

MISZELLEN

NESTOR AND SARPEDON IN PINDAR, PYTHIAN 3 (AGAIN)

In a note recently published in this journal¹) David Sider addresses a question that is posed by P. 3.112–14: why, out of all the many figures available to him, did Pindar select Nestor and Sarpedon in order to illustrate the power of poetry to confer lasting fame? Rightly rejecting the notion (advanced, e.g., by Farnell and Young) that the choice was a merely random one, Prof. Sider cites one or two “more pertinent” attempts at explanation – that the two are representative of the Greek and the Trojan camp respectively²), that they embody wisdom on the one hand and martial prowess on the other³) – before advancing as “more relevant to the theme of *Pythian 3*” the observation that Nestor and Sarpedon “are among the very few in the *Iliad* who explicitly state the theme of *non omnis moriar*” (i.e., at 11.761 and 12.310–28). Pindar’s tacit point, on this interpretation, is that Hieron “should liken himself to those few heroes who are aware that their great deeds have already guaranteed them such status and who, furthermore, derive consolation from this fact.”

By way of supplement to Prof. Sider’s interesting proposal, and in confirmation of his belief that “randomness is not a quality one normally associates with Pindar,” I wish to argue for the existence of yet another rationale behind the choice of names, one which is briefly stated in the commentaries of Fennell and Schroeder⁴) but which to my knowledge has never been accepted, or indeed even reported, by more recent scholars.

In addition to wisdom, eloquence, and reminiscential loquaciousness, a quality for which Nestor was proverbial in classical antiquity is longevity. Attention is emphatically drawn to this trait on the occasion of Nestor’s first appearance in the *Iliad* (1.250–52):

1) D. Sider, Sarpedon and Nestor in Pindar, *Pythian 3*, *RhM* 134 (1991) 110–11.

2) B. L. Gildersleeve, *The Olympian and Pythian Odes* (New York 1890; repr. Amsterdam 1965) 277.

3) Sider cites J. Duchemin, *Pindare. Pythiques (III, IX, IV, V)* (Paris 1967) 56 and W. H. Race, *Pindar* (Boston 1986) 61; cf. also A. Boeckh, *Pindari opera quae supersunt*, Vol. II, 2 (Leipzig 1811–21; repr. Hildesheim 1963) 263 (“ob magnam famam sapientiae et virtutis”) and W. Christ, *Pindari carmina prolegomenis et commentariis instructa* (Leipzig 1896) 145 (“Sarpedonis bellicae virtutes et Nestoris prudentia consilia”).

4) C. A. M. Fennell, *Pindar: The Olympian and Pythian Odes* (Cambridge 1893) 174 and 184, O. Schroeder, *Pindars Pythien* (Leipzig 1922) 31. Fennell presents no evidence or arguments for Sarpedon’s longevity; Schroeder cites Apollod. 3.1.2.

τῷ δ' ἤδη δύο μὲν γενεαὶ μερόπων ἀνθρώπων
ἐφθίαθ', οἳ οἱ πρόσθεν ἅμα τράφεν ἠδ' ἐγένοντο
ἐν Πύλῳ ἡγαθήη, μετὰ δὲ τριτάτοισιν ἀνασσεν.

Following an interpretation found in the scholia and in Eustathius, most modern commentators agree in taking these lines to mean that Nestor has lived through two thirty-year generations and is now king in the third, i.e. that he is "approximately in his seventies"⁵). Although nothing much by the standards of a Sophocles or an Isocrates, such an age is no doubt imposing enough for a man of Nestor's supposed era and circumstances; but is that really the intended meaning of the lines? The fact that the relative pronoun οἳ is in grammatical apposition to δύο γενεαὶ most naturally suggests that that phrase refers not to two periods of time but to two sets or "bod[ies] of persons born at about a certain time and conceived of as living for a certain period"⁶), with ἐφθίατο = "had perished" rather than "had passed by, had elapsed." In that case, however, a difficulty arises if we suppose that the "certain period" here implied is no more than the canonical thirty years: are we really to imagine that Nestor has by some miracle survived two sudden mass extinctions of men in their prime?⁷

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Od. 3.245 τοῖς γὰρ δὴ μὴν φασὶν ἀνάξασθαι γένε' ἀνδρῶν, which according to Eustathius "concisely paraphrases the more diffuse statement" in Il. 1.250 ff., in fact appears to extend Nestor's lifespan considerably *beyond* seventy-odd years, since "reign thrice over the generations of men" is presumably equivalent to "reign over three generations of men"⁸), and reigning *over* three generations is distinctly more impressive than reigning *among* the third. Whether the relation of Od. 3.245 to Il. 1.250 ff. represents "an instance of the growth of the legendary into the miraculous" (Leaf) or a "Steigerung" (Ameis-Hentze) or simply reflects a "misunderstanding" (Kirk), the ampler conception of Nestor's longevity that it embodies was strongly influential in later (particularly Roman) literature⁹).

That Sarpedon may serve along with Nestor as an example of longevity is established by Apollodorus (3.1.2), who states that "Zeus granted him to live for three generations" (ἐπὶ τρεῖς γενεάς ζῆν). The notion of an extended lifespan thus curtly reported by Apollodorus would seem to have arisen originally as a way of

5) M. M. Willcock, A Commentary on Homer's Iliad, Books I-VI (London 1970) 20; cf., e.g., W. Leaf, ed., The Iliad, Vol. I (London 1900; repr. Amsterdam 1971) 22, K. F. Ameis and C. Hentze, eds., Homers Ilias, Vol. I (Leipzig and Berlin 1894) 21 and Homers Odyssee (Leipzig and Berlin 1900) 85, G. S. Kirk, The Iliad: A Commentary, Vol. I (Cambridge 1985).

