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Harpists, Flute-players, and the Early Musical Contests at Delphi

DANIEL CROSBY

In ancient Greece, the Olympic Games were the quintessential athletic contests and were observed with the greatest enthusiasm. For this reason, the Olympics cast a very large historical shadow over the other Panhellenic Games. The result is that sources for and scholarship of these other quadrennial Games, the Pythian, Isthmian, and Nemean, are comparatively sparse. The purpose of this article is to examine one of these, the Pythian Games, and to specifically focus on the nature of its early history and its association with Delphic myth and other local festivals. The sources for these musical and athletic contests that took place at Delphi, the site of the famous sanctuary and Oracle of Apollo, are late, few, and mired so deeply in mythology that fact is almost indistinguishable from fiction.

The greatest surviving ancient authority on the early history of the Pythian Games is Pausanias, the travel-journalist who lived during the second century CE. He claims that before the Pythian Games were reestablished in the year 586 BCE by the Amphictyonic League, the coalition of the *poleis* near Delphi, musical contests for harpists and flute-players were held there.¹ It is apparent from this source and others that some Greeks believed that the musical events of the Pythian Games, which were a part of the program of the Games since the early sixth century, pre-dated the first Pythiad and were celebrated every eight years rather than quadrennially. The evidence for the historicity of these beliefs, however, is very problematic.

History and Mythology

Although Pausanias seems to be very knowledgeable about the history of the Pythian Games following 586 BCE, his account of the Games before that time appears to be more akin to legend and popular myth than to history.² He claims that the oldest contest was that of singing hymns to Apollo, and that the

first victor was a certain Chrysothemis, whose father had cleansed the hands of Apollo after he had slain the Delphic dragon.³ This tale would obviously place the establishment of the Pythian contest into the mythical past while connecting it with the tale of Apollo's battle with the creature called either Python or Delphyne(s).⁴ Pausanias is not alone in this belief. There are, indeed, a number of ancient authorities, including Aristotle that claimed Apollo's battle and the death of the monster as the *aetion*, the reason, of the Pythian Games.⁵

Aside from the mythical *aetion* of the festival, Pausanias includes figures, legendary or suspiciously so, that are said to have been around when the Pythian contests were held. He states that Orpheus and Musaeus, two famous musicians of Greek lore, were too conceited to submit their songs to the scrutiny of judges; Hesiod could not compete because he could not accompany himself with the *kithara*, a Greek harp; and Homer, although he had learned to play the *kithara*, could no longer play due to his blindness.⁶ Other less common figures that are named by Pausanias as victors in the most ancient Pythian contests include Philammon, the son of Apollo, Thamyris, the son of Philammon, and Eleuther, another son of Apollo.⁷

Pausanias is not the only writer to offer mythological figures as examples of competitors in the Pythian contest. Clement of Alexandria, the Christian theologian of the second century CE, was familiar with the myth of Eunomos and the grasshopper, which he says happened during the contest there.⁸ The story is told that a string on the *kithara* of Eunomos broke during his performance, and a cicada joined in the song to replace the broken string. Additionally, a scholiast on the *Odyssey* discusses Demodocos, a singer in the *Odyssey*, who competed in and won the Pythian contest when Creon the mythical king of Thebes presided over the competition.⁹ A scholiast on Pindar's *Pythian Odes* provides a list of victors for the first Pythian contests after they were established by Apollo himself. According to him, Castor won the *stadion*, Pollux boxing, Calais the long-course foot-race, Zetes the armed race, Peleus the discus, Telamon wrestling, and Heracles the *pankration*.¹⁰

There is also some indication in our sources that the defeat of Crissa in the First Sacred War was the occasion for the rededication of the Pythian Games by the Amphictyonic League, which Pausanias believed happened in the year 586 BCE. However, the historicity of the First Sacred War has been called into serious question. It was noticed by Robertson that all of the references to the events of that war date to the mid-fourth century, a time when Phillip II of Macedon was readying himself to intervene in the Sacred War that the Phocians had begun by sacking Delphi in 356 BCE,¹¹ or later. It seems to be a very strong possibility that the war between Crissa and the Amphictyony was invented as a moralizing tale and a justification for Phillip's actions in the Third Sacred War, especially in light of the silence of Herodotos and Thucydides on the issue of the First Sacred War, both of whom had occasion to mention it.¹²

Within sources such as these, we are told that the earliest Pythian contests were celebrated every eight years (nine to the inclusively counting Greeks), but how much ought these sources be trusted? Some scholars, Mommsen, Fontenrose, and Burkert, accept this evidence at face value without hesitation or further remark.¹³ However, there is reason to doubt the accuracy of our ancient authorities. There are three sources for the “nine-yearly” (ἐννεαετηρικός) Pythian contests preceding the “five-yearly” (πεντετηρικός) Pythian Games: an anonymous scholiast on Pindar's *Pythian Odes*, a fragment from Demetrios of Phalerum, and Censorinus. These will be examined in more detail below.

The “Nine-Yearly” Festivals at Delphi

There were three “nine-yearly” festivals at Delphi in the second century CE—as a priest of Apollo at Delphi, Plutarch, our source for this fact, makes an exceedingly reliable witness to Delphic religious practice. The first in the cycle was the Septerion.¹⁴ We are told that the rites consisted of the following events: a solemn procession, the burning of some sort of dwelling, a trip made by a young boy and his companions to Tempe in Thessaly, purificatory rites at Tempe, the collection of Tempean laurel, and a return to Delphi.¹⁵ This festival was supposed by some authors to represent the flight of Apollo to Tempe for

the purpose of ritual cleansing after he had killed Python, the dragon that was sometimes cast as the guardian of the Oracle. The Septerion is of demonstrable antiquity. Both Theopompos, writing in the fourth century BCE, and Ephoros, writing in the third century BCE, were familiar with the rites of the festival and the mythological precedent that they were supposed to commemorate. Indeed, the fact that the festival came to be explained by the Delphic Combat myth and that certain incongruities exist between the rites and the myth likely indicate that the purpose of the festival had been forgotten by the fourth century and that the myth was appended to provide an etiology for the rites.¹⁶ Whatever the original purpose of the festival, it is likely very ancient.

