

CHAPTER THREE

PAST AND PRESENT IN PINDAR'S RELIGIOUS POETRY

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Cult songs were composed in order to be performed within institutional festivals and rites which took place recurrently and had a fixed, or at least predictable, position in the religious and ceremonial calendar.¹ Mircea Eliade, in his seminal book entitled *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954), argued that, on account of their recurrent character, festivals and other ceremonials contribute to the abolition of time and the return to the mythical time of the beginning of things, which he called *illud tempus*. According to him, any acts, gestures, and narrative structures that take place within such events are not perceived merely as repetitions of the initial divine and heroic acts/gestures, but are believed to take place at that very primordial mythical moment. As a result, profane time and duration are suspended, and the celebrants are projected back into the mythical past and resume contact with the 'real sacred'.²

Even though it is a common allegation that festivals interrupt everyday profane time and mark the inauguration of a special time, Eliade's sweeping generalization, that all festivals serve to re-constitute the past and transport the participants to the primordial creative epoch, was much criticized because it throws everything into the same crucible overlooking particularities and variations.³ Robert Parker, in his book *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (2005), offers a more nuanced approach, declaring that the merging of past and present is not an intrinsic characteristic of all festivals but merely one possible scenario. According to him, festivals can actually play tricks with time; apart from projecting participants into the mists of the past and collapsing past and present, festivals may also treat the past as if it were recurrent or present; they can even retroject

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² Eliade (1954) 34–35, 76, and *passim*. On the temporal qualities of festivals see also, Hubert (1999); Werner et al. (1988).

³ See, among others, Kirk (1974) 63–66.

the present to the past.⁴ In fact, as Parker points out, merely a handful of ancient sources testify to both a qualitative and quantitative collapse between past and present within a ritual framework and refer to the participants as being ‘actual actors in the mythical events’ narrated or re-enacted. He does concede, however, that such ‘sober’ prose accounts do not necessarily reveal much about, and therefore should not be taken as reflecting, the participants’ real feelings and actual experience.⁵

In this paper I will attempt to examine how Pindar speaks of, shapes, and configures the relation between past and present in his cult songs, especially his *Paeans* and *Dithyrambos*. What kind of temporality does his religious poetry serve to conjure up? Is this temporality always the same? Does *he* play any tricks with time? What role does he ascribe to himself, *qua* poet, in all this? What should to be stressed from the outset is that Pindar’s cult songs are not merely descriptive of, but are also conducive to, a festival’s sacred ambience. Moreover, they profoundly influence the intensity of the audience’s religious experience, as well as the way in which they perceive and comprehend the relation between past and present. For purposes of comparison and illustration I will round off my discussion with a brief look at the *Epinicians*, the encomiastic songs that Pindar composed for victorious athletes. As will become clear, whereas scholars tend to treat and examine Pindar’s epinician and religious poetry *ensemble*, the way in which Pindar negotiates the relation between past and present, and pitches his poetic *persona* in these two poetic genres differs considerably. This discrepancy, as I will suggest, can be explained by the different aims, etiquettes, and purposes of epinician and cult poetry respectively.⁶

Cult Songs

Let us begin our discussion with *Paeon* 12 (Fr. 52m M.). From the opening lines it can be inferred that the poem was commissioned in

⁴ Parker (2005) 377–378. See also id. (1996) 273–274 where he refers to the foundation of ‘commemoration’ festivals in Greece in the third century BC.

⁵ Parker (2005) 377–378.

⁶ A note needs to be made here on terminology. There has been much discussion on the complex nature of the Pindaric narratorial ‘I’ and the various different identities it can assume. For purposes of convenience, in what follows I will be referring to the different ‘Is’ sylleptically, by using the terms ‘Pindaric narrator’, ‘the poet’ and ‘Pindar’. The bibliography on the Pindaric ‘I’ is vast; see among others the informative discussions by Bremer (1990) 44–45 and Schmid (1998) 147–153.