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# THE IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM OF FIRE IN THE HOMERIC HYMNS AND IN GREEK CHORAL LYRIC

by

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ABSTRACT: The paper discusses the imagery of fire in the Homeric Hymns and in selected works of the Greek lyric poets, with a particular emphasis on Pindar and Bacchylides. It demonstrates how choral lyric authors use the symbolism of fire established in the Greek epic tradition and philosophical reflection, imbuing it with new meanings and painting images which illustrate the ambiguous nature of the element of fire, based on metaphors, similes and ecphrases.

In the minds of the ancient Greeks, fire was primarily an attribute of divine power and a symbol of immortality. Zeus, the highest ruler over gods and men, expressed his anger by hurling thunder and lightning. Deceived by Prometheus at the distribution of the meat of sacrificial victims, he took it out on humans by depriving them of using the fire that was originally kindled by rubbing pieces of ash wood together[1]. Prometheus stole the divine spark from under the wheels of the chariot of Helios or, in another version of the myth, from Hephaestus' forge, in order to give mortals, who found themselves helpless in the face of nature's might, the "gleam of unwearying fire"[2], thus granting them power over all the creatures on earth[3]. Similarly Heraclitus identified fire, in which he saw the first principle of the world (ἀρχή), with a deity manifesting as lightning[4]. Fire, which, so to speak, consumes and creates the whole world, occupies an important place in Heraclitus' concept of the cosmos[5].

In the works of the Greek lyric poets, fire tends to be associated with four deities – Hephaestus, Zeus, Helios and Apollo. From among them, Hephaestus

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[1] Hes. *Theog*. 563.

[2] Hes. *Theog*. 566, transl. by H.G. Evelyn-White.

[3] Pointing out the importance of fire in the process of humanity becoming civilised, Kerényi (2000: 107 ff. and 126 ff.) also stresses the destructive influence Prometheus' gift had on mortals resulting from its being part of the realm of the gods.

[4] Heraclit. fr. B 64 Diels–Kranz: "Thunderbolt steers all things" (transl. by G.S. Kirk).

[5] Heraclit. fr. B 90 Diels–Kranz: "All things are an equal exchange for fire and fire for all things, as goods are for gold and gold is for goods" (transl. by G.S. Kirk). For an interpretation of Heraclitus' teachings, see Reale (1987: 52 f.)

takes a special position in that his name is often found metonymically to mean 'fire'[6]. In Pindar's *Pythian* 3, fire in the form of "the fierce blaze of Hephaestus" (σέλας [...] λάβρον Ἡφαίστου, 39–40) engulfs the funeral pyre with the body of the nymph Coronis laid on it. The chief attribute of Zeus is thunder, described by Pindar as a "fire-flung weapon" (πυρπάλαμον βέλος, *O*. 10, 80), aflame with "ever flowing fire" (κεραυνὸν ... αἰενάου πυρός, *P*. 1, 5–6), or breathing fire (πῦρ πνέοντος κεραυνοῦ, fr. 146 Snell–Maehler, and κεραυνὸς ἀμπνέων πῦρ, fr. 70b, 15–16 Snell–Maehler). The horses yoked to Helios' chariot breathe fire as well. In *Olympian* 7, the god of the sun is called "the father who engenders the piercing sunbeams, the master of the fire-breathing horses"[7] (ὀξειᾶν [...] ἀκτίνων πατήρ,/ πῦρ πνεόντων ἵππων, 70–71).

The ability to kindle fire, seen as a symptom of civilisational progress, is referred to as τέχνη, an art[8]. According to the author of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, Hermes was the first to show humans a new method of kindling fire which made use of a striker (πυρήϊα; 111–114):

> Ἑρμῆς τοι πρώτιστα πυρήϊα πῦρ τ᾽ ἀνέδωκε.
> πολλὰ δὲ κάγκανα κᾶλα κατουδαίῳ ἐνὶ βόθρῳ
> οὖλα λαβὼν ἐπέθηκεν ἐπηετανά· λάμπετο δὲ φλόξ
> τηλόσε φῦσαν ἰεῖσα πυρὸς μέγα δαιομένοιο.
>
> For it was Hermes who first invented fire-sticks and fire. Next he took many dried sticks and piled them thick and plenty in a sunken trench: and flame began to glow, spreading afar the blast of fierce-burning fire[9].

The fire was meant to enable Hermes roast the meat of the cows stolen from Apollo (115–123), and then destroy the evidence of the theft, that is the heads and hooves, by then useless, which were to burn whole (136–137). Thus in addition to the basic, practical function employed by Hermes in the process of cooking, the scene illustrates the destructive power of the element, annihilating the remaining bits of the carcasses of the slaughtered animals. Walter Burkert points out that the act of kindling fire with two pieces of wood as described here can be compared to the ritual lighting of a sacrificial fire, also after it has died down, either with the help of sunlight or with a striker[10]. A ritual dimension of this kind is present in the scene of sacred fire being lit in the temple at Delphi, as depicted in the *Homeric Hymn to Pythian Apollo*. In this case it is Apollo who brings fire, lighting it in the adyton at the moment of his epiphany, "showing

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[6] A special association of Hephaestus with fire is reflected in Homer's epics. In the *Iliad* (XXI 330–382), Hephaestus, assisting Achilles, fights the river god Scamander with blasts of fire.

[7] Transl. by W.H. Race.

[8] *Hymn. Hom. Merc*. 108: πυρὸς [...] τέχνην.

[9] Transl. by H.G. Evelyn-White.

[10] Burkert 1984: 836 f. and 1985: 61 f. Cf. Richardson 2010: 173.

forth the splendor of his shafts"[11] (πιφαυσκόμενος τὰ ἃ κῆλα, 267), that is, the rays of the sun.

