

SOME REFLECTIONS OF THE RANKING OF THE MAJOR GAMES IN FIFTH CENTURY B.C. EPINICIAN POETRY¹

It is common knowledge that throughout antiquity the Olympic Games were the most important and prestigious of all games, and that as a group the four major festivals — Olympic, Pythian, Isthmian, and Nemean — had a higher status than other games. That the Pythian festival came second to the Olympian is also well known, with the mutual ranking of the Isthmian and Nemean games at different times less clear. This paper observes some reflections of the relative contemporary status of the major games in the surviving epinician poetry of the fifth century B.C.

A clear initial indication of how epinician poetry viewed this matter lies in the poets' usage of compound nouns and adjectives made up of the name of the games, together with *-νικός* and its cognates². Pindar uses parts of *᾽Ολυμπιονίκας* and *᾽Ολυμπιονικός* eleven times, while Bacchylides uses *᾽Ολυμπιοδρόμος* once and *᾽Ολυμπιονικ<ι>α* once. In addition Pindar has *τρισολυμπιονίκας* once (*Ol.* 13, 1). As for *Πυθιονικός* and similar terms, the score is: Pindar 3, Bacchylides 2. Pindar never uses *Νεμεόνικος* or *᾽Ισθμιόνικος* or similar forms. But Bacchylides varies on this latter practice: like Pindar, he never uses *Νεμεόνικας* etc., but he does use *᾽Ισθμιόνικας* once (10, 26) and *᾽Ισθμιόνικος* once (1, 156).

The interpretation of these statistics relies on a view currently accepted by most students of epinician poetry, namely that its poets were commissioned poets, whose primary orientation was towards encomium of the victor³. On this hypothesis it must have been highly laudatory in the fifth century B.C. to call a victor, or something associated with him, *᾽Ολυμπιονικός* etc., and less so, but still substantially so, to use *Πυθιονικός* etc. But neither Pindar nor Bacchylides, as far as their extant work reveals, can have felt it honorific to call a man *Νεμεόνικος*. Bacchylides' two *᾽Ισθμιόνικος* compounds may well reflect in one dimension the greater status enjoyed by the Isthmian festival as against the Nemean. This topic will be re-

sumed later. But in another dimension the two uses of *᾽Ισθμιόνικος* compounds may be tendentious attempts by Bacchylides to elevate the Isthmian festival above its true status, and to assimilate it to the two more important sets of games.

These compounds give overall support to modern scholarly perceptions of the relative status of the major games — as far as they can be discovered given the paucity of published statements about this matter: frequently students of epinician poetry and of ancient athletics simply assume that the four major festivals go together, with the Olympic games of course elevated over the others, and with a sliding scale of importance for the rest. Two quotations may be characteristic:

“Of the four athletic festivals for which Pindar wrote Epinicians, the Olympian was held in the highest esteem... But the other three were only little less renowned, and Pindar paid an almost equal respect to them...”. (C. M. Bowra, *Pindar* [Oxford 1964] 162.)

“The four-fold division of Pindar's epinicians is by festivals, with the order of books originally follow-

1. Although mainly handling other topics, M. M. Kokolakis, *Πνευματικές ἐκδηλώσεις στὸ περιθώριο τῶν ᾽Ολυμπιάδων, Πρακτικά Γ' Διεθνoῦς Συνεδρίου Πελοποννησιακῶν Σπουδῶν* (Καλαμάτα, 8–15 Σεπτεμβρίου 1985) 37–55, begins with some useful reflections on the primacy of the Olympic Games.

2. Observations about Pindaric vocabulary are based on W. J. Slater (ed.) *Lexicon to Pindar* (Berlin 1969). For Bacchylides the *Index Vocabulorum* of the Teubner edition (Snell–Maehler) has been used.

3. The view stems from E. L. Bundy, *Studia Pindarica* I–II (Univ. Calif. Publ. Class. Philol. 18. Berkeley–Los Angeles 1962); cf. also D. C. Young, *Three odes of Pindar: a literary study of Pythian 11, Pythian 3, and Olympian 7* (Mnem. Suppl. 9. Leiden 1968), and *Pindar Isthmian 7, myth and exempla* (Mnem. Suppl. 15. Leiden 1971).

ing the order of age and prestige of the festivals, Olympian, Pythian, Isthmian, and Nemean". (G. Kirkwood, *Selections from Pindar. Edited with an Introduction and Commentary* [Chico, CA 1982] 8.)

But within this overall pattern the compounds seem to be hinting at a more complex story: in it the Olympic Games were not only "held in the highest esteem" but were entirely in a league of their own. Then the Pythian Games came a distant but honourable second. So far nothing surprising has been revealed. But the enormous distance between these two festivals and the biennial meetings at Nemea and the Isthmus is of interest. This distance is of course associated with the age and frequency of the different games, but is based on much more. And again the distinct preference which the Bacchylidean use of the compounds gives to the Isthmus over Nemea is worth noting.

