

# Legends of Olympia<sup>(1)</sup> XII

by *Cleanthis Paleologos* ©

## Argeas of Argos Dolichon runner

A man is running on a deserted path. He runs without looking either to the right or the left. A faint smile illuminates his youthful face. Tall, slender and well built he is wonderfully light while running and you would think that from the depths of his being a lively impulse compels him to run, faster and faster while "Phoebus still rides high in the heavens".

It is some hours since the youth set forth, pushed on by an inner call. He runs with a smile on his face. Let us follow him closely and tell his story.

The sun had hardly risen before the Games started at Olympia. The athlete running through the forest left the sacred valley and the stadium echoing with applause some hours ago. The sun had not climbed very high in the sky when the youth had decided to take to the road. He crossed the Erymanthus on foot, that "impetuous torrent", as Polybius calls it, its wide riverbed with difficult fords in spite of the shallow water. It was on this difficult terrain that Heracles the hero, bidden by King Euritheas, killed the wild boar which surpassed all others in size and strength. Then he took to the slopes of the pine-covered mountains, ran for nearly an hour protected by the shade of the big trees, and emerged beside another river, the Ladon, which he

crossed before climbing a steep slope which extended along the river. The Ladon is one of the most enchanting of Greek rivers; it charms you with its tuneful waters and with the idyllic vegetation covering the banks, which are far greener than all the others.

He stopped for a moment on its steep, shaded bank. Bending, he scooped water into his cupped hands and sprayed it on his neck, face and shoulders. Then he began to pray:

— Hero and King Ladon, let me arrive before darkness sets in! For the love of the kind goddess Hera, the patron goddess, and for Argos, my town.

He continued on his way, climbing higher and higher, sometimes running on clear paths, sometimes cutting the bends in the river beneath the increasing heat of the sun.

He is a youth from Argos, called Argeas. His profession is daily messenger. He is always to be found near the Archons of Danaos' famed city, ready to run great distances to carry messages whenever necessary. Be it for a feast or for war, to issue the Archon's peace hopes, to announce weddings, entertainments and splendid sacrifices, or to call for help from the neighbouring mountain tribes or cities inhabited by horse-breeders. Thus Argeas was well known by everyone in Argos, the heritage of the Atrides, with its unconquerable castle protected by Hera.

None of the other runners could compete with him; he was the fastest.

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

He set off after taking the message from the priestess who rules Argos in the name of the gods, and he never stopped. He never worried about the distance; he knew the paths and lanes like no one else, could cross with a steady foot any desolate region, knew all the landmarks and always looking straight ahead ran non-stop... Here, a pine with a tufted cyme, there a gnarled old oak, somewhere else a spring gushing from a cleaved rock, further on a large hundred year old plane tree, or some ash-red rocks lit up by the relentless sun in the middle of a valley or again a solitary fir tree struck by Zeus. He relied on his landmarks, whatever the direction, and his pace was always steady and swift.

Argeas is running now. He runs like an enchanted horse in the opposite direction of the sun, which now bears down on the sacred valley of Olympia, where the athletes are contesting for prizes. The sun will not be long in setting below the Ionian Islands to dive into the purple sea, as it does every night. Argeas runs in the opposite direction towards the east. Well after leaving the crowded stadium, he was dazzled by the sun's rays. First "Apollo's arrows" strike his head and then his shoulders. Argeas runs. He is in a great hurry.

What important message is he carrying?

And why after running for so many hours does his face not show signs of exhaustion?

Do not stop Argeas. Continue running. The "heavenly magician" will soon be coming down. Soon he will be descending to his nightly palaces. You must hurry if you wish to arrive—do not forget you are a messenger—before nightfall. You have already crossed the raging Ladon. Soon you will find on your right among the dark ancient firs

Mainalon, the mountain holy to Pan, the mightiest of all mountains of Arcadia.