A number of poetic depictions of fire point out its ability to spread violently. Like Homer before him[12], Pindar mentions a "seed of fire", σπέρμα. That word, used by Anaxagoras to mean particles of matter which were the cause of all things, can figuratively refer to the beginning of a process, whether physical, biological or social, as observed by Gregory Vlastos[13]. The situation is similar in Pindar's *Pythian* 3, where in order to illustrate the violence and speed of a spreading plague the poet depicts it as a wildfire which quickly spreads to a whole forest and emphasises that it erupts "from one seed" (πῦρ ἐξ ἑνὸς σπέρματος, 36–37), that is, the spark from which the devastating flames arise. The image of a fire which gradually lays waste to a forest or a whole city, ever consuming more victims, is also to be found in Homer, who compares to it a fight between the Greeks and the Trojans, with more and more participants falling on the battlefield to the pressure of the enemy[14]. Solon similarly describes fire in an elegy as a force that is imperceptible at first but eventually unstoppable, comparing to it ruin (ἄτη), which can quickly bring down one overcome with greed (fr. 13, 13–15 West)[15]:

> ταχέως δ' ἀναμίσγεται ἄτη·
> ἀρχὴ δ' ἐξ ὀλίγου γίγνεται ὥστε πυρός·
> φλαύρη μὲν τὸ πρῶτον, ἀνιηρὴ δὲ τελευτᾷ.
>
> Ruin has a small beginning, like that of fire, insignificant at first but grievous in the end[16].

A "seed of fire" comes up in Greek poetry in one other context: as the attribute necessary for kindling fire on a sacrificial altar at a new place of worship. In *Olympian* 7, when recounting the establishment of Athena's cult on Rhodes, Pindar mentions "the children of Helios" – that is, Rhodians – having forgotten to bring with them a "seed of blazing flame" (αἰθοίσας [...] σπέρμ' [...] φλογός, 48) when they were to raise an altar to the goddess on the Acropolis of Lindus and make a sacrifice to her. This is a reference to the ritual carrying over of the so called ἀφιδρύματα (in the form of "seeds of fire", that is, embers from an altar

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[11] Transl. by H.G. Evelyn-White.

[12] Hom. *Od*. V 490: σπέρμα πυρός.

[13] Vlastos 1993: 305, n. 12.

[14] Hom. *Il*. XI 155–157; XVII 736–739.

[15] Noussia-Fantuzzi (2010: 68 f.) notes that Solon builds his simile on a single shared trait of fire, a widespread phenomenon in the natural world, with the abstract ἄτη: the one element in common is destructiveness.

[16] Transl. by D.E. Gerber.

where a sacred fire burnt) to a newly established cult site – temple or precinct – where they would kindle anew the fire on the sacrificial altar[17]. Even though they take the seemingly dead form of cinders, that special function of the seeds of fire which makes them capable of rebirth and restarting the process seems connected to the notion of fire as a substance originating with the gods and endowed with vital energy[18].

When humans encountered it, it tended to reveal its destructiveness, bringing with it devastation and death. In the myth told in Pindar's *Olympian* 10, fire becomes the instrument of revenge for Heracles after Augeas, the king of Elis, deceived him and would not pay him as agreed for cleaning his stables. The wronged hero led a raid in which he wrecked Elis with "ruthless fire and strokes of iron"[19] (ὑπὸ στερεῷ πυρὶ πλαγαῖς τε σιδάρου, 36–37). The attributive στερεός ('firm, solid, hard, stubborn, cruel'[20]) all but grants the fire zoomorphic (or even anthropomorphic) traits[21]. A similar device can be observed in *Olympian* 8, where the adjective λάβρος ('furious, boisterous, huge, mighty, fierce, violent, impetuous'[22]) describes the massive cloud of smoke hanging above a burning city (λάβρον ἀμπνεῦσαι καπνόν, 36). As was pre-ordained (πεπρωμένον, 33), that smoke will become the visible sign of the fall of Troy. In the passage from *Pythian* 3 quoted above, the adjective λάβρος describes flames consuming a funeral pyre like a voracious beast; the effect is emphasised by the use of the verb ἀμφέδραμεν (39), which lets the audience visualise the fire as a living organism running around the pyre. The wildfire mentioned in the same ode, which spreads through a forest by "jumping" or "dashing" (ἐνθορόν, 37), resembles a predatory animal. There is an excellent example for that kind of animation in Timotheus' *Persians* (fr. 791 *PMG*), a figurative depiction of fire with which, as the king of the Persians foretells in his monologue, the Hellenes will destroy the Persian ships. The poet speaks of "fire's smoky strength"[23] (πυρὸς [...] αἰθαλόεμ μένος, 183–184), which will burn (φλέξει, 185) the ships, pressing against them "with its savage body" (ἀγρίῳ σώματι, 184–185). The descriptions quoted paint fire as having the characteristics of a wild creature which attacks prey to sate its hunger.

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[17] For the ritual of transferring the ἀφιδρύματα due to the founding of a new cult site, see Malkin 1987: 120.

[18] Verdenius (1987: 68): "No metaphor, for fire was regarded as living being". A connection can be seen to Heraclitus' concept of "ever-living fire" (πῦρ ἀείζων), Heraclit. fr. B30 Diels–Kranz. On the perceptions of the element of fire in the mythology and philosophy of the ancient Greeks as something which gives rise to and restores life, see Freudenberg (2009: 117 ff.).

[19] Transl. by W.H. Race.

[20] LSJ 1996: 1640, s.v. στερεός.

[21] Verdenius 1988: 70. Cf. Bowra 1964: 242: "[Pindar] speaks of the destructive power of fire and brings out far-reaching implications by bold strokes of anthropomorphic imagery".

[22] LSJ 1996: 1021, s.v. λάβρος.

[23] Quotations from Timotheus in the translation by D.A. Campbell.

