



III. ANCIENT GREECE & THE OLYMPIADS

9. THE ORIGIN & THE MYTH OF THE OLYMPIADS

The ancient Olympic Games were part of the great Greek religious, athletic and cultural festivals that inspired the creation of the modern Olympic Games. The earliest documentation of the ancient Games traces the efforts of King Iphitos of Elis, in ~824 BC, to establish a “Sacred Truce” through the conduct of Games ‘dear to the gods’. These games took place every four years, at ancient Olympia, starting in 776 BC.

The ancient Olympic games were sacred events. Athletes from all Greek town-states joined together at the festivals at Altis, Olympia. Like the modern Games, solemn opening and closing ceremonies marked the ancient Games. The sacred truce beginning the first known Games read: “May the world be delivered from crime and killing and freed from the clash of arms”. Ideally the old town-states in war would lay down their arms for the period of the Games so that the athletes could compete in peace.

The program of competitive events in the ancient Games developed over time. Among the sports contested were the running, wrestling, boxing, pancratium, the pentathlon and the chariot races. The first recorded winner was the runner *Koroibos*.

Only men were permitted to take part in the Olympic Games. Under penalty of death, women were forbidden to compete or be spectators at the ancient Olympic Games. The only female allowed in the whole sacred Altis was the high priestess of Demeter.

Women in ancient Greece, did, however participate in separate festivals of female athletes. Exclusively female Games, honoring the goddess Hera, were held at regular intervals, usually one month before or after the Olympic games.

The ancient Olympic Games are known to have existed for twelve centuries. The symbolic power of the Games lived on after their termination in 394 AD and came to life again as the modern Olympic Games.

The launch of the Olympic Games vanishes in the depths of prehistoric times and is associated with the fights of the gods and heroes. An old legend says that the first fight was among the gods and the heroes, becoming this way the live examples for the mortal men, keeping the noble training till the Roman times. First of all Zeus defeated Cronos in wrestling and Apollo beat Hermes in the race and Ares in boxing.

The rationalist Strabo lets the myths aside and considers that the games had been founded by Heraclides, after their descent, as well as by the Aitolo-Dorian races and the Epioi expansion into Pissa. This view of Strabo is close to reality as the games at the Altar of Olympia, originally of a local character, it seems that they were reorganized after the Dorian Decent, when the old idolatry of the Altar was displaced or limited, and the adoration of Zeus as the sovereign god, was set up. The founder of these renewed games was supposed to be *Oxylos*, the leader of the Aitolo-Dorian races that came to *Elis*.



10. THE IMPORTANT IMPACT OF THE OLYMPIADS

In ancient Greece the religious fetes took place at the great Altars and went together with the idolatry of the gods. The first stadiums were found in the courtyards around the temples; the gods were considered to be present, watching the meetings and were the main spectators encouraging the athletes.

Pindarus' 1st Olympic Ode:

Water is pre-eminent and gold, like a fire
burning in the night, outshines
all possessions that magnify men's pride.

But if, my soul, you yearn
to celebrate great games,
look no further

for another star

shining through the deserted ether

brighter than the sun, or for a contest

mightier than Olympia — where the song

has taken its coronal

design of glory, plaited

in the minds of poets

as they come, calling on Zeus's name,

to the rich radiant hall of Hieron

“we are not going to sing any nobler games, than those of Olympia”,
«μηδ' Ὀλυμπίας ἀγῶνα φέρτερον ἀδάσομεν», ‘*mid' Olympias agona ferteron avdassomen*’, the athletic competitions at Olympia were most noted and significant.

The Altar of Olympia was isolated at the northeast point of the Peloponnese, amongst the untrodden mountains of Arcadia and the isolated coastline of the Ionian Sea. It thrived in its peaceful space, of the Elian country, far from the great centers of Greece. The political and military role of Olympia was inconsiderable in the adventurous history of the ancient times. It made up an exceptionally intellectual victory on the political and geographical factors.

Originally it was a competition center as well as an oracle and it remained till the end of the antiquity in close and creative co-operational relation with the Oracle of Delphi as well as with the rest of the Sanctums of the archaic world. The Sanctum of Olympia was keeping its main mission, the culture of the spirit for struggling and the athletic achievement, whereas the Oracle of Delphi and the mysteries opened the horizons for a higher spiritual life.

By 776 BC, the year of the first Olympiad, the sanctum of Olympia was already established and its prestige was rapidly extended to the East and the West. Individuals and states, even the most powerful kingdoms of the ancient times, respectfully accepted its laws and regulations.

Whole towns and solitary individuals strived to express their devotion to the gods of Olympia. Numerous were the statues and offerings to the Sanctum, as well as the treasure houses, and the public buildings at the foot of Cronius Hill. Offering their donations, the pilgrims prayed to the gods to be well disposed towards their athletes. The Greek towns minded to encourage their citizens to athletics, by various ethical motives.



