
CONFERENCE

Traslated by John Bell

THE OLYMPICS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD*

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This article, which was originally presented with slides at the Centro de Estudios Públicos (Centre for Public Studies), invites the audience to imagine that they are actually present at the Olympic Games of the ancient world. It explains the Games' programme and then goes on to describe the events themselves. Among the more controversial themes that are raised in these pages are ones regarding the professionalism of Greek athletics, explanations about nudity and the exclusive participation of men, as well as the religious origins of the Games themselves.

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With the holding of the Olympic Games at Atlanta, U.S.A. this year (1996), the first centenary of the modern cycle of this type of competition has been completed. In 1896, under the impulse of the French Baron Pierre Coubertin and in the recently restored stadium at Athens, the custom was restarted of bringing athletes from different parts of the world together every four years to compete in different sports.¹

The idea of Coubertin and others was to recreate an institution that they had heard about from literary sources and from successful German excavations at Olympus, which had begun during the 1870's and were carried out by Ernst Curtius, under the direct auspices of Kaiser William 1st.

What I am proposing to do in these pages is to summarily explore the Ancient Olympics as a social and historical phenomenon, stripping them of the romantic patina that has covered them during the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, and illustrating them through art produced by the Greeks themselves. I also want to ask a few questions at a deeper level about the religious and cultural context that gave meaning to this remarkable human activity.

I

It is admirable that the modern Olympics have already completed one hundred years in spite of two world wars and the occasional boycott, but even more surprising is the fact that the ancient Olympics were celebrated, with slight variations, for almost 1,200 years. According to the commonly used Greek calendar of the time, the Olympic games were celebrated for the first time in 776 BC (although it is possible that this was merely a reorganisation of a festival that had existed before²) and were closed probably in 393 A.D when the Emperor Theodosius 1st prohibited the celebration of pagan festivals³. His son, the Emperor Theodosius 2nd decreed the destruction of the temples and sanctuaries some thirty years later.

¹ Before Coubertin there had been various efforts to restart the Olympic Games, most of them little known today. In England they began a first cycle in 1636 and in Greece they organised competitions in 1859 (which were interrupted by the police!), 1870, 1875 and 1889. In the last ones they wanted to limit the participation of athletes and spectators to members of the Greek aristocracy at the time and the whole thing ended with huge disturbances. C.f. Sweet (1987), page 10, and Killanin and Rodda (1976), page 27. Young's book (1984) offers a harsh and demystifying analysis of the participation of Coubertin and several Classical philologists in the development of the modern Olympic movement.

² Sweet (1987), page 4.

³ Sweet (1997), page 3.

During this lengthy period serious efforts were made to compile lists of the winners in the Games, because the date of an event was frequently established making reference to the winner of a trial, almost always a short race or “stade”⁴. For example, it was said that something happened “the year that Daimon of Corinth won the stade”. The winners in the Olympic Games thus provided the framework of reference within which Hellenic life could be fixed. It is with a certain touch of sadness that we find that the last victorious athlete whose name we know is Varazadates (or Barasdates), a Hellenized prince of Armenia, who won the boxing competition in 385 AD when the games were already threatened with extinction⁵.

Where and how did they celebrate the Olympic Games and why?. I think it will be useful to start with the most well known facts so as to try and make sense of them later.

Let us suppose that by some marvellous stroke of luck, we discover that in some place in Greece, Sicily or Asia Minor there is a city or Greek polis that has not been excavated and that we are given the formidable task of doing so. Before starting to dig trenches we need to ask ourselves some questions. Where would the *agora* or public square be and the most important temples?. Where would we find the theatre? And finally, where would these Greeks have constructed their stadium?.

These questions arise because they refer to four essential institutions in Greek life: politics, religion, poetry and athletics. Without a stadium and without a place where one could prepare to compete in a stadium, i.e. a gymnasium, Greek life would not be complete.

The presence of a gymnasium and a stadium inside a *polis* responds to the almost obsessive need of keeping oneself in good physical shape, not as something desirable in itself and compatible with the good physical condition of other citizens (like the idea of fitness today), but as a necessary condition for leaving the *polis* and competing successfully outside it. It has been calculated that at the beginning of the 5th century BC, more than 50 games or competitions were organised between athletes of different cities and that some centuries later that figure had reached more than 300⁶.

