

## “Legends of Olympia”

by Cleanthis Paleologos ©

### Olympia

*“With the god's grace, there are thousands of ways leading to me”.  
(Pindare. Isthm. 4, A.I.)*

Olympia is a decisive milestone of very great duration, not only for the research in Greek history, but also for the general spiritual history of mankind. During the long course of Olympia's existence what was a mere amusement was turned into a game and the game in turn became the school of a proud way of life for all men, pouring out enlightening floods of education and learning, finally becoming the centre of the Greek world. She gathered around her every fourth year all free Greeks who were spread around the rich shores of the Mediterranean, and far into Europe's, Asia's and Africa's hinterlands, from the Caucasus down to the Pillars of Hercules. Thus Olympia was able to demonstrate and prove the common origin of all Hellenes. She gathered them around her, moving them, educating them, making them conscious of their national unity, enabling them to keep for centuries the spiritual and intellectual light, which Olympia had given them, unextinguished.

Olympia, a high place in ancient times, was the birthplace of one of the greatest liturgical ideas, which led men to be in communion with the divine and to live among themselves in a peaceful and self-respecting brotherhood.

The Olympic games were the communal worship of “beauty” the expression of admiration for the superman. The Greeks contested for a “philotimos,” a proud self respect, a term which is used even today after three thousand years. The athletic games, far from any material gain were cultivating a personal superiority, a dis-

tingtion coupled with the desire to win, a heroic prowess of the kind erring rhapsodes sang about. For a simple wreath they entered a life which was tough and almost full of torment and hardships and privations. They knew the wreath meant gains more precious than all the gold in the world, the gains of honour and glory and dignity for their “domestic gods”, their country and ancestors, for their parents and children. What the wreath lacked in material gains, the Olympic victory recompensed in unsurpassable moral values, because it established religious, moral and spiritual meaning and the victor became almost a sacred personage. This we can deduce from the nearly demi-godly honours that were bestowed upon him. The moral value of an Olympic victory was the faith in higher forces—since the games were of divine origin—and also in the human effort and in the belief of pure toil. They believed that bodily gifts which came to them were godsent. So it was in the hands of the athletes to secure within themselves, with sacred toiling and with sweat, the merit, in order to reach a triumph which would bring them happiness. Happiness again was the realisation of merit and this man achieved with bodily perfection, with spiritual superiority and kindness of heart.

This is the moral principle of the Olympic idea, and this guided mankind to the highest point of its evolution. And thus, thanks to the cultivation of the athletic ideal, the small country of ancient Greece became the great and wide world.

Then came the fulfilment of time which fate has prescribed to all things, for ideas as well as for men. Olympia withdrew from the world which had changed, from a world which now was running after other ideas and following a path lighted from high above by the shiny star from the

East, a path which reached from the warmth of the earth to the miracles of heaven. Olympia had withdrawn obeying an indestructable biological law "because to everything, to body and state and action, growing comes according to nature's law, and after that comes the flowering and then decay"<sup>1</sup>.

Man saw the shattered marble, the broken columns the ruined altars and temples and his heart tightened as he passed by and said:

— Olympia has died.

Indeed Olympia's incomparable beauty and uncountable grandeur, the richness of its temples, its marble monuments and godlike statues had perished and with it all the so very human ancient gods after having been mocked and jeered, were ousted from their crystalline palaces' which man himself had built in the clouds of Mount Olympus. The ancient Greek spirit had consumed itself with its own flame. A new faith had swept over the nations.

Olympia had withdrawn and had faded but it had not died. It never died. Because its sublime teachings of divine ideas are still alive and its imperishable spirit remains.

In Olympia athleticism which was conceived as a beautiful idea became reality and a way of life. And athleticism itself brought forth a new culture which ruled supreme in the ancient world. The ancient world in turn was the builder of Parthenons, transcribed philosophy on slabs of marble, elevated ideas on unbending columns scattering the flaming light taken from the Olympic idea through the torchbearers of the spirit like Socrates, Pindar, Plato, Sophocles, Aristoteles, Euripides, Herodotus, Thucydides.

The historical fairy tale of Olympia lasted for twelve centuries. And within those years bound together by the Olympiads to become centuries, splendid-looking boys, beautifully-bodied youths and statue-like men passed through the arenas of Olympia, to shake the people with their glorious feats. Ephemeral figures; but they flashed the splendour of their moral greatness—their Olympic victories—and became immortal. It is only like this that we can understand the apotheosis of the Olympic winners. Because what else was this splendid ceremony of the crowning: of those Olympic winners, their panegyric receptions in their native countries which were triumphal, the erecting of their statues in the Altis and the towns, the rich thanksgiving sacrifices, the composing of hymns, and paeans and dithyrambs, the dinner in the Prytaneum and all these other honours and distinctions?

