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HERAUSGEBER

Wolfgang Decker, Köln – Peter Mauritsch, Graz – Werner Petermandl, Graz – Robert Rollinger, Innsbruck – Christoph Ulf, Innsbruck – Ingomar Weiler, Graz

INSTITUTE

Institut für Alte Geschichte und Altertumskunde, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz
Universitätsplatz 3, A-8010 Graz

Institut für Alte Geschichte und Altorientalistik, Leopold-Franzens-Universität Innsbruck
Innrain 52, A-6020 Innsbruck

Institut für Sportgeschichte, Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln
Carl-Diem-Weg 6, D-50933 Köln

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Vormalige Mitherausgeber waren Joachim Ebert (1988–1999 †) und Ulrich Sinn (1992–2000).

Bis zu ihrem Ableben zählten folgende Personen zu den Mitgliedern des wissenschaftlichen Beirates:

Bronisław Biliński, Rom/Warschau – Hans-Volkmar Herrmann, Köln – Luigi Moretti, Rom – Werner Rudolph, Zepernick – Alexandr Iossifovič Zaicev, St. Petersburg

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Beiträge erbeten an:

Redaktion in Graz:

Werner Petermandl, redaktionelle Mitarbeit Barbara Mauritsch-Bein
Institut für Alte Geschichte und Altertumskunde, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz
Universitätsplatz 3, A-8010 Graz
Tel.: 0316 380-2349; Fax: 0316 380-9715
Email: werner.petermandl@kfunigraz.ac.at

Rezensionen:

Wolfgang Decker, redaktionelle Mitarbeit Barbara Rieger
Institut für Sportgeschichte, Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln
Carl-Diem-Weg 6, D-50933 Köln
Tel.: 02234/54996
Email: w.decker@dshs-koeln.de

weitere Ansprechpartner sind:

Paola Angeli Bernardini, Istituto di Filologia Classica, Università di Urbino, Via S. Andrea 34, I-61029 Urbino, Italien
Hugh M. Lee, Department of Classics, 2407 Marie Mount Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA
Jean-Paul Thuillier, Département des sciences de l'antiquité, École normale supérieure, 45, Rue d'Ulm, F-75230 Paris Cedex 05, Frankreich

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Thoughts on the Historical Origins of the Olympic Games and the Cult of Pelops in Olympia¹

Panos Valavanis
Athens

*For Dr. Theodora Karaghiorgha,
Ephor of Antiquities*

A passage in Philostratus is used as a basis from which it is argued that the *stadion*-race, the event from which the Olympic games began, was originally held as part of the cult, to select the finest mortal, to light the fire on the altar. This distinguishes the cult at Olympia from others, in which the fire was invariably lit by a priest, and explains why the first contests of historical times were held at Olympia and from the beginning of the cult of Zeus in the middle of the 11th c. BC. On the basis of this suggestion, the choice of the *stadion*-race, the crowning of the victors, the athletic nudity and, perhaps, the exclusion of the women are all accounted for as relics of the cult ritual. Hippias chose 776 BC, because this was the year that the Eleians for the first time occupied Olympia and he wanted to trace the rights to the sanctuary to as early a period as possible. It is also proposed, that the hero-cult was associated not with the beginnings of the games but with their expansion in the late 8th and early 7th c. The myth of Pelops emerged as the founding myth in the first half of the 7th c., alongside the introduction of the chariot race, during a phase when the Pisatans were again laying claim to the sanctuary.

*When we do not know how things really happened in the past
and invent a falsehood as like to the truth as possible, are we
doing something useful? (Plato, Republic 382 D)²*

As research has demonstrated in recent years, athletic exercises and performances were a fairly common activity in most early civilisa-

¹ I have had very constructive discussions on this subject with several colleagues and friends, amongst them Th. Karaghiorgha, A. Moustaka, N. Kourou, W. Decker, I. Weiler, M. Tiverios and, of course, E. Baziotopoulou. I would also like to thank the two anonymous readers of the journal. All of these read early versions of the text and made important comments. The translation of the Greek text is due to D. Hardy. Abbreviations follow the conventions of 'Archäologischer Anzeiger' (1997, 611–628), for some others see the 'Abbreviations' at the end of the article.

² Despite the 'Neun Thesen für ein "Non Liquef"' of Chr. ULF/I. WEILER, *Der Ursprung der antiken Olympischen Spiele in der Forschung*, in: Stadion 6, 1980, 29–31, which is in keeping with the meaning of the passage from Plato cited above, I here venture another attempt on the subject, in the hope of providing a number of ideas that may facilitate further research.

tions.³ However, leaving aside the likely influence of these on the ancient Greeks, there can be no doubt that the beginnings of ancient and also of modern athletic history are to be sought at Olympia in early historical times.⁴

How these games began is a question that has been of considerable concern to scholarship. There were many different versions in circulation in ancient times that traced the foundation of the Olympic games back to gods, heroes and also mythical or historical figures, in an attempt to fill the gaps in historical memory and provide an interpretation for events that were already in the distant past and were now forgotten. Another reason accounting for the circulation of different versions lay in the attempts made by the cities near Olympia to associate themselves in retrospect with the majesty of Olympia and the organization of the games by tracing the origins of them to one of 'their own' gods, heroes or rulers.⁵

About the time of Christ, Strabo (8,3,30) exhorts his contemporaries not to believe anything they hear regarding the foundation of the sanctuary of Olympia and the origins of the games: *We must set aside the old stories about the foundation of the sanctuary and the position of the games ... For the evidence about them is recounted in many different ways and is by no means reliable.*

Strabo's exhortation has proved to be highly influential and has transcended time. As a result, it has had a great influence on modern investigation of the question, which, to a greater or lesser extent, rejects the reliability of the relevant ancient tradition, regarding it as an *ex post facto* construct for reasons of political expediency.⁶ For, as

³) DECKER 15–26. DNP 11, 2002, 838–842, s. v. *Sport* and 847–849 s. v. *Sportfeste* (W. DECKER). V. OLIVOVA, *Sport und Spiele im Altertum. Eine Kulturgeschichte*, Munich 1984, 21–81. I. WEILER, *Der Sport bei den Völkern der alten Welt*, Darmstadt 1988, 53–78.

