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Excavations of the Ancient Stadium of Olympia

The stadium of Olympia has just been excavated. George Gerster said: 'It stands there like a gaping wound set in the most pleasant landscape of the world'. Thanks to the good offices of the German Archaeological Institute and the supervision of Emil Kunze who directed successfully the excavating work of Olympia and its surroundings. Although the German Archaeological Institute

started this work at the end of the last century, it is only since 1959 and 1960 that the result of these excavating work was made public. Formerly, this excavating work was confined exclusively to the Olympia ancient stadium, and it gave remarkable result. Splendid finds dating as far back as the 4th century before Christ were brought to light on that site. During the last two years,

considerable work and strenuous efforts have been made to evacuate the enormous quantity of soil which recovered the ancient stadium. The excavations revealed many surprises. The ground of the stadium presented originally a very different aspect from what we see today. It was covered with a profusion of shells of prehistorical vases. This soil did not consist only of a prehistorical accumulation of earth but of sandbanks gathered on this site as a result of landslides from Mount Kronos, which, at the time of building the stadium, may have been used as reinforcing device. This last hypothesis is confirmed from the fact that no vestige of life pertaining to the geometrical period is to be found on the site and its surroundings. On the contrary, vases of the finest pro-hellenic period as well as inscribed shells dating from a period subsequent to the Mycenaean period were discovered, a fact never met before in the annals of Olympia.

The discovery of this layer of soil is a factor of prime importance in the history of the ancient stadium of Olympia and its surroundings. After extensive researches, we now believe that the Olympic Games were held near the Pelopon in the sacred precincts of the Altis and in the vicinity of Zeus temple. It is not yet known where the first recorded Olympiad of 776 B.C. was held. As a matter of fact, the excavating work revealed that it is only during the VIIth century that this site of the stadium was used for holding the Olympic Games.

In the latter half of the VIth century, wells were installed throughout the surrounding region of the stadium. They were used during the Games only for the need of the spectators, when the Games were over, the wells were filled up with earth... The men in charge of the sacred precincts often buried the offerings, which ran the risk of deteriorating when in contact with the open air, in

these wells. Since they were offerings, they were sacred and could not be thrown away, it was the best solution to bury them.

Thus the excavations of the last two years brought to light real masterworks, when 44 wells of the type described were discovered along with bronze statues, inscriptions of all type, weapons and a profusion of gems and jewels. Objects made of bronze were the most interesting finds and constitute now a most valuable collection. They date from the VIIth and the VIth century and stand as an eloquent proof of the influence of the Eastern civilization over ancient Greek civilization.

As a matter of fact, it is in the Vth century that the Olympic stadium assumed its actual gradient and that the stone carved stages where the spectators assembled, first appeared. This also happened when the Zeus temple was built between 560-450 B.C. This second phase did not last long. The south side of the site was modified and altered. The track which dated from the classical period was set in a higher position. The north part of the stadium was built in the axis of the former track; it was precisely because it was too high that, in the IVth century, it was shortened by fifteen to twenty metres. Thus only the northern aspect of the stadium is retained as it stood originally.

Pausanias, when describing the stadium in Olympia, speaks of Demetra Hamyria's altar which was made of marble. The ruins of this altar were discovered in the course of this year, they revealed the extent of the destruction made by Christians. It was owing to finding cinders and fragments of scattered stones belonging to it that the existence of this altar was discovered. The belief is that this site of worship dates from an earlier period than that of the stadium, and was kept in deference to the god.



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