You will thrust yourself into deep ravines, you will run on their slopes. At the bottom, you will find their dangerous chasms, but do not be alarmed. Keep close to the mountainside, without climbing to the summit or crossing the ravines. You will leave Orchomenos on your left and further along you will find Lyrkia strewn with boulders only inhabited by wild animals. Artemision will rise up in front of you, but do not be perturbed—you will not have to climb it.

Stretch out for a moment at its base and take the downward path only when you feel the cool breeze from Mainalon. Then you will leave Kantinea on your right to plunge into the pebbly ravine.

Do not be afraid of entering this dark gorge: these are the gates which will lead you to Argos. When you have passed them, you will smell your homeland, mixed with the salt air of the shores of Argolis.

Run, Argeas. Soon you will find yourself in the flower-scented fields, and you will arrive at last in Argos. With the help of Zeus the Thunderer, you will be there before night spreads over the city of Danaos and her fifty daughters. Since you were intent on bringing the precious message to your country in one day, run. You will arrive. In the meantime, we will tell your extraordinary story.

Some time previously, he was in the gymnasium one morning when Polyxenes the trainer approached him.

— Hail, Argeas. May the great Zeus send you his inspiration and may the fleet-footed Hermes increase your running ability. I have asked you to come and see me.

— Hail to you, celebrated Polyxenes, may the altars always be fragrant with



your offerings. What do you want me for?

— Have you noticed the column in the Agora which our Argive forefathers erected in honour of Dandis, the stadium runner? How many years have passed since then? The rain has nearly washed away the inscription from the marble. Nevertheless, Dandis will not be forgotten. He was a messenger like you.

He twice dedicated his gold crowns from his victories in Olympia to the temple, and his fame remains uneclipsed. He brought eight wreaths back to his country, being victorious twice in the country's greatest games. At Olympia, in the Pythian, Nemean and Isthmus Games, he became the "peridonikis" and acquired the greatest honours. This Dandis was a "fleet-footed" stadium runner and don't ever forget his name.

— I know, Polyxenes! But why are you telling me all this?

— I will explain at once, Argeas. Many generations have passed since Dandis shone in Argos. What has become of all those former Olympic winners of Argos? Your time has come, Argeas.

— What are you talking about, Polyxenes? There are so many others well endowed by the gods who are much better than I am in Greece.

— Perhaps in the Stadion, and also in the Diaulos. But not in the Dolichon, Argeas. I know.

The youth is still running. He has entered the rugged gorge between Artemision and Mainalon. Rocks and rounded boulders, big trees and dense bushes and sharp thorns. Where the gorge ends, dense thickets begin. But these difficult spots do not last long. The "king of heaven" pummels the

back of our runner and makes his shadow run in front of him. Argeas runs after himself. The messenger for the first time carries his own message to his country, the message of his victory.

The great temple of Argos will again be adorned by the Olympic crown.

The difficulties now have all been left behind and the rocky ridge of Artemision appears soft. Now the valley stretches like a green carpet in front of the athlete. He enters a dense wood. A fresh breeze whistles through the leaves and cools his tired brow. Herds of sheep graze in the meadows, you can hear their bells like far off greetings and the sheep-dogs play and bark. Argeas rediscovers the world. He feels life beating around him. The young man feels new force in himself.

The country is so beautiful! He is deeply moved. He strays slightly off his path. A shepherd, a huge man holding a crook, approaches.

— May the hour be favourable to you, young man. Where are you rushing to?

— May the gods always be with you, old man.

— You must have a very important message to transmit to be in such a hurry. Whoever you are, may Pan give you his favour. Stop a moment and have a bowl of milk and then continue on your way.

Breathless, Argeas stopped. The man's kind words moved him. The shepherd brought a big wooden bowl, and gave it to him.

— Drink all you can, my boy.

Argeas took the heavy bowl and drank the thick milk slowly. New strength poured into his body.

— May the gods protect you.

— If you are heading for Argos, follow this path. It will lead you down and from there you will reach Danaos.

— Thank you. May the gods always be with you!

Argeas stood up and continued on his way.

Run, Argeas, run! We will tell the story of your victory.

With his persuasive words, Polyxenos convinced him and the youth started training. So one morning, he brought him to Olympia.

