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Why Was Celebrating the Olympic Games So Important in Hellenic Culture?

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The Olympics were not just recreational games. Rather, they served other socio-cultural purposes. Anthropological analysis of games reveals a deeper understanding of agonistic practices: not only do they underpin the social function of man within society through competition, but they also highlight the dichotomy of life and death. Celebrating the Games, in particular, was crucial because it enhanced individual prestige and, at the same time, it developed a Pan-Hellenic socio-cultural dimension. As this paper will reveal, religion in the Olympics functioned as a tool for both individual and communal expression. Subsequently, the close affinity between warfare and athletic values will show that competitors, influenced by Homeric culture, strived to achieve victory through the display of *areté*. However, the outcome of the contest did not only reflect on the competitor, but also on his city. The *poleis*, through their respective athletes, were protagonists of the Olympic games, thus stressing a Pan-Hellenic function of bloodless confrontation.

The Olympics' religious overtone established a special relationship between the winner and Zeus, culminating in the victor's exaltation in front of his fellow human beings. By virtue of their success, victorious athletes were no longer regarded as normal humans. Rather, they acquired a privileged status. In *Pythian Odes* 8, Pindar portrays victory as "the brightness, given by Zeus," which will bestow pleasure upon the winner.¹ He further

¹ Pindar, *Pythian Ode* 8.96.

contrasts the winners, represented by light and virtuous behaviour, and the losers, surrounded by shadow.² The victor's symbolic transformation is demonstrated by the ritualised formality of the winning ceremony. For example, the coronation with fillets indicates the athlete's consecration to a god, achieved through victory.³ In Greek literature, fillets attested to the privileged position of an individual, whether male or female, in the eyes of the divine. Lucian informs us that these decorations were typical of sacrificial victims, which had a special religious status.⁴ Similarly, Aeschylus tells us that, before meeting her untimely death, Cassandra threw away her fillets, ending the priesthood of Apollo.⁵ The winner's heightened individuality in front of the god can also be inferred from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. On the Western Pediment, the Centauromachy plays on the distinction between what is below or above human nature. The figure of Apollo invites the contestants to behave in a heroic manner, hence overcoming beastly behaviour.⁶ Only in that way, they could achieve the favour of the gods and, consequently, the privileged status in front of their fellow humans. While we have examined individualism in religious athletic performance, the religiousness of the Olympics highlights a collective dimension.

The Olympics' religious aspect fostered the development of a Pan-Hellenic participation. After all, during the sixth and the fifth centuries BCE, the Olympic participants and spectators belonged to similar cultural backgrounds. In this context, attending athletic events was an important cultic activity.⁷ Although relating to the festival on Delos, the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* tells us that the god was pleased with the amount of spectators

² Pindar, *Pythian Ode* 8.95.

³ David Sansone, *Greek Athletics and the Genesis of Sport* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 81.

⁴ Lucian, *On Sacrifices* 12.

⁵ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1264-65.

⁶ Judith M. Barringer, "The Temple of Zeus at Olympia, heroes, and athletes," *Hesperia*, vol. 74 (2005), 236; John Pedley, *Sanctuaries and the Sacred in the Ancient Greek World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 125.

⁷ Matt P.J. Dillon, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge 1997), 103.

attending the festivities in his honour.⁸ At Olympia, the importance of communal participation was even greater, because, as Pausanias writes, the gods held the Games in special consideration. Already from the eighth century BCE, the sanctuary at Olympia had acquired a Pan-Hellenic status.⁹ Thus, great numbers of pilgrims flocked to Olympia every four years not only to enjoy the competition, but, more importantly, to worship the tutelary god, Zeus. The event's collective significance is corroborated by the truce, held in place for the occasion: travellers to and from Olympia were protected from any harm.¹⁰ Hence, the Greeks' religious piety fostered a Pan-Hellenic dimension during the Olympics, whereby both the truce and the devotion to Zeus made different *poleis* come together in peace.¹¹ Nevertheless, individualistic and communal elements cannot only be seen in the religiousness of the Olympics. The relationship between military prowess and athletic contests will show that the Olympics played a paramount role in shaping the Hellenic civic attitude.

