On the Meaning of χρόνος in Pindar's Nemean 1.46

N. 1.46-7 has been one of the most controversial passages in Pindaric poetry, as the image of time extracting the life from the bodies of two snakes seems somewhat unusual in a mythical narrative describing the infant Heracles’ amazing feat when he strangled in his cradle the serpents sent by Hera. The narrative runs as follows (33-47):

ἐγὼ δ᾿ Ἡρακλεός ἀντέχομαι προφρόνας ἐν κορυφαῖς ἀρετῶν μεγάλας, ἀρχαῖον ὀτρύνων λόγον, ός, ἐπεὶ σπάγχνων ὕπο ματέρος αὐτικα θαητὰν εἰς αἴγλαν παῖς Διὸς ωδίνα φεύγων διδύμῳ σὺν κατηνήθητ μόλεν.

One would have expected Heracles, not time, to be the subject of the last sentence. Hence, Schmidt’s conjecture χρόνος, adopted by Bury,2 presumably referring to the serpents’ hiss as life leaves their bodies, instead of the reading χρόνος, which is given by all the manuscripts. Gerber and Segal, in two of the most important

1) All Pindaric citations are from Snell-Maehler. All fragments of the Orphic tradition are cited from the Teubner edition of Bernabé.
2) Bury 1890, 20 f.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2008 DOI: 10.1163/156852507X195466
articles on the passage,\(^3\) both rightly defend the reading of the manuscripts with conclusive arguments.\(^4\)

Gerber follows Fränkel’s observation\(^5\) that Pindar conceives time as an active force, and provides many parallel examples, which show that “time is virtually personified in Pindar”.\(^6\) However, in his attempt to interpret the use of χρόνος in the passage, he employs a more ‘passive’ meaning when he suggests that what Pindar actually means is that “the serpents died in time”\(^7\) and he concludes that it is not necessary to “interpret this ‘period of time’ as being either long or short”.\(^8\)

Segal offers a fuller account of the passage in relation to its context. He rightly connects ‘time’ in l. 46 with ‘all time’ (τὸν ἀπάντα χρόνον) in l. 69, following Fennel’s suggestion, to argue that “Chronos unites the beginning of the myth… with its end”\(^9\) and “denotes the all-encompassing fulfillment of the gods’ design which is as complete in the moment as it is in eternity”.\(^10\) Thus he translates “Time caused the life to be breathed out of the (snakes’) unspeakable limbs as they were being strangled”.\(^11\)

Although this interpretation gives an adequate explanation of the meaning of ‘time’ in the ode, there is a neglected aspect, which can shed new light on the passage and explain why Pindar ever thought of using the word χρόνος in a mythical narrative of the first remarkable feat of the newly born Heracles. The phrasing both in this passage and in l. 69, where we have the only other mention of ‘time’ in the ode, suggests a connection between Heracles and χρόνος that is close to the point of identification. We have already observed that in the first passage χρόνος actually performs the strangling of the serpents, instead of Heracles. In the second passage the phrase τὸν ἀπάντα χρόνον comes at the end of Tēiresias’ prophecy for the young Heracles, where the hero’s name conspicuously remains unmentioned (69-72):

\(^{3}\) Gerber 1962; Segal 1998.
\(^{4}\) Paolo Vivante’s article is the only study focusing on the notion of Time solely in Pindar; however he does not include N. 1.46 in his discussion, except in an endnote, where he simply mentions that time in this passage is a concept “akin to fate”, therefore it may bear “a meaning close to that of death” (1972, 131 n. 2).
\(^{5}\) Fränkel 1960, 10-2 and 20-1.
\(^{6}\) Gerber 1962, 31.
\(^{7}\) Ibid. 32.
\(^{8}\) Ibid. 33.
\(^{9}\) Segal 1998, 162.
\(^{10}\) Ibid. 162 ff.
\(^{11}\) Ibid. 155.