— I would like to see how you manage the bends, said Polyxenos. Here many a good athlete has lost ground and was left behind. Cut the bend each time you reach this column, cut it sharply, and gather speed again.

The days passed, the training was completed and the moment for the great event arrived.

Polyxenos watched the runners from behind the low wall which separated the arena from the spectators. It was still early. The sun was not very high in the sky, when the starting signal for the Dolichos was given. It was the race of endurance in the Olympics and measured 24 stadia, about five thousand meters in our reckoning. For Argeas' trained legs, such a distance seemed a mere game.

— Stay amongst the leaders, and as I told you mind the turnings, Polyxenos reminded him at the last moment. When you have run the first ten stadia, take the lead and don't look back.

Argeas followed the trainer's advice. His competitors, swift and strong, ran

round the stadium. After the first turns, four athletes were out in front of the group of about twenty. One of the four was Argeas. He would not allow anyone else to be in front of him and gained every time in the bends. He felt his forces unspent and ran lightly and with great ease. He did not know how many stadia he had covered, he had lost count and was like a horse which is controlled by its bridle and unable to let itself go. On a bend he heard Polyxenos:

— Hurry up...

This was what he was waiting for. He threw himself forward, his feet hardly touching the ground. His adversaries panted and at every bend fell further back. Little by little the crowd stood up and waved with their clothes and cheered him. It was the last lap. Argeas was unbeatable, reaching the finishing post quite fresh, and while the crowd was showering him with flowers and myrtle the voice of the herald was heard:

— Argeas of Argos wins the Dolichon. Polyxenos, with an arm round his waist, took him to the judges who crowned his head with the wild olive wreath.

— How glad my heart feels, Polyxenos.

— And what great joy at Argos when they hear about your victory. You have honoured your country...

It was then that the youth felt a sort of divine impulse, a power which tore his mind like a luminous sword. He spoke calmly to his trainer:

— I tell you that they will hear about it today with the gods' help, venerable Polyxenos.

The trainer looked at him with curiosity.

All around them the crowd was shouting with joy, and leaves and

flowers were falling like rain upon Argeas.

— How is such a thing possible, my child? Argos is far from here, six hundred stadia.

— I am leaving this minute, Polyxenes. I will run. Before nightfall the venerable citizens of Argos will know the glad tidings.

— But the sun is so hot! I am surprised at your decision, and...

Polyxenes turned around but Argeas had disappeared.

The sun was already high in the sky when the youth started on his way over the winding mountain paths. It was an ordeal that no man had tried before.

The great athlete kept his word and achieved the unbelievable. In the Agora of Argos, men were chatting when they saw the dust-covered messenger in the distance running towards them and waving his arms.

Arriving, he stopped. His chest heaved. The citizens formed a circle around him. The throng increased and everyone spoke at once, asking questions and shouting. Argeas in the middle breathed quickly. Little by little his breathing became quieter. He lifted his arm and everybody understood that he wished to speak, so they were silent.

— Hail, men of glorious Argos. I come from Olympia...

— What has happened? Who sends you, Argeas?

They all talked together, eager to know. Then an old man came forward.

— Speak, Argeas, my son. Who has sent you?

— Nobody, venerable elder. I have been running since this morning to bring you a message.

— You left today from Alpheus' sacred valley?

— Yes, this morning, when the sun was already high in the sky.

— And you arrived in Argos now? By Themis the protectress of all things, are you speaking the truth?

— The truth, Archon.

— And the good tidings? Thrice happy who brings good tidings to us!

— With the help of the gods I won the Dolichon. The venerable Polyxenes has taken my wreath to our temple.

This news provoked pandemonium among the crowds which had gathered in the square. They carried the athlete in triumph to his house.

For days after they discussed this great event in Argos. They did not know which to admire more: the great victory at Olympia or the unbelievable feat of a man running 600<sup>1</sup> stadia in one single day from Olympia to Argos.

*C. P.*

*(to be continued)*

<sup>1</sup> A stadium measures 192 meters, which makes about 115 kilometers.