⁴) For views on the relationship between prehistoric athletic activities and the Olympic Games, see W. DECKER, *Die mykenische Herkunft des griechischen Totenagons*, in: *Stadion* 8/9, 1982/3, 1–24. C. RENFREW, *Minoan-Mycenaean Origins of the Panhellenic Games*, in: RASCHKE 21–23. J. PUHVEL, *Hittite Athletics as Pre-figurations of Ancient Greek Games*, in: RASCHKE 26–31. H. D. EVJEN, *The Origins and Functions of Formal Athletic Competitions in the Ancient World*, in: *Proceedings* 95–104, esp. 96–99.

⁵) Sometimes, the different versions may reflect changes in the direction or emphasis of a cult, in this case the cult at Olympia. See SINN, *Stellung* 8.

⁶) For the history of research on this subject, cf. ULF/WEILER (vd n.2) 1–38. WEILER (vd n.3) 105–109. H. D. EVJEN, *Competitive Athletics in Ancient Greece: The Search for Origins and Influences*, in: *OpAth* 16, 1986, 51–56. IDEM, *The Origins and Functions of formal athletic Competitions in the ancient World*, in: *Proceedings* 95–104.

Strabo again states (8,3,31): *Moderns introduce many innovations, to the point where they say the complete opposite.*

The problems surrounding the origins of the Olympic games may be summarised in the following points.

a. 776 as the date for the beginning of the games was already disputed in ancient times. Following this, and bolstered in recent years by the excavation data from A. Mallwitz's investigation, many scholars place the beginning of the games in the late 8th or early 7th c.⁷ There are views, however, holding that these first indications for 'agonistic' activity at Olympia should be considered evidence not for the beginning of the games, but for their expansion.⁸ In the absence of adequate evidence, other researchers completely reject the existence of contests at Olympia before the 7th century, taking the view that the Olympic games were founded at the same time as the other three panhellenic games in the early 6th c. BC.⁹ Morgan argues that the games began in the early 8th c., on the basis of changes in dedication practices in the sanctuary that can be detected about 800 BC.¹⁰ Finally, those who assert that the games go back to the Mycenaean period are steadily declining in number.¹¹

b. Modern scholarship has also strongly disputed the tradition that the only event held at the early Olympiads was the *stadion*-race. Major scholars of ancient Greek sport, such as E. Gardiner, H.-V. Herrmann and W. Decker have asserted that the games had a full pro-

⁷) MALLWITZ 99–109. A. MALLWITZ, in: *OIBer* 11, 1999, 199. RENFREW (vd n.4) 22. H. PHILIPP, *Olympia, die Peloponnes und die Westgriechen*, in: *JdI* 109, 1994, 78–92. SINN, *Olympia* 26–29. DECKER 43 n.27. Chr. WACKER, *The Record of the Olympic Victory List*, in: *Nikephoros* 11, 1998, 39–50. D. KYLE, *Gifts and Glory. Panathenaic and other Greek Athletic Prizes*, in: J. NEILS (ed.), *Worshipping Athena. Panathenaia and Parthenon*, Madison 1996, 106–136 esp. 111. DNP 8, 1183 s. v. *Olympia* (W. DECKER).

⁸) MORGAN 48. Cf. MALLWITZ 99. LEE 112, 114. J. SWADDLING, *The ancient Olympic Games*, London 2002 (second ed.) 9. EDER 113–114.

⁹) B. J. PEISER, *The Crime of Hippias of Elis. Zur Kontroverse um die Olympionikenliste*, in: *Stadion* 16, 1990, 51, 52, 56. IDEM, *Das dunkle Zeitalter Olympias*, Frankfurt 1993, 222–227. Chr. WACKER, *The Record of the Olympic Victory List*, in: *Nikephoros* 11, 1998, 39–50, esp. 48–49.

¹⁰) MORGAN 48, 56, 192.

¹¹) The recent advocates of this view include HERRMANN 65–79, esp. 65. IDEM., review of B. J. PEISER, *Das dunkle Zeitalter Olympias*, in: *Nikephoros* 6, 1993, 252–253.

gramme from the outset¹² or that, given the aristocratic nature of the games, the first event was probably the chariot-race.¹³

c. With regard to the origins of the games, most scholars trace them back to the funerary cult of Pelops, one of the figures cited as their mythical founder.¹⁴ This view stood out from a vast number of theories and was widely accepted, because it was set in the context of the general growth of hero-cult in the Geometric period, and because it was in keeping with the ideological and political background of this time.¹⁵

There are several scholars, however, who consider that the cult of Pelops was introduced later at Olympia, since the earliest evidence for cult in the Pelopion dates from Archaic times.¹⁶ These views have been supported by a recent study of the finds from the 'black stratum' by H. Kyrieleis. The uniform nature of this level has suggested that only a single deity, Zeus, was worshipped at early Olympia. Accord-

¹²) LEE 110, 113. The doubt cast on the ancient tradition has led to the views that it is inconceivable that there was an interval of 52 years between the introduction of the first and second events (HERRMANN 80–81) or that for 68 years the only contests held were the running events (MALLWITZ 101. A. MALLWITZ, *OlBer* 11, 1999, 99. DECKER 67).

¹³) HERRMANN 45. DECKER 42, 67. J. MOURATIDIS, *The 776 BC Date and Some Problems connected with it*, in: *Canadian Journal of the History of Sport* 16, 1985, 1–14, esp. 6–7. M. GOLDEN, *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge 1998, 5. Cf. R. BILIK, *Die Zuverlässigkeit der frühen Olympionikenliste. Die Geschichte eines Forschungsproblems im chronologischen Überblick*, in: *Nikephoros* 12, 2000, 47–62.

¹⁴) ULF/WEILER (vd n. 2) 2–15. HERRMANN 45 n. 147. SWADDLING (vd n. 8) 9. N. SPIVEY, *The Ancient Olympics*, Oxford 2004, 222–224.

