

# Legends of Olympia<sup>1</sup> VII

by Cléanthis Paleologos ©

## Leonidas of Rhodes, Triast

Many are the athletes from the deep green island of Rhodes, whose names have been recorded brilliantly in the history of famed-crowned Olympia. Big-bodied wrestlers and boxers, indomitable Pankratists, unsurpassable Dolichos and Stadion runners and runners of the Diaulos, accomplished feats which in our days seem superhuman.

The story of the fleet-footed Leonidas of Rhodes tells us of feats so great and difficult, that had they been written up by unknown historians, they would have been considered today figments of sheer fantasy. But the historians are serious writers and their testimonies are real. Leonidas managed to win in four consecutive Olympiads the difficult victories in the three running games, the very same day in the Stadion, the Diaulos and the armed race.

If we examine the details in the procedure of the games in ancient Olympics, the achievement judged by today's standards and with the modern possibilities, becomes truly superhuman and unbelievable. Let us follow this excellent athlete in his first Olympiad, still a young and untried athlete, without any experience whatsoever.

It was in the 154th Olympiad (164 BC). At Olympia, the ceremonies in the games lasted five days.

The first day as soon as Phœbus rose scarlet in the sky, the great procession started for the sacrifices. In front, the priestess of Demeter covered in veils, then the priests who were serving in the temples and shrines of Olympia. Followed the arbiters in their white

chitons, the judges in their short scarlet tunics, the Archon of Elis and after that came the athletes and trainers, naked, their relations and the rest of the people.

The first sacrifice took place on Pelop's tomb where according to legend lay buried the hero-founder of the great games. Here a black ram was slaughtered, they sprinkled the ground with its blood and threw its liver into the fire.

Then with the greatest possible magnificence the great sacrifice at the temple of Zeus the Thunderbearer who was seated in his golden throne, made of ivory and ebony «benign and magnificent», as Pausanias describes him.

This sacrifice was offered by the towns of Elis and was the richest in slaughtered beasts and ceremonies of pomp.

Then followed the sacrifices of organizers of the games on the six twin altars which stood at various points in the Altis. These altars had been erected in honour of Zeus, Poseidon, Hera, Athena, Hermes, Apollo, the Graces, Dionysos, Artemis, Alpheus, Kronos and Rea. After that the people scattered in the Altis to admire the monuments and temples, the statues of the famed athletes, while the various city delegations and the athletes offered their separate sacrifices to their patron gods and heroes and were crowning the statues of celebrated athletes.

Afterwards they descended to the Hippodrome to ask more favours of the gods whose altars had been erected there, to sacrifice and pray.

But most of the sacrifices were brought to the turning point of the Hippodrome where most accidents occurred. There they had built a big altar to Taraxhippos the God of the Hippodrome whom they

<sup>1</sup> See « Olympic Review » since No 64-65.

had to appease with fat slaughter—animals so that he should not frighten the horses when they passed the dangerous corner as they collided and fell on top of each other, as if a battle had taken place, with the people rushing to collect from the debris dead horses and wounded charioteers.

So during the whole morning the Altis was fragrant with the smells of burnt meat, which went straight up to heaven, and the people made the rounds of the altars to praise the rich offerings and to taste the well grilled meats offering their good wishes willingly.

Around midday the athletes with their trainers escorted by their parents, brothers and relatives went to the Bouleuterion (the town council) where in front of the statue of Zeus and the arbiters the athletes delivered the oath that they would contest fairly and would not harm anybody. Zeus stood there formidable holding in his raised hand the thunderbolt and only seeing him one was inspired with awe. As if this ferocious sight of the thunderer was not enough, on the pedestal of the statue, threatening elegies were inscribed against those who might dare transgress the law. Here a hog was sacrificed and the oath was taken on the cut up pieces, first by the contestants or by the fathers and relations of the youths, afterwards by all those who had been elected to judge the ages of the boys and to separate the colts from the horses.

