

# The Gorgons' lament in Pindar's Pythian 12

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## The Gorgons' Lament in Pindar's Pythian 12

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In P. 12,6–8, the beginning of the myth, Pindar asks that Acragas welcome the victorious aulete Midas, νικάσαντα τέχνα, τάν ποτε / Παλλὰς ἐφεῦρε ὑρασειᾶν <Γοργόνων> / οὔλιον ὑρῆνον διαπλέξαισ' Ἀθάνα. The passage presents no problems except for the precise meaning of οὔλιον, the most recent explanation of which is given by Köhnken as follows<sup>1</sup>:

“O. Schroeder versteht οὔλιος ὑρῆνος (8) passivisch und meint: «Ähnlich vielleicht unser ‘Todesschrei’ als eines Getöteten oder über ... den Tod eines anderen zu Tode Erschrockenen: keineswegs bezeichnet es, aktivisch, eine Wirkung des Threnos selbst auf den Hörer». Gegen diese Auffassung sprechen jedoch die Parallelen bei Pindar: O. 9,76 ‘im verderblichen Krieg’ (οὐλίῳ ... ἐν Ἄρει) und O. 13,23 ‘verderbenbringende Lanzen’ (Ἄρης ἀνθεῖ νέων οὐλίαις αἰχμαῖσιν ἀνδρῶν). Das Adjektiv ist also wohl auch P. 12,8 aktivisch aufzufassen (‘verderblich’, ‘schrecklich’): in seiner Wirkung auf Perseus gleicht der Threnos der Gorgonen einem furchteinflössenden und verderbenbringenden Kriegsgeschrei. Dafür spricht auch, dass Pindar die furchtbare Erscheinung der Schwestern so sehr hervorhebt (7 ὑρασειᾶι Γοργόνες; 9 ἄπλατοι ὀφίων κεφαλαί; vgl. 13 ὑεσπέσιον Φόρκοιο ... γένος).”

For reasons that will soon become apparent, I do not think that this is a valid interpretation. To consider Köhnken's arguments first, there is no doubt that in the two other passages in Pindar where οὔλιος occurs, it has the meaning given by Köhnken. No Greek poet, however, is obliged to give a word the same meaning every time he uses it, and this is especially true of a lyric poet. The translation ‘verderblich’ may also seem appropriate in light of the surrounding words ὑρασειᾶν and ἀπλάτοις, but when one considers the end of the myth a different translation suggests itself<sup>2</sup>.

As the myth comes to its close, the τέχνα, τάν ποτε Παλλὰς ἐφεῦρε is picked up in vv. 19–22 in the following manner:

παρθένος αὐλῶν τεῦχε πάμφωνον μέλος,  
ὄφρα τὸν Εὐρυάλας ἐκ καρπαλιμᾶν γενύων  
χριμφθέντα σὺν ἔντεσι μιμήσαιτ' ἐρικλάγκταν γόν.  
εὔρεν θεός.

1 A. Köhnken, *Die Funktion des Mythos bei Pindar* (Berlin 1971) 136.

2 It should also be pointed out that Perseus has not yet been introduced, so that Köhnken's “in seiner Wirkung auf Perseus” would be possible only in retrospect. This is not, however, a major objection, since parallels could no doubt be found for such an anticipatory use elsewhere in Pindar.

Clearly γόον repeats ὑρῆνον<sup>3</sup>, but none of the adjectives in the passage bears any relationship to οὔλιον in the sense of ‘verderblich’. The μέλος which Athena fashioned from Euryale’s lament is described as containing ‘all kinds of sounds’ (πάμφωνον), the lament proceeds from the ‘swiftly-moving’ (καρπαλιμᾶν) jaws of Euryale, and it is ‘loud’ (ἐρικλάγκταν).

