

ALBERT SCHACHTER

SIMONIDES' ELEGY ON PLATAIA: THE OCCASION OF ITS PERFORMANCE

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 123 (1998) 25–30

© Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn

SIMONIDES' ELEGY ON PLATAIA: THE OCCASION OF ITS PERFORMANCE¹

My purpose is to try to set Simonides' elegy about the battle of Plataia into its historical context, to suggest why he wrote it as he did, when and where it was first performed, and to what end. There have of course been other attempts to do this, but I am not entirely convinced by any of them, and there is at least one other possibility which has not, I believe, been considered².

Despite minor variations of emphasis and detail, there is general agreement on its historical context among those who have written about the poem:

A) The poem was composed on commission³, soon after the battle of Plataia⁴, for performance either at a symposium or as part of a festival⁵. The latter is the more prevalent view, and the following places and occasions have been suggested: Plataia, at the Eleutheria⁶; Plataia, at some celebration to honour the dead, who are on the way to being heroized⁷; Aigina, home of Achilles' grandfather Aiakos⁸; Sparta or Thessaly, where there were sanctuaries of Achilles⁹; Delphi, a natural site for a panhellenic celebration¹⁰.

B) It is also accepted that the poem commemorates the victory of the Hellenes, since it focusses on the contributions of more than one polis, although it does reflect Sparta's major rôle¹¹, and that

C) Achilles is the subject of the beginning of the poem either because it was performed at a sanctuary of Achilles¹², and/or the poet wished to stress the epic heroic nature of the battle of Plataia, and did so by focussing on the greatest Greek hero of the Trojan War: in this way Achilles and the Trojan War were balanced and matched by those who fell in the battle of Plataia, and by that battle itself¹³.

My own search for a plausible historical context into which the poem might fit is guided by what strike me as being the most important features of the poem:

- 1) The choice of Achilles as subject of the opening section;
- 2) The Peloponnesian bias of the piece;
- 3) The singling-out of Pausanias;
- 4) The extended prophecy.

Any creditable explanation of the historical setting of the poem must account for all four of these features.

First, why Achilles? The comparison of the defeat of Troy with the defeat of the Medes and Persians at Plataia is easy to make and obvious enough. But Achilles is an odd choice for Simonides to single out

¹ The text is cited according to the edition by M. L. West, *Iambi et Elegi Graeci* 2, Oxford 1992², 118–122.

² Fascicle 2 of *Arethusa* 29, 1996, is devoted entirely to Simonides' elegies. To the bibliography on pp. 283–293, add A. Aloni in L. Edmunds & R. W. Wallace, edd., *Poet, Public, and Performance in Ancient Greece*, Baltimore & London, 1997, 8–28; A. Capra & M. Curti, "Addenda" to their article, *ZPE* 107, 1995, 248.

³ E.g. A. Aloni, *ZPE* 102, 1994, 19–21.

⁴ E.g. I. Rutherford, *Arethusa* 29, 1996, 174.

⁵ E.g. I. Rutherford (n. 4) 174 and D. Boedeker, *Arethusa* 29, 1996, 241 (festival), M. L. West, *ZPE* 98, 1993, 5 (symposium).

⁶ E.g. I. Rutherford (n. 4) 174; *POxy* 59, 1992, 6.

⁷ E.g. E. Stehle, *Arethusa* 29, 1996, 207, 219; D. Boedeker (n. 5) 241.

⁸ E.g. I. Rutherford (n. 4) 174.

⁹ E.g. I. Rutherford (n. 4) 174; D. Obbink, *Arethusa* 29, 1996, 199.

¹⁰ E.g. I. Rutherford (n. 4) 174.

¹¹ E.g. D. Boedeker (n. 5) 232–233.

¹² D. Obbink (n. 9) 199.

¹³ E.g. D. Obbink (n. 9) 199.