In the afternoon a boy was brought who had to have both parents living, they handed him a small golden knife and took him near the temple of Zeus to cut boughs from the wild olive tree which would be turned into the so very much desired wreaths for the happy winners. Thus ended the first day which contained the ceremonial part of the great festivities of the Olympiad.

The second day the games for boys took place, the third the games for men, the fourth was reserved for the equestrian games, the chariot races,

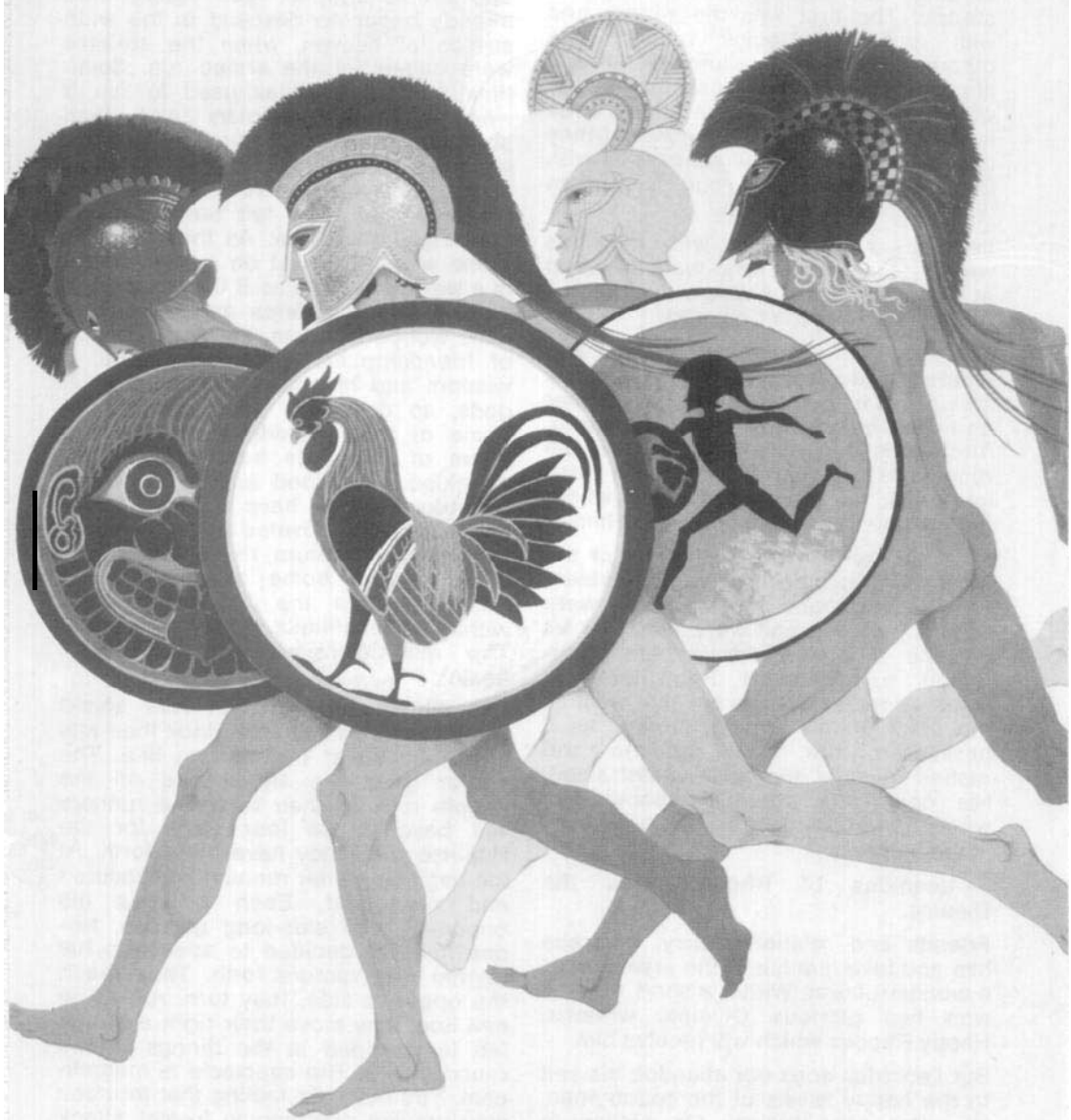
the Pentathlon and the contests for the trumpeters and heralds. On the fifth day they had the official handing out of the prizes by the arbiters, the thanksgiving sacrifices to the gods and from noon on in all encampments the leave taking began and with it a panegyric euphoria. And until the early morning hours, the green valley of Olympia reverberated with dances and songs of victory.