Among all these competitions, four stood out for their prestige and Panhellenic character as they were open to all Greeks: the Pythian Games

⁴ The word “*stade*” can mean three different things: a) a short race, b) a measurement of length equivalent to 600 feet and c) the building itself, i.e. what we call a stadium. Romano (1983), page 9.

⁵ Sweet (1987), page 3. Yalouris (1979), page 296, supported by Moretti (1957), indicates that there is a certain amount of uncertainty regarding the date.

⁶ Finley and Pleket (1976), page 68.

held at Delphi, the Isthmian Games at Corinth, the Nemean games held at a spot in the north-eastern part of the Peloponnese and, of course, the Olympic Games themselves. Pindar, the great lyric poet of the 5th century BC who earned his living composing hymns to the winners in these competitions in return for a substantial fee, proclaims that of the four, the Olympic Games are the most important and he does so in a way that reflects the law of growing complexity in Pindaric verse⁷. His starting point is relatively simple: among liquids, water is the most valued commodity, among metals it is gold and among the Games the Olympics, but to give a definite form to the eulogy he introduces two sub-comparisons (gold-fire, Olympics-sun) which results in the beginning of one of his most beautiful epinicians:

Water is supreme,
 Gold sparkles like incandescent fire in the night
 Above all arrogant riches,
 But if the Games are what you yearn to sing about, my love
 Do not look for another star which shines through the empty ether
 With more heat during the day than the sun
 Nor let us call any other combat superior to that of Olympus⁸.

To confirm the truth of this Pindar's eulogy, I invite you to travel with me to Olympus (not an easy thing to do as Olympus is not next to the sea but some 15 kilometres to the interior from the west coast of the Peloponnese) on a humid and baking plain flanked by two rivers, the Alpheios and the Kladeus: where the two converged we find the *Altis* or the sacred area of Zeus.

If we have arrived by boat from Agrigentum or Corinth at the nearby port of Pyrgos, we will make our way on foot or on the back of a mule, surrounded by Greeks from the remotest corners of the Mediterranean, Asia Minor or the Black Sea. A craftsman from Marseilles will be walking alongside a merchant from Trebizond or Kyrene, a man from Syracuse will be sharing with an Athenian or someone from Corcyra, something which only the Olympic truce or *ekejeiria* has made possible because at this moment both Athens and Corcyra are at war with Syracuse and her allies. But all of us are speaking Greek: we belong to the Hellenic nation and it fires our imagination to feel that for a few days we are part of a superior entity.

⁷ See Gerber (1982) and Dover (1980)

⁸ *Olympica* I, 1-8. Text by Maehler (1971), translated by the author.

FIGURE 1: RECONSTRUCTION OF THE EAST FACADE OF THE TEMPLE OF ZEUS, ACCORDING TO ADLER AND CURTIUS.

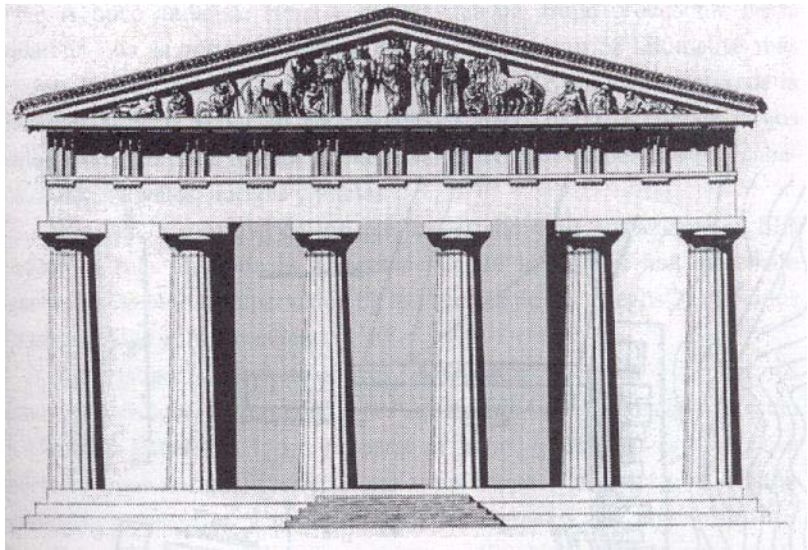
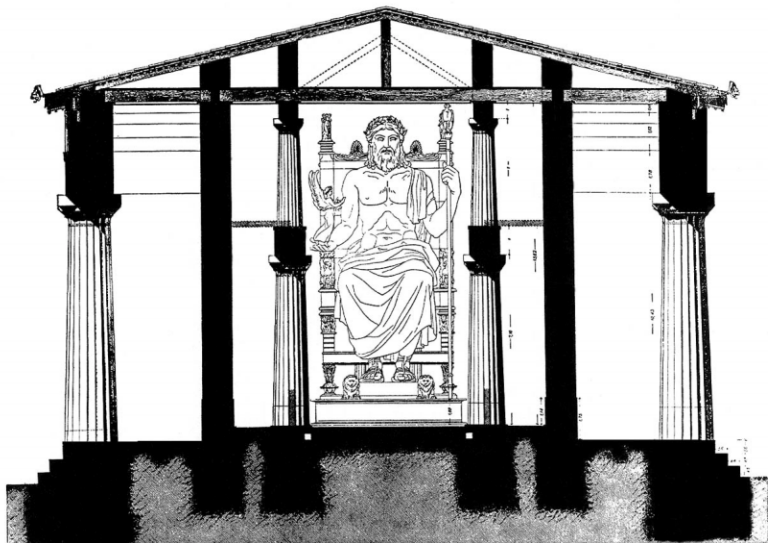