Another “nine-yearly” festival, called the Charila, may inform our understanding of the relationship between myth and ritual with regard to the Septerion. Plutarch tells us that during this festival the “king,” who would dole out barley to all of the citizens, would be presented with a doll which he would then strike with his sandal. The leader of a sacred order would then tie a rope around the neck of the doll and bury it some distance from Delphi.¹⁷ Plutarch explains the ritual by what is almost certainly a myth. There had apparently been a famine at sometime in Delphi and the king struck Charila, an orphan girl, with his sandal during the division of rations after she had insulted him. The girl later went off and hanged herself, and the ritual was proposed by a Delphic oracle to propitiate the spirit of the girl. Plutarch’s is the only glimpse of the rites of this particular festival, so we have no means for comparison with other interpretations. It is attractive, however, to reason that this myth too was invented to explain the rites of the festival.

The Herois, the festival that falls between the Septerion and the Charila in Plutarch’s account, is understood even less. Plutarch tells us that the greater part of the ritual was performed in secret. The fact that the author chooses to comment only on the rites performed in public suggests that he was either uninitiated in the order of the Thyriads, the group presumably responsible for the performance of the secret rites, or that the limit of his oath did not extend to the parts of the ritual that were open to the public. Whatever the true reason

for Plutarch’s lack of description of the secret rituals of the Herois, he does say that the public rites could be perceived as the raising of Semele, the mother of Dionysos, from the underworld.²⁰ The myth holds that Semele was killed when Zeus showed her the smallest portion of his glory; she was vaporized. Whether or not Plutarch’s understanding of the festival was a common one or the correct one is entirely uncertain.

The Case for a “Nine-Yearly” Pythian Contest

There are three sources for the conception that the Pythian contest happened every eight years, like the festivals discussed above, before the year 586 BCE: the scholiast on Pindar of uncertain date, a fragment from Demetrios of Phalerum (mid-fourth—early-third century BCE) and Censorinus (third century CE). These sources are listed in that order and translated below.

τὰ Πυθία ἐτέθη, ὡς μὲν τινες ἐπὶ τῷ δράκοντι, ὃν φύλακα ὄντα τοῦ ἐν Δελφοῖς μαντείου ὁ Ἀπόλλων ἔκτεινεν: ἐκλήθη δὲ ὁ ἀγὼν ἀπὸ τοῦ τόπου: τῷ δὲ τόπῳ ἦν τὸ ὄνομα Πυθὼ ἦτοι ἀπὸ τοῦ τοῦς φοιτῶντας ἐπὶ τὸ μαντεῖον τοῦ θεοῦ πυνθάνεσθαι ἢ διὰ τὸ σήπασθαι, ὡς παρ’ Ὀμήρῳ (α 161): λεύκ’ ὅστέα πύθεται ὄμβρω. καθαρθεῖς δὲ Ἀπόλλων τὸν τῆς δρακοντοκτονίας φόνον ἐν Κρήτῃ παρὰ Χρυσοθέμει ἐκείθεν ἦλθεν εἰς τὰ Θεσσαλικά Τέμπη, ἔνθεν μετεκομίσατο τὴν δάφνην. μέχρι δὲ πολλοῦ ἢ εἰς τοῦς τῶν νικῶντων στεφάνους χωροῦσα δάφνη ἐντεῦθεν ἐκομίζετο ὑπὸ παιδὸς ἀμφιθαλοῦς. ἐτελείτο δὲ ὁ ἀγὼν καταρχὰς μὲν διὰ ἑνναετηρίδος, μετέστη δὲ εἰς πενταετηρίδα.

The Pythian Games were established, as some say, upon the dragon that was the guard of the Oracle in Delphi, whom Apollo killed. The contest was named after the place. The name of the place was Pytho either from the custom whereby those wandering to the Oracle of the god learn or on account of the verb “to rot”—for the word “to rot” means to putrefy, as in Homer (Od. 1.161): “the

white bones rotted in the rain.” Apollo, having been cleansed of the murder of dragon-slaying in Crete by Chrysothemis, and from there he came to Thes-salian Tempe. There he acquired the laurel. The laurel, which lends itself to the crowns of the victors much into our own time, was acquired there by the young boy. In the beginning, the contest was held in the ninth year, but later in the fifth year.²¹

οὕτω Δημήτριος ὁ Φαληρεὺς: Μενέλαος ἅμα τῷ Ὀδυσσεὶ ἐλθὼν εἰς Δελφοῦς τὸν θεὸν ἤρετο περὶ τῆς μελλούσης ἔσεσθαι εἰς Ἴλιον στρατείας. τότε δὴ καὶ τὸν ἐνναετηρικὸν τῶν Πυθίων ἀγῶνα ἀγωνοθετεῖ Κρέων, ἐνίκα δὲ Δημόδοκος Λάκων μαθητῆς Αὐτομήδους τοῦ Μυκηναίου.

Thus says Demetrius of Phalerum: Then Menelaos, going with Odysseus to Delphi, was asking about the outcome of the war of the Trojan War. Then, in fact, Creon presided over the nine-yearly contest of the Pythian Games, and Demodocus the Laconian, the student of Automedes the Mycenaean, won.²²

Delphis quoque ludi, qui vocantur Pythia, post annum octavum olim conficiebantur.