The games started at sunrise and for the men they had first the running games and then followed the heavier games like wrestling, boxing and the Pankration. The running games commenced with the Stadion run which was a game of speed from one end of the stadium to the other.

Heracles the demi-god had counted it with his own feet and its length was six hundred feet. In today's meters 192,70. As we know, in Olympia the official Elian arbiters watched the training of the athletes for one month and we know today that this had its purpose. This way the Elians who were responsible for the games knew how to discern and select each athlete for each game. Thus they could ban those athletes who did not show that they were capable to put up a strong competition, in other words an excellent spectacle. So for the Stadion run they selected sixteen athletes who ran in four lines, four runners in each line.

The winner of each line received a palm, the sign that they had passed to the finals, returned to the starting point to be ready for the final run. So Leonidas won and was crowned with the Olympic Kotinos (the wild olive bough). He had distinguished himself from all his adversaries and his superiority was unquestionable. The crowds cheered him when he returned to his post.

After the Stadion they called for the Diaulos run, a run of semi-endurance. Here no preliminary run took place. Up to sixteen runners could take part at the starting point which was now on the other side of the end of the Stadium, where the finishing post of the simple



run was. After the starting signal the athletes reached the opposite side, turned around a short pillar and hurried to finish at the point where they had started. The first was the winner and was crowned Diaulos runner. The others retired with lowered heads almost ashamed and lost themselves within the stadium where the crowds had only eyes for the victor whom they cheered and whom they showered with flowers and myrtles and oleanders when he passed by them.

Leonidas handed over with care his wreath to his family and went to stand at the starting point where the Diaulos runners had already gathered.

The judge passed in front of them and handed round the urn with the lots, the athletes took the shred with the number on it and held it high up in their hand. Afterwards the same judge placed the runners and having called for the starting judge retired behind the line where the staff bearers came and joined him.

Now the starter passed in front of the athletes. This time they were fourteen. After having made sure that they were correctly placed and were ready he let fall the rope and the runners, light-footed, rush forward. From the first steps Leonidas stands out, he reaches the point of the turning, circles, as if possessed, the small column and rushes towards the goal unrestrained. His opponents are still behind him when the herald's ringing voice is heard in the stadium.

— Leonidas of Rhodes wins the Diaulos.

Friends and relations hurry, embrace him and take him out of the arena. What a wonderful feat. Within a short time he won two glorious Olympic wreaths. Happy Rhodes which will receive him.

But Leonidas does not abandon himself to the happy revels of his countrymen. He aims even higher. He wishes to triple his victory. He has put on his short garment and is resting in the shade of a tree, following the games.

Now they are running the Dolichos, an endurance run which consists of 24 turns in the Stadium.

The fire chariot of god Apollo had already begun to descend in the wide stretch of heaven, when the athletes were called for the armed run. Some time ago the athletes used to run it wearing bronze helmets and high strapped sandals and holding in their hands a round shield and a short sword. Now they are running with only the shield in their left hand, leaving their right hand free. As they say this game was left to last on purpose, as it is a war game. It is as if they wished to convey to all athletes and spectators «The wonderful truce, the armistice full of friendship and peace is ended. If wisdom and manhood stems from the gods, so does war also, which is a game of their making. Now that the altars of the gods have been richly sprinkled with blood and the splendid beautiful athletes have adorned themselves with the coveted prizes, prepare yourselves to return the shortest way back to your home countries. Make haste to pass the foreign frontiers within the time limits of the joyful truce. The man-destroying war will start again...»