The *-νικος* compounds are infrequent; so to fill out the picture, all raw (i.e. literal) references to the four sets of games and to the places associated with them have been collected from the four books of Pindaric epinicia, excluding those epinicia which were wrongly included by the hellenistic editors. The results are:

	All Olympians	Pythians	Isthmians	Nemeans	
Olympia	50	32	9	4	5
Delphi	35	9	19	3	4
Isthmus	26	8	2	11	5
Nemea	25	6	-	5	14

If these results are adjusted to take account of the differing lengths of the four books (with the Olympians used as the mean), then the following hypothetical distribution is obtained:

	All Olympians	Pythians	Isthmians	Nemeans	
Olympia	57	32	8	8	9
Delphi	39	9	17	6	7
Isthmus	42	8	2	23	9
Nemea	46	6	-	11	29

The trend of the unadjusted and adjusted figures is the same. We might well expect the highest figures in each case to be self-referential, and that is indeed the case. But the external references are the interesting part. The primacy of the Olympic Games is clear throughout all four books. The greater tendency of Olympian odes to refer to the Pythian Games is again

a good indication of the relative status of the Pythian festival. The Nemean and Isthmian odes tend to refer reasonably frequently to the other festival, doubtless because they attracted the same class of competitors and victors (see below). One curious feature, i.e. the paucity of reference to the Pythian Games in Nemean and Isthmian odes, requires explanation, and this will be attempted below.

This overall crude reference pattern on the whole confirms the story told by the compounds. But better indications are given by the length and detail allocated in epinician poetry to geographical description of the location of the victory and to the gods, heroes, and foundation legends associated with that place. There is a quite remarkable divergence between the Olympian and Pythian Games on the one hand, and the Nemean and Isthmian Games on the other in these respects⁴. It seems to have been virtually obligatory, not only in an Olympian ode, but also in others where Olympia is mentioned, to introduce either or both of the patron gods of Olympia (Zeus and Kronos), the founder or founders of Olympia (Hercules and Pelops), the river Alpheus, the hill of Kronos, Pisa, and the altar of Zeus. Again the foundation of the Olympic Games is a favoured topic, as are highly laudatory remarks about the Olympic Games and their status.

Similarly the Pythian Games usually require mention of Apollo and of some Delphic topography: the Omphalos, the cliffs of Parnassus, Kirrha, Krisa, the Castalian spring, the Dragon, and the temple of Apollo. There are also frequent encomiastic remarks about the status of the Pythian Games. It is clear that the methodical and thorough inclusion of this material, which emphasised again and again that the victor's victory had been won at the Olympic or Pythian Games, was felt to play a material part in the laudation of the victor, whose prestige was enhanced by his victory in prestigious games.

The contrast in this set of terms with the Nemean and Isthmian Games is noticeable. All epinician odes must of course reveal where the victory they celebrate took place. But most Nemean odes do so with only a passing reference to Nemea or its festival; if there is any "local" emphasis, it is on Heracles. Zeus does not always appear in the Nemean odes, and there is very little description of Nemea. Interestingly, when

4. The references for gods, founders, geographical features etc. can be recovered most easily from Slater *op. cit.* n. 2.

Pindar does — in *Nemean* 6 — offer his only description of Nemea (43-6), that description balances earlier descriptions of the same length within the same ode of Delphi (36-9) and the Isthmus (40-2).

There is more description in the Isthmian odes of the Isthmus and of its geographical surrounds than there is of Nemea in the *Nemean* odes, and there is a little more emphasis on Poseidon at the Isthmus than there is on Zeus at Nemea. This confirms that Bacchylides, in attempting the compounds Ἴσθμιόνικος etc., was in part exploiting a perceived higher status of the Isthmian over the *Nemean* Games. But in comparison with what is said in epinician poetry about Olympia in particular, and then Delphi, the volume of description etc. afforded to the Isthmus is nugatory. Erich Thummer, in the introduction to his commentary on the Isthmian odes, has a section entitled “Das Lob des Kampfortes” (I p. 31). In it he writes: “Ein ausgedehntes Lob des Kampfortes und der dort veranstalteten Kämpfe findet sich vor allem in den olympischen Oden”. He then goes on to exemplify this epinician topic from the Olympic and Pythian Odes alone. This procedure, which might at first sight appear curious in a commentary on the Isthmian odes, has a sound basis: for the “Praise of the place where the contest was held” simply cannot be exemplified properly from the Isthmian odes. Even less so could it be exemplified from the *Nemeans*, leaving aside the oddity of *Nemean* 6.