The Games at Delphi too, which they call Pythian, were once competed after the eighth-year.²³

The third *Argumentum* from the scholia on Pindar’s *Pythian Odes*, with which we are primarily concerned, quite clearly combines the events of two different Delphic festivals, the Septerion festival and the Pythian Games. The boy going to Tempe and collecting the laurel there can be none other than a description of the sacred rites of the Septerion festival, which we have already encountered.²⁴ Additionally, this is the only source to state that the boughs of laurel gathered by the boy were used to make the crowns for the victors of the Pythian Games. The traditional prize of the Pythian Games was indeed the laurel sprig, a plant strongly associated with Apollonine cult and mythology, but if it were true that the laurel sprigs retrieved from Tempe during the Septerion

festival were used as prizes in the Games, it could only have been done every other Games.²⁵ In Plutarch's time, the late-first to early-second century CE, it is clear that the Delphians celebrated the Septerion every eight years and the Pythian Games every four.²⁶

Several scholars have suggested that the Pythian Games were celebrated at one time immediately following the Septerion every eight years.²⁷ This understanding seems to depend on a single word in Plutarch. That author, in the work called *De Defectu Oraculorum*, sets the scene for his dialogue by explaining that the conversation took place just before the celebration of the Pythian Games.²⁸ Later Cleombrotos, a character in the dialogue, tells us that “recently” or “just now” (ἄρτι) the Greeks to north of Delphi, as far as Tempe and Thermopylae, had been initiated into the rights of the Septerion.²⁹ However, ἄρτι is not a concrete expression of time in Greek.³⁰ Even if the Septerion and Pythian Games in the Classical period and later were celebrated in close chronological sequence, the problem of the latter being held twice as often as the former remains. Fontenrose admits this problem, adding that it was the result of the Pythian Games becoming a “five-yearly” festival beginning in 586 BCE.³¹ However, our best evidence tells us that crowns were only given to the victors beginning in 582 BCE. This evidence means that the relation between the two celebrations before the early-sixth century, which depends on the laurel crown, need not exist at all. If we are meant to believe that the laurel, which the boy collected during the Septerion, was used for the crowns of the Pythian victors, we are forced to conclude that this was only done after the introduction of crown prizes for the Games in 582 when the Pythian Games were already being held every four years. It is, therefore, likely that the scholiast on Pindar unwittingly interposed certain aspects of the Septerion into his understanding of the Pythian Games since they share common etiology and symbolism.

Demetrios of Phalerum, who is paraphrased by the scholiast on the *Odyssey*, briefly discusses Demodocos the singer in the *Odyssey*, telling us that he was the Pythian victor at the Games overseen by Creon, the mythical king of Thebes when the city was assailed by the Sphinx.³² The historian Demetrios of Phalerum (c. 350 BCE-post-283 BCE) is said to have described the Pythian

Games as a “nine-yearly” contest, but how much evidentiary weight ought to be afforded to him? We are certainly meant to think of Demodocos as a contemporary of the Trojan War, an event that happened sometime around the twelfth century BCE, if it happened at all. Can one really imagine the Pythian Games extending into so ancient a time, beginning sometime during the Bronze Age and reestablished following the Bronze Age collapse and the resettlement of Delphi? Although this early date is possible, it is not at all probable. Thus, the scholion is obviously not a credible witness to the issue of Delphic history on the whole, but how can one account for the specific reference to an eight-year cycle of the Games? Demetrios or the scholiast seems to have relied on some sort of tradition. If the Pythian Games were the only quadrennial festival at Delphi, it may have been easy to suppose that the Games were, at one time, celebrated every eight years like the three festivals mentioned above, regardless of whether one actually confused the Septerion festival and the Pythian Games. The same reasoning could also have been the cause of the account found in the scholia on Pindar.

Finally, there is the account of Censorinus (third century CE) that only amounts to a matter-of-fact statement in his discussion of periods of time. He claims that the Pythian Games had, at one time, been celebrated every eight years (*post octavum annum*). There is no information on the author’s source, but he too must have been relying on some tradition for this odd piece of information.

Thus far, the difficulties and limitations of our sources are clear. There certainly was a tradition that believed the ancient Pythian contests to have preceded the early-sixth century and to have been hosted every eight years, but it is difficult to lend much credence to these traditions when they are found in mythical contexts. Our only source that is divorced from myth is Censorinus, and his account is around a millennium after the fact. For these reasons, it seems wisest to suspect the influence of legend on this issue.

Contests for Players of Music

We hear from many sources that the first contests at Delphi were musical in nature. Although many of the first contestants of the Pythian contest are plainly the subjects of myth and legend, there is some good evidence that the Pythian Games held competitions for musicians at least as early as 586. Among the first victors of the Pythian Games was a certain Sacadas of Argos.³³ Evidence of his historicity seems fairly strong, although most of our knowledge of him comes from Pausanias. About Sacadas we are told the following facts: he won the solo-flute competition at the first three Pythian Games in 586, 582, and 578;³⁴ his tomb was located at Argos;³⁵ a diminutive statue of him was dedicate at Helicon;³⁶ Pindar, who lived between the late-sixth and early-fifth centuries BCE, apparently made some sort of remarks about him in a lost work;³⁷ tunes that were attributed to him were featured at the foundation of Messene;³⁸ a type of musical instrument called a Σακάδ(ε)ιον, known from a lexicon from around the fifth century CE, may have been named for him;³⁹ some ancients attributed to him the composition of a strain (Τριμερής, “Tripartite”) that combined the three common musical moods (Lydian, Phrygian, and Dorian) into one work; and he was said to have been the first to play the Pythian strain at Delphi. Thus, there is every indication that Sacadas was a real person and that the Games included musical competition in the early-sixth century.⁴²

A specific type of song called the Pythian strain (νόμος), which had apparently existed before the time of Sacadas’ first victory, became a feature of the Games and a vehicle for Delphic myth from the inaugural Pythiad onward. The song has as its subject the battle between Apollo and the Delphic dragon. We know this fact and the constituent parts of the song from three sources. Firstly, Strabo, the geographer of the first century BCE, refers to the work of Timosthenes (c. third century BCE), who composed a rendition of the song.

