

- 1) Four major athletic festivals: Olympian [at Olympia]; Pythian [Delphi]; Nemean [Nemea]; Isthmian [Corinth]. All of which center around hero cult: the *athloi* of the hero are represented by the *athloi* of the contestants.
- 2) **âthlos (aethlos)** ‘contest, ordeal’; **âthlêtês** ‘athlete’.
- 3) Sample *athloi* of heroes:
 - a) *Iliad* 3.121: She found [Helen] in her own room, working at a great web of purple linen, on which she was embroidering the struggles [*athloi*] between Trojans and Achaeans, that Ares had made them fight for her sake. Here: *athloi* = struggles of war.
 - b) *Iliad* 8.357: Athena to Zeus: He forgets how often I saved his son [Herakles] when he was worn out by the labors [*athloi*] Eurystheus had laid on him. Here: punishments/labors.
 - c) *Odyssey* 4.235: Helen to *xenoi*: I cannot indeed name every single one of the escapades [*athlos*] of Odysseus, but I can say what he did when he was in the Trojan *dêmos*, and you Achaeans were in all sorts of difficulties. Here: a challenge, an obstacle. [That’s why Odysseus clobbers the Phaeacians when challenged to *athloi*; ditto for suitors.]
 - d) *Odyssey* 23.246: At last, however, Odysseus said, “Wife, we have not yet reached the end of our trials [*athloi*]. I have an unknown amount of toil [*ponos*] still to undergo.
- 4) A special type of *athlos*, *Iliad* 23.636, Nestor to Akhilles: “And now, sir, go on with the funeral contests [*athloi*] in honor of your comrade: gladly do I accept this urn....”
- 5) Games are founded by Heroes in compensation for a death (death of Patroklos in the myth of *Iliad*, for instance). All four games center around heroic myths of death:
 - a) **Olympian Games**: founded by the hero Pelops in compensation for the death of Oinomaos; *or* founded by the hero Herakles in compensation for the death of his great-grandfather, Pelops (there are variant versions).
 - b) **Pythian Games**: founded by the god Apollo in compensation for having killed the Python.
 - c) **Isthmian Games**: founded by the hero Sisyphus in compensation for the death of the child-hero Melikertes.
 - d) **Nemean Games**: founded by the heroes of Seven against Thebes in compensation for the death, by snakebite, of the child- hero Opheltes.
- 6) Quick myth: Wicked Tantalus attempts to trick the gods by feeding them his dismembered son Pelops from a cauldron. Zeus and the other gods only discover the trick after Demeter has swallowed down Pelops’ shoulder. The gods put Pelops back together by boiling him *again* in a same cauldron (except minus the shoulder blade, which Demeter fashions from ivory). Later, Poseidon is enraptured by beautiful boy Pelops; returns him with magical chariot after rape; Pelops wins Hippodameia by treachery (and in so doing kills Oinomaos).
- 7) An analysis of the ritual (along the lines of W. Burkert and G. Nagy): myth is bipartite. First is the literal death and **re**-birth of the hero: the hero Pelops is disintegrated and then re-integrated through the medium of fire (itself an important

component of ritual). Capture by Poseidon at boyhood is liminal event—P. is taken out of society (homosexually) to be re-integrated later (heterosexually). Hero Pelops commits a ‘questionable’ deed, and is guilty of requiring a blood-price. *Athloi* are that restitution.

- 8) Ritual: From Pausanias 5.13.1 (paraphrased): The Olympics are dedicated to Pelops; there is in fact a sacred precinct dedicated to him [the Pelopion]. It begins with a sacrifice of a black ram in the Pelopion, and next the sacrifice of a bull at the ‘altar of Zeus’ (a pile of ash some ways off). The first event? A footrace:
- 9) And the single-course foot race [**stadion**] was instituted in the following way. After the Eleans had completed all their customary sacrifices [to Zeus], the consecrated parts would lie on the altar, though not as yet set on fire. The runners would stand at a distance of one stadium [**stadion**] from the altar, in front of which there was a priest signaling the start with a torch. And the winner would set fire to the consecrated parts and then depart as an Olympic victor (Philostratus *On Gymnastics* 5).
- 10) Race from Pelopion to the meat on Zeus’s hearth is a struggle to see who may re-enact the fire that disintegrates—but also reintegrates—Pelops. A victory in the *athlos* = heroic rebirth. [Losing = death. Cf. War.]
- 11) First Olympic game = 776 BCE (foot race). Examples of other *athloi*: boxing, pentathlon, race-in-armor (hoplitodromia); chariot-racing; jumping.
- 12) Pindar = Greece’s finest poet of *epinikia*: praise poetry for victory. Born 518 – died 438; born on the outskirts of Thebes. “Of the nine Greek lyric poets Pindar is by far the greatest for the magnificence of his inspiration, his precepts, his figures of language, lavish abundance of matter and words, and river (so to speak) of eloquence.” (Quintilian, *Inst. Or.* 10.1.61.)
- 13) He’s also really hard.
- 14) Hard because Pindar loves to juggle heroic myth and athletic reality at once: his poems invariably compare the winner of an athletic event with an ancient hero. Note that these commissioned poems (Pindar makes the big \$\$\$) confer a *kleos* upon the victorious athlete.
- 15) Excerpts from Olympian 1 (dedicated to Hieron of Syracuse, winner of the single horse race, 476 BCE):
- 16) Best (*aristos*) is water, while gold, like fire blazing in the night, shines preeminent amid lordly wealth. But if you wish to sing of *athloi*, *philos* heart, look no further than the sun for another star shining more warmly by day through the empty sky, nor let us proclaim a contest greater than Olympia. [10] ... [16] Come, take the Dorian lyre from its peg, if the splendor of Pisa and of Pherenikos [Hieron’s horse had won both of these events] has indeed enthralled your mind with sweetest considerations,

when he sped beside the Alpheos river, giving his limbs ungoaded in the race, and joined to victorious power his master, Syracuse's horse-loving king. Kleos shines for him in the colony of brave men founded by Lydian Pelops