FIGURE 2: TRANSVERSAL CUT OF THE TEMPLE OF ZEUS, ACCORDING TO ADLER AND CURTIUS, SHOWING THE POSITION OF PHEIDIAS' STATUE OF ZEUS.



A little later the caravan is joined by a group from Elis, the *polis* which runs the Games, and which is located some 58 kilometres to the north. This colourful entourage has travelled the Sacred Way along the coast and is made up of the *Hellandikai* or official judges with their long purple cloaks, athletes and their trainers, chariots and horses and their owners, charioteers and jockeys. These are the ones that have been obliged to stay at Elis for a month before the competitions begin. There the athletes have trained rigorously under the supervision of the “judges of the Greeks”, well known for their probity and impartiality. The groups of competitors, official delegates and travellers like ourselves had been preceded by teams of workers who were already in Olympia. These had gone to prepare the place, clear out weeds, straighten up a wall or a statue, clean fountains and drinking fountains, and put up temporary dining halls and stables for the animals that were to be sacrificed. Why? Because Olympia was not a *polis*. No one or at least very few people lived there permanently and four years had gone by since the last Games.

Because of this we cannot expect a lot of comfort. If we are not magistrates or ambassadors from some important city we will have to sleep out in the open air and endure the rigours of the climate. Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher of the 2nd century AD says it all very eloquently:

“Don’t disagreeable and hard things happen during life?. Don’t they also happen at Olympia?. Doesn’t the sun scorch you?. Don’t you get crushed by the crowd?. Isn’t it really difficult to freshen yourself up?. Don’t you get soaked when it rains?. Don’t the shouts, the noise and the other discomforts bother you?. But it seems to me that you are willing to put up with all this and that you do so by thinking of the magnificent spectacle that you are about to see”⁹.

The magnificent spectacle that Epictetus was referring to will last five days and take place after the harvests, during the hot days at the end of August. The programme will be more or less the following one¹⁰:

⁹ Epictetus I, 6, 23-29, text from Oldfather (1926), translated by the author.

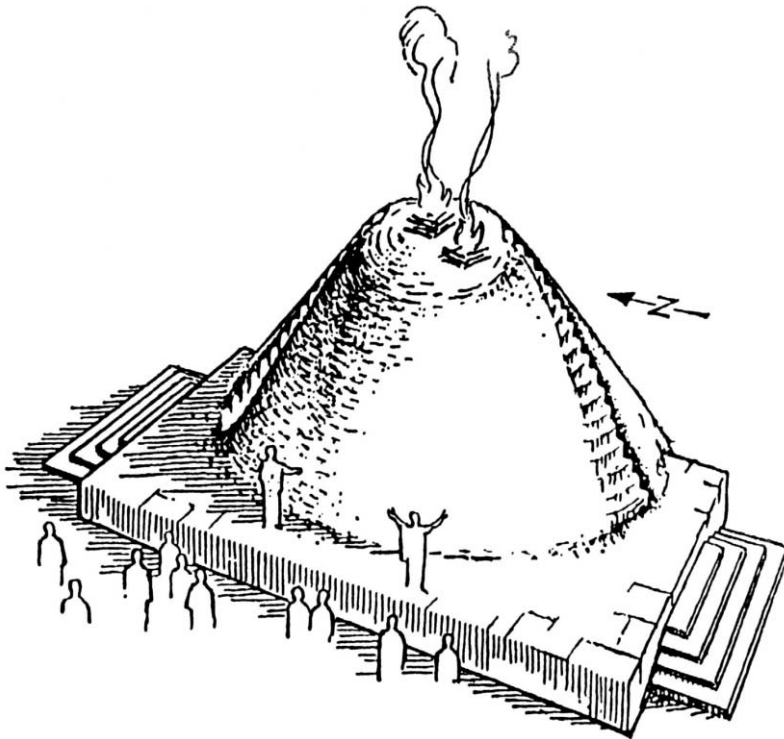
¹⁰ I am basing this on Swaddling (1980), page 37, who reconstructs a theoretical programme at the end of the 2nd century B.C. Duckers (1981) proposes another reconstruction but without any great differences in the essentials.