¹⁵) MORGAN 29, 47–49. F. DE POLIGNAC, *Mediation, Competition and Sovereignty: The Evolution of Rural Sanctuaries in Geometric Greece*, in: S. ALCOCK/R. OSBORNE (eds.), *Placing the Gods. Sanctuaries and Sacred Space in Ancient Greece*, Oxford 1984, 11. D. BOEHRINGER, *Heroenkulte in Griechenland von der geometrischen bis zur klassischen Zeit*, Berlin 2001, 374–375. For hero-cult in relation to the games, see, however, the views of EVJEN in: *OpAth* (vd n. 4) 53–54. EVJEN in: *Proceedings* 101.

¹⁶) MORGAN 29, 43, 45. A. MALLWITZ, *Olympia und seine Bauten*, Munich 1972, 133–137. MALLWITZ 86–89. D. HARMON, *The Religious Significance of Games in the Roman Age*, in: RASCHKE 236–255, esp. 239. C. ANTONACCIO, *Contesting the past: Hero Cult, Tomb Cult and Epic in early Greece*, in: *AJA* 98, 1994, 389–410, esp. 399. EADEM, *An Archaeology of Ancestors*, Maryland 1995, 170–176, esp. 175. A. MALLWITZ, *OlBer* 11, 1999, 197–198. Strong scepticism as to Pelops' connection with the games is also expressed by GOLDEN (vd n. 13) 13–15. For the role of Pelops at Olympia, see, recently, A. JACQUEMIN, *Pausanias, témoin de la religion grecque dans la sanctuaire d'Olympie*, in: A. PASQUIER (ed.), *Olympie*, Paris 2001, 181–211, esp. 184–187. C. O. PACHE, *Baby and Child Heroes in ancient Greece*, Chicago 2004, 87, 91–92.

ing to Kyrieleis, the cult of Pelops was probably introduced about 600 BC, or even later.¹⁷

Philostratus' testimony

The present article will attempt to consider the problems connected with the origins of the Olympic games, taking the ancient tradition as a starting point. A passage in Philostratus (*Gym.* 5) has not received the attention it merits from modern scholarship, or has been misinterpreted. The text refers to the first appearance of the *stadion*-race, but since we accept that this was the first event at the Olympic games, then it indirectly provides evidence for their origins: *The stadion race was invented in the following manner. When the Eleians had carried out the sacrifice according to custom, the sacred parts [of the sacrificial animal] were placed on the altar, though the fire was not yet lit on it. The runners were one stadion away from the altar, in front of which stood a priest holding a torch to award the prize. The victor lit the fire for the sacred parts, and departed as Olympic victor.*

This passage makes it absolutely clear that the foot-race began as a basic element of the cult and was intended to reveal the man who would have the honour of lighting the sacrificial fire on the altar.¹⁸ In essence, the contest was a way in which the god chose the strongest, the best, and the most favoured mortal to come into communication

¹⁷) H. KYRIELEIS, *Neue Ausgrabungen in Olympia*, in: *AW* 21, 1990, 177–188. IDEM, *Zu den Anfängen des Heiligtums von Olympia*, in: H. KYRIELEIS (ed.), *Olympia 1875–2000. 125 Jahre Deutsche Ausgrabungen*, Mainz 2003, 219. We are waiting for further evidence from this scholar to document his very interesting new views. See also A. Moustaka's suggestion that the cult of Hera was introduced at Olympia later, A. MOUSTAKA, *On the Cult of Hera at Olympia*, in: R. HÄGG (ed.), *Peloponnesian Sanctuaries and Cults. Proceedings of the 9th International Symposium at the Swedish Institute at Athens, 11–13 June 1994*, Stockholm 2002, 199–205. EADEM, *Zeus and Hera im Heiligtum von Olympia*, in: KYRIELEIS (ed.), *Olympia 1875–2000*, 301–315.

¹⁸) After completing the paper, I saw that the same opinion on the origins of the Olympic games based on the text of Philostratus was already expressed by Th. SCANLON in the preface of his book, *Eros and Greek Athletics*, Oxford 2002, 33–34. The same view is also to be found in P. SIEWERT, *Zum Ursprung der Olympischen Spiele*, in: *Nikephoros* 5, 1992, 7–8, though he gives it a more oracular character, considering it to be the way in which the god chose the most suitable mortal to light the sacrificial fire. The significance of the passage is also noted by W. BURKERT, *Greek Religion*, Cambridge MA 1985, 106 and E. BRULOTTE, *The 'Pillar of Oinomaos' and the location of Stadium I at Olympia*, in: *AJA* 98, 1994, 53–64, esp. 63, though it is not connected with the origins of the games.

with him by lighting the fire on his altar.¹⁹ This initial relationship led to the later, widely held view that the victors in the games were the favourites of the god.

The reason why Philostratus's view has not received the attention it deserves in modern scholarship, is that back in 1909, J. Jüthner, in his monumental edition of the *Gymnasticus*, launched a highly influential attack on the reliability of the statement, leaving no room for its acceptance.²⁰ Jüthner's argument concentrates on the fact that the amalgamation of the sacrifice and foot-race cited by Philostratus is nowhere attested, either in mythology or in cult rituals, since the sacrifice invariably comes first and is followed by the contests.

This is not the only distinctive feature, however. According to the text, and in contrast with all the known ritual tradition, the sacrificial fire on the altar was lit not by the priest, but by the victor in the contest. This is the main distinguishing feature that sets the cult at Olympia apart from all the others.²¹ These very differences reported by Philostratus should not only not be rejected as erroneous, but should actually be highlighted, since they explain why the games began at Olympia and not at some other sanctuary of early Greece. In contrast with the usual practice, the 'lighter' of the fire on the altar at Olympia was not known in advance but had to be designated each time through the contest!