The athletes arrived with their shield slung over their left arms, took their lots and lined up at the starting line. The starter gave the signal and all the people rose to their feet. The runners will have to do four turns for the Hoplites run. They have burst forth. At the beginning their running is measured and calculated. Each watches his opponent with side-long glances. No-one has yet decided to speed up his rhythm and venture forth. They reach the opposite side, they turn, run all in one line, they move their right arm, the left is strapped in the thongs of the round shield. The spectacle is magnificent. You have the feeling that fourteen warriors are charging in frontal attack an invisible enemy. Now they are wheeling for the first time round the turning of the starting point. Their order

has not yet broken up. They have covered half the distance and the voices of the crowd become stronger and the uproar rises from everywhere. The thunderous applause in the Stadium and the noise reminds one of the time when the thunderbearing Zeus together with Athena in her iron armour precipitated the vanquished Titans into Tartara.

There in the middle of the third turn a beautifully bodied athlete flies forward, accelerates his powerful running and by the time the others arrive at the turning he has already gained quite a distance. The crowds are frantic. The beautiful athlete takes the last turning, he increases speed and passes like lightning in front of the audience. The stadium vibrates. Such force. Where had he concealed it all this time? How had he restrained himself? And now it is easy to discern who the happy victor is who rushes to the goal, leaving all the other runners well behind.

— It's Leonidas, it's the Rhodian Leonidas.

The athlete has reached the finishing post when the great voice of the herald is heard.

— Leonidas of Rhodes wins the Hoplitest run...

The Stadium resounds for a long time with reverberating joyous shouts and then little by little quietens down. The crowds perceive the raised hands of the herald. In one he holds the long staff of his office. A deep silence follows and the proclaiming voice was heard as far down as the shining waters of Alpheus.

— Leonidas of Rhodes is proclaimed Triast.

It is an altogether special honour in this difficult game. Winner of three games in famed Olympia, in the same Olympiad and in the very same day. Oh ye gods!! How blissfully happy this man must be, how proud his parents and relatives and how happy Rhodes, the deep green island to own him as a citizen.

But Leonidas' fame was to become even greater and his name celebrated

by history. The unconquerable athlete did not rest on the laurels of his triastic victory in this Olympiad. He returned after four years in the 155th Olympiad and became a Triast for the second time. This wonderful feat was repeated in the 156th Olympiad and Leonidas the Rhodian was Triast for the third time! The reception of this incomparable athlete by the people was a real hero's welcome.

During a period of twelve years he was the fastest man of the then known world. He had committed an unsurpassed feat. But the story does not end here, there is also this unbelievable and fantastic sequel.

In the 157th Olympiad, twelve whole years from the time when Leonidas was Triast for the first time, the beautifully bodied athlete from Rhodes overcomes his opponents in the same games on the same day. In the Stadion, in the Diaulos and the Hoplitest run. It is an apotheosis. He will be embraced by history and his statue in the Altis will vouch for his unsurpassed feat for the coming centuries. The historians will write books on him. We will keep to the writer's account of the "Olympic Winners Index" by Eusebios Pamphilos who refers to him simply and unpretentiously, the way superhuman feats which later pass into the realm of legend should be dealt with.

In copying this Index we add, to help the reader, the dates of the Olympiads in brackets:

"154th Olympic Games (164 BC) Leonidas of Rhodes is proclaimed Triast (Stadion, Diaulos and Hoplitest).

155th Olympic Games (160 BC) Leonidas is Triast for the second time.

156th Olympic Games (156 BC) Leonidas is Triast for the third time.

157th Olympic Games (152 BC) Leonidas is Triast for the fourth time.

He was the one and only athlete to win twelve crowns in four Olympic Games."

C.P.

(to follow)