It is time now to consider the various meanings οὔλιος may have and a possible model for Pindar’s use of οὔλιον here. The most detailed treatment of the word in recent years is by J. A. C. Greppin<sup>4</sup>. As one of its meanings he defends, convincingly in my opinion, the argument made by McKenzie<sup>5</sup> that in some passages οὔλος means ‘thick, frequent’, virtually a synonym of πικνός. Both Greppin and McKenzie assign this meaning to the phrase οὔλον κεκλήγοντες in *Il.* 17,756 and 759<sup>6</sup>, and one is immediately struck by the possibility that Pindar had this phrase in mind when he composed vv. 8 and 21. As was mentioned earlier, γόον in v. 21 repeats ὑρῆνον in v. 8, and this repetition, combined with the repetition of ἐφεῦρε and εὔρεν, seems to me to make it plausible that Pindar intended us to see some connection between the adjectives that modify the two nouns. This connection becomes apparent if we take οὔλιον and ἐρικλάγκταν to be a reference to οὔλον κεκλήγοντες. If this is so, and if Greppin and McKenzie are right in their explanation of οὔλον in the Homeric passage, then the likelihood becomes strong that οὔλιον here means ‘oft-repeated’. Such a meaning ties in well with πάμφωνον (v. 19) and especially with καρπαλιμᾶν γενύων (v. 20), since ‘swiftly-moving jaws’ imply frequent repetition of what is uttered.

Finally, a reference to repetition is especially appropriate in connection with a threnody<sup>7</sup>. The unceasing nature of lamentation is often stressed in

3 M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge 1974) 11, finds “some differentiation” in the Homeric use of these two words, but admits that in classical authors there is “little distinction of meaning”. They are sometimes combined, as in Eur. *Andr.* 92 and *Medea* 1211.

4 *Oulos, ‘Baneful’*, *TAPhA* 106 (1976) 177–186.

5 *Etymologies*, *CQ* 19 (1925) 208–210. McKenzie does not mention our passage and Greppin assigns the meaning ‘destructive’ to all three occurrences of the word in Pindar.

6 A scholiast on the passage gives the explanation ὄξυ βοῶντες καὶ πικνόν. McKenzie argues that πικνόν is right, but not ὄξυ, and he gives as a translation ‘uttering oft-repeated cries’. Could the scholiast have been misled by ὄξεα κεκληγῶς in *Il.* 17,88 or by the use of ὄξυς elsewhere of birds, as in ὄξυ λεληκῶς (*Il.* 22,141)? – F. Bornmann, *Callimachi Hymnus in Dianam* (Firenze 1968) 120–121, has a lengthy note on οὔλα in vv. 246–247, αἱ δὲ πόδεσσιν / οὔλα κατεκροτάλιζον, in which, without citing McKenzie, he concludes that Callimachus “identificò οὔλα con πικνά nel senso omerico di ‘fitto, frequente’, un significato che si adatta molto bene ai movimenti dei piedi nella danza”. It seems to me that the same identification with πικνός is possible for the other occurrences of οὔλος in Callimachus (*Hymn to Zeus* 52; fr. 228,41; *Epigr.* 5,5 Pf.), in all of which it is associated with a verb of motion.

7 On the repetitive nature of Greek threnodies, including the frequent use of refrains, see Alexiou (above, n. 2) 135ff.

Greek poetry and ὑρῆνος or γόος are qualified by words such as ἀδινός<sup>8</sup> (e.g., *Il.* 24,747), αἰεί (e.g., *Soph. El.* 530, *Eur. IA* 1176), ἀκορέστατος (*Aesch. Pers.* 545), ἀλίαστος (*Il.* 24,760), ἀνάριθμος (*Soph. El.* 232), παμμήκης (*Soph. OC* 1609), πολύς (e.g., *Soph. El.* 88.255), πολύφαμος (*Pind. I.* 8,58)<sup>9</sup>, etc. In contrast, there does not seem to be any example of a threnody that is 'verderblich'<sup>10</sup>.

8 Cf. Chantraine, *Dict. étym. de la langue gr.* s.v. ἄδην, who explains the phrase as a 'plainte pressée, répétée'.

9 More probably 'vielsagend' (Thummer) than 'of many voices' (Slater).

10 There is, however, some support for a threnody of the type postulated by Schroeder in the quotation from Köhnken cited at the beginning of this article. Cf. *Il.* 23,10 and 98 ὀλοοῖο ... γόοιο (lamentation for the dead Patroclus), *Aesch. Agam.* 1445 μέλψασα θανάσιμον γόον (of Cassandra), and possibly *Septem* 917 δαϊκτῆρ γόος, where Hutchinson in his commentary says δαϊκτῆρ may mean 'concerned with those who slew, or, with slaying'. But in view of the preponderance of parallels for the repetitive nature of threnodies and in view of the structure of the myth in *P.* 12, with the obvious ring-composition present in its beginning and end, it seems much likelier that the adjective means 'oft-repeated'.