And the contest that was to reveal the victor could not be the chariot race, in which only a few had the right to compete. Nor could it be

¹⁹ F. M. CORNFORD, *The Origin of the Olympic Games*, in: J. HARRISON (ed.), *Themis. A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, Cambridge 1912, 212–259, long ago noted the significance of the passage, but believed that the victor was chosen to be the consort of the goddess Gaia at the sacred marriage that followed. W. BURKERT, *Homo Necans. The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1983, 96–103, D. SANSONE, *Greek Athletics and the Genesis of Sport*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1988, 82–3 and G. NAGY, *Pindar's Olympian I and the aetiology of the Olympic Games*, in: TAPA 116, 1986, 77–78, assert that the race to the altar shows that the athlete was nothing more than the intended victim of the sacrifice, which has to go to the altar of its own free will! Cf. EVJEN in: *Proceedings* (vd n. 6) 102.

²⁰ J. JÜTHNER, *Philostratos. Über Gymnastik*, Leipzig/Berlin 1909, 195. The reliability of Philostratus has recently been called into question again (see G. ANDERSON, *Philostratos. Biography and Belles Letters in the 3rd c. A.D.*, London 1986, 269–270), but without any reference to the specific passage. Cf. also D. YOUNG, *A brief History of the Olympic Games*, Malden MA 2004, 19. J. KOENIG, *Athletics and Literature in the Roman Empire*, Cambridge 2005, 301–344, esp. 326, 330.

²¹ But cf. the statement by F. de POLIGNAC (vd n. 15) 5, that there was no difference between Olympia and the other early sanctuaries at the beginning of the cult.

any of the contests involving a series of fights between pairs, such as wrestling, etc. The reason that the priests of Olympia selected the foot race and not some other event is that this was the easiest, quickest and fairest way to select from amongst all the worshippers the best to light the fire on the god's altar.

Another argument advanced against Philostratus' view is that a procedure of this kind ought to have been retained in the conservative programme of the games.²²

This would only have been easy in the beginning, however, when the number of events was relatively small. Later, this tradition, too, gave way to the practical needs involved in the conducting of many contests. It should not be forgotten that our evidence for the programme of the games comes from relatively late sources, and reveals the final form of this programme, after all the events had been included.²³

On the other hand, some scholars have misinterpreted the passage and maintain that Philostratus associates the beginnings of the *stadion*-race with the torch-race.²⁴ However, it is perfectly clear that the torch was held by the priest who stood before the altar and gave it to the victor *after* the race to light the fire.²⁵

I believe, then, that the origins of the Olympic games should be sought in a foot-race held as a cult act already from the beginning of the cult at Olympia. This race had a very limited nature, and only some of the worshippers who had attended for the cult will have taken part in it.²⁶ We should not, therefore, regard the games as a new ele-

²² Cf. I. WEILER, review of J. Swaddling, *Die Olympischen Spiele in der Antike*, in: Nikephoros 16, 2003, 266.

²³ For the programme of the Olympic Games, see most recently H. M. LEE, *The Program and Schedule of the Ancient Olympic Games*, Hildesheim 2001 (Nikephoros Beiheft 6), 22–23, 52–53.

²⁴ See e.g., H. M. LEE, *The Ancient Olympic Games: Origin, Evolution, Revolution*, in: The Classical Bulletin 74, 1998, 131. GOLDEN (vd n. 13) 19. SANSONE (vd n. 19) 80–83.

²⁵ JÜTHNER (vd n. 20) 195.

²⁶ Gardiner's scepticism [see LEE, 110 and LEE, *Origin* (vd n. 23) 129–141, esp. 132] as to who would go to watch a game that lasted only a few seconds is meaningless, since at that time the contest formed part of the cult ritual. Strabo (8,3,30) speaks of the local character of the first games, which he dates to the time of the Trojan War. Games on a limited scale during the first period are accepted by, amongst others, MORGAN 48, 92–93 and LEE 112. Also by SINN, *Stellung* 35, 49, 52. SINN, *Olympia* 11, 13, 27, 29, though in the context of the festival ['als Rahmenprogramm'], rather than of the cult. The same view is advanced by J. MOURATIDIS (vd n. 13) 2, despite the fact that it is based on the old views regarding the character of the early dedications at Olympia.

ment that was incorporated into an existing cult, as is usually claimed, but as an integral and inseparable element in the cult of Zeus, which goes back to the middle of 11th c. BC.²⁷ If the contest really is as old as this, then its true founders are the Pisatans, as they claimed in later times, according to the evidence of Xenophon (*Hell.* 3,2,31) and Diordorus (15,78,2–3).

This theory cannot, of course, be documented by archaeological evidence, since activities of this kind often leave no archaeological traces, because the dedications made by victors were not any different from the dedications commonly made by other worshippers.²⁸ Moreover, given the form in which we may suppose the original foot race to have taken place, there was no need for any structure or specially laid out space in which to hold it.

At this point, I should like to comment on Mallwitz's conclusion drawn from the excavation record, which shows that at the beginning of the 7th c. there is a distance of 100 metres between the early altar and the first stadium. In his view, this does not justify a connection between the games and the cult from the outset.²⁹ However, the holding of the original contest would not even require the ground to be levelled. The first runners would run on the natural terrain and would not be concerned by any irregularities in it.³⁰ When the area was lev-

²⁷ As a new element introduced into an earlier cult see, e.g., P. SIEWERT, *The Olympic Rules*, in: *Proceedings* 113–117. KYLE (vd n. 7) 111, 114. MALLWITZ 99. A. MALLWITZ, *OIBer* 11, 1999, 198 and recently E. PEMBERTON, *Agones Hieroi. Greek Athletic Contests in their Religious Context*, in: *Nikephoros* 13, 2000, 118. In several cases (see, e.g., HEILMEYER apud MALLWITZ 96), a view of this sort is hinted at without being expressly stated. Cf. ULF/WEILER (vd n. 2) 30 (5). For the date of the beginning of the cult, see KYRIELEIS, *Olympia 1875–2000* (vd n. 17) 216–217. SINN, *Olympia* 8–9, 131. Until a few years ago, the beginning of the cult was placed in the late 10th c., on the basis of stylistic study of the dedications from the black stratum (MORGAN 30–33, 48). Now that Submycenaean kylikes have also been found in it, the date has been put back about 100 years. See most recently B. EDER, *Continuity of Bronze Age Cult at Olympia? The Evidence of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Pottery*, in: R. LAFFINEUR/R. HÄGG (eds.), *Potnia. Deities and Religion in the Aegean Bronze Age*. *Aegaeum* 22, 2001, 201–209. EDER 102–105.

