

Presentation of the history of the Olympic Games through time

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Imagine the awe, the admiration, think of the surprise of the traveller Pausanias when, during his peregrinations in Greece in the 2nd century B.C., he visited Elis and saw for the first time the Sanctuary of the Altis with its majestic temples, its beautiful auxiliary buildings and the three thousand statues and votive offerings which are still preserved in excellent conditions.

Well, what was Olympia? What was it that gave it its incomparable glory and aura? What was it that brought to it respect, splendour and sancticity? Was it a place of worship or a gathering site for festive traditional celebrations? Was it a meeting place for philosophers, poets, artists and athletes? As many questions which we should try and find an answer.

There are three fundamental elements associated with Olympia.

The Divine - symbolized by the Sanctuary, the sacred precinct with the temples, Nature - symbolized by the Grove and Man - the connecting link between the other two, who, transcending his nature, struggles to move closer to perfection, to assimilation, to identification with God.

We find these three elements in all the myths related to the foundation and resumption of the ancient Olympic Games.

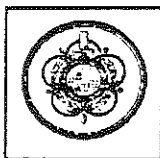
The Olympic Games of antiquity lasted for more than 15 centuries. It is understandable that during this long historic period great changes occurred, both as regards political convictions and the modes and customs and the traditions of the Greeks.

All these factors influenced and shaped the myth related to the founding of the Olympic Games and contributed to the birth of the Olympic Ideal.

I will just mention two characteristic myths concerning the creation of the ancient Olympic Games.

The presence of Pelops in the myths of Olympia is important. Pelops, son of Tantalos, king of Lydia or Phrygia in Asia Minor, is a symbol of change and renovating effort. Pelops reconstituted by Hephaestos comes to Olympia where he takes part in a chariot race against king Oinomaos with the king's daughter Hippodamis as the prize for the victor.

Thirteen suitors had lost their life before Pelops for having been defeated. Pelops, with the help of Hippodamis and the charioteer Myrtilos, won the contest during which Oinomaos was killed. Pelops then murdered Myrtilos for treason, however, in order to placate the gods he founded a sanctuary and organized Olympic Games (Paus. V, 1, 7).



This murderous contest in Olympia would be the last. In the course of the next centuries, sports competitions in Olympia would be bloodless. The games became more noble and the athletes were striving for victory and its moral value. The denigration death of the opponent no longer marked the end of the contest. This myth, with the condemnation of murder, symbolizes change renewal, the reshaping of society's principles and values.

The myth of Pelops and Oinomaos reveals the influence of the Achaians and originates from the period when the Pisaian, the neighbours of the Eleians, were supervising the games.

According to another myth which brings us closer to historic truth, the games were founded by the king of Elis Aethlid (Paus. V, 1, 3).

Contestants were called athletes from his name and the event "athla", terms that are in use to this day.

The historic period of the Olympic Games began in 1104 B.C. when the Dorians-Aitolians starting from Aitolia and crossing over from Antirrhion to Rion settled in Western Peloponnese. They had received an oracle from Delphi to choose as their leader for their descent to the Peloponnese "an one-eyed man". According to Apollodoros (2, 8, 3), they saw a man that had lost one eye sitting on a horse. It was Oxylos (Paus. V, 3, 7).

He had left his country because he had inadvertently killed his brother with the discus (Paus. V, 3, 7). Oxylos led the Dorians into the Peloponnese asking for the Eleian territory in return. He brought the Dorians to Arkadia and seized Eleian and founded the games.

Etrabo (H³⁵⁷) confirms this, saying that the first "Olympiads" were celebrated by the Aitolians with Oxylos.

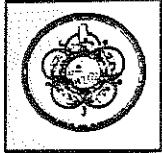
The festival during the first centuries that followed the descent of the Dorians had a restricted and local character. Only the Eleians and the Pisaian took part in it. The games became all-Peloponnesian affair when Greece went through a period of drought, major disasters, internecine wars, with disease and infection devastating the whole of the land, Iphitos, King of Elis and descendant of Oxylos, thought of consulting the oracle of Delphi for a cure for these troubles (Paus. V, 4, 5).

The Pythia in her oracle ordered Iphitos and the Eleians to "restore the Olympic games" (Paus. V, 4, 6). Iphitos, together with the king of Sparta Lykourgos, agreed to re-establish the games as a Peloponnesian festival (Paus. V, 4, 5).

All this is confirmed by Plutarch (Parallel Lives, life of Lykourgos, par. 23) who informs us that : The re-established games were celebrated with splendour and an agreement was signed, which was called a truce, between Iphitos in the name of Elis, Lykourgos in the name of Sparta and Kleisthenes in the name of Pisa. The agreement was inscribed on bronze disc which was seen by the philosopher Aristotele according to his own testimony (Plutarch, Parallel Lives, life of Lykourgos, par. 1). This disc is undated, but it may well be that the proclamation of the truce, to which the Delphic Oracle had contributed, did in fact take place after the 8th century, when the games had gained a certain amount of fame and that the disc was engraved later.