First Day

At dawn, the competitors and the judges will have to swear an oath before the altar of *Zeus Horkios*, Zeus the Oath Enforcer, in the *Bouleuterion* or Council Building. Afterwards competitions will begin for heralds and trumpeters, horse races and wrestling and boxing for youths between 12 and 18 years of age. There will also be private and public speeches as well as sacrifices in the *Altis* and people will consult the oracles.

In the afternoon there will be some discourse from a Sophist or well-known philosopher and poetry and music recitals. Many of those present will take advantage of the occasion by visiting the *Altis* and meeting up again with old friends from other cities.

FIGURE 4: THE GREAT ALTAR OF ZEUS, ACCORDING TO ADLER AND CURTIUS

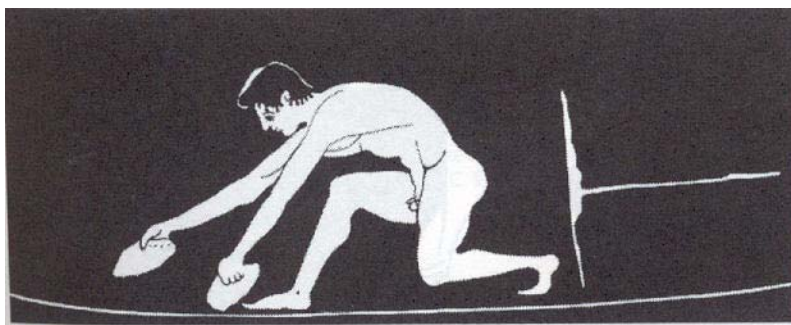


Second Day

In the morning the activities will commence with a solemn procession to the Hippodrome, followed by horse and chariot races.

The afternoon will be dedicated to the pentathlon: discus, javelin, long jump, running and free style wrestling¹¹. As the sun goes down funeral rites will be celebrated in honour of Pelops, the ancestral hero of the Sanctuary, with a procession of the victors, praised with hymns or epinicions. Feasts and symposiums will follow at night.

FIGURE 5: ATHLETE PRACTISING THE LONG JUMP WITH WEIGHTS OR *JALTERES* IN HIS HANDS, APPROXIMATELY 480 BC BERLIN, ANTIKENMUSEUM.



Third day

The activities start early on with a procession of the *Hellandikai*, the official ambassadors of the *poleis* and all the competitors around the Great Altar which is in front of the Temple of Zeus. There is a sacrifice of different animals which culminates in the *hecatombe* or the public sacrifice of a hundred oxen offered by the hosts, the citizens of Elis.

The races take place today. The shortest is the *stade* (192 metres), followed by the *diaulos*, double the distance of the *stade*, a race where the athletes run to the opposite end of the stadium, go round a wooden stick or *kampter* and run back to the starting line or *balbis*. There is also a long distance race or *dolijos* of about 5 kilometres. The day ends with a public banquet in the magistrates' building of Elis.

¹¹ Only the first three of these exist today as part of the pentathlon.

FIGURE 6: DISCUS THROWER ON A NARROW MOUTHED VASE OR *KRATER*, BY EUPHENIUS, APPROX. 510/500 BC BERLIN ANTIKENMUSEUM.



FIGURE 7: SPRINT OR STADE ILLUSTRATED ON AN AMPHORA THAT WAS GIVEN AS A PRIZE IN THE PANATHENAIC GAMES, BY THE PAINTER OF BERLIN, 480/470 BC BERLIN ANTIKENMUSEUM.



