

# Pindar's "Best is water": Best of What?

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PROBABLY THE MOST FAMOUS utterance of Pindar consists of the three words which open the splendid First Olympian Ode: ἄριστον μὲν ὕδωρ. Yet this deceptively simple statement is very difficult to interpret, primarily because Pindar does not provide a genitive of the whole in order to make clear just what water is the best *of*. There have been two principal suggestions for supplying the missing genitive, and two different interpretations have resulted. This article attempts to show that both of them are incorrect, and that a comparison of similar Pindaric passages reveals a pattern of thought which clarifies the probable function of water here.

One group of critics and translators follows several of the ancient scholia in supplying the genitive *στοιχείων*, so that water becomes the "best of the elements."<sup>1</sup> This addition has some merit, in that it views water as the best in its realm (the elements) just as gold and the Olympic games are best in theirs. The logic of the priamel would be: "ut aqua elementis reliquis; ut aurum metallis reliquis; ut sol stellis reliquis . . . ita et Olympici ludi reliquis omnibus praestant."<sup>2</sup> There are, however, three major objections to this interpretation. First of all, Pindar nowhere else shows any interest in primal elements and to introduce them in this context has no support whatsoever. Second, it necessarily gives rise to 'cosmological' speculation as to why Pindar considers water to be the best of the elements. Thus attention is diverted from the poem to such

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. B. Drachmann, *Scholia Vetera in Pindari Carmina* I (Leipzig 1903) 17ff, scholia 1 b, 1 d, 1 e, and 1 f; E. Schmid, *Πινδαρου Περίοδος* (Wittenberg 1616) 70; C. G. Heyne, *Pindari Carmina* (London 1815) 1; J. A. Hartung, *Pindars Werke* (Leipzig 1855) 183; A. Puech, *Pindare: Olympiques* (Paris 1958) 56 *ad Ol.* 3.42, "entre tous les éléments"; C. A. P. Ruck and W. H. Matheson, *Pindar, Selected Odes* (Ann Arbor 1968) 146, "Elements' prince"; R. A. Swanson, *Pindar's Odes* (Indianapolis 1974) 5, "Best of elements is water"; and D. E. Gerber, *Euterpe* (Amsterdam 1970) 374.

<sup>2</sup> E. Schmid (*supra* n.1). One scholium (1 e, and *cf.* 1 f) goes so far as to see a special significance in the fact that water is the best of the four elements, just as the Olympic games are the best of the four major contests.

issues as the possible influence of Thales<sup>3</sup> or even Heraclitus<sup>4</sup> on Pindar, and the passage becomes a precursor of such debates as Plutarch's *Aquane an ignis sit utilior* (*Mor.* 955D).<sup>5</sup> Last, and perhaps most important, we cannot know whether Pindar was interested in (or even aware of) Ionian physics, but it is clear that such speculation is out of place in the introduction of an ode to Hieron of Syracuse on the occasion of an Olympic victory.

The other main line of interpretation, which does not derive from the scholia<sup>6</sup> but is followed by many recent commentators and translators, adds the genitive *πάντων*, as in C. M. Bowra's "Water is the best thing of all," R. Lattimore's "Best of all things is water," and G. S. Conway's "Best blessing of all is water."<sup>7</sup> There is some support for this addition at Athenaeus 40F, where the speaker supplies *πάντων* when referring to this passage, and at Aelian *VH* 1.32,<sup>8</sup> but these are very late and hardly reliable authorities.

<sup>3</sup> Beginning with scholium 1 d (*ἀρχὴ γὰρ τῶν ὄλων κατὰ Θαλῆν τὸ ὕδωρ*) and continuing throughout the tradition is speculation that Pindar's statement derives from Thales. But even if Pindar's *ἄριστον μὲν ὕδωρ* is a distant echo of Thales, it is used in a very different sense, and nothing that we know of Thales really contributes to the understanding of this passage.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. H. Fränkel, "A Thought Pattern in Heraclitus," *AJP* 59 (1938) 326 n.38, and *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, trans. M. Hadas and J. Willis (Oxford 1975) 471–72.

<sup>5</sup> The notion that Pindar is concerned here with primal elements gains specious support from the fact that he goes on to mention *χρυσός* [supposedly = *γῆ*], *πῦρ*, and *αἰθήρ*. But 'gold' must be substituted for 'earth' and fire and air appear in subordinate similes where their 'elemental' character is not in question. Finally, if water is supposedly the best of *elements*, then how can Pindar logically assert the superiority of gold immediately afterwards? Indeed is there any logic at all in claiming the superiority of one element over another, when all are essential? Water (specifically *ὑδωρ πόντου*), air, and gold also appear in the priamel at Bacch. 3.85–89, where they contrast with the human realm (*ἀνδρὶ δ'*), but the logic and structure of this priamel are so different from Pindar's that attempts to explain the one in terms of the other are unconvincing. Cf. R. Wind, "Bacchylides and Pindar: A Question of Imitation," *CJ* 67 (1971) 9–13; C. Carey, "Bacchylides 3.85–90," *Maia* 29 (1977) 69–71; and T. Krischer, "Die logischen Formen der Priamel," *GrazBeitr* 2 (1974) 88–91.