The truce was an agreement of "divine peace".

It guaranteed : 1) the inviolability of the Altis sanctuary,
2) the free movement of pilgrims, even between cities at war,
3) the condemnation of any act of hostility during the games.



The significance of the truce as an institution was that it was recognized by all Greeks and through it the sanctuary of Olympia gained considerable stature and fame.

Now, what were the ideals of the Olympic Games which the Greeks appreciated so much?

The ancient Greeks believed that a well trained body must also be pleasant to look at, while the individual must also be a good athlete. There was an evident desire to combine beauty with skill and this was the basis of Greek education.

To "compete", according to Plato, meant the methodical, volunteer and balanced effort, purity, honesty and precision.

During the contest virtue and bravery become apparent, dishonesty is not allowed, competence, ability, imagination and skill are acclaimed.

We read in Anacharsis, "were someone, Anacharsis, to discard love for fame from his life, what other good would be left and who would want to make anything remarkable or great? (Lucian Anach. 36).

Plato has formulated the aims of Athenian education, "the primary benefit is health, followed by beauty and strength in racing and all the other motions of the body" (Laws 1, 6).

Competition for the ancient Greeks was not just an accidental phenomenon resulting from the necessity of existence. The way the ancient Greeks had conceived it, it was the combination of competitive coexistence, competitive recognition and systematic athletic confrontation, enhanced by the element of individuality and sociability.

Many exercises were performed to the accompaniment of music; what is important is the style of the performer, perfection in the execution of the exercise, the pursuit of excellence and the success of victory, the achievement of mental health and physical beauty.

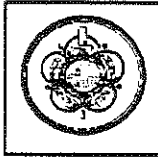
Pindar (Isthmian Odes IV, 10 Phylakidas of Egina) writes :

"Men must toil and suffer to acquire the divine virtues and graces", emphasizing that the athlete's most important virtue is modesty, a virtue that leaves intact the moral benefit of victory, without arousing the envy of his fellowmen or the spiteful jealousy of the gods.

The sporting and competitive spirit had permeated all the facets of Greek life, giving it its special character and colour. Athletes, poets, philosophers, orators, painters, were competing with their works in order to excel.

The ideal of "Kalckagathia" was at the root of Greek education. The young exercised and trained systematically, but this was not enough. For their harmonious and perfect development they also learned singing, music, dancing, while philosophers and pedagogues taught them philosophy. In this way they became strong, healthy, wilful young men, with cultivated mind. This is the double dimension of education, the harmonious coexistence of mind and body that leads man to higher level, to perfection.

The culmination of such coexistence were the games in Olympia. Just as water is the most precious of all elements and god dominates as the most valuable of all goods, just as the sun shines brighter than any other star, Olympia stands higher, overshadowing any other contest, Pindar would write.



In the sanctuary of Olympia, the moral value of the feat was honoured and appreciated, the ideal of fair competition was acknowledged, which represents the basis of education. Athletes were judged on their morality, strength, ability, skill and perseverance.

Athletes were not carried away or intoxicated by the elation of victory and glory. Were this to happen, they would immediately be stricken by the divine punishment of Zeus.

The Olympic Games of antiquity contributed to the development of relations and ties between the Greeks, to the cultivation of unique language and common religion, traditions, customs and mores. They succeeded in uniting the Greek world of the time and consolidating all-Greek Olympic ideals.

Olympia was the religious, cultural, spiritual and artistic centre of the Greeks.

Here, the conjugation and coexistence of all these elements would be achieved through sports and even more so through competition. Olympia though was something more, it was a living museum of ancient and greek history, tradition and architecture.

Ethnic and geographical, political, religious and social causes would lead to the decline of the Greek city-states and certain of the Olympic Games as well.

The competitive spirit of the Greeks, however, did not perish with the decline of the Olympic Games or their abolition in 3rd B.C.

The sporting tradition was kept alive through the Byzantine and both by the people in the rural areas and the aristocrats without forgetting private initiatives. But it could not maintain its integrated character.(1).

The nudity of athletes and certain events like boxing, wrestling and the pancratium clashed with the Christian conception of morality and for that reason the competitive spirit could not be accepted and established as an educational tool.(2)

Although the panhellenic games in Byzance were steadily losing their glory and fame, sporting events were organized throughout this period. In Antioch, games which were called Olympic were being held up to the 6th century A.D.

The right to this name had been obtained by the Antiochians from the Eleans for 90 quinquennia. These gymnastic and music games were preserved until 521 A.D.

The sporting tradition during the Byzantine period was mostly kept alive by the Akrites, as we learn from their songs and poems. (5) The Akrites were special troops assigned to the protection of the Byzantine borders.