at the celebration of a victory: after all, Achilles did not live to see the Trojans defeated and their city taken. And it is his death and burial, rather than his triumphs on the field of battle which are celebrated in this poem. This alone would seem to preclude a first performance of the poem at Plataia itself, although it is not impossible. What may be impossible is that the poem, even if performed at Plataia, was performed at the Eleutheria. There is no contemporary evidence for this agon – which was in any case military and athletic – before the closing years of the fourth century BC. Thucydides reports that after the battle, Pausanias sacrificed to Zeus Eleutherios in the agora of Plataia¹⁴, but the only formal ritual at Plataia connected with the battle attested during the fifth century was the tending of the graves of the fallen by the people of Plataia¹⁵. It is possible that there was a special celebration, just after the battle, but I should prefer to find an occasion which is specifically appropriate to Achilles, or rather one for which Achilles was appropriate. We should therefore be looking for a context into which he fits naturally. This makes the suggestion that the poem was first performed at Delphi attractive, perhaps at the Pythia of 478. Here at least a connection with Achilles can be established, for it was here that his son Pyrrhos/Neoptolemos was killed. The story is told by Pindar in two versions, Nemean 7.34–47 and Paian 6.78–120. The latter poem was written for performance at Delphi at the Theoxenia, which is another possible Delphic occasion. A large portion of Pindar's Paian deals with Apollo's attempts to delay the fall of Troy, by shooting Achilles dead, but to no avail (78–120). This section contains at least one distinct echo of Simonides: this is where Pindar refers to Achilles as *κυανοπλόκοιο παῖδα ποντίας* | *Θέτιος βιατάν*; he may also be recalling Simonides when (lines 78–80) he writes that it was Apollo, in the guise of Paris, who killed Achilles; then there is, at lines 98–99, the reference to Achilles' tomb. Gregory Nagy has suggested that the death of Achilles may have been “a traditional theme” appropriate to a paian performed at the Theoxenia, although the discovery of Simonides' poem now makes it more likely that Pindar used it as the starting point for his own telling of the story¹⁶.

A festival or ritual at Delphi, then, might be appropriate as a setting for the first performance of Simonides' poem, at least as far as the section on Achilles is concerned. And the setting might be suitable for the prominence given to Pausanias, for we are told by Thucydides that the tripod set up by the Hellenes at Delphi to commemorate their victory over the Medes originally bore a couplet – attributed to Simonides – which claimed that Pausanias had dedicated the memorial in his capacity as leader of the Hellenes. The offending lines were removed from the stone (if they were ever there), but not before they had been transcribed for posterity¹⁷. Nor would the extended prophecy in Simonides, foretelling the expulsion of the enemy from Asia, have been out of place at Delphi, before a panhellenic audience.

But two things argue against Delphi. One is Achilles himself: in Simonides' poem he is the centre of attraction. At Delphi he is a peripheral figure, and in any case Delphi is not a place in which he or his offspring appear in a good light: Apollo killed both Achilles and Neoptolemos, the former because the god wanted to delay the inevitable end of the war, the latter because of his impiety towards the gods at the sack of Troy. But more important is what I see as the Peloponnesian bias of the poem. This poem is not a celebration of a panhellenic victory, it celebrates a victory won by Sparta and its allies. It has been argued that we do not have enough of the poem to show that it was biased in favour of Sparta¹⁸, but if we widen the net to include Sparta's Peloponnesian allies, the neglect of other Hellenes, even in a relatively incomplete text, is striking. Even the Homeric Greeks in Simonides are called by their Peloponnesian name, Danaoi, rather than the more common Achaioi (fr. 11.14). There is not a single reference in the Plataia section to Hellenes; the focus is wholly on the Spartans and their Dorian allies:

¹⁴ 2.71.2–4. Cf. 3.58.5.

¹⁵ See my *Cults of Boiotia* 3, London 1994, 127.

¹⁶ G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans*, Baltimore & London 1979, chapter 4, esp. p. 60.

¹⁷ Thucydides 1.132.2–3; cf. M.-L. 27 = “Simonides” Epigram XVII(a) Loeb/FGE.

¹⁸ I. Rutherford (n. 4) 175.

1) The men to be remembered are those who, at or relying on, Sparta, warded off the day of slavery (11.25–26);

2) They set out on their march from Sparta, bringing with them Spartan heroes and led by Pausanias son of Kleombrotos (11.30–34);

3) They marched to Corinth and then to Megara, where the armed forces of neighbouring peoples gathered (11.35–38)¹⁹;

4) It is the sons of Doros and Herakles, that is the Dorian Peloponnesians and their Heraklid leaders, who faced the Medes and Persians in the plain (13.8–12);

5) The prophecy is put into the mouth of the Spartans' seer (14);

6) The Corinthians are described in glorious and complimentary terms: they are between two other contingents, presumably – if we follow Herodotos (9.28 and 31) – between the Lakedaimonians and Tegeans on the right, and the other Peloponnesians on the left (15–16).

It is also possible that the passage at fragment 11.39–45, where the plain of line 40 has been identified as the plain of Eleusis, has been incorrectly restored²⁰.

Indeed, it is accepted that this restoration creates difficulties²¹. The allied forces are said to have driven somebody – the Medes, presumably – out of Pandion's land. This could only mean that the Hellenes drove the Persian forces out of Attica, but there is no evidence that this happened. In addition, if ἐξε[λάσσα]ντες is read (11.41) and given its normal transitive meaning, there is nothing to refer to a passage from Salamis.

