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## Two Notes on Simonides' Plataea-Poem

### 1. Son of the Nereid

Achilles' Matronym in Simonides, *Eg* 10–11, Bacchylides 13 and other texts

“Peleides” is one of the most recognisable patronyms in Greek poetry, but occasionally poets refer to Achilles matronymically. In the Plataea-poem Simonides addresses him with this periphrasis (ll. 19–20):

θεᾶς ἐρικυ[δέος υἱέ,  
κούρης εἰν]αλίου Νήρεος

Invoking Achilles as son of the daughter of Nereus is a way of drawing attention to his semi-divine status, which is appropriate at this point in the poem<sup>1</sup>.

Albert Schachter has recently compared a similar matronymic formula for Achilles (“son of Thetis”) in Pindar, *Paeon* 6, 83–4:

κυανοπλόκοιο παῖδα ποντίας Θέτιος βιατάν

The epithet *ποντίας* is equivalent to *εἰναλίου* in Simonides, but apart from that the parallel is not overwhelming. Schachter suggests: a) first that Pindar imitates Simonides, b) second that the point of the matronymic in Simonides is to allude to the fact that the Achilles that Simonides is concerned with is an Achilles of the Black Sea, and thirdly c) that this factor corroborates his hypothesis developed in his article that the Plataea-poem was performed at Sigeum. In fact, the expression “offspring of Thetis” is not as unique as all that. It also occurs also in one other passage of Pindar, in *Olympian* 9.76, dated to 460 B.C.: ἐξ οὔ Θετίος γόνος ... And the ultimate model for this Pindaric use is likely to be two cases where this is used in Homer's *Iliad* for Achilles, both times in direct speech. In Book 4.512, Apollo, rousing Trojans to war, refers to the “son of Thetis” skulking by the ships. And in Book 16.860, Hector answers Patroclus, who has just made a prophecy about his death: “maybe I will kill the son of Thetis”. In both cases the tone may be pejorative, but in both cases it is possible that this pejorative tone is obtained via the ironic use of a formula that would normally have a highly positive association.

Describing Achilles as ‘offspring of Thetis’ is more common in 5<sup>th</sup> century texts. Two examples can be cited.

i) First, Bacchylides 13, an epinikion composed in 485 B.C. for Pytheas of Aegina, which retells the story of the *Iliad*, and uses the image of the waves to describe the anger of Achilles (121–123):

ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ πολέμοιο  
λήξεν ἰοστεφάνου Νηρηίδος ἀτρόμητος υἱός,  
ὥστ' ἐν κυνανθέϊ· θυμὸν ἀνέρων  
πόντῳ Βορέας ὑπὸ κύμασιν δαΐζει,  
νυκτὸς ἀντάσας ἀνατελλομένας, λήξεν δὲ  
σὺν φαεσιμβρότῳ  
Ἄοϊ, στόρεσεν δέ τε πόντον  
οὐρία . . .

<sup>1</sup> See D. Obbink, *The Hymnic Structure of New Simonides*, *Arethusa* 29.2 (1996) 193–203. Cf. fr. 10, 5–6, where Achilles is identified as *κούρης εἰν]αλίης ἀγλαόη]με πάι*.

The primary sense of Νηρηΐδος is “daughter of Nereus”, so the expression amounts to the same complex matronymic found in Simonides, and it is the nearest we come to a precedent for it. Here the matronymic is worked into the context. Achilles’ withdrawal from the fighting is said to resemble the sea withdrawing with the tides, and the parallel is underscored by a lexical parallel with the word λήξεν. Achilles is not only related to sea deities, he even behaves like the sea. But it is worth observing that a role for Nereus in Aeginetan myth, and probably in Aeginetan cult, is implied by the fragment of the Aeginetan prosodion known as Pindar “Paeon 15”. So perhaps Bacchylides is describing Achilles in a way that would have been familiar to Aeginetan audiences.

ii) My second example of the use of the matronym “offspring of Thetis” or the equivalent in a 5<sup>th</sup> century text is from the Achilles Ode in Euripides *Electra*. Here Euripides tells how the Nereids accompanied Achilles from Thessaly to Troy, and, earlier than that, brought his divine armour from Lemnos to Thessaly (challenging the conventional Iliadic version). Achilles is referred to thrice as “son of Thetis”, never as “son of Peleus”. One case is an apostroph: ὦ Θέτιδος παῖ (454). Notice in particular the phraseology of line 450: Θέτιδος εἰναλίου γόνον, where the epithet εἰναλίου seems to reflect Simonides IEG 11.