ἔμελοποίησε μὲν οὖν Τιμοσθένης, ὁ ναύαρχος τοῦ δευτέρου Πτολεμαίου ὁ καὶ τοὺς λιμένας συντάξας ἐν δέκα βίβλοις. βούλεται δὲ τὸν ἀγῶνα τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος τὸν πρὸς τὸν δράκοντα

διὰ τοῦ μέλους ὑμνεῖν, ἄγκρουν μὲν τὸ προοίμιον δηλῶν, ἄμπειραν δὲ τὴν πρώτην κατάπειραν τοῦ ἀγῶνος, κατακελευσμὸν δὲ αὐτὸν τὸν ἀγῶνα, ἴαμβον δὲ καὶ δάκτυλον τὸν ἐπιπαιανισμὸν τὸν γινόμενον ἐπὶ τῇ νίκῃ μετὰ τοιούτων ῥυθμῶν, ὧν ὁ μὲν ὕμνοις ἐστὶν οἰκείος ὁ δ' ἴαμβος κακισμοῖς¹, σύριγγας δὲ τὴν ἔκλειψιν τοῦ θηρίου, μιμουμένων ὡς ἂν καταστρέφοντος ἐσχάτους τινὰς συριγμούς.

Timosthenes, the navarch of Ptolemy II, composed it [the Pythian strain] (he also composed *The Harbors*, arranged in ten books). And he/it wishes to sing the contest of Apollo with the dragon through the strain. He/it makes clear that “the setting out” is the introduction, “the trail” is the first struggle of the contest; “the encouragement” is the contest itself; the iamb [lampoon] and dactyl [dance] parts are victory songs that happened upon the victory, following these rhythms, of which the latter is suitable for hymns and the iambic for reproaches; and “the hissings” is the death of the monster, imitating some harsh hissings of the dying one.⁴³

It is evident from this account that the different movements of the Pythian strain corresponded to various episodes or stages in the battle. Likewise, Pollux, writing in the second century CE, says that the tale of Apollo’s victory over the dragon was remembered in song.

τοῦ Πυθικοῦ νόμου τοῦ αὐλητικοῦ μέρη πέντε, πείρα κατακελευσμὸς ἰαμικὸν σπονδειὸν καταχόρευσις. δῆλωμα δ' ἐστὶν ὁ νόμος τῆς τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος μάχης πρὸς τὸν δράκοντα. καὶ ἐν μὲν τῇ πείρᾳ διορθᾷ τὸν τόπον, εἰ ἀξιὸς ἐστὶ τοῦ ἀγῶνος: ἐν δὲ τῷ κατακελευσμῷ προκαλεῖται τὸν δράκοντα, ἐν δὲ τῷ ἰαμβικῷ μάχεται. ἐμπεριεῖληφε δὲ τὸ ἰαμβικὸν καὶ τὰ σαλπιστικὰ

κρούματα καὶ τὸν ὀδοντισμὸν ὡς τοῦ δράκοντος ἐν τῷ τοξεύεσθαι συμπίοντος τοὺς ὀδοντας. τὸ δὲ σπονδαῖον δηλοῖ τὴν νίκην τοῦ θεοῦ. ἐν δὲ τῇ καταχορεύσει ὁ θεὸς τὰ ἐπινίκια χορεύει.

There are five parts of the Pythian strain: “the trial,” “the calling-out,” “the iambic,” “the spondaic,” and “the dancing.” It is a means of making known the battle of Apollo with the dragon. In “the trial,” he [the poet] indicates the place, whether it is worthy of the contest. In “the calling-out,” he calls out the dragon. In “the iambic,” the battle is fought. “The iambic” encompassed both the sounding trumpets and the odontismos, like when the dragon gnashed his teeth upon being shot. “The spondaic” makes clear the victory of the god, and in “the dancing,” the god dances the victory.⁴⁴

The substance of these accounts of the Pythian strain is similar. Both versions contain the same or similar divisions: “the trial” (ἄμπειρα/πέιρα), “the encouragement” or “calling-out” (κατακελευσμόν/κατακελευσμόν), “the iambic” (ιαμβικόν/ιαμβικόν), “the dactyl” or “dance” (δάκτυλος/καταχορεύσις), and “the whistling” or “tooth-grinding” (σύριγγες/ὀδοντισμός). However, there are several noteworthy differences between the two. (1) Timosthenes includes an ἄγκρουσις, “introduction,” which Pollux makes part of the πέιρα, “trial.” (2) Timosthenes believes the κατακελευσμόν is the battle itself, which suggests that there may have been encouragement for the god as he was fighting the dragon, and Pollux says that this was where the dragon was “called out.” It makes the most sense that the ἄμπειρα/πέιρα be the actual beginning of the battle, since that is the meaning of the word, but why would the dragon be “called out” in Pollux’ account after the battle had begun? If it is deemed advisable to translate κατακελευσμόν as “the encouragement,” as we have done in the version of Timosthenes, a question remains: why would the poet encourage the dragon? Perhaps he was calling out the dragon to challenge it

not to be cowardly. It seems more likely, however, that Pollux was merely confused about the details of this particular part of the song. (3) Timosthenes includes a dactylic part not seen in Pollux, and Pollux a spondaic part that he names as a smaller division of the greater iambic movement and is not found in Timosthenes. Finally, (4) Timosthenes' account of the σύριγγες makes it clear that he considered it to be a section of the song in its own right and was the last division in the song. Pollux, on the other hand, places the ὄδοντισμός within the iambic movement. Nevertheless, the two different names must have represented the same portion of the song, since they are both made to be the section in which the dragon breathes its last.