Although athletics and military duties were closely related, this association should be explained in relation to the civic values prescribed by Homeric culture. The Olympic contestants strived to achieve victory, as it was the most valuable outcome not only in athletic competitions, but also in warfare.¹² Epictetus notes that "in the Olympic Games you cannot just be beaten and depart, but, first of all, you will be disgraced...before the whole world."¹³ The abundance of sources, both literary and archaeological, propounding this theme makes us realise that the individual contestant's aim was obvious: either win or die. The strong similarity between agonistic competition and warfare effort are related to the common values shared by both the soldier and the athlete. As Poliakoff notes, "victory or death" is a recurrent

⁸ *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 146.

⁹ Pedley, *Sanctuaries and the Sacred in the Ancient Greek World*, 120.

¹⁰ E. Norman Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 34.

¹¹ Dillon, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage*, 104.

¹² Waldo E. Sweet, *Sport and Recreation in Ancient Greece: a Sourcebook with Translations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3.

¹³ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.52.

theme on the tombs of Greek soldiers.¹⁴ Apart from the ideology, the athletics-warfare relationship can be seen in a practical light; namely, by emulating belligerent actions, physical activity trained soldiers for battle. However, while athletics and warfare could have depended on each other, this affiliation was not wholly evident in the ancient world. In *Anacharsis*, while Solon explains how athletic contests would help soldiers in battle, the Scythian cannot hold his disbelief.¹⁵ Similarly, in modern scholarship, the duality of the argument is still alive. On one side, scholars, like Swaddling, argue that physical activity kept men fit for war.¹⁶ On the other side, along Sinn's line, agonistic competitions were useless for crucial tasks of military service.¹⁷ The reason behind the relationship between military efforts and athletic contests can be found in the Homeric tradition. As we read in the *Iliad*, Patroclus' funeral games were held as a form of entertainment, which celebrated martial values within an agonistic context.¹⁸ Thus, the exhibition of warfare values at the ancient Olympics should not be understood in a merely practical light. Rather, it should be seen as part of Hellenic culture, evolving from Homeric tradition and becoming a standard for athletic contests.¹⁹ In this setting, while Olympic participants were interested in winning, they wanted to achieve victory in a lawful and moral way, displaying the ethics typical of the Homeric texts.

The Olympic participants obtained individual recognition through displays of *areté*. As Pindar writes, a man was distinguished by his excellence.²⁰ This allowed the competitors to achieve the highest level of glory without taking in consideration their socio-economic class: already from the archaic age, non-aristocrats sought participation in agonistic

¹⁴ M.B. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World. Competition, Violence, and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 90.

¹⁵ Lucian, *Anacharsis* 30, 31.

¹⁶ Judith Swaddling, *The Ancient Olympic Games* (London: British Museum Press, 1980), 44.

¹⁷ Ulrich Sinn, *Olympia. Cult, Sport, and Ancient Festival* (Princeton: M. Wiener, 2000), 50.

¹⁸ Homer, *Iliad* 23.256-24.6.

¹⁹ Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World*, 112.

²⁰ Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 7.7.

contests.²¹ Thus, *areté* was closely associated to individual merit and to prowess.²² Consequently, the Olympics allowed common citizens to acquire a special civic status through their own talent and deeds. This can be especially seen in the treatment of the Olympic winners. Despite Xenophanes' complaints, the victor "would be more...glorious to behold" by his citizenry.²³ Thucydides, for instance, tells us that Kylon attempted a *coup d'état* during "the greatest festival of Zeus," legitimising his actions through an Olympic victory.²⁴ As Bowra argues, those who admired athletic success saw it as something above human.²⁵ Diodorus' account of Exainetos of Akragas shows that Olympic winners were widely celebrated within their communities.²⁶ The competitions, in fact, represented the struggle to rise above man's ephemeral condition.²⁷ It should not be a surprise that some Olympic winners became the central focus of a cult, as in the case of Theagenes of Thasos.²⁸ However, this civic exaltation of the Greek man was not the only reason why displaying *areté* in the Olympics was important. The contests fostered a Pan-Hellenic dimension, whereby different *poleis* could come together peacefully.