6) R. J. Cunliffe, A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect (London 1923; repr. Norman, Oklahoma 1963) *s.v.* γενεή. Eustathius *ad loc.* notes that the relative clause "is not easily reconciled" with the temporal interpretation of γενεαὶ (οὗ ἐυκόλως πρὸς τὴν τοιαύτην ἔννοϊαν συμβιβάζεται).

7) Porphyry's notion that the first generation is Neleus and the second Nestor's brothers, all of whom were killed by Heracles in his attack on Pylos (schol. *ad Il.* 1.250), is contradicted by the patent generality of reference in γενεαὶ μερόπων ἀνθρώπων.

8) I construe γένεα as the object of ἀνάξασθαι, following A. Heubeck, S. West, and J. B. Hainsworth, A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey, Vol. I (Oxford 1988) 175.

9) For copious references see P. J. Enk, *Sex. Propertii Elegiarum Liber Secundus*, Vol. II (Leiden 1962) 196-97.

rectifying a chronological discrepancy. Although according to the *Iliad* Sarpedon is the son of Zeus by Laodameia, one of three children borne to Bellerophon by his Lycian princess-bride (Il. 6.192 ff.), an alternative tradition apparently current as early as the *Ehoiai* (fr. 140 Merk.-West) makes him the son of Zeus by Europa and hence the brother of Minos – and how, save by being gifted with praeternatural longevity, could a brother of Minos have been a vigorous and effective participant in a war in which Minos' grandsons Idomeneus and Meriones also fought¹⁰? Explicit allusions to such a prolongation of Sarpedon's lifespan appear to be lacking for the fifth century, but it is necessarily implied by, e.g., Eur. *Rhes.* 29 ἢ τὸν Εὐρώπας, Λυκίων ἄγων ἀνδρῶν, which explicitly identifies the Sarpedon of Minos' generation with the Lycian prince who commanded a contingent of allied troops at Troy¹¹).

Far from being random, then, Pindar's choice of names in P. 3.112 can be seen to reflect a number of mutually compatible rationales, ethical as well as aesthetic. If Gildersleeve is right to discern a careful balancing of Greek cause against Trojan, if Boeckh and others are right to see the two figures as emblematic of *sapientia* and *virtus* respectively, and if Professor Sider is right to connect them with the *non omnis moriar* theme¹²), Fennell and Schroeder are also right to regard the pair as (in Fennell's words) "types of longevity". Pindar's implicit point in invoking such *exempla* is in full harmony with the consolatory and paraenetic intention that informs the poem as a whole. Although Nestor and Sarpedon may have been granted a prolongation of life well beyond the human norm, they died in the end nonetheless, suffering a bodily extinction no less complete and no less absolute than that which faces any ordinary mortal; and they were rescued from the oblivion that otherwise would inevitably have ensued only because they had done deeds worthy of song and found a poet to sing them. It follows, then, that mere *quantity* of life is much less important than the *use* one makes of the time, long or short, that one has¹³). In telling the story of Asclepius Pindar has already warned

10) The account found in Diod. Sic. 5.79.3, according to which there were *two* Sarpedons, one the brother of Minos and the other a grandson who fought at Troy, is a rationalistic – and hence presumably later – solution to the same difficulty; cf. also Eustath. *ad Il.* 6.198–99 οἱ δὲ νεώτεροι Εὐρώπης καὶ Διὸς υἱὸν Σαρπηδόνα λέγοντες καὶ ἀδελφὸν αὐτὸν ἱστοροῦντες τοῦ Μίνωος ἄλλον ἐκείνον Σαρπηδόνα γενεαλογοῦσι παλαιότερον, ὡς φασιν οἱ ἀκριβέστεροι.

11) Cf. also Bacch. fr. 10 Snell and Herod. 1.173, in which, however, the identification is *not* made explicit. The conception according to which Sarpedon is still in his fighting prime at the end of three generations while Nestor has become the archetypal γέρον would seem to be analogous to that which has the "deathless and ageless" Olympians undergo physical maturation after birth only as long as is required in order for them to attain the bodily form that expresses their essential nature, at which point all change ceases.

12) It should be noted, however, that formulaic expressions such as "being looked at as a god" and "being honored as a god" are very common in epic diction and appear in contexts in which mortality, survival through fame, and consolation are not even implicitly at issue (cf., e.g., Il. 5.78, 9.155, 297, 302, 10.33, 11.58, 13.218, 16.605, 22.434, Od. 5.36, 7.71, 8.173, 19.280, 23.339, Hes. Th. 91).

13) Thus in his use of paradigmatic figures Pindar implicitly anticipates a *topos* of later philosophical consolation; cf. [Plut.] *Cons. ad Apoll.* 111a (οὐχ ὁ μακρότατος βίος ἀριστος ἀλλ' ὁ σπουδαιότατος) and the discussion of that passage in R. Kassel, *Untersuchungen zur griechischen und römischen Konsolationsliteratur* (Munich 1958) 83–85.

Hieron (and all other auditors and readers) that it is useless, foolish, and impious to long for physical immortality; now in the final lines of the poem he implicitly reminds them that even exceptional longevity, which as a putative desideratum falls well short of immortality, offers no substantive advantages to human beings in the absence of achievement and celebration. Blessed with the resources to act effectively and to have those actions commemorated in enduring song, Hieron has no just cause to repine at the shortness of his days¹⁴).

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14) Cf. Nestor's appearance as an *a fortiori* exemplum in two self-consolatory epigrams from the Palatine Anthology, 7.157 (ἔθανεν χῶ τριγέρον Πύλιος) and 9.112 (καὶ Νέστωρ δ' ἤλυθεν εἰς Ἀΐδην).