The accepted interpretation also depends on taking [Παν]δίονος in line 41 as referring to the land of Attica, but this is not secure either. There were two Pandions in Attica, one the father of Erechtheus, Boutes, Prokne, and Philomele, the other the father of four sons – Lykos, Pallas, Nisos, and Aigeus – among whom Attica was divided²². However, by the time of the battle of Plataia, Pandion had been in a sense demoted to the status of eponymous hero of Pandionis, one of the ten Kleisthenic tribes, and had no particular connection with Eleusis.

But there was a third Pandion, a Megarian hero. He seems to have been adopted by the Athenians and absorbed into their own legendary genealogies, perhaps as early as the sixth century. It has even been suggested that the presence of Pandion in both Megara and Attica reflects a supposed situation in the Bronze Age, when Megara and Attica were a single unit²³.

If Simonides' Pandion were transposed from Attica to the Megarid, a number of problems would be resolved. First, the Peloponnesian forces gathered at Megara²⁴ would have been free to enter Boiotia by the normal land route from the Peloponnese, rather than make an unnecessary detour by way of Eleusis²⁵. Second, the reference to driving the enemy out of Pandion's land could now be seen to refer to an incident described by Herodotos and Pausanias: according to Herodotos, when Mardonios was enroute

¹⁹ Cf. Herodotos 9.19.1.

²⁰ On the authority of Herodotos 9.19.2: Ἐκ δὴ ὄν τοῦ Ἴσθμοῦ καλλιτερησάντων ἐπορεύοντο πάντες καὶ ἀπικνέονται ἐς Ἐλευσίνα.

This would have been the point at which the Peloponnesian forces were joined by the Athenians coming over from Salamis.

²¹ See, for example, I. Rutherford (n. 4) 183–184.

²² U. Kron, *Die zehn attischen Phylenheroen*, Berlin 1976, 104–107; E. Kearns, *Heroes of Attica*, London 1989, 191–192.

²³ U. Kron (n. 22) 107–109; E. Kearns (n. 22) 88, 192; M. L. West, *The Hesiodic Catalogue of Women*, Oxford 1985, 107, 132; B. Sergent, *REA* 99, 1997, 11–23.

Pausanias was shown Pandion's tomb in the Megarid in the countryside (1.39.4 and 1.41.6) and his heroon in the city itself (1.41.6–7).

²⁴ Cf. by contrast Herodotos 9.21, where they seem all to have gathered at the Isthmos, and then set out from there to Eleusis.

²⁵ N. G. L. Hammond, *The main road from Boeotia to the Peloponnese*, in *Studies in Greek History*, Oxford 1973, 417–446 = *BSA* 49, 1954, 103–122.

to Boiotia from Attica, he was told that an advance guard of Lakedaimonians had come to Megara. He directed his army towards Megara, his cavalry going first and overrunning the territory, But, when he heard that the Hellenes had gathered en masse at the Isthmos, he turned back and entered Boiotia by way of Dekelea (9.14–15). Pausanias was told a story of how with the help of Artemis the Megarians pursued and massacred the Persians as they fled back to join Mardonios at Thebes (1.40.2, cf. 1.44.3)²⁶. And the plain which this force had reached would have been the Leukon/Loukou Pedion, located by late geographers in the Megarid²⁷.

If the poem celebrates Plataia, not as a panhellenic victory, but as a victory won by Sparta and its allies, a first performance at either Plataia or Delphi seems unlikely, and we are left to find a suitable sanctuary of Achilles. There were several of these, but most are attested only in late sources²⁸, and only the sanctuaries in Lakonia²⁹ would have been a suitable venue for a poem celebrating the Peloponnesian League. The prophecy regarding the delivery of Asia would certainly have found a sympathetic audience here. On the other hand, a poem singling out Pausanias for praise would have offended many Spartans.

Arguments from silence are notoriously insecure, and it is possible that one or more of the sanctuaries of Achilles attested on the mainland in later sources was functioning in the fifth century BC. As it happens, however, there are two sanctuaries of Achilles where cult activity can be traced back to the Archaic period. One was in the Black Sea, on the White Island off the mouth of the Danube, the other at the Achilleion, not far from Sigeion, at the entrance to the Hellespont³⁰.