These two texts may provide clues as to the earlier part of the narrative of Simonides 11. But they also show that a poem in which Achilles is addressed or described in this way need not have been performed in direct connection to the cult of Achilles at Sigeum. Achilles’ heroic cult is a panhellenic tradition that can be called up anywhere.

As a coda to this section, I would like to suggest that there may be a direct link between ll. 19–20 of the Plataea poem and Bacchylides 13. 121–3. It may have been a direct link, if Bacchylides’ use of marine imagery to describe the moods of Achilles in 485 B.C. was remembered and imitated seven years later by Simonides. Alternatively, it may have been an indirect link, if, for example, both poets draw on a lost model, perhaps a hymn to Achilles.

## 2. An ally for my song

### Or what did Simonides’ Plataea-poem mean for Timotheus?

Simonides’ Plataea poem and the *Persae* of Timotheus share a similar theme, though their form is different. One specific parallel between them has to do with the invocation by the poets of divine assistance<sup>2</sup>. Simonides invokes the Muse as ἐπίκουρος at the point of transition from the hymnic introduction to the main part of the poem; ἐπίκουρον is a military metaphor; Simonides imagines his situation as a poet as analogous to that of a fighter in a battle, and he calls on the Muse to assist him<sup>3</sup>. So in the *Persai* of Timotheus the epithet ἐπίκουρος is used in a poetic invocation, this time applied to Apollo (202ff.):

ἀλλ’ ὦ χρυσεοκίθαριν ἀέξων μοῦσαν νεοτευχῆ,  
ἐμοῖς ἔλθ’ ἐπίκουρος ὕμνοις, ἰήϊε Παιάν·

This passage too comes at point of transition: Timotheus has just described the Greeks singing the paean of victory, and he moves from there to ask “Paeon” Apollo to assist him in his own song. The paian-cry supports the military metaphor, since paeans are sung in war; in fact the immediately preceding myth ends with the Greeks singing a victory-paeon<sup>4</sup>. The grounds for the request is that Timotheus has been abused by the Spartans who approve of older music, and disapprove of his new songs. This is an unfair attitude, he claims, since Timotheus himself is the continuer of an ancient tradition of *kitharodia* that goes back to Orpheus and Terpander. One significant difference between these two poetic invocations for a divine ἐπίκουρος is that the help Timotheus asks for is in respect of his status as a poet, not of the theme or organisation of the song; so whereas Simonides’ battle is purely metaphorical, Timotheus’ is to some extent real, in so far as the Spartans had really attacked him.

<sup>2</sup> See Rutherford, 1996, 182.

<sup>3</sup> On the word, see further J. J. O’Hara, 1998. *Venus or the Muse as ‘Ally’* (*Lucr.* 1.24, *Simon. Frag. eleg.* 11. 20–22 *W*), *CP* 93 (1998) 69–74.

<sup>4</sup> The paean-cry is analysed by P. van Minnen, *The Performance and Readership of the Persai of Timotheus*, *AFP* 43 (1997) 246–260.

Granted that Timotheus alludes to Simonides' Plataea-poem here, it is legitimate to ask what the point of the allusion might be. The simplest answer would be that it was suggested purely by the similar themes of the poems. For all we know, there were other similarities between the poems also: perhaps Timotheus began with a hymn to a hero, perhaps Simonides ended with a σφῶγις<sup>5</sup>. Timotheus by implication places himself in the tradition of what was perhaps the most celebrated elegy on the Persian Wars.