The final citation of the divisions of the Pythian strain is found in the Argumentum on Pindar's Pythian Odes, written by an unknown scholiast:

πειρον μὲν, ὅτι ἀπεπειράθη τῆς μάχης τῆς πρὸς τὸ θηρίον: ἴαμβον δὲ διὰ τὴν λοιδορίαν τὴν γενομένην αὐτῷ πρὸ τῆς μάχης: λέγεται γὰρ ἰαμβίζειν τὸ λοιδορεῖν: δάκτυλον δὲ ἀπὸ Διονύσου, ὅτι πρῶτος οὗτος δοκεῖ ἀπὸ τοῦ τρίποδος θεμιστεῦσε: Κρητικὸν δὲ ἀπὸ Διός: μητρῶον δέ, ὅτι Γῆς τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι: σύριγμα δὲ διὰ τὸν τοῦ ὄφεως συριγμόν.

The trial on the one hand, since he made trial of battle before the beast, and on the other the lampoon on account of the abuse happening to it [the dragon] before the battle—for abusing is called lampooning—and the dactyl from Dionysus, because he first learns to deliver oracles from the tripod, and the Kretic from Zeus, and the maternal, because Ge is the Oracle, and the hissings on account of the hissing of the snake.⁴⁵

The scholiast agrees mostly with the divisions of the song, although he seems to have confused the Pythian contest (ἀγών) and the Pythian strain (νόμος).⁴⁶ There are πειρον (trial), ἴαμβον (iamb or lampoon), δάκτυλον (dactyl or

dance), and σύριγμα (hissing) movements, but the most striking fact is that only three of the six divisions of the song are directly related to the combat myth. The δάκτυλον (dactyl) is said to be about Dionysos, and new divisions, called Κρητικὸν and μητροῦον, are related somehow to Zeus and Ge respectively. It appears that the typical movements (πεῖρον, ἴαμβον, δάκτυλον, and σύριγμα), are represented here as different events within the Pythian contest, with the addition of some different ones (Κρητικὸν and μητροῦον).

Thus, it appears that there was a tradition of musical composition and playing of the Pythian strain as early as the fourth century BCE. But when is our first evidence of this strain? If Sacadas was only the first person to bring it to Delphi and Pythian Games, as Pausanias says, then it must have been invented earlier. There is only one clue about its origin. We are told in a fragment from the first book in the work of Aristoxenos (fourth century BCE), *On Music*, that Olympos was the first to sing the dirge of Python, a name for the Delphic dragon, in the Lydian mode.⁴⁷ The historicity of this figure is difficult to establish, for there appears to be two different people named Olympos in the work, *On Music*, which is incorrectly attributed to Plutarch.⁴⁸ The first is obviously a mythological figure; he was said to have been taught the art of pipe-playing by Marsyas, who challenged Apollo to a musical contest.⁴⁹ The second Olympos, according to our sources, was very influential to the advancement of the musical art in Phrygia, and he may have actually existed, perhaps flourishing in the mid-seventh century.⁵⁰ Whatever one believes regarding the authenticity of Olympos, it is confirmed by two sources that the song about the battle between Apollo and the Delphic dragon, which was latter called the Pythian strain, preceded its first recorded use by Sacadas in the Pythian Games of 586.

This fact raises a serious concern about the commonly accepted history of the Games, namely the idea that the musical contests preceded the early-sixth century. If this fact were true, why would 586 have been the year of the first performance of the Pythian strain at Delphi? The subject matter of the song seems custom tailored for performance in that place. If Pausanias is correct about this detail of Greek musical history, it must be asked how a song so

aligned with Delphic myth was not sung at Delphi until a century or so after its invention. How did this song precede the inception of the Games at all?

Quasi-Historical Victors

To this point, the history of the Pythian Games before 586 has been shown to be surrounded by mythology. The case not only for the “nine-yearly” nature of the first contests but even its historicity before the early-sixth century is weak. Yet there is at least one figure, Terpander, whom musical historians are wont to claim as a genuinely historical person, who is called a four-time victor of the ancient contests at Delphi.⁵¹ Terpander is indeed the first in a list of victors at the Carneian festival to Apollo in Sparta that began in the twenty-six Olympiad (676-673 BCE), and thus, he may be a genuine historical figure.⁵² However, we also perceive that some legendary material has accreted to him. For example, he is said to have died from choking on a fig that someone threw at him while performing.⁵³ Terpander’s musical tradition even reminded M.L. West of the poetic tradition of Homer.⁵⁴ As a very famous kithara-player, his memory would have been prone to the accretion of a variety of honors, including victories at the most honored of musical contests, the Pythian Games. M.L. West says, “Much of this [his musical accomplishments] was no doubt constructed by projecting citharodes’ practices and repertory back upon the first famous citharode to be remembered.”⁵⁵

The evidence above raises a pair of questions. Are the accounts of Terpander winning the contests of the seventh century to be believed, or are historians of later periods, when the Pythian Games were the preeminent musical competitions, projecting the honor of Pythian victories back onto him? We know from Pausanias that some Greeks were compelled to come up with reasons why Homer, Musaeos, Orpheos, and Hesiod had never been credited with Pythian victories, despite the fact that their works were considered to be the pinnacle of Greek achievement.⁵⁶ It seems probable that the opposite could have been employed in honor of certain individuals; historians could have credited the famous with victories they did not actually earn. Secondly, what was pseudo-

Plutarch's source for Terpander's four consecutive victories? We cannot be certain on this point either. If it was a historical record at all and not just a tradition, it must have been different from the one that Pausanias used. The list of victors Pausanias consulted seems only to have begun in 586; his record of victors previous to that year is more like examples of popular tradition than a list of champions.

