CHAPTER I

Pindar Mythologus and Theologus

It is hazardous, in dealing with the tangle of ancient polytheism, to pronounce with absolute dogmatism about any not insane hypothesis . . .

—Lewis Farnell

1.1 Epinician Theology

The Greek gods were real: to begin with. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the argument I am going to relate. Real is a dangerous word, of course, applied to gods of any era, and, while there has been more than a little scholarly chauvinism in the out-of-hand rejection of the existence of Zeus, etc., by those who continue to worship their own gods in their own way, the question of objective existence is beyond the scope of scholarly investigation. What I mean by the slippery word ‘real’ is something else: that, as perceived by the individuals and communities of the ancient Greek world, the divine was a present and powerful force. The corollary of this conclusion is double: first, that when we encounter ancient Greek depictions of the divine, we must ask what existing realities were brought to bear in the process of their creation; second, we must also ask how the new representation contributes to those available realities.

1 Farnell 1907, 135.
2 With apologies and credit to Charles Dickens (and Jacob Marley), A Christmas Carol.
3 On this issue v. Henrichs 2010, “What is a Greek God,” esp. the comments at 28–29 on the personal monotheism that is predominant among scholars and the firmly etic perspective thus established toward the polytheism of the Greeks.
4 We might use the term belief here, though without the valence of ‘elective adoption of a particular credo’ that is often implied when we speak of belief in monotheistic contexts. For hesitations about the term, v. Giordano-Zecharya 2005, esp. 343–347: for a discussion of its importance and complexities in thinking about ancient Greek religion(s): Harrison 2015; Johnston 2019, 18–19.
Pindar’s victory odes teem with divinity. The gods are the patrons of the athletic contests where victories are sought and won; the source of assistance and punishment in the odes’ mythical narratives; the inhuman interlocutors of human aspiration. “Do not seek to become Zeus!,” one victor is warned, “you have everything if a portion of this excellence reaches you!” (μὴ μάτευε Ζεὺς γενέσθαι· πάντ’ ἔχεις, ἐὰν καὶ τοῦτον μονῆ ἐρίκιοτο κολῶν). Despite the prominence of the gods in the epinician corpus, Pindar’s victory odes have been insufficiently recognized as theological interventions into the lived religious realities of his fifth-century world. My dissatisfaction with this state of affairs was the impetus for this book.

When I characterize the odes as theological, I mean that they actively, purposefully, and self-consciously conceptualize and negotiate the nature of the divine and its implications for human actions and self-conceptions. While Pindaric scholarship has always recognized the prominence of religious motifs in the epinician corpus, those motifs have been understood in ways that undervalue the coherent and sustained project that motivates them. In earlier scholarship, under the influence of biographical and historicizing approaches, depictions of the gods and expressions of piety were often taken as simply reflecting contemporary religious thought, either as a reflection of Pindar’s own beliefs or those of his patrons, or even as the desperate efforts of an already-outmoded mind to cling to conservative beliefs in the face of a changing world. More recent work on Pindar, from the camps of cultural historians and formalists alike, has consistently included those same depictions of the gods and expressions of piety among the generic markers of epinician and regarded the gods as part of the apparatus of victory, but has continued to miss Pindar’s agency as a theological thinker and the corollary implications for the nature and function of the genre.

