

*Je n'ai pas pu terminer
ce que je desirais accomplir. Je crois qu'un Centre
d'Etudes Olympiques aiderait plus que n'importe
quel au maintien et au progrès du beau œuvre et
la préserverait des déviances que je redoute pour elle.*

Pierre de Coubertin

I was unable to complete the work I wished to accomplish. I think that a *Centre of Olympic Studies* should help more than anything else to continue and further my work and would save it from the *déviances* I fear.

Pierre de Coubertin.

THE FIRST AGES OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES

by Sisto Favre

It is believed that the Olympic Games existed for thousands of years under another name and undoubtedly in a barbaric form. In the first historic ages, we know that the opening ceremony of the Games was preceded the day before by Games dedicated to Hera, Zeus's wife and tyrant of the matriarchal era. Hera's Games were organized by the priestesses of the goddess of maternity. The virgins of the temple took part in them. The competition was held between girls of different ages, according to a system of handicaps giving the greatest advantage to the oldest and so on down to the youngest, who started from the start line.

It is supposed that this race, the winner of which was awarded the coveted position of priestess of the temple of Hera, called for a specifically athletic way of life and training, especially as the virgins competing formed part of a sacred ballet and the garrison of the Amazons. The perfect statuary of the Golden Age gives us a picture of the morphology already wonderfully developed in neolithic times, which was continued down through generations of matriarchal lineage thanks to the excellent physical education practised in all major and minor religious centres of the time.

HISTORY

Subsequently, Hera's Games were held a fortnight before and a fortnight after the celebration of the Olympic Games proper. The two sexes competed separately. This was a first sign of the veritable revolution which was gradually to mark, in the Asia-Hellenic region, the end of the matriarchal regime and the beginning of patriarchal times, i.e. the advent of man to despotism over the family, clan, tribe, city-state, and his rise from sacrificial victim to the position of sacred king, condottiere and warrior.

The Olympic Games, of which Herakles was proclaimed chief, have an official date of foundation : 776 B. C. but we have seen that identical games were celebrated in the most distant past.

Under the sceptre of Zeus, who put an end to the absolute matriarchy of Hera, who nevertheless remained his quarrelsome spouse, the Games, through the legislation of Iphitos, consecrated the virile Heraklean superiority. From then on they were exclusively reserved to men — except of course for the preliminary games dedicated to Hera. Their programme grew wider, their rewards were no longer thrones but prizes.

It is extremely important to study why the Olympic Games were held every four years. The reason lies deep and far back in the distant past. It is known that in the matriarchal and Amazonian period the sovereign mistress of the clan,

i.e. the queen and high-priestess, changed her husband-king every 49 or 50 moons. She herself acceded to this position of sovereignty as victor of the ritual women's race and even sometimes of a wrestling match. She therefore chose for her companion (pàredro) the winner of the men's races. She remained queen until her natural death. However every four years, i.e. every 49 or 50 moons, the men ran a race the winner of which evinced the current king. In the dim distant past, this ousted monarch was sacrificed on the great goddess's altar ; later, he was given a chance : from the top of a rock he was cast into the sea provided with a sort of parachute. Later still, his sacrifice became merely symbolic. But why did the king reign only 49 to 50 months, i.e. for a period of four years ?

It is supposed that it was considered — not without reason — that the peak of a man's virile and athletic prowess did not exceed this period, which was in fact extended if the retiring king was capable of winning the new race.

The case of Herakles remains typical. When he had hunted the Nemean lion, he courted the 50 daughters of Thespios, who gave him 51 children and, wisely, in the full strength of his 18 years, after strangling the terrible beast, he changed himself into a bird of the forests, free of tiring labours, not however without having given proof of the generative powers of the male. Subsequently, the Olympic Games proved that very often the athletic-agonistic and probably the virile peak could be maintained for several Olympiads. The lists of winners of the Games up to the 20th Olympiad (700 B. C.) are incomplete and we find no repetitions of names. Only the name of Sparta recurs three times. However at the 21st (696 B. C.) and the 22nd Olympiad (692 B. C.) we find the name of Pantacles as winner of the 280 metre race, which represented one complete lap of the stadium.

Thus began the time of the champions with repeated victories to their credit, just as the memory of the origin of the Olympic Games and their four-yearly interval began to fade.



*Before Zeus, **Hera.***