Homer accords fire just such animal characteristics when he portrays it as "the might of blazing fire" (πυρὸς μένος αἰθομένοιο, *Il*. VI 182) which "devours" (πῦρ ἐσθίει, *Il*. XXIII 182) the corpses of the twelve Trojans laid on Patroclus' pyre[24]. According to Herodotus, that is roughly how the Egyptians imagined it: "[...] while the Egyptians believe fire to be a living beast that devours all that it catches, and when sated with its meal dies together with that on which it feeds"[25]. In accounts of combat, fire becomes a weapon of war and simultaneously a clear symbol of destruction and death. Pindar demonstrates the devastating power of fire in his *Paean* 6 for the Delphians (fr. 52f Snell–Maehler), where he says that Troy was destroyed by the "gleam of blazing fire" (σέλας αἰθομένου πυρός, 97–98)[26], and Alcaeus is another poet to refer to the fall of Troy, as in one of his "songs on Helen" (fr. 42 Voigt) he says that Zeus destroyed the sacred Ilium with fire (π[ύρι δ' ὤλεσε, 3). The fire motif is a dominant element in the account of the sea battle of Salamis in Timotheus' *Persians* (fr. 791 *PMG*); the poet describes the Greek ships which have caused the death of the young Persians as "scorching" (σείριαί τε νᾶες, 179), and thus refers to an earlier mention of incendiary projectiles with which the Greeks attacked the Persian fleet, described as covered in pitch and "wrapped flaming with fire" (περίβολα πυρὶ φλεγ[όμ]εν', 26–27). Timotheus also mentions another ballistic weapon alongside the fiery projectiles – a javelin with a leather thong wrapped around it which therefore span when flung – comparing its destructive force to fire: "like fire the man-slaying [...] (warlord)" (ἴσος [...] πυρὶ δαμ[ασίφως/ Ἄρης, 21–22).

In war, fire brought about losses for the Greeks as well, as Bacchylides reminds his audience in *Epinician* 13, referring to an episode from the Trojan War recounted in Books 15 and 16 of Homer's *Iliad*: acting in accordance with the will of Zeus, who in turn wanted to fulfil the request of Achilles' mother Thetis, Hector sets the ships of the Achaeans on fire[27]. According to what was foretold before, this means that Achilles will now renounce his wrath and resume fighting[28]. In Bacchylides' ode, the fire spreading among the ships becomes an instrument of the madness that takes hold of Hector, which the gods brought about (θεσπεσίῳ πυ[ρὶ, 108)[29], and at the same time a portent of the approaching fall of Troy.

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[24] An association between the process of combustion and the act of eating and digestion in metaphorical uses of fire in Homer's *Iliad* is pointed out by Marchewka (2018: 98).

[25] Hdt. III 16, transl. by A.B. Godley.

[26] Also in Homer, the expression αἰθόμενον πῦρ tends to mean the fire that brings destruction and death, as e.g. in *Il.* XVI 293.

[27] Hom. *Il*. XV 596–600.

[28] Hom. *Il*. XVI 60–63, 123–129.

[29] See Nagy 2011: 191: "this fire is not a simile for the violence of Hector. It is a direct instrument of this violence".

The belief that fire is an unbridled, uncontrollable force is expressed in this gnome of Pindar (fr. 232 Snell–Meahler):

> τὸ πεπρωμένον οὐ πῦρ, οὐ σιδάρεον σχήσει τεῖχος.
>
> What is fated neither fire nor wall of steel can hold back[30].

Thus the element of fire appears as a power towering over humankind, which only the gods can stand up to.

Its destructive force is exemplified in the description of an eruption of Etna found in *Pythian* 1, perhaps one that Pindar witnessed during his stay on Sicily in the years 476–475 BCE (21–26):

> τᾶς ἐρεύγονται μὲν ἁπλάτου πυρὸς ἁγνόταται
> ἐκ μυχῶν παγαί· ποταμοὶ ἀμέραισι
> μὲν προχέοντι ῥόον καπνοῦ
> αἴθων᾽· ἀλλ᾽ ἐν ὄρφναισιν πέτρας
> φοίνισσα κυλινδομένα φλὸξ ἐς βαθεῖ-
> αν φέρει πόντου πλάκα σὺν πατάγῳ.
> κεῖνο δ᾽ Ἀφαίστοιο κρουνοὺς ἑρπετὸν
> δεινοτάτους ἀναπέμπει· τέρας μὲν
> θαυμάσιον προσιδέσθαι.
>
> from those depths belch forth holiest springs
> of unapproachable fire; during the days rivers of lava
> pour forth a blazing stream
> of smoke, but in times of darkness
> a rolling red flame carries rocks into the deep
> expanse of the sea with a crash.
> The monster sends up most terrible springs
> of Hephaestus' fire – a portent
> wondrous to behold...[31].

The volcano which, as the Greeks believed, hid Hephaestus' forge, is here depicted as a source of the terrible (ἁπλάτου, 21) fire. Depicted in the form of rivers or streams, fire here has traits characteristic of liquid substances, resembling water, which results in a *coincidentia oppositorum* – a juxtaposition of opposing elements repeated as many as three times[32]. The poet describes the flames emerging from the crater due to volcanic gasses burning as "springs of [...] fire" (πυρὸς [...] παγαί, 21–22)[33], while the lava flowing out as the volcano erupts

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[30] Transl. by W.H. Race.

[31] Transl. by W.H. Race.

[32] The presence of "a strong contradictory image" in Pindar's account of the eruption of Etna is pointed out by Schade (2013: 29).

[33] Farnell (1932: 109) interprets the place differently: "Pindar could have observed that the forcing out of boiling water was one of the volcanic phenomena".

takes the form of rivers (ποταμοί) which "pour forth a blazing stream of smoke" (προχέοντι ῥόον κάπνου αἴθων', 22). The same image reappears towards the end of the description, where Pindar tells his audience it is the hundred-headed monster Typhon, crushed by Zeus under Etna's rock, that spews the "most terrible springs of fire", referred to here using Haephaestus' name (Ἀφαίστοιο κρουνοὺς [...] δεινοτάτους, 25). Aeschylus draws on that description in his tragedy *Prometheus Bound* when he speaks of the fate of Typhon imprisoned beneath Etna, his anger causing the volcano to spurt "rivers of fire" (ποταμοὶ πυρός, 368), or the lava pouring out on the fields of Sicily. As one hypothesis holds, the expression "fire blazing in the night" (αἰθόμενον πῦρ [...] νυκτί, 1–2), used by Pindar in the simile opening *Olympian* 1, may also refer to the eruption of Etna which started in 479 BCE, as indicated by similar terms being used in the description of the eruption from *Pythian* 1 quoted above – πυρός ('fire', 21), αἴθων' ('blazing', 23), and ἐν ὄρφναισιν ('in the darkness', 3)[34].