That is the Pindaric situation. What then of Bacchylides 9, which offers a more expanded account of Nemea and of the foundation of the *Nemean* Games? This should perhaps be interpreted, as should in part Bacchylides’ dual use of Ἴσθμιόνικος, as a bold, and perhaps transparent, attempt to improve on the position of his addressee. In antiquity the primacy in epinician poetry was given not to Bacchylides but to Pindar. We may be seeing here one of the reasons, i.e. a lack of encomiastic discretion on the part of Bacchylides.

Doubtless the relative status of the major games could be illustrated from epinician poetry in many other ways. This paper limits itself to one or two further indications. The first concerns the victor’s other victories, those he has won in the past, and even more determinant, those which the poet wishes for him. The catalogues of men’s past victories are of course matters of fact, and the epinician poet will not have wanted to leave out anything which would, in context, redound to the credit of his laudandus. But

whereas in the case of a *Nemean* or *Isthmian* victor, the poet catalogues his earlier victories at local games carefully, in the case of an Olympic victor — or even a *Pythian* victor — the poet will certainly mention *Nemean* and *Isthmian* victories, but he is less concerned, unless he has special reasons for emphasising them, to go into details about his laudandus’ performances in local games.

As for victories aspired to, the one most wished for⁵ as the supreme goal throughout epinician poetry is, not surprisingly, an Olympic victory. Naturally no Olympic victor is ever wished a *Nemean* or *Isthmian* victory, or even a *Pythian* victory. A *Pythian* victor can be wished an Olympic victory (*P.* 5, 124), although there is no such aspiration for victories at *Nemea* or the *Isthmus* in the case of a *Pythian* victor. The poet wishes on behalf of the *Isthmian* victor Olympic and *Pythian* victories [*I.* 1, 65-7 (P&O); 6, 8f. (O); 7, 49-51 (P)]. So far the ranking of the games and the gulf between the top two and the bottom two are again illustrated. But there is a curious feature here in the case of the *Nemean* victor. Pindar only once (*N.* 2, 9f.) wishes a *Nemean* victor victories in the other games, and he excludes the Olympic games. This may not only confirm that the *Isthmus* ranked higher than *Nemea*, but may suggest that the *Nemean* games were not really of the same order as the other three.

The final indication is offered by the rank of the victors celebrated in the different groups of Pindaric odes. There is no hard and fast rule linking rank of competitor and status of games, since e.g. (as *Nemean* 9 shows) the noble and wealthy Chromios of Aetna could compete and win in local games at Sicyon. But on the other hand the great men, the Arce-silauses and the Hierons, are celebrated by Pindar for Olympic and *Pythian* victories, not for *Nemean* or *Isthmian* victories.

The picture which emerges from fifth century B.C. epinician poets is of greater distances in ranking between the four major festivals than we normally assume: even the notion of a “first division” containing the Olympic and *Pythian* festivals, and a “second di-

5. In epinicia the poet wishes victory for the encomiand. In epigrams (rarely) the athlete may himself wish for victory: cf. J. Ebert, *Griechische Epigramme auf Sieger an gymnischen und hippischen Agonen* (Abhandlungen der sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Phil.-hist. K1. 63, 2. Berlin 1972) 168f.

vision" containing the Isthmian and Nemean Games is inadequate. Between the top two and the bottom two the gulf was unbridgeable; but the gaps between Olympic and Pythian, and between Isthmian and Nemean, were also considerable.

If the epinician poets do give us a more precise insight into the relative contemporary status of the four major games, then there is a converse: that more precise insight into the ranking of the games allows us to read the epinician poets with a better feel for certain nuances of their encomium, and in particular

it gives us a better appreciation of Pindar's expertise in his craft*.

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* I am grateful to Prof. J. Ebert, Prof. M. Kokolakis, and Mr. K. Rowe for discussions of various aspects of this paper. Naturally all views and flaws are my responsibility. An earlier version of the paper was delivered during the First International Symposium on ancient Achaea and Elis held in Athens in May 1989. I thank the conference organisers for their invitation and hospitality.

SUMMARY

SOME REFLECTIONS OF THE RANKING OF THE MAJOR GAMES IN FIFTH CENTURY B.C. EPINICIAN POETRY

This paper studies reflections of the relative status of the four major Games within fifth-century B.C. epinician poetry. Pindar and Bacchylides are examined in terms of their use of *-νικος* and analogous compounds, of the frequency and distribution of references to the various games in their work, and of their

geographical descriptions etc. of the locations of the games. This allows some refinement of our conclusions about the ranking of the games in their time, and also a better assessment of the poets' encomiastic skills.