²⁸ For the change in the nature of the dedications and the conditions that dictated them see A. M. SNODGRASS, *Dedications in Greek Sanctuaries*, in: *Anathema. Scienze dell'Antichità. Storia, Archeologia, Antropologia* 3–4, 1989–90, 287–294.

²⁹ MALLWITZ, 99. Cf. SINN, *Stellung* 36 n. 17.

³⁰ For the irregular ground to the south of the Kronion see MALLWITZ 99 and SINN, *Stellung* 36–37. SINN, *Olympia* 23. Given this hypothesis, we may revert to the old idea advanced by HERRMANN 106 and rejected by MALLWITZ 95, 99, that there was an 'Urstadium'. The 'Urstadium' that I envisage, however, would not be a specially designed athletic area, but as a natural area in which a foot race was

elled and the first stadium created 100 m to the east of the altar at the beginning of the 7th c., the contest was moved in the stadium and the winner would run to the altar afterwards.

The advantages of the new theory

The new theory proposed here accounts for many elements that have remained obscure or disputed by scholarship: It firmly establishes the primary, inseparable relationship between the games and the cult, and relegates to the margins all those views claiming that the games were not connected with the cult, or that this connection was secondary.³¹ It provides a clear explanation for the close connection between the games and Olympian Zeus. Zeus was the deity to whom victory was attributed, as can be seen very characteristically from the odes of Pindar, and it was to him that the victory dedications were offered.³² The tradition that the foot-race was the earliest event also emerges as correct and beyond all dispute.³³

Furthermore, the new theory provides a basis from which to account for the awarding of wreaths as prizes for the victors in the games: The runners in the cult contest did not wear wreaths as they ran. The winner, however, who was to light the fire on the altar, was immediately involved in the cult ritual. He therefore had to be crowned with a wreath directly after the end of the contest. The wreaths worn by the victors were thus a relic of the original period when the contest was exclusively a part of the cult.³⁴ The same logic

held. An 'Urstadium in natürlichem Gelände' is also argued for by U. JANTZEN in: *Olympia in der Antike*, Ausstellungskatalog, Essen 1960, 58. The same view can also be found in B. RIEGER, *Von der Linie zur Hysplex. Startvorrichtungen in den panhellenischen Stadien Griechenlands*, Hildesheim 2004 (*Nikephoros Beiheft* 9), 60–61, who, correctly, calls this installation a *dromos*, not a *stadion*.

³¹ For this group of views, see ULF/WEILER (vd n. 2) 27–29. Furthermore, the connection of the games with religion should not be approached in the context of the general view that connected everything with gods or heroes, as GOLDEN claims (vd n. 13) 23.

³² A. HÖNLE, *Olympia in der Politik der griechischen Staatenwelt*, Tübingen 1968, 14–15.

³³ See above p. 139 f. and n. 12, 13.

³⁴ The same general view is expressed by KYLE (vd n. 7) 111. IDEM, *Games, Prizes and Athletes in Greek Sport: Patterns and Perspectives (1975–1997)*, in: *Classical Bulletin* 74, 1998, 119. For the role played by wreaths in cult ritual, see M. BLECH, *Studien zum Kranz bei den Griechen*, Berlin 1982, 302–312 and for the wreaths worn by the victors at Olympia 109–111, 127–131. E. KEPHALIDOU,

can be used to explain why the games were *stephanites* [in which the prize was only a wreath], and why the victors at the Olympic games were not awarded other kinds of prize.³⁵ In the same way we can explain the exclusion of the women and the nudity of athletes, which originally had a cult significance.³⁶ Finally, the special importance attaching to the victor in the *stadion*-race in later times was probably connected not so much with the fact that this was the earliest event, as with his original connection with the cult ritual.

The new theory also accounts for the fact that the games are not mentioned by Homer or Hesiod, since in their day they will have been a limited, local phenomenon that in no respect resembled the striking and splendid *Panhellenic* festivals that evolved later.³⁷ The frequently cited contradiction between the extensive athletic programme of the Homeric poems and the existence of only a single event at Olympia, is illusory.³⁸ The Homeric poems refer to games of a funerary (*Iliad*) or

Νίκητης, Thessaloniki 1996, 72–73. EADEM, *Ceremonies of athletic Victory in ancient Greece*, in: Nikephoros 12, 1999, 100–102.

³⁵ For other views on this subject see most recently the ideas of GOLDEN (vd n. 13) 156–157 and B. BROWN, *Homer, Funeral Contests and the Origins of the Greek City*, in: D. PHILLIPS/D. PRITCHARD (eds.), *Sport and Festival in the ancient Greek World*, Swansea 2003, 139–147.

³⁶ L. BONFANTE, *Nudity as Costume in Greek Art*, in: AJA 93, 1989, 543–579, maintains that athletic nudity had cult origins. Similarly, KYLE, *Games* (vd n. 34) 119 n. 56, believes in cultic rather than practice origin, despite ancient explanations. M. McDONNELL, *The Introduction of athletic Nudity: Thucydides, Plato and the Vases*, in: JHS 111, 1991, 182–192, believes that nudity made its first appearance in the games at the end of the 8th c. and became firmly established in the 6th c. On this general subject, which has given rise to various views, see most recently GOLDEN (vd n. 13) 65–69, S.G. MILLER, *Ancient Greek Athletics*, New Haven/London 2004, 11–13 and N. CROWTHER, *Athletica. Studies on the Olympic Games and Greek Athletics*, Hildesheim 2004 (Nikephoros Beiheft 11), 135–136, esp. 169–179, where the latest research is presented. Of special importance is the contribution by P. CHRISTESEN, *On the meaning of γυμνάζω*, in: Nikephoros 15, 2002, 7–37, with full bibliography.