The ancient Greeks believed that fire's cleansing effect was one of its most important functions. Those purifying properties took on special significance during funeral rites[35]. Cremating the corpse was intended to ensure that the soul would be freed swiftly from the corporeal shell so that it could depart to the netherworld. For the followers of mystic cults, cleansing with fire was a prerequisite for apotheosis and uniting with the gods and heroes. Heracles attained to immortality as he was struck by thunder and burnt on the pyre raised on Mount Oeta, whence Zeus carried him to Olympus[36]. However, death on a pyre was not the only way for a mortal to attain to the status and privileges of a hero, as indicated by the mythical tales of mothers and nurses who placed or cast infants into fire to make them immortal, grant them eternal youth, and protect them from the dangers which might threaten them in childhood. According to a tradition which may have already been known in the Archaic Period, but which is only attested to much later, in Hellenistic literature, Thetis placed baby Achilles in flames to make him immortal[37], having thus incinerated the mortal parts of her other six sons sired by Peleus. In the scholia to the *Iliad*, we read that by putting her children into a fire, she meant to find out whether they were mortal, and to save whatever of their nature was not[38]. In his *Alexandra*, Lycophron of Chalcis, probably identical to one of the Alexandrian Pleiad of tragic poets, claims that

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[34] That hypothesis of Fennel (1879) is quoted in Gerber (1982: 13).

[35] The connection between cremation and purification is noted in Wypustek (2010: 37). Cf. the *ignis purgatorius* in Christian tradition.

[36] See Hom. *Od*. XI 601–604; Hes. *Theog*. 950–955. Heracles' death on the pyre is only first mentioned in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (1193–1199).

[37] Apollon. Rhod. IV 869–872.

[38] Schol. ad Hom. *Il*. XVI 37. Cf. Apollod. *Bibl*. III 13, 6.

Thetis killed those six sons by subjecting them to fire as a kind of trial, while the last son, Achilles, was saved from the flames by Peleus[39].

Similar procedures were applied by Ino to her son Melicertes (as mentioned in Pindar[40]), and by Demeter to Demophoon, the son of Metaneira and Celeus, then the king of Eleusis, whom she wanted to grant immortality. Being the *aition* of a ritual element of the Eleusinian Mysteries, the story of Demophoon is told in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Placed centrally in the hymn (236–241), the episode shows Demeter as the infant Demophoon's nurse, who every night without his parents' knowledge immersed him in fire (πυρὸς μένει, 239) like a torch. The fire was to make the boy immortal, but in her ignorance[41] the terrified Metaneira misread the intentions of the goddess (248–249):

> τέκνον Δημοφόων ξείνη σε πυρὶ ἔνι πολλῷ
> κρύπτει, ἐμοὶ δὲ γόον καὶ κήδεα λυγρὰ τίθησιν.
>
> Demophoon, my son, the strange woman buries you deep in fire and works grief and bitter sorrow for me[42].

Angered, Demeter snatched the child from the flames (ἐξανελοῦσα πυρός, 254), depriving him of his chance to live forever. Placing Metaneira's earthly son, entrusted to a divine nurse, "deep in fire" (πυρὶ ἐνὶ πολλῷ, 248–249), is reflected in the climax of the Eleusinian ceremony held in the *telesterion*, where the bright light of fire would shine suddenly in the dark of the night. As the Christian author Hippolytus of Rome records, the hierophant would announce the birth of a divine son of the queen of the underworld "under a great fire" (ὑπὸ πολλῷ πυρί)[43], which could mean the glare of the many torches with which the *mystai* were purified[44]. Karl Kerényi sees the formula ὑπὸ πολλῷ πυρί as referring to birth in the great fire of a funeral pyre, invoking mythological examples of "a birth in death", such as Agamemnon sacrificing Iphigenia to Artemis, which led to his daughter's *palingenesis*[45]. Evidence for the Greeks associating fire with the realm of death can be seen in a fragment of Euripides' *Phaethon*, where the queen of the netherworld, Persephone, is called the "lady of fire" (πυρὸς δέσποινα)[46], indicating that she ful-

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[39] Lyc. *Alex*. 178–179.

[40] Pind. fr. 128d, 2–3 Snell–Maehler.

[41] Demeter accuses humans of being unable to recognise the gods' will; *Hymn. Hom. Cer*. 256–257: "Witless are you mortals and dull to foresee your lot, whether of good or evil, that comes upon you" (transl. by H.G. Evelyn-White).

[42] Transl. by H.G. Evelyn-White.

[43] Hippol. *Ref.* V 8, 40.

[44] An interpretation put forward by Richardson (1979: 27).

[45] Kerényi 1967: 92 f.

[46] Eur. fr. 781, 268–269 Nauck².

fills Hecate's duties and is bestowed with the powers attributed to her, as it was Hecate who was usually associated with fire.

The heterogeneity of fire, which both comes across as a destructive force and brings rebirth and immortality, is perfectly illustrated by Pindar's *Pythian* 3, where the poet recounts the myth of Artemis punishing the unfaithful Coronis with her deadly arrows. By cheating on Apollo, the father of her child, with the foreigner Ischys, she crossed the boundary of what was permitted to the mortals and drew the ire of the divine siblings. The story is crowned by a gnome illustrating the devastating power of divine wrath (36–37):

> πολλὰν δ' ὄρει πῦρ ἐξ ἑνὸς
> σπέρματος ἐνθορὸν ἀΐστωσεν ὕλαν.
>
> Fire that springs from one
> spark onto a mountain can destroy a great forest[47].

The quickly spreading fire (πῦρ) stands for death from the plague sent by Artemis at the behest of her brother Apollo. Although only Coronis is to blame, there are other victims, since, as Pindar says, "many neighbors shared her fate" (35).