A slightly more sophisticated answer would make use of the comparatively conservative nature of Simonides' poetry. Timotheus' agenda in this passage is to prove that his poetry, while novel in some respects, was traditional in others; that agenda is served, I would suggest, by appropriating a recognisable and conspicuous detail of poetic vocabulary from a more conservative poem on a similar theme. As scholars have pointed out, the form of the Plataea-poem is conservative, harking back to the elegiac narrative poems of 7<sup>th</sup> century poets such as Callinus and Mimnermus<sup>6</sup>. Timotheus implies that in his current struggle with Spartan musical taste, he can rely on exactly the same sort of divine assistance that was available to Simonides when he wrote the Plataea-poem. Admittedly, the Plataea-poem represents a different poetic tradition from the citharodic tradition that Timotheus seems to link himself to a few lines later, but it is a poetic tradition nevertheless.

Another factor that may be relevant to the issue is the role of Sparta. The Plataea-poem narrates a battle where the Spartans played the major role, and it may have been commissioned by Pausanias himself<sup>7</sup>. In the *Persai* the allusion comes at a point when Timotheus is about to describe the disrespect with which the Spartans have treated him. Thus, while Simonides' Muse helped him narrate a Spartan military success, Timotheus' Apollo will help him narrate his own conflict with Sparta. Timotheus' *Persai* sets itself up as a rival to the Plataea-poem, but Timotheus' own Plataea (so to speak) is his conflict with Sparta.

What would give this hypothesis more point would be if the Plataea poem was one of the traditional poems that the Spartans preferred. In fact Sparta has been suggested as one of the locales for the original performance of the poem, on the grounds that it seems to stress the involvement of the Spartans in the conflict, and particularly the role of the Spartan general Pausanias has a prominent role in the narrative<sup>8</sup>. Even if the original performance was not in Sparta but somewhere else (Plataia itself? Delphi?)<sup>9</sup>, it remains possible that it was reperformed in Sparta. Could it perhaps have achieved canonical status at Sparta? Did it come to have a place in Spartan μουσική in the life-time of Timotheus? This was the period when Pausanias' eponymous grandson was king at Sparta, and it is possible to imagine him encouraging the performance of poems that celebrated his grandfather's military exploits.

Unfortunately, there is a problem with this hypothesis: Pausanias fell from favour at Sparta, and was starved to death in circumstances resembling a state-execution towards the end of the 470's. Is it really possible that the Spartans would have been comfortable with a poem that commemorated his exploits, even at a time when his grandson was king of Sparta?

Even if we abandon the idea that the poem was being performed at Sparta in the time of Timotheus, the very reason we had to abandon it may give us a clue to how the allusion works. What if the disgrace of Pausanias is the whole point? Timotheus is furious with Sparta for drumming him out. I would suggest that his revenge has two levels. On a more overt level he celebrates the great Athenian victory at Salamis; and on a more covert level, he alludes to the Plataea-poem, a poem whose focus on Pausanias must have been deeply embarrassing to contemporary Sparta for whom Pausanias remained a traitor. The ἐπίκουρος Muse helped Simonides praise Pausanias who a) after the battle showed himself to be an extremely arrogant man; and b) was hounded by the Spartans; what could be more appropriate than that ἐπίκουρος Apollo should support Timotheus who is being hounded by arrogant Spartans?

Of course, more than one of these points could be true at the same time: Timotheus might appeal to the Plataea-poem at this point in his poem because he wants to mark his poem in a tradition of other battle poems, and/or because he has just had his own battle with Sparta, and/or because this was the sort of traditional poem the Spartans preferred, and/or because the figure of Pausanias suggests both the arrogance and the hostility of the Spartans.

<sup>5</sup> See Rutherford, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> See Rutherford, 1996, 176.

<sup>7</sup> See Aloni, 1997, 8–29.

<sup>8</sup> See P. J. Parsons, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 59 (1992) 32.

<sup>9</sup> See the survey in Rutherford, 1996, 174–175.

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