

of Olympia Ancient Stadium excavations

Extract of Albert Mousset's work (*Olympia and the Greek Games*) (1st Prize of the French Academy), published by Albert Guillot, 61, Av. de la Bourdonnais, Paris.)

Olympia fell into oblivion for several centuries. The ancient city lay buried under the sand banks resulting from the flooding of the river Alfeos and victim of the landslips of the surrounding hills.

It was a Frenchman, the Benedictine monk Bernard de Montfaucon (born in 1654) of Saint-Maur congregation, who, in 1723, was the first to call back the past lustre of

Olympia, this glorious mirror reflecting the history of Antiquity. On the 14th of June 1723, he wrote to Cardinal Angelo Maria Quirini, Bishop of Corfu, calling his attention on the joy in store for him when he brings to light the archaeological treasures to be found in his diocese. 'But, he added, what are they compared to the treasures to be found on the Morean shores, opposite these islands?

It is the site of the ancient city of Elis where the Olympic Games were held and where a profusion of monuments and statues erected to honour the visitors are to be found as well as bas-reliefs, inscriptions, etc., etc. What wealth of treasures are thus buried underground. The strange thing is that I believe, nobody has ever thought of excavating on that side.'

However, in the enlightened world of the 18th century, the idea took root and made some headway. An historian of German Art, Johann Joaquim Winkelmann (born in Steindall Brandenburg in 1717) also began to interest himself in Olympia. He wrote: 'I am strongly inclined to believe that there is a lot to be done in Elis in the way of exploring and excavating, the result of which will surpass all expectation I guess, I am convinced that the systematic exploration of that region will throw great light on the matter of Art history.' Up to the time of his death, in 1768, he endeavoured in vain to interest the princes of the Roman Church to his scheme. (He was librarian of the Vatican and was murdered in Trieste.)

However, a few scholars ventured to go and explore the site. An Oxford theologian scholar, Richard Chandler, and a Frenchman Fauvel, who was in charge of an archaeological mission, went there, and after examining the remains dugged out by local peasants of the neighbouring villages who wanted building material, they identified these remains as being the ruins of the Olympian temple of Zeus as described by Pausanias. In the period from 1801 to 1805, various other archaeologists confirmed the interest aroused by these discoveries. Thus, bit by bit, Olympia is brought back to light and the thought of its restoration still haunted the minds of the archaeologists. In 1824, Lord Spencer Stanhope published the first complete map of the site depicting Olympia and its surroundings. But it was France who was first in proceeding to carry out a systematic plan of exploring the site.

In 1829, the Greek war of Independence evoked strong feelings of sympathy in France when pro-hellenic clubs and associations sprung up everywhere. The government of Charles X dispatched an Expeditionary

Army Corps to Greece under the command of Marschall Maison. A mission composed of archaeologists and artists accompanied the army. Under the supervision of the architect Abel Blouet (who was responsible for the completion of the building of l'Arc de Triomphe in Paris) this mission explored the site of the ancient monuments of Olympia. Its special task was to explore the site of Zeus temple in Olympia. In less than six weeks, while excavating the light running soil, the mission succeeded in digging all the fragments necessary to the reconstitution of this temple: the description of this excavating work has been compiled in the masterly book written by Blouet on the Morean expedition.

In this way, everything was reconstituted according to traditional hierarchy and Zeus presided as it were to the restoration of Olympia. But the mission was called back to France and the excavating work stopped. It was resumed later on by the German scholar, Ernst Curtius, philologist and historian, author of the book: *History of Greece*. On April 25th 1874, a convention is signed by the Government of Athens authorizing Germany to proceed with the excavating work, this Bill was voted definitively by the Greek Government on November 11th 1875. Up to May 20th 1881, in the course of six consecutive missions, the German archaeologists worked desperately hard in order to reconstitute the sacred precincts. Three hundred navies worked relentlessly at removing the soil to a depth of 5 to 7 metres, not only in view to extricate the monuments of the Altis but also in order to discover the ruins of the ancient buildings surrounding the sacred precincts. The result of this excavating work is truly stupendous.

'Germany succeeded in bringing to light what was left of Olympia, wrote de Coubertin, why should France not succeed in restoring its past splendours?' From that moment to the time of the revival of the Olympic Games, which he did in 1894, there was but a few years.

In 1896, King George of Greece pronounced the traditional phrase: 'I declare open the Olympic Games celebrating the first Olympiad of the modern era...' Thus the tradition of the Altis goes on for ever.