Further into the mythological part of the ode, Pindar mentions fire once more in the context of "Hephaestus' glow" (σέλας [...] Ἀφαίστου, 39–40) kindling Coronis' funeral pyre. The flames engulfing her (καιομένα [...] πυρά) part at Apollo's command, so he can snatch his son from the nymph's corpse (43–44). Thus his mother's pyre becomes the place of both Asclepius' birth and rescue. This is not the only example of being born in a fire to an immortal life. Dionysus was also lifted from the flames devouring the body of Semele, who saw Zeus in all his glory among the thunderbolts which were the attribute of his epiphany[48]. For her, death by fire foretold a new, eternal life, as Dionysus took her from Hades and carried her onto Olympus, an event recounted by Pindar in *Olympian* 2 (25–26):

> ζώει μὲν ἐν Ὀλυμπίοις ἀποθανοίσα βρόμῳ
> κεραυνοῦ τανυέθειρα Σεμέλα.
>
> Long-haired Semele lives among the Olympians
> after dying in the roar of a thunderbolt[49].

He also seems to refer to Semele's apotheosis in *Pythian* 3, where he mentions her affair with Zeus and calls her Thyone, a name she assumed in connection

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[47] Transl. by W.H. Race.

[48] Eur. *Bacch*. 88–93; 244–245; 288–289; 524–525. Dionysus was carried from his mother's burning body by Hermes (Paus. II 26, 6) or by Zeus himself (Eur. *Bacch*. 288–289; Apollod. *Bibl.* III 4, 3).

[49] Transl. by W.H. Race.

with her new, divine status[50]. Fire marks both the beginning and end of Asclepius' earthly life; as Pindar continues to narrate, Asclepius was punished for resurrecting a man out of greed, crossing the line of what was permitted to mortals. He died a violent death at Zeus' hand, struck by his fiery thunderbolt (αἴθων [...] κεραυνός, 58). That death from a thunderbolt strike, which is a form of punishment for a transgression against the gods, can at the same time mean the beginning of a new life[51], since Asclepius became immortal and, like thunderstruck Semele, came to be worshipped[52].

The same ode has another example of a mythical character saved from his funeral pyre after flames caught his body (πυρὶ καιόμενος, 102), and carried off to the land of the blessed – Achilles (102–103):

> ὦρσεν πυρὶ καιόμενος
> ἐκ Δαναῶν γόον.
>
> and as he was consumed by the fire, he raised
> a lament from the Danaans[53].

In *Olympian* 2, Pindar claims that Achilles owes his carefree existence on the Isles of the Blessed to Thetis, who snatched him from the flames[54] and placed him among heroes (78–80):

> Πηλεύς τε καὶ Κάδμος ἐν τοῖσι ἀλέγονται·
> Ἀχιλλέα τ᾽ ἔνεικ᾽, ἐπεὶ Ζηνὸς ἦτορ
> λιταῖς ἔπεισε, μάτηρ.
>
> Peleus and Cadmus are numbered among them,
> and Achilles too, whom his mother brought
> after she persuaded the heart of Zeus with her entreaties[55].

Death on the pyre being synonymous with being saved by the gods and carried off to the land of the blessed was the lot not only of mythical characters, but

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[50] Diod. IV 25, 4.

[51] Cf. Curie 2005: 354: "it could be seen as a means to heroization or apotheosis, signifying his incorporation among the gods or heroes"; also 2005: 361. In the same vein, Kingsley 1995: 258, n. 24: "death by lightning as punishment for a crime was in no way incompatible with death by lightning as a prelude to heroization".

[52] On Asclepius being placed among the gods and heroes, see Farnell (1921: 234), and Burkert (1985: 208 ff.), who lists Asclepius alongside Heracles and the Dioscuri as "figures who cross the Chthonic–Olympian Boundary".

[53] Transl. by W.H. Race.

[54] In his epitome of the description of the hero's funeral which featured in the *Aethiopis* (*EGF*, p. 47, 26–28 Davies), Proclus mentions Thetis seizing Achilles from his pyre and carrying him off to the White Island.

[55] Transl. by W.H. Race.

also of historical figures. In his *Epinician* 3, Bacchylides tells the story of king Croesus, who, after the Persians captured Sardis, preferred to die than live in captivity, so he climbed into his pyre together with his wife and daughters (29–51)[56]. However, as "the bright force of the grim fire was darting through the pyre"[57] (ἐπεὶ δεινοῦ πυρὸς/ λαμπρὸν διάϊ[σσεν μέ]νος, 53–54), Zeus sent rain, which doused the flames (55–56)[58], and Apollo rewarded the king's piety by carrying him and his daughters off to the land of the Hyperboreans (58–62): as in Heracles' case, voluntary death by fire predicts Croesus' heroisation, which will make him immortal. Still, it was not always the case that fire brought hope for a better, everlasting existence, as indicated by the example of Meleager, the length of whose life was determined, as fate ordained, by the burning of a fire-brand thrown into a fire. Fire only brought the moment of his death closer, offering him no chance of any posthumous existence in the company of gods and heroes. In the mythological part of *Epinician* 5 for Hiero, Bacchylides tells of Meleager's death, caused partly by his mother Althaea, who thus avenged the death of her brothers, Iphiclus and Aphareus, during the quarrel over the hide of the Calydonian Boar (140–142):

> καῖέ τε δαιδαλέας
> ἐκ λάρνακος ὠκύμορον
> φιτρὸν ἀγκλαύσασα.
>
> she set fire to the swift-dooming log, taking it from the elaborate chest[59].

The fire immediately caused Meleager's death, which had to happen when the firebrand symbolising his life burnt out (144–154).

In Pindar's *Pythian* 3, fire once more features as a destructive force: Asclepius heals people who had "bodies wracked by summer fever" (θερινῷ πυρὶ περθόμενοι δέμας, 50), that is, were suffering from sunstroke or burns, where the figurative expression "summer fire" (θερινῷ πυρί) refers to harmful excessive heat[60]. Thus fire, here meaning the noxious radiation of the sun, is again depicted as an element bringing destruction.

Purification through fire let humans free the superior, immortal portion of their nature and attain a blessed existence in the company of gods and heroes;

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[56] According to Herodotus (I 86), Croesus was made to ascend the pyre by order of Cyrus, who changed his mind on hearing Solon's words which Croesus quoted. He then wanted to have the fire put out, but by then it was too late.

[57] Transl. by D.A. Campbell.

[58] In Herodotus (I 87), it is Apollo who sent the rain clouds and saved Croesus from dying in the flames.

[59] Transl. by D.A. Campbell.