<sup>6</sup> So far as I am aware, A. Boeckh, *Pindari Opera* II.2 (Leipzig 1821) 102 was first to supply "of all things" in interpreting this passage, and he combines it with the 'cosmological' interpretation: "Sed cur aqua *rerum omnium* principatum teneat (*ἀριστεύει*, poeta inquit Olymp. III.), de eo multa neque spernenda in Scholiis dicuntur, advocato praesertim Thaletis placito, ex quo aqua reliquorum elementorum initium" (italics mine). Boeckh does, however, go on to doubt the importance of such speculation, and prefers a simpler explanation closer to the one proposed here.

<sup>7</sup> C. M. Bowra, *The Odes of Pindar* (Baltimore 1969) 64; R. Lattimore, *The Odes of Pindar* (Chicago 1947) 1; and G. S. Conway, *The Odes of Pindar* (London 1972) 2. T. Krischer (*supra* n.5) supplies *πάντων* but also retains the notion of cosmic elements. He argues that there is a "polare Gegensatz" between water and gold and between the cosmic and human realms, but his analysis of the Pindaric passage is confused by the parallels he draws from Bacchylides.

<sup>8</sup> Aelian's statement, *ὑδωρ ἐστὶ τὸ πάντων ἄριστον*, carries little conviction, for there is

Unlike the addition of *στοιχείων*, which limits the sphere of *ὔδωρ, πάντων* is so inclusive that it adds a note of finality, as if Pindar were making an absolute statement and granting complete superiority to water *over all else*. And yet the following lines also grant preeminence to gold and to the Olympic games. It is simply illogical to state categorically that water is the best of all things, and then proceed to grant superiority to other things. But the problem with these translations is not so much that they supply what is doubtful (*πάντων*), but that they neglect what is there, namely the *μέν*. Best *in one respect* (*μέν*) is water, while gold shines like fire gleaming at night, supreme of lordly wealth. Although *μέν* is notoriously awkward to translate, the point is clear that water is not unqualified best, but is best from a certain standpoint (*μέν*).<sup>9</sup> The question *τί ἄριστον*; underlies the entire priamel and water is not the definitive answer, but rather it qualifies in one way. The importance of this *μέν* is underscored by its inclusion in the parallel passage at *Ol.* 3.42: *εἰ δ' ἄριστεύει μὲν ὔδωρ*. In both cases the *μέν* qualifies and restricts the superlatives (*ἄριστον, ἀριστεύει*).

Then in what way is water best?<sup>10</sup> The answer is not new, but it is neglected because it has not received adequate support. Indeed, one scholium (1 a) sums up the argument of lines 1–7 very well:

Pindar says that three things in the case of humans (*ἐν ἀνθρώποις*) are best: best is water when it comes to life (*εἰς τὸ ζῆν*), for without its existence is impossible; then gold in the case of wealth (*ἐν πλούτῳ*) is superior to other possessions; but when it comes to glory (*πρὸς δὲ δόξαν*), best is an Olympic victory.

One important aspect of this interpretation is the emphasis on *man*.<sup>11</sup> Pindar is not concerned with water as part of a grandiose

no explicit reference to Pindar and it is spoken by Artaxerxes in a very anecdotal setting (*λόγος Περσικός*).

<sup>9</sup> The *μέν . . . δὲ . . . δέ* marks a climactic parataxis (cf. W. J. Slater, *Lexicon to Pindar s.v. μέν* 2fβ). Although the adversative force of the *δέ*'s is limited, the shift of syntax with *ὁ δὲ χρυσός* and *εἰ δ' ἄεθλα* suggests more than mere coordination (as is the case of *μέν . . . δὲ . . . δέ* at Bacch. 3.85–87). On the force of *ὁ δὲ χρυσός* cf. B. L. Gildersleeve, *Syntax of Classical Greek* II (New York 1911) 215, and C. A. M. Fennell, *Pindar: The Olympian and Pythian Odes* (Cambridge 1893) 8. In any event, the *μέν* exercises a limiting effect on *ἄριστον* (and *ἀριστεύει* at *Ol.* 3.42).

<sup>10</sup> L. Dissen, *Pindari Carmina* II (Göttingen 1830) 5, and Fennell (*supra* n.9) point out the proverbial nature of the expression “water is best,” but there is no evidence of its existence before Pindar, nor agreement on what it means. Cf. Leutsch-Schneidewin, *Corp. Paroem. Gr.* II 776, for the later expression *πυρὸς καὶ ὕδατος ὁ φίλος ἀναγκαιότερος*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Puech (*supra* n.1) 26 n.1: “Il est inutile, pour expliquer ce début, de faire intervenir l'influence de théories cosmogoniques, telles que le système de Thalès. La mention de l'*or*, qui suit celle de l'*eau*, montre que Pindare juge des *valeurs* par rapport à l'*homme*.” And yet he later translates *Ol.* 3.42 as “Si entre tous les éléments l'eau tient le premier rang.”

scheme of *κοσμικὰ στοιχεῖα* (scholium 1 e), or as the best single thing in the universe. Throughout his poetry he mentions water as a normal part of life: as rivers and seas, to be used for such things as drinking, sailing, fishing, washing, etc., and in this priamel as well he is concerned with the *life of man*. And of the requirements of human life, first and foremost is the basic natural need of survival (*τὸ ζῆν*). Water here represents the *sine qua non* of existence, and in that sense it is "best," but it is hardly the exclusive best—there are other needs (such as wealth and glory) which make life worthwhile.

A comparison of similar passages in Pindar increases the probability of this interpretation. First the priamel which opens *Olympia* 11:<sup>12</sup>

Ἔστιν ἀνθρώποις ἀνέμων ὅτε πλείστα  
 χρήσις· ἔστιν δ' οὐρανίων ὑδάτων,  
 ὄμβριων παίδων νεφέλας·  
 εἰ δὲ σὺν πόνῳ τις εὖ πράσσοι, μελιγάρυες ὕμνοι  
 5 ὑστέρων ἀρχὰ λόγων  
 τέλλεται καὶ πιστὸν ὄρκιον μεγάλαις ἀρεταῖς.

Here the emphasis is unmistakably on man (*ἀνθρώποις*, 1), and upon his 'natural' needs (*χρήσις*, 2).<sup>13</sup> The *ἔστιν . . . ὅτε* qualifies the superlative *πλείστα* in the same fashion as the *μέν* at *Ol.* 1.1, except that here it is temporal rather than logical. What is important to note is that wind and rain (*ὑδάτων*, 2) are foil for achievement (*εὖ πράσσοι*, 4) and its celebration in song. Even the syntax of the climax (*εἰ δὲ . . .*, 4) parallels that at *Ol.* 1.3, where achievement and song (*ἄεθλα γαρύεν*) are also the subject.

Another parallel is at *Isthm.* 1.47–51:

μισθὸς γὰρ ἄλλοις ἄλλος ἐπ' ἔργμασιν ἀνθρώποις γλυκύς,  
 μηλοβότα τ' ἀρότα τ' ὄρνιχολόχῳ τε καὶ ὄν πόντος τράφει.

<sup>12</sup> Dissen (*supra* n.10) and T. D. Seymour, *Selected Odes of Pindar* (Boston 1882) 75, note that the opening of *Ol.* 11 is quite similar, but do not explore those similarities.

<sup>13</sup> The frequently cited passage from Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.7.1364a26ff, is much to the point here. "From another point of view, that which is abundant is to be preferred to that which is scarce, because the use (*χρήσις*) of it is greater (*ὑπερέχει*), for 'often' exceeds 'seldom'; whence the saying *ἄριστον μὲν ὕδωρ*" (trans. J. H. Freese). In the later tradition it is the *usefulness* of water which is stressed. Cf. Vitruvius 8.1, *est enim [aqua] maxime necessaria et ad vitam et ad delectiones et ad usum cotidianum*, and Plut. *Mor.* 955E, *πότερον ὕδωρ ἢ πῦρ χρησιμώτερον*. Certainly this later evidence must be used with caution, and it is too rash to say with Fennell (*supra* n.9), "We must mentally supply 'of things abundant and useful,'" for abundance is not in question in the Pindaric passage. Nevertheless, the necessity for water in order to live and its usefulness on a physical level are consonant with the Pindaric passages cited.

γαστρὶ δὲ πᾶς τις ἀμύνων λιμὸν αἰανῆ τέταται  
 50 ὃς δ' ἀμφ' ἀέθλοις ἢ πολεμίζων ἄρηται κῦδος ἀβρόν,  
 εὐαγορηθεὶς κέρδος ὕψιστον δέκεται, πολιατᾶν καὶ ξένων  
 γλώσσας ἄωτον.

Here again the emphasis is on man (*ἄνθρωποις*, 47), and man's basic need for nourishment (*γαστρὶ*, 49) is foil for glory (*κῦδος*, 50) and its celebration in speech and song.<sup>14</sup>

In very abbreviated fashion, the summary priamel at *Nem.* 3.6–8 leaves room for the same thought:

διψῆ δὲ πρᾶγος ἄλλο μὲν ἄλλου,  
 ἀθλονικία δὲ μάλιστ' αἰοιδὰν φιλεῖ,  
 στεφάνων ἀρετᾶν τε δεξιωτάταν ὀπαδόν.

The verb *διψῆ* even implies a need for water, and suggests that we are intended to include basic needs in the summary *ἄλλο μὲν ἄλλου*. The point is that these other needs are foil (*μὲν*) for achievement (*ἀθλονικία*, 7) and its need for song (*αἰοιδάν*, 7).

There is one final passage which is relevant,<sup>15</sup> the prooimium of *Nem.* 4:

Ἄριστος εὐφροσύνα πόνων κεκριμένων  
 ἰατρός· αἱ δὲ σοφαί  
 Μοισᾶν θύγατρεις αἰοδαὶ θέλξαν νιν ἀπτόμεναι.  
 οὐδὲ θερμόν ὕδωρ τόσον γε μαλθακὰ τεύχει  
 5 γυῖα, τόσσον εὐλογία φόρμιγγι συνάρορος.

Although the order of presentation is different, this passage has many features similar to *Ol.* 1.1ff. First, it opens with the superlative *ἄριστος*, but—as in *Ol.* 1.1—it does not imply *absolute* superiority. Indeed, as the thought develops in lines 2–5, *εὐφροσύνα* is “best” only in a very qualified sense, and is surpassed by *αἰοδαί*,

<sup>14</sup> The climax of this priamel is a variation of *Ol.* 1.3 and *Ol.* 11.4, for *ὃς δέ* (50) is the equivalent *εἰ δέ* (. . . *τις*). For types of conditional expressions in Pindar see E. L. Bundy, *Studia Pindarica* I–II (Berkeley 1962) 59.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Nem.* 8.42–43, where the *χρεῖαι* . . . *φίλων* are related to the *ἀνέμων* . . . *χρηῖσις* in the priamel at *Ol.* 11.1ff, and both are capped with the need for song. Of the various needs (*χρεῖαι* . . . *παντοῖαι*) one has for friends, most important (*ὑπερώτατα*) initially (*μὲν*) is that in time of toil; *but* enjoyment too (*δὲ καί*) has a place in confirming achievement. Pindar then becomes even more specific in the following address to Midas (44–50) by saying that he obviously cannot effect Midas' *physical* immortality, but can (it is implied) immortalize him in song. In this passage as well as in the examples discussed above, it becomes apparent that Pindar consistently recognizes the priority (both temporal and logical) of basic natural needs and uses them as background for the ‘secondary’ role of song in commemorating deeds.

for they last longer (6–8). As E. L. Bundy interprets it: “ἄριστος in N. 4.1 means ‘most desirable in the immediate present’.”<sup>16</sup> Here εὐφροσύνα clearly means the victory revel, and the word ἱατρός (2) shows that Pindar is stressing its *physical* sense as relaxation after toil. But after the bodily needs comes the celebration in song, and in lines 4–5 Pindar develops the same thought with different imagery. “Not even warm water soothes the body (γυῖα) as much as song.” The θερμὸν ὕδωρ (like ὕδωρ at *Ol.* 1.1 and ὑδάτων at *Ol.* 11.2, all in prooimial passages) stresses the physical needs of man, and serves as foil for achievement and celebration in song.

On the basis of these passages, I would argue that there is a consistent pattern of thought in Pindar’s poetry, whereby basic physical needs (often expressed in terms of water) are contrasted with achievement (generally athletic) and its celebration. As Gildersleeve succinctly puts it: “No profound philosophical tenet is involved . . . The poet emphasizes, after the Greek fashion, water as the source and sustenance of life.”<sup>17</sup> Water is “best” from the point of view of physical existence,<sup>18</sup> for it represents the basic *conditio humana* out of which arise the glories of wealth, achievement, and song which make life worthwhile. As one scholium puts it (1 f): “just as the elements [*i.e.*, water] are responsible for life (τοῦ ζῆν), so the games are responsible for the *good life* (τοῦ καλῶς ζῆν).”

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<sup>16</sup> Bundy (*supra* n.14) 2 n.9.

<sup>17</sup> B. L. Gildersleeve, *Pindar: The Olympian and Pythian Odes* (New York 1885) 129.

<sup>18</sup> Bundy (*supra* n.14) 2 n.9 quotes Phocylides 9, which well expresses the relationship between natural needs and achievement: διζησθαι βίον, ἀρετὴν δ' ἔταν ἢ βίος ἤδη.