Fourth Day

Today is the day of the fights. In the morning there is free style wrestling, in the afternoon boxing and the *pankration*, a type of violent fight where both locks and blows were permitted. The only thing that was prohibited was to tear out your opponents' eyes. The day ended with the *hoplitodromos* where people raced in the armour used by the heavy infantry or hoplites.

FIGURE 8: RACE WITH SHIELDS OR HOPLITODROMOS, BY THE PAINTER OF PISTOXENOS, APPROX. 465 BC BERLIN ANTIKENMUSEUM.



Fifth Day

Procession of the winners to the Temple of Zeus where the *Hellano-dikai* reward them with wild olive wreaths and those who are present shower them with leaves and flowers (*fillobolia*). Celebrations and banquets then follow.

The next day everyone begins the slow return to their respective *poleis*, where the victorious athletes will receive more honours, prizes in money and other things, culminating sometimes with the assignation of free meals for the rest of their days and with the erection of a statue paid for from public funds. There will be a kind of collective frenzy and many of the citizens will be proud of the triumph of a relative or of the son of a neighbour or simply of an athlete linked to them by friendship, but there will also be some philosopher, such as Xenophanes of Celophon, who will pass a severe judgement on the values generated by athletics:

FIGURE 9:



“[...] it is not just to prefer strength to true wisdom: because although there might be a good boxer or a winner of the pentathlon or the wrestling or a race in the town, all of which is highly appreciated in the displays of strength in the games, it is not for this a *polis* is considered to be in such good order (*eunomia*)”¹².

As a counterweight to this emotional exaltation of triumph, Xenophanes points to something much more important and stabilising for the city: good government and citizens who obey the law and, according to him, victories in athletics contribute little or nothing to this¹³.

II

We shall now distance ourselves a little with the idea of identifying some features of the Olympics that are peculiar to the Games themselves and which, being outside our experience, make them somewhat strange to us.

Let us begin with the names. You will have noticed that I have avoided using the word “sport” when referring to the Olympics. I have used the traditional expression “Olympic Games”, but I have done so fully conscious of the fact that it is insufficient. “Sport” and “Game” suggest the ideas of diversion, recreation, and pastimes. There is opposition to doing something in sport or playing a game and taking it seriously.

The Greeks, on the other hand, did not use in this context the word equivalent to “game” (*paidia*) or the term that corresponds to “diversion” or “recreation” (*apolausis*). They used to call the Olympics *agones*, “fights” or “contests”, employing a substantive of the same root which appears in our verb “to agonise” or to fight life’s last battle. The great Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt (1818-1897), in his famous *History of Greek Culture* (*Griechische Kulturgeschichte*), maintained that the central characteristic of the Hellenic world was its agonistic character, its capacity to turn everything into a competition or a fight. Like every simplification, this thesis has its limitations, but essentially we have to admit that it is correct. The Greeks did not just have athletic contests but also poetry, music and theatre ones, contests between trierarchs or commanders of warships, male beauty competitions etc.

¹² Xenophanes, Fragment B 2, Diels-Kranz, translated by the author.

¹³ Socrates also criticised the superficial sensation of happiness that the Athenians experienced after one of them had won a horse race in the Olympics. Cf. Plato, *Apology* 36d.

In the Symposium of Xenophon there is a description of an amusing beauty contest between Socrates and Critobulus, a good looking young man, in which Socrates, by now old and fat, maintains that he to win because his lips are more beautiful than his opponent: as they are fuller, they allow him to kiss better¹⁴.

The Greeks also sensed an *agon* in serious situations. When the commanders of an enormous contingent of Athenian troops were on the point of conquering the minuscule polis of the island of Melos and invited the Melian representatives to parley, the latter understood the conversations as being like an *agon*, where only one of two things could happen: either they would win or lose. To lose the *agon* would mean, for the Melians, that the Athenians were right and that therefore they would have to submit to them: but if they won the discussion or debate, the Athenians would attack them and make them submit by force¹⁵. That is to say, we are not talking about a true *agon* but a solution imposed by the force of will of the Athenians.

This anecdote allows us to reveal two important features of the agonistic character of the Greeks. On the one hand they hope that there will be “fair play”, impartiality or conditions that do not arbitrarily benefit one of the two parties, and, on the other, they recognise that the aim of any participant is to secure victory or *nike*.

In effect, one of the ideas in circulation when the Olympics were started again at the end of the last century was the importance of competing: the importance of doing sport for sport's sake. Nothing could be further from the conception of the Greeks, for whom to lose was an ignominy and to win was everything. We must not forget that in the ancient Games there were no second places: it was triumph or nothing.