[60] Cf. Young 1968: 41: "extreme summer heat to which sunstroke is attributed".

as the author of an elegy collected in the *Theognidea* says, a trial by fire (πυρί) also made it possible to reveal the actual worth of gold and silver (499–500). In *Nemean* 4, Pindar compares the song in the victor's honour to gold, which reveals its real glory when smelted in a fire (82–85):

> ὁ χρυσὸς ἐψόμενος
> αὐγὰς ἔδειξεν ἁπάσας, ὕμνος δὲ τῶν ἀγαθῶν
> ἐργμάτων βασιλεῦσι ἰσοδαίμονα τεύχει
> φῶτα.
>
> refined gold
> displays all its radiance, and a hymn
> of noble deeds makes a man equal in fortune
> to kings – [61].

In his victory odes, fire tends to be associated with a transition to a new and better life – not only a blessed existence with the gods and heroes, but also a life made bright by the glory of fame that the winner may gain from his success in a competition and a poet's song[62]. Pindar describes the poet's song as a sacred flame which makes the victor, his family and his home city shine with a special brilliance visible from afar[63]. That light symbolises the fame which accompanies great deeds. This seems to be the best interpretation of the expression αἰθόμενον πῦρ [...] νυκτί used by the poet in the gnome which opens *Olympian* 1: he compares the brilliance of gold, the most precious of all worldly goods, to the light of a fire shining in the night(1–2):

> ἄριστον μὲν ὕδωρ, ὁ δὲ χρυσὸς αἰθόμενον πῦρ
> ἅτε διαπρέπει νυκτὶ μεγάνορος ἔξοχα πλούτου.
>
> Best is water, while gold, like fire blazing
> in the night, shines pre-eminent amid lordly wealth[64].

Of the several proposals for deciphering the symbolism of fire in this passage, one hypothesis is particularly noteworthy: that here fire could mean the poetic song[65]. Like a fire blazing in the dark, the song becomes a clear message about events of particular importance. As a method of communication, it resembles light signals produced by torches or beacon fires. Communicating via

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[61] Transl. by W.H. Race.

[62] Boeke (2007: 47) points out that in his poetry Pindar highlights the ambiguous nature of the element of fire: "In its 'civilized' form fire illuminates and honours".

[63] On this subject, see Harriott (1969: 75), who also stresses that in Bacchylides fire does not signify poetic inspiration: "neither poet described the fire of inspiration". Cf. Bowra 1964: 34.

[64] Transl. by W.H. Race.

[65] Cf. Dornseiff 1921: 6; an interpretation also considered possible by Gerber (1982: 12). See also Young 1970: 80 f.

light signals is commonly associated with the most famous episode in the Trojan War: according to Proclus' epitome, in the *Iliou Persis* by Arctinus of Miletus, a beacon of that kind summons back the Greeks who have sailed to the island of Tenedos[66]. The signal is sent by Sinon, who stayed at Troy as a scout to wait for the Trojans to welcome the wooden horse filled with Greek warriors. In this case, a fiery beacon becomes symbolic, being a foreshadowing of the great conflagration which will rage across Troy because of the Greeks[67]. The "fiery sign" foretelling the fall of Troy, for which a guard watched all year round, lying down on the roof of the hall of the Atreides, is also important in the prologue to the first play of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Agamemnon has a fire lit on Mount Ida to communicate that the Greeks have captured Troy (*Ag*. 20–21), and thanks to a system of beacons lit successively on the highest spots between Troy and Argos, the news of the victorious king's upcoming return soon reaches Clytaemnestra[68]. As in the odes in honour of winners in sport competitions, the brilliance of a torch means victory here, since, as Clytaemnestra herself says (315–316), it is evidence (τέκμαρ) and a sign (σύμβολον) sent over to her from Troy by her husband. Likewise, the glow of fire destroying the Achaean ships becomes a visible sign of Hector's greatest deed, meant to give him fame in the memory of posterity[69]. In *Epinician* 13, the fame the island of Aegina enjoys due to the victories won by Pytheas is compared by Bacchylides to a torch (τιμὰν [...] πυρσὸν ὥς, 80–82). In Pindar's *Isthmian* 4, the term "beacon-fire of hymns" (πυρσὸν ὕμνων, 43) is used for the encomium extolling the achievements of the Cleonymids – both Melissus, victor at a *pankration*, to whom the ode is addressed, and his ancestors who fell in the war against the Persians in 480/479 BCE. Pindar highlights the notion that a poet's word grants eternal fame both among future generations and all over the world, as it becomes "the radiance of noble deeds forever undimmed" (ἐργμάτων ἀκτὶς καλῶν ἄσβεστος αἰεί, 42). Thus, like the flame of a torch shining in the dark, the poet's song saves from oblivion all human actions worthy of the memory of posterity[70]. That particular characteristic of the encomium is expressed in Pindar's odes by the verb φλέγω ('burn, burn up, light up; *metaph*. make illustrious or famous'[71]). In *Paean* 2 for

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[66] *EGF*, p. 62, 14–15 Davies.

[67] Anderson (1997: 129) emphasises the special meaning of the episode, which can be treated as a "symbolic prelude to the greater fire to follow when the Greeks burn the city".

[68] The chain of beacon fires also stands for the causal chain of events dealt with in the other plays of the trilogy – crime, punishment, and forgiveness.

[69] Hom. *Il*. VIII 180–183.

[70] In addition to the motifs of fire and light, references to songs of praise in Pindar's odes contain the symbolic images of the sun and the moon as important elements. The presence in Pindar's epinicia of such images illustrating "the close connection of heavenly bodies, light and fire" is pointed out by Hutchinson (2012: 279 f.).