Conclusions

It should be apparent that most of the extant evidence for the early Pythian contests is deeply rooted in mythology. As a result, the only sources for historians to use are not likely to be very reliable. The conception that the Pythian Games before 586 BCE were once "nine-yearly" celebrations is only supported by three sources from the Hellenistic period and later, and only one of those, that of Censorinus (third century CE), is not found in the company of a myth. Additionally, Plutarch, one of the priests of Apollo at Delphi, seems to have been unaware of this opinion, since neither does his list of "nine-yearly" festivals include the older Pythian contests nor does this idea appear anywhere else in his work. He had both ample opportunity and cause to mention this fact if he had known, and yet a reference to the "nine-yearly" Pythian contest is not found anywhere in his extant writings.

Some historians have proposed that the Pythian Games had been a "nine-yearly" contest because of an assumed connection with the Septerion, which we can be sure was both ancient and celebrated at such a rate. However, the evidence of their connection is weak; it depends chiefly on their common etiology, a source that claims that the laurel collected at the Tempe during the Septerion was used to make the crowns of the Pythian victors, and a single word (ἄρτυ) in Plutarch. There are several issues with this understanding. Some evidence indicates a good possibility that the myth of Apollo's flight to Tempe after killing the dragon, the action of the Septerion, was developed as an explanation of the rites of the festival and appended to the older Delphic Combat myth in a time when the meaning of those rites had been forgotten. If this observation

were true, it would likely mean that the Septerion originally had no connection with the musical contests; it is, after all, a myth. Secondly, if the Tempean laurel from the Septerion was used to crown champions at the Pythian Games, as the scholiast on Pindar claims, both would need to have been held on the same schedule, but we know that this was not the case in the time of Plutarch. We hear from Pausanias that crowns were not awarded in the Games until 582 BCE and thereafter the Games were “five-yearly” competitions like the Olympics. If the laurel crowns were not given before 582, there is no reason to think that the laurel from the Septerion was used to make the crowns in a previous time when the Pythian Games were a “nine-yearly” contest. Finally, some historians have offered ἄρτι, “recently,” as evidence that the Septerion occurred immediately before the Pythian Games. However, the word is not a very precise expression of time, and even if it indicates what some historians think it does, it still remains to explain where the laurel came from every other celebration of the Pythian Games, when the next Septerion was another four years away.

It is certainly attractive to think that the Pythian Games never existed before we first encounter lists of champions and the Pythiads begin to be counted, but one must explain the evidence that claims Pythian victories for quasi-historical individuals. It is possible to speculate that victories at the most prestigious of musical contests would have naturally accreted to the traditions of successful musicians, like Terpander, along with other dubious tales. Additionally, it must be questioned what sources were used by the ancient musicologists as evidence of those victories, since Pausanias’ list of victors began only with the Games of 586. If they were legitimate, older lists of champions, why do both Pausanias and his source seem to be unaware of them? This matter can only be addressed by opinion since additional evidence is lacking.

The evidence of the Pythian strain may be taken as evidence that the Pythian contests did not exist before 586. The song had a distinctly Delphic subject, the slaying of the dragon in that place, and we are told the song was not sung at Delphi until Sacadas competed at the Games of the first Pythiad. Another source, which may be dubious, says that the Pythian strain was invented by

Olympos, a Phrygian musician who may have lived in the mid-seventh century. Why would the Pythian strain, which seems to have been composed specifically for competition at the Pythian venue, be sung first there in 586, if both the song and the contest had existed for more than a century before that time?

The arguments above cast serious doubt on the historicity of the Pythian musical contests before the first Pythiad of 586/582.⁵⁷ It is clear that a rather robust mythical and legendary tradition about these Games developed with regard to its origin and earliest history, not unlike the interest that other historians and mythographers took in the origin and earliest history of the Delphic Oracle. It seems that once it had been proposed that the Games were established by Apollo himself, the way was paved for the embellishment of the mythical and legendary traditions of heroes and quasi-historical musicians by conferring Pythian victories to musicians like Terpander and by explaining a lack of victories for poets like Homer. Thus, the Pythian Games became more to the ancient Greeks than just another opportunity to cheer on the hometown heroes. It was made literarily to be a connection with what some Greeks perceived as their historical past-- collections of myths and legends that were full of gods, heroes, and all manner of fantastic creatures.

NOTES

- 1 Paus. 10.7.4. Fontenrose suggests that subsequent Pythiads were calculated from the contest of 582 BCE, at which crowns of laurel were first awarded to the victors and a program of contests, similar to the Olympic Games, was employed ("The Cult of Apollo and the Pythian Games," in *The Archeology of the Olympics: The Olympics and Other Festivals in Antiquity*, ed. Wendy J. Raschke [Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988], 125-126).
The transliterations of words and names from Greek to English conform to a fairly standard pattern; kappa changes to 'c.' Here the -os termination is preferred to the Latinized -us, and Heracles to Hercules. The spellings should not make the names unidentifiable.
- 2 The specific mention of certain champions and changes in the program suggests that he consulted a written source of some sort, perhaps even Aristotle's own work. Aristotle and his nephew Kallisthenes were accorded special honors at Delphi for having written a short history of the Pythian Games (*Fouilles de Delphes* [FD] 3.1.400). The work was inscribed on stone and stored somewhere within the temple of Apollo.
- 3 Paus. 10.7.2. cf. 2.7.7, 2.30.3, 10.6.7.
- 4 On the similarity of these two creatures, see Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 13-22. The word "contest(s)" is used to refer to the musical competitions at Delphi that were supposed to have existed before 586 BCE; "Games" refers to the competitions after that year.