5 Isth. 5.14–15. 6 Cf. Eidinow et al. 2016; Larson 2016, 12–13. 7 Thus, e.g., Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1922, 461–463; Coppola 1931, xv: “In Pindaro, mito e gnome sono non solo stilisticamente affini, ma le seconda è commossa sintesi di un mondo politico-religioso, osia etico …” [In Pindar, myth and gnomic statement are not only stylistically similar, but the second is the moving synthesis of a politico-religious world, or rather, an ethical one …]; Finley 1955, 6–8; Bowra 1964, 83: “[Pindar’s] handling of the gods is traditional and anticipates very few of the intellectual reforms which were already at work on theology in his age.” Norwood 1945, 62, is particularly dubious about the significance of Pindar’s religious interventions: “My ungrateful and invidious task, of exhibiting a great poet’s incoherence and irrationality in theological and moral doctrine, can now be closed …” 8 For example, Bundy 1962; Young 1968; Kurke 1993; Instone 1996; Mackie 2003, 77–106; Burnett 2008.
Pindar’s theological project is rooted in and inseparable from the contexts in which his songs were created and consumed. The victory odes, as they are preserved for us, cannot communicate the rhythm of the musical accompaniment, the movements of the chorus, the mood of the gathered community, or the reason for their presence. Nor can they articulate the contemporary concerns and experiences that framed their consumption. Composed to resonate within the experiences of a certain place and time, Pindar’s victory songs have become disoriented. An awareness of this dislocation has characterized a strand of Pindaric scholarship stretching back to Wilamowitz and has spurred efforts to reconstruct the odes’ historical/political as well as cultural and social contexts. More recent developments in scholarship look to contemporary religious landscapes as well, taking account of the political dynamics of rituals, festivals, and cult. These investigations, however, have primarily confined themselves to the sphere of human experience; even those that contemplate the cultic role of the odes emphasize them as a platform for the self-expression of poet, victor, or worshipping community. These contextualizing approaches are interested in how the odes intervene in what we might call a ‘horizontal axis,’ that is, in the interactions and relationships between humans, whether at the level of the individual or the community.

In contrast, I recontextualize Pindar’s epinician odes within the lived religious landscapes of the fifth century in order to understand how the odes intervene in a corresponding ‘vertical axis,’ that is, in the relationships...
that obtain between humans and gods.¹⁴ I adduce the presence of a world surrounding and superseding mundane human experience as a definitive context for Pindar’s compositions in order to ask how they orient the laudandus and his community in relation to the divine. This perspective simultaneously expands the scope of the world that we can perceive in Pindar’s compositions and reveals a consistent epinician interest in theorizing and modeling the nature of humans and gods and the interaction between them – in other words, an epinician theology.

1.2 Revivifying Mortality

If you know one thing about Pindar’s epinician odes, that thing is probably that “water is best.” If you know a second thing, it is that these songs of victory are shot through with stark reminders of the victor’s mortality. “Remember,” one ode advises, “that the last clothing you will put on your limbs is dirt.”¹⁵ The motif of human limitation develops throughout the corpus in counterpoint to the immortality of the gods, crafting a dichotomy that is universally recognized as a through-line of the victory songs.¹⁶ The importance of that dichotomy for our understanding of Pindar’s epinician project, however, has been obscured by readings that flatten the real and complex presence of immortality in the world inhabited by Pindar and his patrons.

Three main interpretative approaches have emerged in response to Pindar’s juxtaposition of mortality and immortality as an essential feature of victory celebration. One view flattens the importance of this theme for the work done by an epinician ode, viewing reminders of mortality as toothlessly ‘traditional’ or ‘pious’ and exerting little influence over the rest of the ode.¹⁷ A second interpretation, which I will call the ‘literary’ reading, understands the evocation of the victor’s personal mortality as a foil for the poetic immortality that his victory achieves by virtue of Pindar’s

¹⁴ cf. Graf 2012, 41–42, on Vernant’s model of sacrifice: “Since this act of communication takes part in a group, it has not only a vertical axis that leads up to the gods, but also a horizontal one between the human members of the group . . .” Related: Hubert and Mauss 1964, 48.
¹⁵ Nem. 11.15–16.
¹⁶ For example, Bowra 1964, ch. 2: ‘Gods, Heroes, and Men’ (esp. 94–98); Boeke 2007, esp. 54–72.
¹⁷ For example, Norwood 1945, 44–71, v. esp. 69: “His maxims deserve serious attention only when considered each for the moment in its special context . . . But even if we appraise them in isolation, we must not attribute to them remarkable potency.”
1.2 Revivifying Mortality

A third approach argues that reminders of mortality serve a social function: the victor’s potentially dangerous exaltation has to be defused by reminding him of his ultimate likeness to his human community.  

By reading the victory odes back into the lived religious landscapes that shaped their creation and consumption, I offer a new interpretation of Pindar’s epinician constructions of mortality and immortality, one that constitutes a rejection of the first position, an expansion of the second, and a complement to the third. In making this case I am also responding to the work of Bruno Currie, who takes Pindar’s representations of immortality seriously, but interprets them as offering the victor, at least in select cases, a chance for what he terms ‘literal’ immortality (through heroization) as well as ‘literary’ immortality.  

This interpretation, too, I will argue, flattens the complexities of immortality as constructed in Pindar’s fifth-century world and in his songs. Rather than disregarding depictions of human transience and divine eternity as two-dimensional embellishments or even as reflexive echoes of an established religious sensibility, I understand them as sites for the active negotiation of contemporary religious experience and belief. This theological reading does not negate the value of the social reading, but seeks to complicate it by emphasizing the importance of the victor’s orientation on the vertical as well as the horizontal axis. Nor does my ‘theological’ reading precisely challenge the importance of the ‘literary’ position; rather, I argue that the value of the ‘literary’ immortality on offer in Pindar’s odes is conditioned by their depiction and negotiation of mortality and immortality as ways of being in the world. Pindar’s victory songs develop a model for understanding the relationship between mortality and immortality in conversation with the other available models, not in a vacuum, and then use that model to establish the victor’s humanity as an indispensable qualification for his epinician exaltation. The epinician encounters between mortal and immortal natures assert that humans, because of their transience, have a capacity for exaltation realized through the immortality of song and memory that is utterly foreign to the distinct capacity for

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exaltation enjoyed by the immortal gods.21 This is the fundamental theological claim that Pindar makes about mortality in his epinician songs.

While this single, coherent thesis motivates the odes’ interventions into mortality and immortality, Pindar’s theological program, like the odes themselves, is complex and ramifying.22 In order to foreground and interrogate that complexity, I refer throughout the book to Pindar’s theologies of mortality, emphasizing by the plural formulation the impossibility of collapsing the modeling in any one ode into simple coherence with the modeling in another. Esther Eidinow and her co-authors have theorized a spectrum of theology, encompassing a range of activities from anything classifiable as ‘talking about the gods’ (the weak end) to “an explicit, systematic, and generalized theory about the divine or, conversely, explicit and abstracted speculations about divinity which may be either systematically doctrinal or open-ended and aporetic to different extents …” (the strong end).23 My reading of the odes orients the work that they do toward the strong end of this spectrum, but decidedly in the ‘open-ended’ camp, approaching their theological work as an exploration and elaboration of the central concern with a uniquely human exaltation that resonates and rhymes within itself but does not aspire to strict internal consistency or straightforward exposition.

Within the rich ecosystem of the epinician odes exists a set of figures whose identities challenge the sharp distinction between mortality and immortality. Herakles is born mortal and experiences apotheosis; the Dioskouroi (the twin brothers Kastor and Polydeukes) alternate between states; Amphiarao (the Argive seer) is swallowed alive by the Theban earth; Asklepios is transfixed by Zeus’ lightning. Each of these figures, I will argue, is enlisted in the epinician negotiation of mortality and immortality because their multiple modes of existence challenge the validity of those categories by blurring the dividing line between them. Pindar manipulates their ambiguous positions between the worlds of gods and humans by first foregrounding their extraordinary status and then developing the surrounding material of the ode to respond to the anomaly in a way which reasserts the categorical distinction between mortality and

21 Cf. Crotty 1982, 56: “Anyone who seeks some form of immortality must have recourse to his fellows. Only within the community can one enjoy an undying kleos. The person’s name can live so long as there are people to hear it. Kleos is the immortality which community makes possible.”
22 On ‘theologies’ v. the edited volume of Eidinow, Kindt, and Osborne 2016. In the introduction to this volume, the importance of the plural refers both to the “multiplicity of stories” (1) in play as well as the flexibility of the term ‘theology’ itself.
1.3 Lived Religious Landscapes: A Methodology

immortality. Pindar’s depiction of these figures depends on an engagement with the identity of each figure in the lived experiences of his audiences and results in a contribution to – or even an alteration of – those shared conceptions. Through a series of case studies focused on these figures, I will demonstrate the theological work managed by the odes and the inextricability of this work from the effectiveness of Pindar’s epinician praise.

First, though, in the remainder of this introduction, I turn to some issues of methodology and terminology, including the small questions of how we can access lived religion, how we should think about the nature and function of Pindar’s epinician myths, and whether we can really talk about an opposition between mortality and immortality in the first place.

1.3 Lived Religious Landscapes: A Methodology

Gertrude Stein once said of her own writing: “And then there is using everything.”²⁴ This is, perhaps, the most concise articulation of what I have tried to do in recontextualizing Pindar’s victory songs in the lived religious experiences of the fifth century and, not coincidentally, what I argue Pindar was doing when he composed the odes in the first place.

My understanding of lived religious landscapes builds on the model of Greek religion as ‘embedded,’ that is, the notion that religious experience permeated daily life and was inextricable from other areas of endeavor.²⁵ I employ the language of ‘lived’ religion to foreground the implications of the embedded religion model: that every experience, from walking down the street, to washing, to attending a choral performance, took place in physical and conceptual spaces permeated with religious meaning that could be activated for and by different people at different times depending on particular confluences of perspectives and stimuli. The emphasis I place on the adjective ‘lived’ is informed by the theory of lived ancient religion pioneered by Jörg Rüpke and the research cluster he led at Erfurt, but not identical with that approach, which explicitly endeavors to move away from an emphasis on civic cult and to foreground the role of individual agency in interpreting, maintaining, and subverting religious practices and norms.²⁶ In this study, my goal is rather different: not primarily to assign religious agency, but to call attention to the vibrant landscapes of religious

²⁴ Stein 1926.
experience inhabited by Pindar, his patrons, and their communities, and to
demonstrate that they constitute indispensable contexts for interpreting
the victory songs.

With as much care taken as possible for problems of dissemination (in
space and time) and an awareness of the inescapable truth that the majority
of our sources for thinking about any topic in Greek religion distinctly
postdate Pindar, I have attempted to draw on the many contexts and
modes of expression that contributed to contemporary thinking about the
divine and shaped the composition and consumption of the odes.57 I deal
with these two frameworks, first, contexts and, second, modes of expres-
sion, sequentially here in order to highlight their status as mutually
implicated but nonidentical lenses for thinking about contemporary
religious experience.

First, then, to contexts. In some instances, as Eveline Krummen has
demonstrated, these are reflected in the language of the ode itself and tell
us something about the physical performance of the ode (as, for instance,
in Isthmian 4, where the poet highlights the importance of a Theban
festival in honor of Herakles).28 In the majority of cases, though, the
textual allusions are brief or absent. Moreover, the contexts of physical
performance, beyond the fact that they are often impossible to reconstruct,
are not the only point of reference that the audience brought to a choral
performance.29

The athletic contests provide an obvious point of reference shared by
poet, victor, and community. The crown games (Olympian, Pythian,
Nemean, and Isthmian) occurred in conjunction with festivals in honor
of Zeus, Apollo, Zeus (again), and Poseidon, respectively; references to the
power of these gods in celebrations of victories won at their precincts is
neither incidental nor merely traditional. Participation in athletic contests,
in addition to being a way to assert and increase one’s social standing, was a

57 All while attempting to avoid the effect described by Fehr 1936, 8–9: “Wie leicht widerfährt es uns,
dass wir – ganz unbewusst – spätere Zutaten, Umgestaltungen, oder Versionen bei der Lektüre
früherer, prägnanter Fassungen hineindenken, dass wir den Stoffen oder Motiven Tendenzien
beilegen, die dem frühen Dichter noch völlig fern lagen . . . Gerade die deutschen Philologen seit
A Boeckh haben oft Dinge hineingeheimnisst, die nur einem Gelehrtenkopf, nicht aber einem
Dichter zutrauen sind.” [How easily it happens to us that we – all unawares – bring later elements,
reorganizations, and variations to bear on our reading of earlier, more concise versions; that we
attribute tendencies to the content and subject matter, which were as yet entirely remote from the
early poet . . . Just in this way, German philologists since A. Boeckh have often read things in[to
their texts] that only a scholar would be capable of, not a poet.] Cf. Bernardini 1983, 86–87.
28 Krummen 1990.
mode of worship. The divine patron, in turn, was felt to extend favor to the victorious athletes. Pindar’s odes reflect and extend this reciprocal interaction: the odes glorify the victor by emphasizing the favor of the gods and the ode itself, commissioned by the victor or a family member, becomes a sort of votive set up as a thank-you to the god. In this sense – as Pindar himself notes, and scholars have further articulated – an epinician composition is like the victor statues that were set up in the divine precincts: expressions simultaneously of human glory and divine power.

Local religious environments add another context, in conjunction with that of the Panhellenic festivals, for the consumption and comprehension of the odes. They were sometimes commissioned for performance at another festival in the victor’s hometown, and even those that were for private consumption (at a symposium for intimates, for example) reflect the influence of epichoric pantheons. The landscapes of a polis were punctuated and defined by the presence of structures expressing the existence of the gods, from monumental temples to simple shrines. These sacred spaces must have marked the daily physical experience of the city in the same way that the cycle of holidays marked the experience of time. In contrast to the single contexts of the crown games shared by a geographically diverse crowd of competitors, these local contexts varied widely and constructed distinct points of reference for, say, a victor from Opuntian Lokris as opposed to one from Epizephyrian Lokri.

In addition to the synchronic contexts of local and inter-polis religious practices, the diachronic traditions of aristocratic families – and sometimes communities as a whole – constructed further parameters for thinking

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10 Burkert 1985, 104–107: "... the sporting event is no profane festival." (106) Sansone 1988, 110: “We sometimes lose sight of the fact that the athletic competitions in ancient Greece that were organized on a regular basis were in fact part of a religious festival. Brêligh 1958, 89 n. 81, is aggravated by the insufficient attention granted to the religious import of the games even by historians of religion – and the associated unwillingness to take heroization of athletes seriously. Cf. Nagy 1990, 137–145, for a different ritual ideology that sees the athletic contests as compensation for the death of a cult hero and the epinician as compensation for the athletic ordeal.

11 On the inherently hymnal aspect of epinician v. Bremer 2008, who argues that divine favor contributes to and cooperates with human excellence, “they are two ways of indicating the same reality, like the wave and particle in modern quantum mechanics” (16). Cf. Croisy 1982, 1–40, on divine and human effort combining in human victory; Heath 1988, 189–190, on the requests for reception by the gods (valid even if one does not credit his anti-choral argument).


13 Carey 2007, in his discussion of performance contexts, indicates that “all civic locations need not have been exclusively religious” (202) – his use of ‘exclusively’ gets at the overlapping spheres of experience that integrated religious experience into diverse areas of endeavor.

about and responding to the gods. The traditions of divine and heroic
descent could express political history and the relationships between
communities, but these valences should not mask the potential significance
of a perceived closeness between the divine or heroic ancestor and the
present-day population.\footnote{For heroic traditions as sites for the articulation of political and historical realities v., e.g., Hall 1997; Shapiro 2012.}

Our second framework, modes of communicating about the divine,
operates within these interwoven and overlapping contexts. Pindar’s con-
temporaries talked about the gods using a dizzying array of media with an
equally diverse range of goals: from vase paintings to tragedies, coins to law
cases, metopes to hymns. In (a) religious system(s) untrammeled by a
single scripture or hieratic authority, no single representation or version
could be considered the ‘standard’ one against which deviations could be
measured and every representation – verbal, visual, performative, etc. – of
the divine/heroic/monstrous world was always framed in contexts that
motivated certain emphases and guided the selection of events and people
depicted.\footnote{Parker 2011, 20–34. Noyes 2016, 142–155, offers a model for thinking about the salience of these contexts.} Rather than trying to attribute
final authority to particular
modes of communicating about (and often with) the divine, then, I begin
from the premise that every representation of an extra-mundane figure in
an individual’s prior experience contributed to a sum of associations
clustered to articulate a conception of that figure’s nature.\footnote{Cf. Johnston 1993, 117–118. The italics are mine.}

This approach asserts the irrelevance of terms like ‘seriousness’ in
conceptualizing modes of communication about the divine and the dan-
gers of making claims about what kinds of sources provide insight into
‘real’ religious experience. In 1994, Scott Scullion articulated what he saw
as a corrective to the over-privileging of literary-poetic depictions of the
gods: “The vision of the Greek pantheon offered in Homer, the Hymns,
and the handbooks is not privileged and does not set a standard or, more
accurately, does so only in literary terms; it should not be allowed to distort our perception of the world of actual cult and cultic legend, which, in
religious terms, is a larger and more complex and serious world.”\footnote{Scullion 1994, 117–118. The italics are mine.} This is an
important call to recognize the complexity of the world of religious
experience and to include the practices of cult, but it undervalues the...