If we shift our attention away from mainland Greece eastward to the Hellespont and beyond, fresh possibilities arise. This, for example:

After the battle of Mykale, Leotychides the Spartan king, who had commanded the allied fleet, went home with his Peloponnesian allies. The Athenians in the fleet, together with the allies from Ionia and the Hellespont, stayed on, besieged and took Sestos, and then withdrew, probably in spring 478³¹. A Hellenic fleet under the command of Pausanias, consisting of twenty Peloponnesian ships, thirty from Athens, and what Thucydides calls a *πληθος* from the other allies, was sent out – probably in spring 478, after the capture of Sestos – against Cyprus and Byzantion³². After a successful campaign against Cyprus, Pausanias and his forces made for Byzantion, which they besieged and took, either late in 478, or as seems more likely, in the spring of 477. By this time news of Pausanias' unjust and tyrannical behaviour had reached Sparta, and he was recalled. The Athenians, capitalizing on his unpopularity and on the vacuum left by his departure, assumed the leadership of the Hellenes themselves, and created what became the Delian League³³.

²⁶ R. P. Legon, *Megara*, Ithaca & London 1981, 168–170; C. Hignett, *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece*, Oxford 1963, 291ff.

See too the ode found inscribed on stone in Megara which commemorates Megarians fallen in battle. This too has been attributed to Simonides. They fell at Euboia, Pelion, Mykale, Salamis, Plataia. A line is missing from the poem (it is elegiac), which could have referred to this incident: IG 7.53 = "Simonides" fr. XVI Loeb/FGE.

²⁷ R. P. Legon (n. 26) 22. Schol. *Odyssey* 5.334 BPQT; *Etymologicum Magnum* 561.4, s.v. *Λευκοθέα*; *Heychios* 741 s.v. *Λευκοῦ πεδίου*.

²⁸ L. R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults*, Oxford 1921, 409; J. T. Hooker, *RhMus.* 131, 1988, 1–7.

²⁹ S. Wide, *Lakonische Kulte*, Leipzig 1893, 232–236, esp. 232–233.

³⁰ J. T. Hooker (n. 28) 1–7; G. Hedreen, *The cult of Achilles in the Euxine*, *Hesperia* 58, 1989, 313–330, esp. 313–314 (Achilleion near Sigeion), 319–322 (White Island); G. Nagy (n. 16) 340–343. See too F. Graf, *Nordionische Kulte*, Rome 1985, 351–353; *Neuer Pauly* 1 s.vv. "Achilleion", "Achilleus" (esp. 79).

On the joint tomb of Achilles and Patroklos, see *Odyssey* 24.76–84, cf. *Iliad* 7.84–94, 23.245–248.

³¹ Thucydides 1.89.2.

³² Thucydides 1.94.

³³ Thucydides 1.95.1–4, 1.96.1–2.

The sequence of events and suggested dates: W. T. Loomis, *Pausanias, Byzantion and the formation of the Delian League*, *Historia* 39, 1990, 487–492; J. M. Balcer, *The liberation of Ionia: 478 B.C.*, *Historia* 46, 1997, 374–377.

Along the route which Pausanias and his forces had to take on the way from Cyprus to Byzantion lies the Achilleion at the entrance to the Hellespont. It is possible that it was here, and in the course of this expedition, that Simonides' poem about the battle of Plataia was first performed. What place was more suitable for an invocation of Achilles, which focussed on his death, than the traditional site of his joint tomb with Patroklos? As far as the content of this section of the poem is concerned, it might be argued that in referring to the capture of Troy, Simonides was prefiguring the intention of Pausanias to take another city held by barbarians, namely Byzantion. Even naming the victors at Troy "Danaans" – from the Peloponnese – and the very fact that the poet speaks of the Trojan War at all, a siege in which the leading Greek powers came from the Peloponnese, and in which Athenians played a minor rôle, could be seen as an attempt to emphasize, by giving it legendary backing, the importance of the Spartan-led expedition of the current year, as opposed to the previous year's Athenian-led campaign against Sestos.

Another motif in the poem which may have linked it with the Hellespont is the repeated invocation of Achilles as son of Thetis, instead of by his normal epithet "son of Peleus" (10.5 and 11.19–20). The appellation was picked up by Pindar and Euripides, Pindar at line 84 of *Paian 6* (κυανοπλόκοιο παῖδα ποντίας Θέτιος βιατάν), Euripides at *Iphigeneia Taurica* 317 (τῷ τᾶς Νηρέως κούρας). Writing in a completely different context, Gregory Nagy has argued that Achilles is bound closely to the region of the Hellespont by the figure of his mother Thetis, goddess of the Pontos. Achilles himself, in later antiquity at least, bore the epithet *Pontarches*³⁴.