Moreover triumph generally meant rewards and monetary rewards. In the Panathenian Games, the most important contests that were held in Athens, the winners received sometimes as many as one hundred amphorae filled with olive oil, a prize of enormous value. I insist on making this point because in the modern Olympics, under the influence of Coubertin and E. Norman Gardiner, the myth of the “amateur” sportsman was created, the sportsman who competes, literally, “for love” and who never receives a reward.

¹⁴ Xenophon, “*Symposium*”, Chapter V. The joke is based on the fact that the Greek adjective *kalon* has different meanings that fluctuate between “beautiful” and “functional”.

¹⁵ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, V, 86. Cf. *Estudios Públicos* No. 44 (1991), page 250.

As David Young has shown, this myth, based as it was on the rigorous distinction between social classes that was prevalent in Victorian England, explicitly proposed the exclusion of athletes from the lower classes. Its most famous victim was the North American athlete, James Thorpe, who won the pentathlon as well as the decathlon in the 1912 Stockholm Olympics only to be disqualified when it was discovered that he had played baseball for two seasons and been paid fifteen dollars a week¹⁶.

In Greece there were certainly a lot of athletes who were both noble and moneyed, because to have the time for training or the money to keep horses and chariots required a personal fortune. There were also several exclusions, but the exclusions were not based on social class but rather on origin (you had to be Greek), gender (you had to be male) and rights (you could not be a slave). For example, it is said that the winner of the *stade* in the first Olympics, Koroibos of Elis, was a cook¹⁷. In spite of his status he could compete and managed to win.

The aim of whatever *agon* is the triumph, but whose triumph?. Strictly that of the individual. One of the things that most separates us from Greeks is the present pre-eminence of team sports, including the practice of adding together the medals of the individual competitions as if they were a collective achievement. It was not as if the Greeks never knew team sports (there are plenty of examples of relay races with torches, for example): it was just that this type of event never formed part of the great *agones*.

Why such passion for the achievement of the individual?. Were the Greeks not capable of recognising the value of a collective victory, where personal feats were subordinated to the aims of the group, the team, and the community?. Isn't it just their political system, democracy, which values "us" above "me"?.

There is undisputed proof, in my opinion, that the Greeks were perfectly capable of joining together athletics and democratic egalitarianism if they wanted to. I refer to that kind of great American football game which was known as the battle of Marathon. According to Herodotus, the Greek lines advanced running (*dromoi*, a word that Herodotus repeats four times within a short chapter) without losing their order. The centre of the Greek line yielded but the reinforced wings resulted victorious, they came together behind the Persian centre and attacked the best troops of the enemy in the rear¹⁸.

¹⁶ Young (1988), page 55.

¹⁷ Young (1988) page 62.

¹⁸ Herodotus, VI, 112-113.

The victory was total and what made it possible was without a doubt, the egalitarian principle which determined the tactics (for example, there were no officers on horseback or generals in front but only lines where no one stood out). But there was one other factor which is rarely mentioned: thirty years before Marathon, in 520 B.C. the *hoplitodromos* or race with armour had been introduced into the Olympic Games, which meant that there were a lot of Greeks who were trained to run with helmet, shield and greaves. Why then this persistence to the end with individual events, even after the incorporation of an event that was related to the military tactic of the proto-democracy founded by Cleisthenes in 502 B.C.?. As in a lot of other cases, we have to look for the answer in Homer.

The world of the Homeric poems is a world of *basilees* or *heroes*, kings and heroes whose following is made up of troops who practically take no part in battles. The Homeric fight is one of single combat between one warrior and another, both of whom can lay claim to a clear pedigree and ancient titles. The incidents in the fight of such a determined hero are called his *aristeia*, the exploits that demonstrate his excellence and which answer to an ideal which appears more than once in the *Iliad*:

aïen aristeuein kai hypeirojon emmenai allon
 “to be always the best and superior to the rest”¹⁹

The quality or excellence to which this verse refers is warlike capacity and that most appropriate of virtues, courage. When a Homeric hero displays his *arete*, his valour, he shows himself worthy of an *aethlon* or prize, i.e. a part of the booty, and the other kings honour him, they concede him *time* (honour).