This was the way that Olympia taught mankind that the games were not only simple bodily functions or a demonstration of mere muscular force, but actions which necessitated a combined and utterly harmonious collaboration of spirit, mind and body in order to create beauty.

Man will always recur to his cultural sources in order to justify his hard struggles and all that his forefathers have succeeded in and even more so in order to strengthen his hopes in a future. Olympia shone far more than twelve historical centuries, before returning in to the realm of myth from which she emerged.

In this book we shall try and give of all those splendid-bodied boys, the beautiful and good youths and the glorious men who won the Olympics, only a few of the more impressive figures of these overlife-sized athletes who left the traces of their trail through the sacred panhellenic valley,

<sup>1</sup> Polyvios. Stories VI,51,4.

unextinguished. It was those demigod-like heroes with their improbable exploits that made tangible history pass again and remain for ever in the realm of Legend. All, described or transformed in this book are incidents from the athletes' lives as mentioned in the historically proved testimonies which have been handed down to us. They are facts of a historical period from which we may even today be taught and derive some benefit.

The athletic spirit is the most authentic spirit which this country has produced and Olympia with an open heart, full of immortal values has bequeathed it to the whole wide world.

## **THEAGENES OF THASOS THE PANKRATIST**

It's morning. The first rays of sunshine have just spilled hastily over the sky and are just beginning to illuminate the earth. And yet, why already such a big gathering in the little square? Something serious must certainly have happened. More and more men are arriving all the time, pointing, gesticulating and full of great excitement Children are running everywhere, as if they were calling an assembly. More and more people arrive, frantically pushing in every direction; they want to find a place, to get as far to the front as possible, right into the very centre of the small square, to hear, to see, to find out what it's all about, what all the others in front are seeing, all those who stand around a formed circle and gesticulate.

It is the small square of Thasos. On the one side, the broad border of the harbour and as a backdrop, spread around in a wide circle, a few big white pines. In the centre there stood the bronze statue of Zeus. In this little square, the Demos of Thasos used to foregather and its citizens had the habit of assembling under the protective eye of generous Zeus. And Thasos thanks to this protection lived happily, far from men-destroying wars, never getting mixed up with its mainland neighbours of Thrace, who were fighting each other ever so often.

Yet the commotion is getting constantly greater and greater and nobody can gather what it's all about.

But there! A movement like the undulating sea; the crowds are thinning, subsiding on the one side, then they part and make way for the venerable Archons, who appear in a hurry and seemingly disturbed. First comes a very tall man with a thick beard and a severe look, then follow another three who, judging from their clothes, seem to belong to the notables of small Thasos. They make their way to the centre of the square. The people push around them and the gap closes again. The ones in front knew what had happened. The Archons knew it too once they got into the middle of the square.

Then after a great hush all the people learned from mouth to mouth what had happened. From the one and only square of Thasos, the centre of the Agora, the big bronze statue of its patron, the all-seeing Zeus is missing!

The pedestal gapes empty, without the magnificent god who towered over the Agora. Then again whispering started up, discussions were heard, shouts and clamour and general confusion. And questions were falling like rain.

– “What had happened to the huge statue of the patron of Thasos?”

– “Who had yanked it off its base?”

– “For what reason?”

– “Was by any chance the Supreme One, the Cloud-Gatherer angered by the Thasians and had he returned to his palace on multipinnacled Olympus?” They were all asking, guessing and shouting, but nobody was able to say what had really happened.

And suddenly the mystery was solved! A fair haired youth was seen running towards the square, waving his arms and shouting. They made way, he rushed through the excited crowd, reached the centre of the Agora, stopped in front of the Archons and panting for breath spoke with halting words:

– “Venerable elders ... I saw him ... the august god has not left ... A boy ... a boy lifted him at night ... having yanked him from the pedestal ... Then he shouldered him ... to his house ...

– “What is this you are trying to tell us? A boy ...” the eldest of the Archons spoke angrily.

– “Yes honoured Archon ... I saw him ...”

– “But how could he? A boy ... on his own?”

– “He is strong, Archon of Thasos. Even stronger than Heracles the demigod...”

– “But what are you trying to tell us?”

The youth stood his ground in front of the Archons and it was obvious that he was speaking the truth.

– “Follow me and I will show you his house. The bronze statue of Zeus is there. Theagenes, the son of Timosthenes the priest, has taken it there.”

The Archons listened, the teaming people around them looked very doubtful and couldn't believe what they had just heard. Then the eldest spoke.

– “Lead on my boy.” And turning to the

people: “And you people of Thasos follow us.”

So they all followed in a long line, doubtful and perplexed with all they had heard and curious what they were going to see next.