[71] LSJ 1996: 1944, s.v. φλέγω.

the Abderites (fr. 52b Snell–Maehler), he speaks of the vicissitudes of fate which have determined the history of their city and concludes that "a man who performs a noble labor is lit up by praises" (εὐαγορίαισι φλέγει, 66–67). In *Olympian* 9, aware that his mission is to praise glorious achievements, he promises he will "light up [...] with blazing songs" (μαλεραῖς ἐπιφλέγων ἀοιδαῖς, 22) Opus, the winner's home city. In *Pythian* 11, the poet lists the sporting victories of both the winner Thrasydaeus and his father Pythonicus, "for their celebration and glory are ablaze" (τῶν εὐφροσύνα τε καὶ δόξ' ἐπιφλέγει, 45). The victorious Strepsiades from Thebes, to whom *Isthmian* 7 is addressed, is gifted the light of glory through song by the violet-tressed Muses (φλέγεται δὲ ἰοπλόκοισι Μοίσαις, 23), whereas the charioteer Carrotus praised in *Pythian* 5, to whom the king of Cyrene Arcesilas owed his victory in the race, has been wreathed in light by the beautiful-tressed Charites (ἠΰκομοι φλέγοντι Χάριτες, 45), who personify grace, beauty and joy. Also Callias of the Bassids, addressed in *Nemean* 6, having won the boxing competition, "was ablaze with the clamor of the Graces" (Χαρίτων [...] ὀμάδῳ φλέγεν, 37–38), and the bright light of fame bathes Argos, the home town of Theaeus extolled in *Nemean* 10, because, as the poet puts it, it is "ablaze with achievements beyond number because of its valiant deeds" (φλέγεται δ' ἀρεταῖς/ μυρίαις ἔργων θρασέων ἕνεκεν, 2–3).

Fire burning on an altar can also have a communicative function alongside its basic religious one. In a fragment from Pindar's *Laments* depicting the afterlife of the pious, sacrifices are mentioned among other activities, mingled with "far-shining fire" (πυρὶ τηλεφανεῖ, 9)[72]. Pindar seems thus to emphasise that the light of sacrificial fire burning in the underworld Elysium reaches the Olympian abode of the gods and so becomes a link between them and the inhabitants of the land of the blessed.

The ancient Greeks treated fire burning on a sacrificial altar as an omen through which the gods could reveal their will. The oracle of Zeus at Olympia practised the observation of how the parts of sacrificial animals thrown into the fire burnt. As Herodotus records, similar practices were carried out in the temple of Apollo Ismenius in Thebes: "sacrifice is there the way of divination, as at Olympia"[73]. According to Pliny the Elder, divination by fire is believed to have been invented by the Argive seer Amphiaraus[74]. It is to that practice, called empyromancy[75], that Pindar refers in *Olympian* 8 when he mentions the seers who try to ascertain the will of Zeus as they "examine burnt offerings" (ἐμπύροις τεκμαιρόμενοι, 3) in his temple at Olympia. The process, here intended to decide

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[72] Pind. fr. 129 Snell–Maehler.

[73] Hdt. VIII 134, transl. by A.D. Godley.

[74] Plin. *Nat.* VII 203.

[75] On the subject of empyromancy, see Bonnechere 2007: 152.

the outcome of the fratricidal duel between Eteocles and Polynices, is described in detail in Euripides' *Phoenissae* (1255–1258)[76]:

> μάντεις δὲ μῆλ' ἔσφαζον, ἐμπύρους τ' ἀκμὰς
> ῥήξεις τ' ἐνώμων ὑγρότητ' ἐναντίαν
> ἄκραν τε λαμπάδ', ἣ δυοῖν ὅρους ἔχει,
> νίκης τε σῆμα καὶ τὸ τῶν ἡσσωμένων.
>
> The seers proceeded to sacrifice victims and observed the fissures at the tips of sacrificial flame, denoting an unfavorable moistness, and the peak of the fire, which portends two things, either victory or defeat[77].

In Greek lyric, fire features in similes describing not just the bright light of fame accompanying beautiful deeds, but also the light radiated by a deity at the moment of epiphany. That is how Bacchylides describes the Nereids in one of his two Theseus dithyrambs (17 Snell–Maehler); on seeing them, Theseus was afraid, because "from their splendid limbs shone a gleam as of fire" (ὥτε πυρός, 103–105). In the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, even though the goddess appears as a young girl, she has some characteristics which make it possible to discern her divinity. They are in particular parts of her clothing which shine with a light brighter than that of fire (86):

> πέπλον μὲν γὰρ ἕεστο φαεινότερον πυρὸς αὐγῆς.
>
> For she was clad in a robe out-shining the brightness of fire[78].

Therefore, like the light it produces, fire symbolises the splendour of divinity. In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, it is the god's eyes that gleam with fire (πῦρ ἀμαρύσσων[79], 415) when Apollo discovers that his cows have been stolen by the newly born son of Maia. Hermes' "fire-glittering" gaze is here described in a manner very similar to that used for Typhon's fiery gaze in Hesiod's *Theogony* (ἐν δὲ οἱ ὄσσε [...] πῦρ ἀμάρυσσεν, *Theog*. 826–827). When Hermes swore he had had nothing to do with the theft of Apollo's oxen, he was also betrayed by the frequent glinting of his eyes (πυκνὸν ἀπὸ βλεφάρων ἀμαρύσσων, 278). Athanasios Vergados notes that the author of the hymn associates the gleam in Hermes' eyes with those moments when the god manifests his particular skill at invention[80], but it seems that in the situations outlined here it would be more

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[76] Cf. Soph. *Ant*. 1005–1011.

[77] Transl. by D. Kovacs.

[78] Transl. by H.G. Evelyn-White.

[79] Some editors (such as Càssola 1992: 536 or Strauss Clay 1989: 137) adopt the emendated reading of πῦρ ἀμαρύσσον here, in which case the "smouldering fire" ought to refer to the remains of the fire in which Hermes roasted the meat of the cows; see Jarczyk 2017: 223.