The ancient Greek athletic spirit gave an honorable position to women, too. The Pan-Hellenic meetings for young-girls were held every four years at Olympia apart from the Olympic Games. They were called “*Hraia*”, and were dedicated to the goddess Hera. A tradition wants them to have been found by Hippodameia, after her wedding to Pelops. Another legendary tradition is that the games were established by the “sixteen respectable women of Elis”, who in the 6th century BC had taken upon themselves the responsibility to conciliate the region of Elis.

In the Olympic athletics the main objective was not the breaking of a record, and the reports about the course of the performances are limited. Those champions took the title of the winner by being the first among the distinguished athletes. The Discus, the Javelin and the Jump were the triad of the throwing and they were executed under the sound of the double flute. Greek people considered Pentathlon to be the ideal athletic event, as it had the advantage to lead to the well-balanced growth of the capacity of every muscle of the body. After throwing the discus and the javelin the Pentathlon athlete inspired and encouraged threw his own body over the sand pit. Later he gave all his strength to the stadium race and ended his athletics building up his muscular power for the final victory.

The athlete at Olympia had the mythical heroes as a model. The mission of the Sanctuary was to equate man to the heroic status of the founders of the games. Their spiritual long-term project was to teach men how to free themselves from the primitive living, «θηριώδη βίη», ‘*thiriodi vio*’. Through the continuous athletic effort the competitor set forth his unlimited mental and body forces and virtues, with which man is endowed, trying to come closer to the god virtues as a free human being.

The sports at the sanctum were not just a fair for the ancient Greeks; it was a way of life, a religious ceremony. Music and gymnastics were the talent gifts given by the gods, as Plato stated. The Olympic champions were radiated by the divine charisma. The triumph at the contests was the supreme power and the noblest honor a person could have. Pindarus nonetheless counsels the athletes to stay sensible, not to fall into the trap of arrogance.

The noble vying was the base of education of the youth at the ancient Greek town-states and the motive of their culture. Their practice aimed to the best growth of their body as well as their psychical and mental aptitude.

The fighting aspect was a basic factor in the formation of the ancient Greek culture; every significant achievement was due to great effort and that was true not only in athletics but also in letters, art, politics and every kind of expression of their existence.

The need of competition was deep and urgent in everyday life, as well as at their turning points. Since the beginning of the 5th century BC, the “Contest”, «Ἀγών», ‘*Agon*’ had been formed into a specific figure and its statue, holding dumb-bells, was erected at the Sanctuary of Olympia. In another bas-relief representation, the Contest decorated the gold-and-ivory table on which the wreaths of the winners were put during the coronation ceremony of the Olympic champions. Depiction of the Contest of 500-480 BC ornamented the coins of the *Peparethos* Island that today is called *Scopelos*.

The “Victory”, «Νίκη», ‘*Nike*’ had also been given a specific form. Numerous representations of the goddess Victory on works of plastic art and paintings prove the continuous presence of Victory in the mind and the heart of the Greek people. The ancient Greek world dreamt of securing unity and peace; in the Sanctums this aspiration was realized.



During the “Holy Truce”, under the invisible presence of the gods, the Greek men brushed aside their conflicts and occupied themselves in peaceful efforts. The dividing rivalry and the killings gave their place, to the noble creation in the course of competition. Throughout the Games, Olympia gave the wise men as well as the men of letters the chance to read their plays through which they urged the Greek men to keep peace. They helped this way to the progression of the communal conscience among Greek people.

That was the great offer of Olympia. In the peacefully calm environment of the holy grove of Altis, the Greek people identified their intellectual unity and crystallized the common characteristics of the ancient attitude, which sealed endlessly the identity of archaic Greek men.

Even at the most crucial moments of their history, the Greek ancestors gave a major priority to their Olympiads. In 480 BC, just before the war with the Persians, when *Leonidas* and his 300 men fell at the *Thermopiles*, the youth of Greece got together fighting at the 75th Olympiad. Herodotus had written about a Persian officer who spoke to *Mardonius*, admiring the Greek men who fought just for an olive-tree branch.

The heroes of *Thermopiles*, *Marathon*, *Salamis* and *Plataea* were hammered at Olympia and the other Greek Sanctuaries. Dr N. Gialouris has said that the victory of the Greeks against the Persians constituted an Olympic Triumph. The first Olympiad after the Persian Wars had been the apotheosis of the Sanctum of Olympia. The Greeks celebrated in a special way the 76th Olympiad, in 476 BC. The Greek people gathered at Olympia in even greater faith to the ideal of the free, athletic man. The participation of the inspired youth was very great. *Themistocles* was present during the whole Olympiad and, as stated by Plutarch, the spectators glorified him like an Olympian.