Participating in the Olympics brought the several *poleis* in contact with one another, acquiring prestige through their athlete's victory. Moreover, it allowed the city-states to assess their strengths in light of potential warfare. Although the athletes entered the Games as individual participants, they also represented their hometowns.²⁹ The contestants, therefore, did not only strive for personal glory. As representatives of their own *poleis*, they brought

²¹ Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World*, 107.

²² Henri I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1956), 11.

²³ Xenophanes, *Poems* F2, 6.

²⁴ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.126.5.

²⁵ Cecil Maurice Bowra, "Xenophanes and the Olympic Games," *American Journal of Philology*, vol. 59, 265.

²⁶ Diodorus, *Library of History*, 13.82.7.

²⁷ D.C. Young, *The Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athlete* (Chicago: Ares, 1984), 175.

²⁸ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 6.11.8-9; Bruno Currie, *Pindar and the Cult of Heroes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 123.

²⁹ Gadiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World*, 28-29; D. Allen & V. Lantinova, "The Ancient Olympics as a Signal of City-State Strength," *Economic of Governance*, vol. 14, 33.

honour to their cities.³⁰ This is shown by the privileged retributions provided to the Olympic victors by their own *poleis*: apart from substantial payments,³¹ and lifelong access to the *prytaneion*,³² the winners could aspire to prestigious political positions,³³ thus emphasising the civic character of the athlete-*polis* relationship. In this setting, the different city-states peacefully competed with one another through their athletes to achieve greater honours. While the city-states of the Hellenic world convened for the Olympics, we cannot assume that there was a sense of unity among the *poleis*.³⁴ Even though it was unlikely that the Games were used as a tool for pacifying disputes, the competition would have provided the *poleis* with information regarding the strength of other city-states.³⁵ In this context, the Olympic competitions permitted the different city-states to ascertain other *poleis*' power through their respective athletes, in light of future warfare.³⁶ Furthermore, these symbolic contests created bloodless battlegrounds in which the *poleis* could safely challenge one another, fostering a Pan-Hellenic dimension of competition.

Celebrating the ancient Olympic Games allowed the development of individualistic accomplishment and fostered a Pan-Hellenic environment. Firstly, the religious component has been examined, showing that the competitors' individuality was exalted in relation to Zeus. By virtue of their victory, contestants could reach a superhuman status. At the same time, the religious aspect of the Olympics provided the spectators with a Pan-Hellenic arena, where Greeks could participate in the cultic activities notwithstanding their geographical provenance. Subsequently, the civic aspect of the Olympics has demonstrated that military and athletic contests aimed at achieving victory. By doing so, the Olympic victor acquired a

³⁰ Dillon, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage*, 121; J. Pedley, *Sanctuaries and the Sacred in the Ancient Greek World*, 134.

³¹ D. Allen & V. Lantinova, "The Ancient Olympics as a Signal of City-State Strength," 36.

³² *IG I³* 131.10-15; *IG I²* 77.

³³ Sweet, *Sport and Recreation in Ancient Greece*, 3.

³⁴ Mark Golden, *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5.

³⁵ D. Allen & V. Lantinova, "The Ancient Olympics as a Signal of City-State Strength," 33.

³⁶ D. Allen & V. Lantinova, "The Ancient Olympics as a Signal of City-State Strength," 31-32.

sense of individual glory and, consequently, the admiration of society. Moreover, since the contestants represented their own city-states, their glory would not just be individual. Rather, it would also benefit the *polis*, which, in turn, granted special provisions to the Olympic victor. The competition at Olympia, nevertheless, was a symbolic one, whereby the Greek *poleis* could compete against one another, without the violence of warfare. At the same time, through the physical confrontation of their respective athletes, the city-states could assess their own strengths in light of potential warfare. Thus, participation in the Olympic Games created an environment, where individuals could aspire to great honours and city-states could symbolically assess their power and acquire prestige.

About the author

Luca Ricci just graduated with Honors from the University of Adelaide (Australia). He has just started his Research Master of Art at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands.