

The Olympic Torch and its origin

by Jean Ketseas

Many people wonder about the origin of the Sacred Flame which is lit at Olympia before being carried often hundreds and even thousands of kilometres, before arriving at the Stadium where the Olympic Games are being held. These few details which follow deserve to be added to the short history of the Games of the Modern Era.

It was at Olympia in 1834, at the closure of the session of the International Olympic Committee, that it was decided to institute the Olympic Torch. The late Professor Carl Diem, who had been the first person to propose this ceremony which was to unite the modern Olympics with their ancient birth-place, came to see me soon afterwards, so that together we might examine the means to be adopted for the lighting and carrying of the flame. He had already thought along general lines about the carrying of the flame by relays of runners at every thousand metres. He said to me, however, that he had not found a solution to the problem of the lighting of the flame and that he proposed to consult specialists as soon as he returned to Germany.

At this very time, I was in the midst of reading Plutarch's *Lives*. It was in this way that the life of Numa Pompilius gave me the answer to this problem. I sent the text in question to Carl Diem, who replied without delay that in effect we had only to copy the Ancient Greeks.

Here is Plutarch's text taken from the *Lives*. Numa (IX).

'Numa was the founder of the system whereby six Vestals tended the sacred fire.

The Vestals were to be virgins and were to remain so.'

Further on Plutarch writes :

6. '... thus in Greece at Delphi or Athens¹ where the undying flame burnt, it was to women who had passed the age of marriage and not to virgins that the care was entrusted.'
7. 'If by chance the fire went out, as did happen it is said, at Athens under the tyranny of Aristion² and at Delphi when the temple was burnt by the Medes, and also during the wars with Mithridates and the civil wars in Rome. Then the altar was destroyed and the sacred flame was put out. A new fire was lit not by means of another flame but *by the touch of the pure and immaculate flame of the sun.*'
8. 'This fire was lighted generally by means of a *Skaphia* — that is to say by a crucible — a utensil shaped in the form of an isosceles cone. The *Skaphia* were placed facing the sun in such a way that the incandescent rays, converging from all sides towards the centre, rarified the air. The light dry materials placed there caught fire through reflection since the rays produced fire and energy.'

It was in this way that the problem was solved.