The pro-Peloponnesian bias of the Plataian section is also easier to explain if the poem was composed for performance before a captive audience – that is, the *πλῆθος* of the other allies – who were no doubt being wooed equally fervently by both Athenians and Spartans. It sets out the Spartans' claim to lead the Hellenes against Persians in Asia. The second half of the prophecy, which speaks of driving an enemy out of Asia, and the foundation of an alliance, can be taken to represent Sparta's policy in the region: it is they who will drive the Persians out, they who will lead the alliance. The prominence given to Pausanias – the kind of thing which got him into trouble over the offering at Delphi, and which probably contributed to his recall from Byzantion – also fits into this context. As Thucydides (1.95.3) puts it, one of the factors leading to his recall was that his generalship seemed to be more like an imitation of tyranny, which could well refer to his penchant for self-glorification. There is another example of Pausanias' arrogance while at Byzantion: *Nymphis of Herakleia* (FGrH 432F9), cited by Athenaios (12.536AB), wrote that while he was at Byzantion Pausanias had an inscription put on a bronze krater dedicated to the local gods, and quotes a pair of elegiac couplets, which claim that the dedication was made by Pausanias ἄρχων Ἑλλάδος εὐρυχώρου, leader of spacious Greece, Lakedaimonian, son of Kleombrotos, a Heraklid. The poem was attributed to Simonides³⁵.

Pausanias came out to Byzantion again later in the decade³⁶, and this too could have provided an occasion for the performance of the poem, but the earlier date seems more likely, as it fits more easily into the context of the two major Greek powers' jockeying for hegemony in the East. Similarly, the Achilleion seems more likely than the sanctuary on the White Island, because of its more accessible location.

To summarize: Simonides' elegy on the battle of Plataia was commissioned by Pausanias, to be performed at the supposed tomb of Achilles near Sigeion at the entrance to the Hellespont. Its purpose was to impress the Greeks of Asia with the magnitude of the achievement in defeating the Medes and Persians at Plataia, and to emphasize the leading rôle played in this battle by the Peloponnesian forces led by Pausanias. This, he hoped, would help convince the Asians to choose Sparta as their military

³⁴ G. Nagy (n. 16) 343–347, esp. 344, and references to Hesiod, *Theogony* 241–244, 233, and Pindar, *Isthmian* 8.34. For Achilles *Pontarches*, see p. 343, and G. Hedreen (n.30) 322–323.

³⁵ "Simonides" fr. XXXIX Loeb/FGE.

³⁶ Thucydides 1.128.3 and 1.131; Cambridge Ancient History 5, Cambridge 1992, 46, 100, 499.

leader rather than Athens. The first performance would therefore have taken place in spring or summer of 478. Athenians present, although not necessarily pleased, could have brought the text back to Athens, where echoes of it are heard in Aischylos' *Persai* (472 BC) and the inscribed Athenian elegy on the Persian Wars³⁷.

In conclusion, some remarks might be in order about the implications of this poem on the account given by Herodotos. As I have interpreted the Simonides elegy, it is a piece of Spartan propaganda cast in the form of poetry. It takes its place in the same tradition as the Homeric Hymns to Demeter and Apollo. But Simonides' emphasis on the importance of the Peloponnesian contribution to the liberation of Greece should not blind us to the fact that Herodotos also consciously distorted facts. We owe an important section of the poem – and indeed confirmation of its authorship – to Plutarch's indignation at Herodotos for denigrating the important rôle played by the Corinthians at Plataia³⁸. Why would Herodotos have distorted and virtually ignored the contribution of the Corinthians to the Hellenic victory at Plataia? For a possible answer we have to go forward at least fifty years to when Herodotos was putting his work together. It is estimated that he wrote well into the Archidamian War³⁹. He would have seen how Corinth instigated the breakdown of the hard-won peace between Athens and Sparta, from close at hand if it is true that he spent at least part of his later years at Thurii, and his distaste for the Corinthians of his own time could have coloured his treatment of their ancestors in the war of liberation. In any case, it is interesting to see how Herodotos treated the historical material in Simonides' poem, just as Aischylos, Pindar, and Euripides contain echoes of his poetry.

McGill University

Albert Schachter

³⁷ Aischylos, *Persai* 817 (Δωρίδος λόγχης); [δούλιον ἦμ]α at 11.25 is restored from CEG 1.2 = M.-L. 26.

³⁸ De Herodoti Malignitate 42 (872D).

Note too the prominence given to the Corinthians (third after Spartans and Athenians) on the "Serpent Column": M.-L. 27; and compare the epitaph of the Corinthians who died at Salamis: M.-L. 24 = CEG 1.131.

³⁹ C. W. Fornara, *JHS* 91, 1971, 25–34 and *Hermes* 109, 1981, 149–156.