³⁷ For the same idea, see D. KYLE, *Athletics in ancient Athens*, Leiden 1993, 12. For the connection of the games mentioned in epic poetry with the historical reality of the period, see S. LASER, *Sport und Spiel*, Göttingen 1987 (Archaeologia Homeric T), 26–32. DECKER 26–38. C. RENFREW, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Origins of the Panhellenic Games*, in: RASCHKE 16–18 and 21–23.

³⁸ See e.g., K. HERMANN, in: *Proceedings* 47. LEE 111. For the athletic games in Homer see M.M. WILLCOCK, *The funeral games of Patroclus*, in: BICS 19, 1972, 1–11, and K.F. KITCHELL, 'But the mare I will not give up'. *The Games in Iliad 23*, in: *Classical Bulletin* 74, 1998, 159–171.

entertainment (*Odyssey*) character, while at this period at Olympia there was only a local race of an exclusively cult character.³⁹

The new idea also solves many problems relating to the date 776.⁴⁰ Given that there was a contest from the beginning of the cult, any date referring to the beginning of the Olympic games that does not also refer to the beginning of the cult is certainly fabricated. It should not be forgotten that the ancient Greeks had devised other, different chronologies for the beginning of the games: Eratosthenes, for example, places their beginning in 884 BC. We also read in Phlegon and Eusebios that Koroibos was not the first victor but the first *registered* victor, and that the Olympiad of 776 was preceded by 13 earlier celebrations.⁴¹

We also need to examine the reasons why Hippias, in writing the history of his own birthplace, chose the year 776 as the starting point of the Olympic Games. I am not convinced *either* that the use of writing for keeping archives at Olympia goes back as far as 776 or that that date was arbitrarily decided by Hippias himself by simply adding 400 years (10 generations) to his own time or 300 years (75 Olympiads) to 476, the year in which one of the most important Olympiads in ancient times took place.⁴² I believe that, in order to promote his birthplace as the only organiser of the games, Hippias removed from the tradition anything connected with their original founders and organisers, the Pisatans.⁴³ At the same time he sought to

³⁹ See also KYLE (vd n. 36) 113: 'The Mycenaean Greek custom of funeral games survived through and beyond Dark Age, but as in myths and Homer, games were held in multiple contexts'. Indeed, recent research tends increasingly to bear witness to the Mycenaean past of the area around Olympia, mainly through the abundant remains of Mycenaean cemeteries. See EDER 89–102. A new dimension to this question has been supplied by the discovery of the Kafkania pebble with Linear B signs, dated securely to the 16th c. See X. ARAPOJANNI/G. RAMBACH/L. GODART, *Kavkania: Die Ergebnisse der Ausgrabung von 1994 auf dem Hügel von Agrilitsa*, Mainz 2002. P. VALAVANIS, *Games and Sanctuaries in Ancient Greece*, Athens 2004, 32–33, fig. 18–19. For other points where archaeological investigation confirms the written tradition on Olympia see. KYRIELEIS, *Olympia 1875–2000* (vd n. 17) 214, 215, 218.

⁴⁰ Bibliography on this problem, see PEISER, *The Crime* (vd n. 9) 42–55. BILIK, (vd n. 13) *passim*. See also RE 17, 2528–2531 s. v. *Olympia* (ZIEHEN). DECKER 43.

⁴¹ LEE 112 and n. 19. For the different dates for the beginning of the games, see WEILER (vd n. 3) 63. PEISER, *The Crime* (vd n. 9) 40–42. GOLDEN (vd n. 13) 63, WACKER (vd n. 7) 39–41. P.-J. SHAW, *Discrepancies in Olympiad Dating and Chronological Problems of archaic Peloponnesian History*, Stuttgart 2003 (Historia Einzelschriften, Heft 166), 52–90, 241–244.

⁴² LEE 110–118. J.P. MAHAFFY, *On the Authenticity of the Olympian Register*, in: JHS 2, 1881, 169. F. JACOBY apud U. SINN, *Stellung* 51–54.

⁴³ Cf. MORGAN 47. A. MALLWITZ, *OIBer* 11, 1999, 198.

assign the involvement of Elis at Olympia to as early a period as possible.

Despite the contradictions in the early chronology of Olympia, we now know that the military conflicts between the Eleians and the Pisatans were already under way in the middle of the 8th c.⁴⁴ According to a suggestion of A. Ramou, 776 was probably the year in which the Eleians occupied or began to lay claim to the area of Olympia, which at that time still belonged to Pisa;⁴⁵ since it was the aim of Eleian propaganda, which is expressed through Hippias's history, to produce convincing arguments for Eleian rights to the sanctuary, he naturally selected for the beginning of the games a date going back to the earliest connection between the Eleians and Olympia.⁴⁶

The Olympic Games and the hero-cult

The new theory also refutes the prevailing view that the early games were of an aristocratic character, and it is now pointless for scholarship to prove that the cook Koroiobos was supposedly of aristocratic descent.⁴⁷ He was simply the fastest of the worshippers that year. The games acquired an aristocratic character only later, and gradually, when they were adopted by the members of the aristocratic clans of the new city-states. The competitive character of the games was in keeping with the ideals of *that later* period and helped the aristocrats to satisfy their own needs for self-promotion and competition, which had hitherto been met only by dedications. The precise time at which

this occurred is not easy to detect. It probably took place gradually, one sure indication being the increase in the number of events in the last quarter of the 8th century. The introduction of the chariot-race, preeminently an aristocratic event, into the Olympic games in 680 BC, may be regarded as the *terminus ante quem* of the process.⁴⁸

On the basis of this last point, I believe that the beginnings of hero-cult at Olympia and the introduction of the cult of Pelops should be assigned to the same period, that is, the first quarter of the 7th c., since "The games did not develop from hero cults but rather that heroes evolved aetiologically from earlier athletic rites"⁴⁹ and "The story [of the chariot-race between Pelops and Oinomaos] only became significant for Olympia once the chariot-race had already been introduced as a new event in the 25th Olympiad" and "Die Beliebtheit der Wagenrennen in Olympia und der Oinomaossage mag ... Hand in Hand gehen."⁵⁰ This date is entirely consistent with the prevailing views on the general period at which hero-cult was introduced into Greece (750–650 BC), and solves the problems arising from the view that the origins of the games are to be sought in hero-cult.⁵¹