- 17) A priamel (remember Sappho 16: some say an army of horseman, etc.). Some say water, some say gold, but I say ... singing about Olympic *athloi* is best.
- 18) Also: note the sneaky way Pindar segues to Pelops from Hieron – uses *kleos* as the bridge between the two. Then wafts into the story of Pelops (and denies the unpleasant shoulder-eating episode): ‘But when you disappeared, and despite much searching no men returned you to your mother, one of the envious neighbors immediately said in secret that into water boiling rapidly on the fire they cut up your limbs with a knife, and for the final course distributed your flesh around the tables and ate it.’
- 19) Compare the famous cross-examination question: when did you stop beating your wife?
- 20) In Pindaric poetics, the medium of *kleos* (the singer) shares in the glory as well [115]: “May you walk high for the time [*khronos*] that is yours, and may I join victors whenever they win and be foremost in wisdom [*sophia*] among Hellenes everywhere.”
- 21) In Isthmian 8, P. sings a song over the deceased boxer Nikokles, and compares him to the dead Akhilles: [56a] “Not even when he [Akhilles] died did song abandon him, but the Muses stood beside his pyre and his tomb and poured over him their dirge [*thênos*] of many voices. Indeed, the immortals too thought it best to entrust a brave man like that, even though dead [*phthi-menos*], to the hymns of the goddesses. That principle holds true now as well, and the Muses’ chariot is speeding forward to sing a memorial [*mnêmê*] to the boxer Nikokles.” Wow: Pindar isn’t just channeling the Muses: he **is** the Muses.
- 22) Pythian 8: Pindar’s last ode (considered by some his masterpiece). Commemorates the win of Aristomenes of Aigina (for wrestling). 446 BCE.
- 23) Incredibly difficult – and incredibly Pindaric. “This island, this *polis* of *dikê*, did not fall away from the Graces [*Kharites*], connected as it is to the *kleos*-making achievements [*aretê* pl.] of the Aiakidai. It has achieved a perfect fame, [25] going back to the very beginnings. It is a subject of song for many, as its nurturing earth sprouts the greatest heroes [*hêrôes*] in victory-bringing contests and in violent battles.”
- 24) First: Pindar makes things local – this is in praise of the island of Aigina (off the coast of Athens). Second: traces everything back to its first beginnings (in this case, the sons of Ajax). Lastly: explicitly invokes heroes as proficient in both contests and

battles (and therefore bridges the gap between ‘war’ heroes and our *athlos* hero, Aristomenes).

- 25) “For you follow, at wrestling matches, in the footsteps of your mother's brothers. ... Making great the house of the Meidulidai, you win as a prize the words that once the son of Oikles [Amphiaraos] said [*ainissomai*], when he saw [40] the Sons holding their ground at Thebes, by the power of the spear, at the time when they, the Epigonoï, had come from Argos, on the second expedition. Thus he spoke about those who fought: [45] “The will of the fathers [*pateres*] shines through from them, in the very thing that is inborn in the nature of their sons.”
- 26) Myth of the Seven Against Thebes. Seven heroes attack Thebes, each guarded by a Theban hero. The attacking heroes get clobbered. The sons of the Seven attack later, but win gloriously. Amphiaraos’ (beautiful) words stress continuity: that the son may succeed where the father failed, and there that there is an essence that passes from generation to generation. (And implicitly, then, from Ajax to Aristomenes).
- 27) Taps into language of epic: “Four times did you come slamming down from above, with no kind thoughts, on top of bodies below. For all of them the outcome at the Pythian Games was no pleasurable nostos. [85] No sweet laughter was there to make an aura of *kharis* as they came back home to stay at their mothers' side.” Aristomenes as *nostos*-spoiler.
- 28) The disquietingly enigmatic final stanza: [95] Creatures of a day. What is a someone, what is a no one? Man is the dream of a shade. But when the brightness given by Zeus comes, there is at hand the shining light of men, and the life-force [*aiôn*] gives pleasure. Aigina! *Philê* Mother! Make an armada of freedom for this *polis* as you bring it back to light and life, back to Zeus! May Aiakos the Ruler be there. So also Peleus. And noble Telamon. And especially Achilles.
- 29) This is disconcertingly bleak. Men are ‘creatures of a day’: literally, ephemeral. Moreover, they are not only inconsequential, they are *less* than nothing: a dream of a shade. Nothingness squared. The only rays of hope come from Aigina, which has produced a line of heroes adept at overcoming *athloi*: Aiakos, Peleus, Telamon, and especially Akhilles – he who lived the shortest (but most gloriously) of all.
- 30) Dovetails with Amphiaraos’ assertion that the ‘will of the fathers’ shines through the sons: men might live briefly, but they will continue to flourish (‘live’) through their heroic progeny.