- ⁵ Arist. frg. via Schol. Aristides p. 105, ed. Frommel; Hyg. Fab. 140; Ov. Met. 1.438ff; Stat. *Theb.* 6.8-9; Ptolemy Hephaestion via Phot. *Bibl.* 190; Clem. Al. *Protr.* 1.1.7-22, 2.34.1; Lact. Plac. in *Theb.* 6.8-9; John of Antioch via Exc. Salmasii in Craineri Anecd. Par. II, p. 383-388; *Argg.* 1 and 3 to Pi. *P.*
- ⁶ Paus. 10.7.2-3.
- ⁷ Philammon: Ov. *Met.* 9.317; Eleuther: Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.10.1.
- ⁸ Clem. Al. *Protr.* 1.1-3.
- ⁹ Schol. *Od.* 3.267. Eustathius echoes this scholion at the same citation in his commentary on the *Odyssey*. Creon was said to have ruled Thebes at a time when the Sphinx was besieging it. Oedipus later solved the riddle and released the city from the threat.
- ¹⁰ *Arg.* 1 to Pi. *P.* Recall that the athletic contests were not held at the Pythian Games until 586 BCE, according to Pausanias (Paus. 10.7.4-5). The reader is most likely familiar with the modern versions of the ancient sporting events of boxing, discus, and wrestling but perhaps not with the *stadion*, *dolichon*, *hoplites*, and *pankration*. The *stadion* and the *dolichon* are foot races of approximately 180 meters and 4,800 meters, respectively. The *hoplites* is a *stadion* run in full armor—traditionally, the events were contested in the nude. Literally meaning “all powers,” the *pankration* was much like modern mixed martial arts fighting with only biting and gouging the eyes specifically outlawed.
- ¹¹ *Arg.* 1, 2, and 4 to Pi. *P.* Note that some of the details, particularly the fact that things of value were the prizes for the victors and that these were later replaced by the laurel sprig, are similar to Pausanias’ account (cf. 10.7.5). It is possible to see Pausanias’ emphasis on the importance of the Amphictyons in the establishment of the Games (10.7.4) as evidence that he was familiar with the story of their reconstitution of the Games following the First Sacred War, a war with which he was familiar (10.37.5-8). There is evidently some fact missing from the details of Pausanias’ account of the reestablishment of the Games. Specific details about the war itself in Pausanias are different from the scholiasts on Pindar, which likely means that they used different sources for the history of the war proper.
- ¹² Noel Robertson, “The Myth of the First Sacred War,” *CQ* 28, no. 1 (1987), 38-73. The acceptance of Robertson’s thesis is not a major premise of this article, since it only speaks to the Pythian Games of the first Pythiad and not to the contests of times previous.
- ¹³ August Mommsen, *Delphika* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1878), 153-154; Joseph Fontenrose, “The Cult of Apollo and the Pythian Games,” 125; Joseph Fontenrose, *Python*, 456; Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley: University of California Press), 128.
- ¹⁴ Plut. *Mor.* 293B. The Septerion is at least first in the list of “nine-yearly” festivals that Plutarch gives us. On the etymology of the name of the festival, see August Mommsen, *Delphika*, 210n1. Most probably from *σέβομαι*, “to revere.”
- ¹⁵ Pi. and Call. frgg. via Tert. *De Cor. Mil.* 7.5; Theopomp. Hist. frg. via Ael. VH 3.1; Call. *Dieg.* 2.23ff; *FD* 3.2.191.15-20; Plut. *Mor.* 293C, 418B-C; St. Byz., s.v. “Δειπνιάς.” For other accounts of Apollo’s pollution by the death of the Delphic dragon, see Paus. 2.7.7, 2.30.3, 10.6.7, 10.7.2; Lact. Plac. in *Theb.* 1.570; *Arg.* 3 Pi. *P.*; ps.-Plut. *De Musica* 14. Anaxandrides of Delphi apparently thought that Apollo performed labors as expiation (Anaxandr. Hist. frg. via Schol. E. *Alc.* 1).
- ¹⁶ Plutarch’s Cleombrotus vehemently denies the mythological precedent (Plut. *Mor.* 293B-C). He observes that the dwelling, which was burned down by those in the procession, was more akin to the dwelling of a despot than that of a snake, which was the common interpretation. This

discrepancy between the actual rites and the explanation in the myth is likely indicative of the fact that the former preceded the later.

¹⁷ Plut. *Mor.* 293D-F.

¹⁸ Plut. *Mor.* 293C-D.

¹⁹ cf. Apuleius' account of the mystery cult of Isis in book eleven of *Metamorphosis*. On the public rites, he comments freely, but his description of the arcane initiation rites is intended to leave the reader with the curiosity mysterious that led to Lucius' misfortunes at the beginning of the story.

²⁰ Semele was killed when Zeus showed her the smallest portion of his glory; she was vaporized. For more on the Semele myth, see Hes. *Th.* 940ff; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.26-27; D.S. 4.2.1. For Dionysus' connection to the Delphi and its Oracle, see A. *Eu.* 24-26; E. *Bacch.* 300; Plut. *Mor.* 365A, 388E; *Arg.* 1 to Pi. *P.*

²¹ *Arg.* 3 to Pi. *P.* All translations are my own.

