

The chief characteristics of the paeon in the classical period are these: a basic component is a speech act of prayer directed toward a deity referred to as "Paian", most often Apollo; it was performed by a chorus, usually a chorus of men, often a citizen chorus; its chief formal feature is an antiphonal refrain; and it was used in wide (but not unlimited) range of contexts: cult, apotropaic prayer, battle, the symposium, theoria; not poetic competitions, as far as we can tell.

From the diachronic perspective, one obvious view is that the paeon develops in three phases:

- a. pre-Classical: pre- or sub-literary paeans with a simple structure;
- b. Classical: elaborate festival paeans by Pindar and other poets
- c. decadent: post-Classical deviations: such as the Paeon to Dionysus of Dionysius of Scarpheia; or the paeans in praise living kings in the Hellenistic period.

Paradoxically, it is surviving examples from the 4th century that best fit category a.

One problem with this approach is that some of the paeans that seem to have been performed in the Hellenistic and Roman periods are traditional ones, including the so-called Erythraean Paeon to Asclepius, and also Sophocles' Paeon to Asclepius. This suggests the hypothesis that what changes between Classical and Hellenistic period is not so much the songs themselves, but their performers and the circumstances of their performance. To take three examples:

- a. In the classical period, the performers of paeans are usually choruses of citizens. In the Hellenistic period, the use of the citizen chorus falls away. Instead we find performances by two new groups: i. tekhnitai, as in the case of the Delphic Paeans; and ii. paianistai: special religious organizations operating within some Roman cities, dedicated to the cults of Asclepius and Sarapis, and defined by the function of paeon-singing.
- b. In the Classical and Hellenistic period, the paeon seems never to be found in the context of poetic competition (contrasting in this respect with the dithyramb); but in the Roman period, competitive use of paeans is attested (from Termessos on Pisidia).
- c. One of the ostensibly new uses of the paeon in the Hellenistic period is to praise living rulers. But rather than interpreting this as representing a "decadent" phase of the genre, we would do better to see it as an extension of the traditional use of the paeon to praise/appeal to/thank deities. What is new here is the practice of treating rulers as gods.

The anthropologist Maurice Bloch has showed how a ritual can survive through major political changes, and may in fact serve the purpose of legitimising a new power structure by representing it as traditional. The paeon can be seen in much the same way: a traditional form of choral performance rooted in the world of the archaic and classical polis, which survives in the radically different society of the Hellenistic and Roman period, deployed strategically as a symbol of tradition and Hellenism.