After some time they reached the last houses of the little town. From then on the country began and it was full of trees and greenery. There were olive trees and almond trees and bushy acacias. The youth who was guiding them stopped in front of a house, which was surrounded by a broad courtyard, full of greenery and shaded by a large walnut tree. Everybody stopped but the Archon proceeded. Just then the door opened and there on the doorstep a boy appeared. From hundreds of mouths a long-drawn “ah-ah-ah” was heard and quite a few of them took a step backwards. It looked as if the whole door was blocked by an enormous body. The head, handsome with shock of thick wavy hair, broad shoulders, well formed muscles on his chest, showed through a thin chiton which reached the middle of his thighs and was fastened over only shoulder. His hands were strong and his one legs as if made of steel. He is only a child who can be taken for an adolescent thanks to his height. On his face there was an expression of great gentleness. He looks a little frightened by all the people and by the Archons who were observing him severely.

– “Are you Theagenes?”

The eldest of the Archons asked and his voice sounded more admiring than angry.

– “Yes Archons ... Theagenes the son of Timosthenes”.

– “Where is the statue of our patron Zeus?”

– “I have put it into the courtyard, venerable elder ...”

– “Where did you get the oxen from, and



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the leath, how did you manage to move it? Who were your helpers? Why did you do such an impious act?"

At this moment Theagenes' father and mother emerged from the front door of the courtyard. They stood there in front of the Archons quite speechless, really not knowing what to say. Theagenes spoke quite fearlessly then:

– "Nobody helped me, venerable Archons. I, on my own, lifted the statue, took it from its base and brought it home. My friends had challenged me yesterday. I had told them that I could lift it and transport it. They did not want to believe me. They made fun of me. The bronze god is my witness!"

The crowd heard. The people could not believe their ears. As if it were possible that a mere boy could lift such a statue!

The elder looked at the dauntless youth, his strong stature, his intelligent and youthful mien, his clear blue eyes. You would think that he was measuring the boy's unlimited strength. Little by little his anger subsided and his face was getting more and more cheerful.

– "How old are you, Theagenes?"

– "Nine, my father told me, Venerable Archon."

At this, his father's voice was heard.

– "Honoured Archons of Thasos, I am Theagenes' father and priest in the temple of Heracles. I am Timosthenes, an honest citizen, faithful and loyal to my country and its laws. It is as my son told you. His schoolmates teased and angered him. His error is very great. I too have only a little while ago seen it and have spoken my punishment."

– "And what kind of punishment have you thought of which could atone for so impious an act?"

– "Archons, this very minute it shall be carried out. He who has wounded shall

also heal. Theagenes will shoulder the bronze God and replace it, by himself, on its base. I think the punishment is severe, but fitting."

A faint smile played over the elder's face. He lifted his hand to stroke his thinning beard and you would have thought that he kept his hand there in order to hide the welling laughter, which was threatening to break out with every moment.

– "Timosthenes. Your son has committed an act which calls for heavy punishment. I shall not call the assembly. I shall judge him because of his tender age with every leniency. I accept what you have decreed. This minute Theagenes will carry our patron Zeus to his base at the Agora and you, come with us to offer sacrifices so that the countenance of the supreme Olympian Lord and Titandestroyer may continue mild and gentle."

Everybody heard and no one uttered a sound. They all stood around amazed and waiting and nobody could really believe that such a heavy sentence could be carried out by this boy. And then, a long drawn and admiring shout was heard from the crowds and there through the big door of the courtyard head first, emerged the big bronze statue of Zeus! There resting on Theagenes' broad shoulders was the huge statue!

Everybody looked on with surprise and wonder. The boy's feet stood the ground firmly and steadily, leaving deep footprints. His calves swelling with every footstep, the powerful youth progressed slowly and steadily without the slightest stagger. The buzzing crowd closed in as if in a procession and eventually they reached the Agora. Theagenes put the god back in his place, stood back, took a big breath and glancing at the people who watched in silent admiration blushed and lowered his head.

Then the elder moving towards the father who was making ready for the sacrifice said:

– “Timosthenes, take this child home. The punishment has been fulfilled. This only: Try to teach him to control his passions and to avoid being carried away by his impulses.”

Then turning to the youth:

– “And you Oh Theagenes, endowed as you are by the Gods, may you with their help honour your country with great deeds and may your statue be put up in celebrated Olympia, the world’s cradle of all the gold wreathed games.”

A long time passed. The happening which had shaken the quiet and wooded island had been forgotten. The father delivered the strong and powerful boy to a trainer who coached him with great care and diligence. Yet this unbelievable youth was in no need of training in order to improve muscle and abilities. On the contrary, the trainer’s great task was to control and master his great and untamed powers and to discipline his uncontrollable temper. His power and vigour overflowed like the brook which suddenly has been swelled by the heavy load of a huge cloudburst, becoming an impetuous river and carrying away anything it finds in its way. The trainer taught him how to use this titanic force of his intelligently and how to hide the steel and iron in his muscles and only show the beauty which goes along with art, dexterity and agility.

