

On the origin of the Olympic Games

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The true origin of the Olympic Games is not very distinct. All we know is that these Games were celebrated for the first time at Olympia by the hero Heracles in honour of Zeus. On the basis of this certainty I put forward the theory that the Games originated in my country, the Lebanon, formerly called Phoenicia.

Before going any further I should state that I am neither a historian nor an archaeologist, and have not made any special study of the pre-Christian period. However I have always been interested in reading about my country and Olympism.

I was recently very interested to read a doctorate thesis put forward by a young Lebanese sports educator, Dr. Labib Bou-

tros, on "sport in Phoenicia and its influence on the Olympic Games"¹. It should not be deduced from this that the Olympic Games were organised by the Phoenicians, but we do think that the Phoenicians had a certain amount of influence and that they should be given certain credit for the origin of the Games.

At the beginning of this article we explained that Heracles celebrated the Games at Olympia to honour the god Zeus. But who were these gods? Precisely Phoenician gods, introduced into Greece by exiles in the sixteenth century BC.

The famous conqueror Cadmus, leaving the city of Tyre in Phoenicia, landed in the province of Boetia in Greece and founded a

¹ See "Olympic Review" No 82-83.

Phoenician runners in Greece





Phoenician runners

large city which was later to become Thebes. The city's fortress moreover bears his name—"Cadmean". Phoenician settlers therefore came to Greece, bringing with them their commerce, inventions—including the alphabet—and forms of worship. They built temples to the gods, particularly Melkart and Baal, whom they had worshipped at Tyre in Phoenicia. The Greeks in their turn soon adopted and worshipped them according to the same rites, in particular, sports events. Thus they built temples to these gods whom in their tongue they called Hera-

cles and Zeus. But the origin of these gods is unmistakably Phoenician, Melkart being identified with Heracles and Baal with Zeus. These alterations in name should not surprise us; we could quote many examples of this kind. Is not Jesus Christ called by different names in different continents?

This, briefly, is the parallel we wanted to draw between the origin of the Games and the Lebanon. I am not speaking of the Olympic Games, but games in general. Sport was a religious rite for the Phoenicians, and became such for the Greeks. It is highly probable that this was at the origin of the Olympic Games as Heracles celebrated the Games for the first time at Olympia in honour of Zeus. And were not Heracles-Melkart and Zeus-Baal both Phoenician gods?

Melkart of Tyre

Heracles



G. G.