It is not too difficult to see that these principles of achievement and social recognition survive in exactly the same way in Greek athletics. An athlete must show himself to be the best, display his *arete* individually, and for this he is honoured and rewarded. In effect Hellenic athletics has an eminently archaic character: it keeps alive and vibrant customs which disappeared centuries ago. The clearest indication of this is the survival of chariot races long after the chariot had been abandoned as an instrument of battle. If we read the *Iliad* more carefully we can see that when this great poem took its definitive form they also did not use chariots. Homer did not understand how this magnificent and, at the time, terrifying ancestor of the tank operated. In Homer the chariot is a kind of taxi that takes Hector, Achilles or Diomedes to the battle front and leaves them there to pick them

¹⁹ *The Iliad*, VI, 208: XI, 784.

up later when they have tired of fighting. How do we explain the amazing fact that they never make use of the real potential of such an excellent instrument of war?.

The poet (or the two poets) whom we know by the name of Homer lived around 700 BC but their poems sing of a world that has already disappeared, the Mycenaean world which collapsed about 400 years previously. This generates an intriguing problem: when Homer describes a custom or usage, are we talking about one from the Bronze age which has come down to him via oral tradition or rather a custom of the Archaic period, one of his own time?.

This question is particularly important for us because the *Iliad* as well as the *Odyssey* contain the oldest references to the practice of athletics²⁰. Are we talking about an anachronistic projection backwards or did athletics contests already exist in the social context of the Mycenaean world as a way of displaying *arete* when men were not at war?. This problem has been debated with some vigour without reaching a consensus and the reason for this is that archaeology has not produced unanimous results²¹. There is a Mycenaean vase in the British Museum which might represent two boxers in action (but which could also represent a ceremony that we don't understand) and the stelae in Circle A at Mycenae might represent chariot races (but they could also represent scenes from a battle or a hunt)²².

The important thing for us is that the athletic contests in the *Iliad* have a specific social function: they are rites destined to honour a death. The heroes compete during the funeral of Patroclus and this is one of the great paradoxes of ancient athletics: in the beginning these contests are a display of energy and force to honour someone who has lost both. Are we talking about putting on a show that might be seen by the fallen warrior?. Or is it rather an affirmation of life on the part of those who see the descent into Hades as an absolute irreparable loss?. We do not know.

What we do know is that the Olympic Games also have a funeral as being included in their origins because, in one of the myths recalling their foundation, the Games honour the hero Pelops after his death, the hero who competed in a chariot race to obtain the hand of Hippodamia, the princess of the area.

Patroclus and Pelops are semi-divine figures from a very remote past. As such they represent a very ancient religious substratum that beco-

²⁰ In the *Iliad* XXIII, the following contests appear: chariot races, boxing, wrestling, running, fighting with armour, shot putting, archery and throwing the javelin. In the *Odyssey* several of these are repeated and the long jump is added. Homer, whom we presume to have lived after the beginning of the Olympic Games in 776, does not mention them explicitly.

²¹ Renfrew (1998)

²² BMC vases C 334, Swaddling (1980), page 63; and Karouzou (1992), page 28.

mes subsumed into a new religion later on, the religion of Zeus and the young gods. We do not know when this transition occurred (it was certainly a gradual one) but by the Classical period the four principle competitions are firmly under the control of a god. The Pythian Games are celebrated in Delphi were held under the aegis of Apollo, the Isthmian under Poseidon and the Nemean and Olympic Games under Zeus²³.

To understand Classical Greek athletics as a religious practice allows us to understand other of its perhaps more disconcerting characteristics: the complete nudity of its competitors. It wasn't always like that. In Homer the contestants use a loincloth²⁴ or shorts the same as the young men who appear in Cretan images during the Minoan period²⁵.

When was this new custom introduced and why?. We do not know with any certainty and the later Greeks also didn't but they gave pragmatic and contradictory versions regarding the beginnings of the custom. According to one source, the first to run naked was Orsipus of Megara (720 BC), who discovered that by doing this it was easier for him to win: on the other hand, another source claims that the same athlete lost the race because his shorts fell down and from then on the custom was established not to wear anything. A third source adds more colour to the tale by saying that Orsipus tripped over and killed himself through getting tangled up in his own loincloth²⁶. Nudity therefore becomes a safety factor !. It also happens that the name of Acantus of Sparta appears as being the first nude runner and the city of birth of the first nudist varies according to the source. The conclusion to be drawn is that we are confronting the typical Greek custom of always finding a *protos heurètes*, a first discoverer of a determined institution or custom.