[80] Vergados 2011: 85.

correct to refer to Hermes as a trickster, since he combines inventiveness with cunning[81]. Then the fire in his gaze would symbolise a flash of extraordinary intelligence, the birth of a creative idea to be implemented immediately, something illustrated perfectly in the hymn as the sudden impulse leading to the invention of the lyre is compared to the moment when "bright glances flash from the eye"[82] (ὅτε δινηθῶσι ὀφθαλμῶν ἀμαρυγαί, 45). Another character in whose gaze the gleam of fire could be seen is Theseus. In his *Dithyramb* 4 for the Athenians, Bacchylides describes the young Theseus returning to Athens and achieving amazing feats along the way (18 Snell–Maehler). The poet says of the hero that "from his eyes flashes red Lemnian flame"[83] (ὀμμάτων δὲ στίλβειν ἄπο Λάμνιαν φοίνισσαν φλόγα, 54–56), while his cap rests on "fire-red hair" (κρατὸς πέρι πυρσοχαίτου, 51). In one version of the myth, it is on Lemnos that Hephaestus had his smithy[84], which could mean the fire shining in the hero's eyes was divine in provenience as well, but in comparing it to the bright light of the Lemnian volcano, Bacchylides also refers to the fixed expression τὸ Λέμνιον πῦρ[85], which may here mean that Theseus' gaze was fierce: in the eyes of the hero who comes to Athens as a terrifying armed warrior, killing criminals notorious for their cruelty and monsters along the way, fire may reflect not just courage and strength, but also emotions. One might say that with Theseus, as with the warriors at Troy in Homer's *Iliad*, fire in the eyes externalises wrath (μένος), which gradually increases, letting out aggression directed at the enemy[86]. The hero arriving with his gaze and hair radiating a fiery glow foreshadows his future deeds, referred to by the Chorus as follows[87]: "truly a god must be driving

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[81] Cf. Jarczyk 2017: 232.

[82] Transl. by H.G. Evelyn-White.

[83] Transl. by D.A. Campbell.

[84] Hom. *Il*. I 103–104. Cf. *Od*. IV 661–662. Hephaestus' forge was believed to be located inside Mount Moschylus, which was supposedly a volcano. Literary sources pointing to links between Lemnos and fire, links between Lemnos and Hephaestus, and the island's volcanic activity are analysed in West (2017: 217).

[85] The expression τὸ Λέμνιον πῦρ means a particularly fierce fire; it is used in that sense in Aristophanes, *Lys*. 299.

[86] As Marchewka (2018: 100) notes, "[fire] also plays an important part in Homer in the process of creation, being an excellent point of reference in the portrayal of characters desperate for violence, revenge, or simply blinded with anger (Gr. Ἄτη), as well as characters overcome with terror, even if they happen to be the greatest of heroes" (my translation, M. S.). Hector's "eyes blazed with fire" when he charged the walls of the Achaean camp (*Il*. XII 466). Cf. *Il*. I 104 (Agamemnon); XIII 474 (Idomeneus compared to a hunted boar); XIX 365–366 (Achilles).

[87] Pippin Burnett (1985: 122) interprets the Chorus' prediction of Theseus' future deeds thus: "He will 'punish the unjust' (42) in the archaic sense by killing the bull of Marathon and the Minotaur, in a melodramatic sense by driving Medea away, and in a truly Athenian sense by organizing the city and giving it law".

him on to contrive just punishments for the unjust"[88] (41–42). That portrayal of Theseus resembles those descriptions of heroes in the *Iliad* which precede their *aristeiai*[89]. Finally, a closer look at those proposed interpretations of Bacchylides' dithyramb which take into account its political and geographical context seems to be in order. In the expression "Lemnian fire" E.D. Francis sees an allusion to Cimon, who reached Lemnos when he led the expedition of the Athenian fleet to the islands in the northern part of the Aegean, and his father Miltiades, who had captured the island ca. 500 BCE to give it over to the Athenians[90]. The mention of "fiery locks", meanwhile, may point to Theseus' northern descent; allegedly he inherited his red hair from his mother Hegesipyle, a daughter of the king of Thrace[91].

The images created by the Greek choral lyric poets reflect the archetypal ambiguous nature of fire, which combines the opposite values of good and evil[92]. In their descriptions of war and battles, which draw on the traditions of Homeric epic poetry, fire is painted as an untamed, destructive force that kills and devastates, and in such scenes, the fiery element is figuratively animated through the apt choice of modifiers. So depicted, fire also becomes a metaphor for and an instrument of the emotions which can give rise to destructive and dangerous behaviour. The destructive and uncontrollable power of the element of fire stems from it being part of the realm of the wild as identified with the divine realm. On the other hand, as something that comes from the gods, fire appears as a vital force; once "tamed" by humans, it becomes indispensable to the development of civilisation, as well as standing for rebirth and renewal. This concept of fire is linked in the works of the Greek choral poets with its ritual, cult, and purifying functions. In cult songs, the light of fire is a trademark, so to speak, of the presence of the divine, distinguishing gods and heroes at the moments when they reveal their identities, expressing their power, force and creativity. The vital aspect of fire is also given expression in Pindar's victory odes, where, like other elements of the natural world, it becomes a metaphor for human achievements, the immortal fame accompanying them, and the poet's song by which it is guaranteed. In the passages that have been discussed, the following terms are used to denote the above mentioned aspects of the image of fire: πῦρ ('fire, funeral fire'),

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[88] Transl. by D.A. Campbell.

[89] Cf. Marchewka 2018: 100: "When a character about to perform an *aristeia* enters the scene, his form glows with the light of fire, which spreads conflagration and terror" (my translation, M. S.). As examples of such *aristeiai*, the author invokes the description of Diomedes in *Il*. V 4 and 7, and the scene in which Achilles dons armour in *Il*. XIX 364–383; see Marchewka 2018: 100 ff.

[90] Francis 1990: 54.

[91] Vickers 1997: XXIII.

[92] In Greek lyric poetry, poetic images and metaphors rely on conventional associations. Cf. Maslov 2015: 174: "Archaic Greek lyric remains committed to traditional imagery".

Ἡφαίστος (‘fire’), σέλας (‘light, brightness, flame, lightning’), φλόξ (‘flame’), καπνός (‘smoke’), πυρσός (‘firebrand, torch, beacon, signal fire’), ἀκτίς (‘ray, beam, brightness’), λαμπάς (‘torch, beacon light, light’), λάμπω (‘give light, shine’), δαίω (‘light up, kindle; *pass*. blaze, burn fiercely’), αἴθω (‘light up, kindle, burn, blaze’), φλέγω (‘burn, burn up, light up’), ἐπιφλέγω (‘burn up, heat, inflame’), καίω (‘kindle, set on fire, burn’), ἀμαρύσσω (‘sparkle, twinkle, glance’), στίλβω (‘glitter, gleam’).

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