The possible introduction of the cult of Pelops to Olympia in the first quarter of the 7th c. must have been accompanied by the appearance of the myth that the Olympic games were founded by Pelops after his victory in the chariot-race with Oinomaos. And since it is generally agreed that this myth reflects a Pisatan version, it was probably

⁴⁴ A. MÖLLER, *Elis, Olympia und das Jahr 580 v. Chr.*, in: R. ROLLINGER/Chr. ULF (eds.), *Griechische Archaik. Interne Entwicklungen – Externe Impulse*, Berlin 2004, 249–270, esp. 250. P. VALAVANIS, *Ολυμπιακοί αγώνες, πρώτοι πόλεμοι και ιερά εκκεχειρία*, in: N. BIRGALIAS (ed.), *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference of Ancient Hellenic History. War, Peace and Panhellenic Games. Ancient Olympia-Pyrgos, June 26th – July 3rd 2005* (in the press).

⁴⁵ A. RAMOU-HAPSIADI, *Λυκοῦργος και Ἰππιτος: Πιθανές αιτίες συγχρονισμού τους*, in: BIRGALIAS (vd n. 44) (in the press). I am grateful to A. Ramou for allowing me to study her unpublished paper.

⁴⁶ This idea explains the ancient tradition mentioned by Pausanias (5,8,5) that 776 was the year in which the games were re-founded after a long break. The tradition has a real historical starting point and it is not a fabricated attempt to reinforce the antiquity of the Olympic games, as MORGAN 47–49, 92, 222 among many others believe.

⁴⁷ E.g. MORGAN 46. M. SIEBLER, *Olympia. Ort der Spiele, Ort der Götter*, Stuttgart 2004, 135. See also the thoughts of KYLE (vd n. 34) 124 and PEMBERTON (vd n. 27) 111–123, esp. 120 n. 36.

⁴⁸ Cf. MORGAN 56, 90–92. There can be no doubt of the existence of chariot races in Mycenaean times, as recent scholarship has demonstrated. See LASER, (vd n. 37) 26–27. V. OLIVOVA, *Chariot racing in the ancient world*, in: Nikephoros 2, 1989, 65–88, W. DECKER, *Zum Wagenrennen in Olympia. Probleme der Forschung*, in: *Proceedings* 130–131, and K. REBER, *Apobaten auf einem geometrischen Amphorenhals*, in: *AntK* 1999, 126–141. EDER 109–110. These games, however, had no influence on the beginnings of the Olympic games, and influenced only their expansion, through the establishment of hero-cult. For the survival of the Mycenaean cultural tradition in the area see EDER 109–110.

⁴⁹ N. ROBERTSON, *Festivals and Legends: The Formation of Greek Cities in the light of public Ritual*, Toronto 1992, 205. Cf. also D.C. KYLE, *Games, Prizes and Athletes in Greek Sport: Patterns and Perspectives (1975–1997)*, in: *Classical Bulletin* 74, 1998, 113.

⁵⁰ a) J. DAVIDSON, *Olympia and the Chariot race of Pelops*, in: PHILLIPS/PRITCHARD (vd n. 35) 101–122, esp. 114–115. b) BURKERT (vd n. 18) 95–6, and I. WEILER, *Der Agon im Mythos*, Darmstadt 1974, 217, resp. U. von WILAMOWITZ-MOELLENDORFF, *Pindaros*, Berlin 1922, 213, was the first to associate the myth of Oinomaos and Pelops with the introduction of the chariot race. Cf. A. MÖLLER, *Elis, Olympia und das Jahr 580 v. Chr.*, in: ROLLINGER/ULF, *Griechische Archaik* (vd n. 44) 264.

⁵¹ Cf. EVJEN in: *OpAth* (vd n. 6) 53–54, with earlier bibliography.

adopted to support Pisa's claims to the sanctuary and to counter the Eleian view claiming that the games were founded by Herakles.⁵² The cult was therefore introduced during a phase when control of the sanctuary was contested by the Pisatans, since, as Spivey appositely puts it, "the rivals would come armed with their own justifications of myth and cult."⁵³ This phase may have been the period about 676 BC – only one Olympiad after the introduction of the chariot race – when, according to Strabo (8,3,30), control of Olympia came into the hands of the Pisatans.⁵⁴

It is therefore more likely that Pelops' connection with the games dates from this period and is not associated with their beginnings, as some scholars attempt to demonstrate through a tortuous and obscure line of argument.⁵⁵ Since the evidence for the Mycenaean origins of the hero is very strong,⁵⁶ we are obliged to accept that the myths of Pelops already existed and that only one part of them, the contest with Oinomaos, was linked up in the first quarter of the 7th c. with the beginnings of the games at Olympia.⁵⁷

⁵² For the political dimension of the Olympic myths, as handed down by various ancient authors, see most recently Chr. ULF, *Die Mythen um Olympia – Politischer Gehalt und politische Intention*, in: Nikephoros 10, 1997, 9–51. SIEBLER (vd n. 47) 133.

⁵³ SPIVEY (vd n. 14) 225.

⁵⁴ For this date, see SHAW (vd n. 41) 92–94. MÖLLER (vd n. 50) 250. The view advanced by MALLWITZ 102–103 that the cult of Pelops may have been introduced by Pheidon, the tyrant of Argos, who is known to have invaded Olympia, cannot be accepted, since the attack is no longer dated to the 28th Olympiad of 668 BC, as Mallwitz believed. For the date of Pheidon, based on the most recent evidence, see DNP 9, 766, s. v. *Pheidon von Argos* [3]. SHAW (vd n. 41) 91–94. N. CROWTHER, *Elis and Olympia: City, Sanctuary and Politics*, in: PHILLIPS/Pritchard (vd n. 35) 61 with n. 4, and IDEM, *Power and Politics at the ancient Olympics: Pisa and the Games of 364 B. C.*, in: Stadion 29, 2003, 1.