²² Demetrius of Phalerum frg. *via* Schol. *Od.* 3.267. cf. Eust *ad Hom. Od.* 3.267. Apparently, Menelaus was curious how he might punish Paris. For the oracle that Menelaus received, see Ath. 232D.

²³ Censorinus *De Die Natali* 18.6.

²⁴ The alteration of the purpose of the trip to Tempe is likely a necessary result of the scholiast's belief that Apollo was cleansed in Crete, a view held also by Pausanias (Paus. 2.30.3; 10.6.7).

²⁵ The laurel was woven into crowns (Paus. 10.7.5; Ov. *Met.* 1.450). There are reports that different prizes given out too, palm branches at some times (Plut. *Mor.* 724A-B; Lib. *Laud.* 9.9) or apples at others (Lucian *Anach.* 9; *Anth. Pal.* 9.357; Maximus of Tyre 1.4, 34.8; Lib. *Laud.* 9.9). Ovid says that the first prizes were oak wreaths (Ovid. *Met.* 1.448-449). However, this is merely because the story of Daphne, the *aetion* of Apollo's connection with laurel, has not yet been told (Ov. *Met.* 1.452ff).

²⁶ Plut. *Mor.* 293B-C.

²⁷ Fontenrose, *Python*, 460; August Mommsen, *Delphika*, 211; Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 130, n. 77.

²⁸ Plut. *Mor.* 410A.

²⁹ Plut. *Mor.* 418A.

³⁰ Ian Rutherford concurs. See *Pindar's Paeans: A Reading of the Fragments with a Survey of the Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 202, 202n4.

³¹ Paus. 10.7.5.

³² Schol. *Od.* 3.267. Eustathius echoes this scholion at the same citation in his commentary on the *Odyssey*.

³³ The other victors were Melampus the Caphallenian, who won the harp contest, and Echembrotus the Arcadian, who won for singing to the flute (Paus. 10.7.4). About these two musicians not much more is known.

³⁴ Paus. 6.14.10, 10.7.4; ps.-Plut. *De Musica* 8.

³⁵ Paus. 2.22.8.

³⁶ Paus. 9.30.2.

³⁷ Pi. frg. 282 *via* Paus. 9.30.2 and ps.-Plut. *De Musica* 8.

³⁸ Paus. 4.27.7.

³⁹ Hsch., s.v. "Σακάδ[ε]τον"; LSJ, s.v. "Σακάδιον."

⁴⁰ ps.-Plut. *De Musica* 8.

- ⁴¹ Paus. 2.22.8.
- ⁴² The tradition of Sacadas, like Terpander, who is discussed below, would likely have been subject to the accretion of apocryphal tales. However, the evidence of his name on the list of Pythian champions is difficult to deny. The denial of the historicity of Sacadas would only lend more credibility to the main thesis, namely that the early history of the Pythian Games is so crowded by legend that it is difficult to support any certainties about the competitors or nature of the competition in that period with the extant evidence.
- ⁴³ Timosthenes frg. *via* Str. 9.3.10. The “encouragement” movement recalls to memory the renditions of the myth in which Apollo is supported by the locals who are at the battle. cf. Ephor. frg. 31B *via* Str. 9.3.11-12; Call. *Hymn* 2.97ff. The translation of μελοποιέω, “to compose,” is a bit tricky. As it has been said above, Pausanias believed that Sacadas sang the first song to the Pythian strain at Delphi. We, therefore, ought not to understand from Strabo that Timosthenes was the first, but rather a musician known for composing a rendition of the Pythian strain.
- ⁴⁴ Poll. 4.84. For probable examples of the Pythian strain, see FD 3.2.137 and 138, the two Delphian hymns. Both of these hymns originate from the second century BCE and are preserved with musical notation.
- ⁴⁵ *Arg.* 1 to Pi. *P.*
- ⁴⁶ Clearly the author of this scholion (*Arg.* 1 to Pi. *P.*) is attempting a description of the old Pythian contest since he uses the words Πυθικὸς ἀγών (line 9, Drachmann ed.). The description, however, corresponds closely to other known descriptions of the Pythian strain (*supra*).
- ⁴⁷ Aristoxenos frg. ps.-Plut. *De Musica* 15. K.O. Müller apparently believed that this dirge of Olympus was sung at Delphi, but there is no indication of the location of its performance in the primary sources (Karl Otfried Müller, *The History of the Literature of Ancient Greece*, vol. 1 [London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1840], 157).
- ⁴⁸ There are multiple works entitled *On Music*. That of Aristoxenos and that attributed to Plutarch are different; the latter cites the former.
- ⁴⁹ ps.-Plut. *De Musica* 7; Hyg. *Fab.* 165, 273. According to ps.-Apollod. 1.4.2, Marsyas was the son of Olympus.
- ⁵⁰ K.O. Müller places the second Olympus in the mid-seventh century BCE (Karl Otfried Müller, *The History of the Literature of Ancient Greece*, vol. 1, 159).
- ⁵¹ ps.-Plut. *De Musica* 4. On the innovations of Terpander, see Karl Otfried Müller, *The History of the Literature of Ancient Greece*, vol. 1, 149-156; M.L. West, *Ancient Greek Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 329-330.
- ⁵² Hellicanus frg. *via* Athenaeus 635.
- ⁵³ *Anth. Pal.* 9.488. cf. Suda, s.v. “Τέροπανδρος.” See D.L. Page, ed., *Further Greek Epigrams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 100.
- ⁵⁴ M.L. West, *Ancient Greek Music*, 18-19.
- ⁵⁵ M.L. West, *Ancient Greek Music*, 330.
- ⁵⁶ Paus. 10.7.2-3.
- ⁵⁷ See note three above.