The Akrites competed in racing, jumping, archery, weightlifting, riding, stone throwing, even swimming. (6)

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, which marked the end of the Byzantine empire, the sporting spirit was kept alive in the treshing grounds and abodes of the Klephtes and Armatoloi, armed troops which were fighting for the independence of Greece; moreover, in contrast to the Byzantine period, it was also perpetuated through the orthodox church. The church contributed to the preservation of Greek tradition and organized sporting events in the churchyards.



The main events, i.e. wrestling, jumping, stone throwing, fencing, riding and shooting were held with the church's blessings, competitors took the oath and received a laurel crown as symbol for their victory. (7) These sports events almost always closed with Greek dances, just like in ancient times. This custom is still alive in many regions of Greece. (8)

The revival of the Olympic Games, however, remained a topical issue for three decades following the creation of the modern Greek state. Evangelos Zappas from Epirus, revolution fighter and wealthy merchant who lived in Roumania, proposed in 1856 to the King to take over the costs of reviving the Olympic Games so that they could be again celebrated every four years.

This initiative led to the staging of the "Olympia" in 1858, 1870, 1875 and 1888. The "Olympia" games of 1875 were particularly successful and contributed a lot to the revival of the Olympic Idea.

Three statues have been erected in honour of Zappas, the great Greek benefactor. (32).

One at Lavobo, his birthplace (on Albanian territory today), one in Athens with the inscription "here lies his head" and one in Vostheni, Roumania, the place where he lived and did great things, with the inscription : (33)

"Your glory is not unique, Iphitos. Greece now has Zappas Olympic Games". (34)

The significance of Zappa's Olympiads is enormous, both for the history of the revival of the international Olympic Games and for the history of Greece.

These games were descendants of the ancient Greek games as the precursors of the modern Olympic Games.

Many elements which they contained, like the distinction between amateurs and professionals (for the first time), the Olympic anthem, the athletes' oath, the opening and closing ceremonies and the uniformity of dress, are now basic features of the Olympic Games. Furthermore, some of the sports on the Olympic programme date back to Zappas' Olympiads.

The "Olympia" games had also prepared the Greeks so that on March 25, 1896, 60-70,000 spectators would throng the stadium and contribute with their presence to the success of the Games. It was the first time in the history of modern sport that such vast crowd of fans would gather to watch a sporting event especially at a time when sport was not that popular.

Zappa's idea, through the English educationist Arnold Brucks would be taken over by the French pedagogue Pierre de Coubertin on whose initiatives the Olympic Games were internationalized and the Olympic idea revived in the last century.

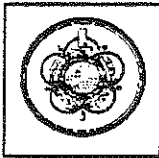
Coubertin realized that sport would become a major element in popular education. But we must "internationalize it, before we popularize it", he said (15), for he knew that a universal idea can be shared by all, independent of race, sex, social class, religion and ideology. Thus, it would be easier to promote sport as a pedagogical element in the educational system of his country, France, and among the youth of the whole world.

The achievement of the Olympic Movement's educational aims must rely, above all, on the support of its own institutions.

The purpose of modern Olympism is not to create over-developed and over-skilled athletes.

Olympism must reach the young in their life before, during and after school and offer them, under proper guidance, a sound physical education, competition, recreation, as well as intellectual and mental development.

This is the only way in which a firm basis can be created for popular and high quality sport.



Epilogue - Conclusion

At the end of the last century, the views of people whose social ideologies differed had to adjust to the new conditions which had emerged as a result of technological and industrial development. The result of this evolution was that almost all social religious and political institutions had to be revised and replaced by new, able to withstand the test of time and to survive, institutions that would be resting on solid bases and have the necessary flexibility and adaptability.

The revival of the ancient Greek spirit, enhanced by the liberal thoughts of the Victorian era, gave Coubertin, the pacifists, educationists, sports leaders, the ideal conditions for the development of a new, all-human institution, which was offered to all the people of this earth.

Olympism today is a philosophy with which any people can identify and through which they can express their own culture, with looking for bonds of friendship and understanding with other people.

Olympism wishes its ideals of fair play, equality, respect towards individuals, sexes, races, nations on mutual understanding, tolerance, dialogue, friendship, to contribute the shaping of the character of youth all over the world, with the ultimate aim of "Kalokagathia".

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize that it is man who is called upon to incarnate these principles. He must promote them against all odds, overcoming any obstacle created by other institutions and remaining always open dialogue.

I also wish to emphasize that, always within the content of bonafide criticism; we should examine any technocratic proposals for the modernising of Olympism's principles and attempts to unmythicize the games. Often behind such proposals there lies will for total commercialization.

We know that we live in a multi-institutional, pluralist society and that the Olympic Movement cannot avoid the influence of external factors.

The last boycotts in Moscow and Los Angeles have proved, however, that the Olympic Movement today is able to survive the blow which it receives.

Olympism must keep away from political confrontation because relying solely on its humanitarian values and principles, without any political planning, it can remain a great social idea.