⁵⁵ BURKERT (vd n. 19) 95–96. G. NAGY, *Pindar's Homer*, Baltimore/London 1990, 127–129. The idea (see e. g. DAVIDSON n. 50) 114–115: 'The sections of the myth of Pelops relating to the story of death, dismemberment, cooking and reintegration of Pelops, which provides the aition for the Olympic games, specifically for the stadion, the original event on the program' simply have no connection with Olympia and the games. Cf. also, S. HORNBLLOWER, *Thucydides and Pindar. Historical Narrative and the world of Epinician Poetry*, Oxford 2004, 5–10.

⁵⁶ For the view that the myth of Pelops has Mycenaean origins, see DECKER (vd n. 48) 130–131. HERRMANN 40–41, who sets out all the evidence that the myth started in the north-west Peloponnese. For other views on the transfer of the myth of Pelops to Olympia, see HERRMANN 41. DAVIDSON (vd n. 50) 110–114.

⁵⁷ The fact that the myth of Pelops and Oinomaos is Mycenaean does not mean that the games also have a Mycenaean origin, as has frequently been asserted.

Justification is thus provided in this case, too, for our belief and confidence not only in the ancient tradition, but also in one of the basic axioms of study of the past: that nothing happens without cause. Any element or reference to be found in the ancient sources has its origins in some earlier phenomenon. The ancient Greeks of all periods may have often distorted historical truth, either by adding alien inclusions or by making modifications, in order to make it conform with what they wanted. But they never invented history out of nothing. As P. Veyne characteristically says, it is impossible to speak of something that does not exist, or to tell complete lies, because no-one would believe it.⁵⁸

Conclusions

From the above, it is clear that the efforts by both ancients and moderns to establish the precise date of the beginning of the Olympic Games (in 884 or 776 or about 700 BC) are pointless. The games did not begin abruptly but existed as a seed from the beginning of the cult at the middle of the 11th c. BC, of which they were an integral, inseparable element. They began as a ritual event designed to reveal the best mortal for the job of lighting the fire at the altar, as Philostratus tells us, and during the early centuries they continued to be a local phenomenon, involving only one event (the *stadion*-race). Hippias selected the date 776 as the year of the beginning of the games out of a desire to trace the right of his birthplace to as early a period as possible, since it appears that this was the date that the Eleians for the first time occupied or went to war with the Pisatans to contest control of Olympia.

The games started to expand gradually from the last quarter of the 8th c. on, and were adopted by the aristocratic members of the city-states of the period. Hero-cult, which has been closely connected with the *beginning* of the games, is responsible only for their *subsequent* development. The institution of a hero-cult at Olympia, with the cult of Pelops, should probably be dated to the first quarter of the 7th c., possibly to the same period as that in which the chariot-race was introduced as an event. This cultic innovation occurred during a phase in which Olympia and the games had again been taken over by the Pisatans (676 BC), and was intended to support their claims against

⁵⁸ P. VEYNE, *Did the Greeks believe in their Myths? An essay on the constitutive Imagination*, Chicago 1988, 103–115.

the Eleans. The episode of the contest between Pelops and Oinomaos is a surviving fragment of the earlier, no doubt Mycenaean, body of myth, which emerged as the founding myth of the Olympic Games.

I am obliged to pass on what the Greeks say, but I am not obliged to believe everything. (Pausanias 6,3,8)

Abbreviations

DECKER = W. DECKER, *Sport in der griechischen Antike*, Munich 1995

EDER = B. EDER, *Im Reich des Augeias: Elis und Olympia zwischen 1200 und 700 v. Chr.*, in: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Anzeiger der philos.-histor. Klasse 138, 2003, 80–121

HERRMANN = H.-V. HERRMANN, *Olympia. Heiligtum und Wettkampfstätte*, Munich 1972

LEE = H. M. LEE, *The 'First' Olympic Games of 776 B. C.*, in: RASCHKE 110–118

MALLWITZ = A. MALLWITZ, *Cult and Competition Locations at Olympia*, in: RASCHKE 79–109

MORGAN = K. MORGAN, *Athletes and Oracles. The Transformation of Olympia and Delphi in the 8th c. BC*, Cambridge 1990

Proceedings = W. COULSON/H. KYRIELEIS (eds.), *Proceedings of an International Symposium on the Olympic Games*, Athens 1992

RASCHKE = W. J. RASCHKE, *The Archaeology of the Olympics. The Olympics and other Festivals in Antiquity*, Madison 1988

SINN, *Olympia* = U. SINN, *Olympia. Cult, Sport and Ancient Festival*, Princeton 2000

SINN, *Stellung* = U. SINN, *Die Stellung der Wettkämpfe im Kult des Zeus Olympios*, in: Nikephoros 4, 1991, 31–54

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DEPARTMENTS

Institut für Alte Geschichte und Altertumskunde, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz
Universitätsplatz 3, A-8010 Graz

Institut für Alte Geschichte und Altorientalistik, Leopold-Franzens-Universität Innsbruck
Innrain 52, A-6020 Innsbruck

Institut für Sportgeschichte, Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln
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Institut für Alte Geschichte und Altertumskunde, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz
Universitätsplatz 3, A-8010 Graz

Tel.: 0316 380-2349; Fax: 0316 380-9715

Email: werner.petermandl@kfunigraz.ac.at

Reviews:

Wolfgang Decker; collaborator: Barbara Rieger

Institut für Sportgeschichte, Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln
Carl-Diem-Weg 6, D-50933 Cologne

Tel.: 02234/54996

Email: w.decker@dshs-koeln.de

or:

Paola Angeli Bernardini, Istituto di Filologia Classica, Università di Urbino, Via S. Andrea 34, I-61029 Urbino, Italy

Hugh M. Lee, Department of Classics, 2407 Marie Mount Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA

Jean-Paul Thuillier, Département des sciences de l'antiquité, École normale supérieure, 45, Rue d'Ulm, F-75230 Paris Cedex 05, France