So Theagenes grew and became one of the best known athletes of his day and his name was known all through Greece.

For the first time he won the Pankration in the 75th Olympiad, boxing in the 76th and 77th and was first of the great athletes to have achieved such a feat worthy of Hercules, who is reputed to have won two wreaths both for wrestling and the Pan-

kration. Theagenes also won in the 78th Olympiad (468 b.c.) a double victory in boxing and the Pankration. He won the Pythian games three times, the Nemean games nine times and the Isthmian games ten times, sometimes at the Pankration. He toured the whole of Greece, took part in the various games of the various towns he visited and was covered with fame and glory. Pausanias says Theagenes had collected a thousand four hundred wreaths from the various games in which he had taken part.<sup>1</sup>

Once when he found himself at the games of Phthia, which is the birthplace of the fleetfooted Achilles, he abstained from taking part in the Pankration and in boxing, which were events in which he excelled, but took part in running the Doli-chos (the 3 mile race) and won. Pausanias writes: “I think that thus he acted having the ambition to win a victory at the running event in Achilles’ own country, the swiftest among the so called heroes.”<sup>2</sup>

The citizens of Thasos were very proud of Theagenes. He had become a legend and his exploits were known by word of mouth throughout the whole of Greece. His fellow citizens claimed that he was not the son of Timosthenes, but that his father was the Thasian Hercules, in whose shrine Timosthenes was priest and that Teagenes’ mother had spent the night with the ghost of Hercules, who in turn had taken on Timosthenes’ guise.

The statue of Theagenes at Olympia was the work of Glaukias, a citizen of Aegina and an artist famous for all the statues of athletes that he had made. Pausanias who saw the statue says that it was put up in the Altis, next to the statues of the kings. So it stood next to Philip, the son of

<sup>1</sup> Paus. VI, II, 5

<sup>2</sup> Paus. VI, II, 5

Amyntas, to Alexander son of Philip, to Seleucus who was one of Alexander's generals and prince of Syria, Antigonos, a general of Alexander and father of Demetrius the Besieger and others. Another big statue was erected by the Thasians after Theagenes' death in Thasos itself which his great victories had rendered famous. Pausanias tells a very characteristic story which happened to this statue in Thasos.<sup>1</sup> There was a man who during Theagenes lifetime had been his enemy. The saying goes that he was also an athlete, but he never managed to win because of the invincible Theagenes. So every night he went up to the bronze statue and whipped it, thinking that in doing so he was whipping Theagenes himself. It seems that one night, when the madman was flogging the statue it fell down and killed him, thus making an end of his shameful behaviour. The dead man's children went to court and asked that the murderer should be punished according to the law. Now the citizens of Thasos according to the laws of Dracon punished all murderers with banishment. So they took the statue and threw it into the sea.

It so happened that one day a great disaster visited the island. There was a great barrenness, crops would not grow, fruit fell from the trees, grass failed to grow, the livestock was dying off and the people were facing famine. So what 'were the Archons to do? They send a deputation to the oracle of Delphi asking for help and advice.

– "What are we to do in order to save our country from this great calamity?" The oracle gave the following prophecy: "Bring back the exile to the soil of his fathers, so that Demeter may be appeased." In those days everybody

punished by exile was sent to the small islands of the Cyclades. So the Archons made up their minds and brought back home every single one of them. But infertility and famine still continued, the country was poor and miserable and the people went on suffering.

So again they sent to the wise Pythia and told her that they had done all she ordered them to do but that the wrath of the Gods had not been appeased. The islanders were in great despair. "Why don't the gods have mercy on us?" So Pythia then gave the answer: "You have forgotten your great Theagenes whom you threw upon the sands where he now lies." And while the notables were in a great dilemma how to find the statue of Theagenes, some fishermen who went out to fish caught it in their nets and brought it back to the shore.<sup>2</sup>

The Thasians, overjoyed, offered sacrifices and put the statue back on its pedestal. The great barrenness ended, the crops grew plentifully, fruit ripened on the trees, the grass was lush and green and the livestock had never done so well and so the great famine ended. But from then on Theagenes was worshipped as a sort of healer. Pausanias adds: "I have seen statues to Theagenes in many places put up by both Greeks and barbarians. The people honour him by sacrifices because they believe that he can cure pludism."

So in those good old days the great athletes though mortal passed into legend and were immortalised like their gods.

K. P.  
(To follow)

<sup>1</sup> Paus. VI, 11, 6-9

<sup>2</sup> Paus. VI, II, 9.