What is possible to infer from the above is that once nudity was introduced it acquired a ritualistic character, something that was done without exception or question, even if it isn't understood. A rite of this kind, combined with the rite of washing and anointing oneself with oil both before and after exercise points to a religious practice that probably stems from the Doric branch of the Greek family and recreates an initiation rite.

Thucydides, one of our more reliable sources, says that the Spartans were the first to do exercises naked²⁷ and that during the Archaic period in

²³ In Delphi, the Isthmus and Nemea the Games also began as funeral rites in honour of Python, Palamon and Andrastus, respectively. Sweet (1987), pages 7-8.

²⁴ *The Iliad* XXIII, 683, 685, 710. *The Odyssey* XVIII, 67.

²⁵ Karouzou (1992), page 37.

²⁶ All these texts are compiled in Sweet (1987), pages 124-129.

²⁷ Thucydides I, 16.

Thera (present day Santorini), an island colonised by the Spartans, they celebrated dances of nude boys which marked their passing to maturity.

If these conjectures are correct, we have a second confirmation of the Archaic character of Greek athleticism, which does not only personify the most ancient traditions transmitted by Homer but also the most remote strata of Doric religiousness, probably shaped well before the Dorians arrived in the Peloponnese at the end of the 2nd millennium B.C. These, with their emphasis on puberty and fertility would also explain the races of naked young men, where the victor would obtain the hand of the daughter of the king, and the symbols of fertility, implicit in the fillobolia or showering of flowers and leaves, as well as the wreaths of wild olive or laurel with which the victor was crowned.

Is it possible to go further back?. There are some who say “yes” and that comparative ethnology would give us reasons for thinking that all these rites definitely have a common root: the practice of the hunt in the Indo European period previous to the introduction of agriculture²⁸. But here we are entering a nebulous zone where it is difficult to walk on firm territory because we do not know how to intertwine the hunt with the religious rites that surely accompanied it. Moreover, nothing of what we know of the habit of our remote ancestors to strip off their usual clothes before going out to hunt so that their smell would not make their prey flee, nothing of this, I say, explains the naturalness with which the Greeks practised total nudity from the Archaic period onwards. Maybe it’s better to look back at these things in amazement, or what Aristotle called *thaumazein*, instead of being silenced by insufficient explanations.

I should like to end up with a question which becomes more interesting every day in Classical studies: what was the role of women in an institution that was so important for the Greek world?.

It is a known fact that Greek culture is eminently masculine, as the greater part of known cultures have been since only a short time ago. But in the case of the Greeks it is important to avoid stereotypes.

It is certain that women were always excluded from the Olympic Games, under the pain of severe penalties for the transgressors, but in the post Classical period it seems that there were contests for women in the other great competitions and some minor ones. I say “it seems” because the sources are few and obscure.

What we do know with some certainty is that contests exclusively for women dedicated to the goddess Hera were held every four years in the same Olympia, without coinciding with the Games of Zeus. Sixteen noble

²⁸ Sansone (1988).

women of Elis used to organise them and they consisted only of races of young girls divided into three age groups. They did not run naked. The prize for the winner was an olive wreath and a part of the heifer sacrificed to Hera, together with the right to erect her own image in the sanctuary of Zeus' wife²⁹.

We also know that for these female races the track was cut to something like 150 metres, which at first sight seems a concession to a supposed female weakness, but a short time ago it has been demonstrated that the real reason is religious: the track corresponds to three times the length of the temple of Zeus³⁰.

Finally, at various times³¹, Plato proposes that women practice athletics on a par with men and at the end of Antiquity women could be *gymnas-tai* or directors of a gymnasium³² but it's only with the coming of the modern Olympics that women have full participation in the Games.

Thus the athletic contests of the Helladic age, and especially the Olympic Games, were initially religious and funerary rites whose social forms tenaciously persisted even after their origin was forgotten. In spite of the obsessive spirit of competition and the inflexible imperative of victory which always presided over them, they managed to be a point of encounter for more than a millennium and a focal point of unity for a nation which, otherwise, would have languished in the fragmentation generated by another of its great institutions, the *polis*, the city-state whose ideal of absolute independence was its greatness and its weakness.

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²⁹ Pausanias 5, 16, 2-3.

³⁰ Romano (1983), pages 12-14.

³¹ Cf. Especially *Laws*, 804c and 833a-834a.

³² Sweet (1987), page 138.

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