, and resettlement loom large in Pindar's *Olympian 12*. In this paper, inspired by Walter Benjamin's charge to "brush history against the grain" (257), I contribute an explicitly Marxist perspective to the interpretation of the poem. Within the program of praise, the epode narrates Ergoteles' exile from Crete, a result of στάσις ἀντιάνειρα ("hostile civil strife"), and his acceptance into the citizen-body of Himera (*Ol.* 12.13-19). Scholarship to date has prioritized the establishment of the ode's date (Barrett), philological analysis (Verdenius), and the interplay of form and content (Silk, Race). Peter Rose, however, has demonstrated the validity of a Marxist analysis of class and ideology for the Archaic and early Classical period (2012), and Nigel Nicholson's examination of charioteers, trainers, and other marginal figures in Pindar has indicated that an approach focused on the ideological work of epinikian is fruitful (2005). Thus, here, I critique the ideological basis of Pindar's praise of Ergoteles in *Olympian 12*.

By integrating Aristotle's arguments that inequality and moral and economic problems always cause *stasis* (*Pol.* 1301b26, 1303b7; cf. Berent, 334), as well as the Marxist notion that ruling classes generalize and universalize historically contingent situations (Marx and Engels, 59), my approach historicizes what is included and excluded in the ode. Pindar's reconfiguration (and universalization) of Ergoteles' factionalism and exile, from a moral lapse or a desire for κέρδος καὶ τιμή ("profit and honour," *Pol.* 1301a30) to fated glory and victory (for him and his adopted city), is skillful poetic deception and class rhetoric rather than straightforward praise of athleticism.

Pindar's counter-factual at *Ol.* 12.16 (εἰ μὴ στάσις ἀντιάνειρα Κνωσίας ἄμερσε πάτρας "If hostile civil strife had not deprived you of your Knossian fatherland") signals an opening for

my own critical intervention. Neither we, nor ancient audiences, are obliged to uncritically accept the re-configuration of *stasis* in this ode, nor the universalizing of Ergoteles' life. In this paper, I invert the supposedly causal relationship between generality and biography and reveal the class ideology at work in this ode. By integrating *stasis* into the accepted notions of the imperceptibility of fate and the vanity of human designs, Pindar effectively mystifies and generalizes a historical particular – he moves it to the realm of divine processes rather than human responsibilities.

If art is highly involved in the ideological program of the dominant class, then *Olympian* 12 demonstrates the skill of Pindar the poet (and ideologue). The foreclosing of perspectives, the complex and reductive process of ideology at work in the poem – each functions to control the message that the audience receives and to alter the received character of *stasis*, “destroyer of the Hellenes” (Theog. 781: στάσις Ἑλλήνων λαοφθόρον). Given the pervasiveness of *stasis* in Archaic and Classical Greece, *Olympian* 12 serves not only as the vehicle for the praise of a single aristocrat, but also as an act of ideology for an entire class.

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