

Women at Olympia¹

by *Conrado Durantez*

II. The cursed judgement

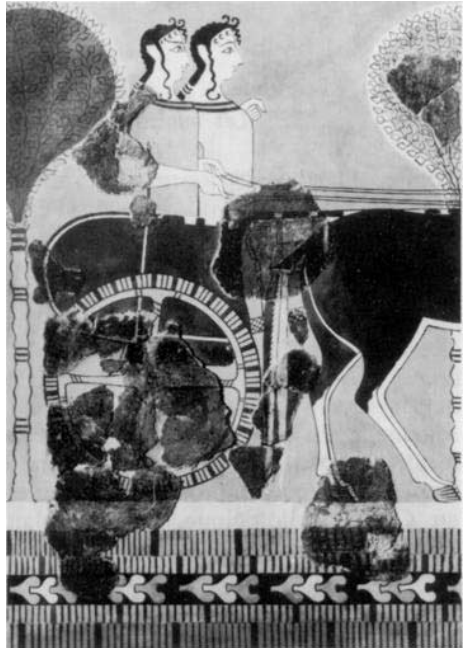
“On the road from Escilunte to Olympia”, says Pausanias, “before crossing the Alpheus, there is a mountain with huge steep rocks. It is called Mount Tipeon. There is a law in Elis which rules that each woman caught at the Olympic Games or even in the other part of the Alpheus, on the days forbidden for women, is to be thrown on these rocks. However, it is said that no woman was found there except Callipateira. She is sometimes called Pherenice and not Callipateira. She was a widow; she disguised herself perfectly as a gymnastics trainer in order to take her son to compete at Olympia. Peisirrodes, her son, was victorious, and, when Callipateira jumped over the fence behind which the trainers were, they saw that she was a woman; they let her go with impunity out of respect for her father, her brothers and her son, who had all been champions at Olympia. But as a result a law was published requiring that the trainers undress before entering the arena.”²¹ And in the following volume of his work he continues: “On the side opposite the one occupied by the hellanodics there is a white marble altar. Seated on this altar a woman, the priestess of Demeter Camine, contemplates the Olympic Games. The Eleans sometimes entrust this task to certain women. It was not forbidden for young virgins to contemplate the Games.”²²

From the combined interpretation of these two texts, of which certain passages appear contradictory, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. No married woman could attend the Games as a spectator. With the little information we have it is difficult to state the origin of this categorical ban which, precisely on account of the lack of knowledge of its basis, could only be protected by the exemplarity of capital punishment. Diem considers the reason for this harsh and powerful law to be the wish to avoid the presence of pregnant women at the Games on account of the danger the strong emotion and extreme tension habitually felt in the stadium

could represent for them²³. But clearly such a threatening sentence could never have been justified by such a simple and human argument as that. On the contrary, it could well have been motivated by old religious precepts handed down through the ages following essential changes in the ancestral rites. Mezö's explanations are in this vein, when he evaluates the consequences of the sudden change in the administration of the primitive tribal clans with the changeover from the original matriarchal system to the subsequent

Cretan women leading the hunt from a fresco by Thyrinte (1300 BC). Athens, National Archaeological Museum.



patriarchal system. In the former the married woman was the symbol of family power conferred by the ancient rites of fertility. With the new religion on which the Games are based, the radical transformation has already taken place and the married woman loses all her old attributes, since she is the sole recognised representative of the old power which is not the case of course of the young virgin²⁴.

2. The priestess of the goddess Demeter Camine, escaping the ban concerning married women, was the only one able to preside over the Games. A new feature, diverging from the norm we have explained, and equally difficult to justify: for what reason did the Eleans grant the famous priestess such a great privilege by reserving for her, moreover, a first-class seat? We do not know anything about the cult of Demeter at Olympia, perhaps essentially comparable with the mysteries of Eleusis, and yet the symbolism of the goddess has been proved to be related to the primitive agrarian cults. The temples of Demeter were habitually situated outside the towns²⁵. Perhaps the goddess's temple at Olympia was situated at the place where the north side of the stadium was later to extend when the famous sports installation was moved outside the sacred boundaries of the Altis towards the middle of the fourth century BC. With Demeter's sanctuary thus situated among the spectator stands²⁶, the Eleans—ever respectful of religious traditions—may have granted this unusual privilege to the priestess of the divinity, probably in compensation for the damage that the new enlargement work would cause her. This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that the only place reserved for the priestess was a simple seat or belvedere from which she could preside over the Games, the temple or Sanctuary which had been there in honour of the goddess having been moved beyond the new enclosure according to the cult's usual standards.

As a result of the pre-eminent distinction granted to the priestess of Demeter in office for her singular privilege, we know that this responsibility was sedulously sought after and coveted by the noble and moneyed ladies of the period, who used every possible means to obtain it when

the position became vacant according to the established cycles²⁷. In the Roman period the same craze of the distinguished women to obtain this post was revealed by Regilia, wife of the plutocratic benefactor Herod Atticus, in the year 155. Upon her initiative the seat was restored with white marble and bronze rings in order to give it a less modest appearance. In recognition of the honour granted to his wife Herod Atticus offered the ornamental exedra and the large capacity aqueduct, placing on the wall of the large central basin a statue of a bull carrying on its chine a votive inscription: "Regilia, priestess of Demeter, dedicates the water and the statue to Zeus."

3. Failure to respect the law was punishable by death. Pausanias seems to be our chief source of information as far as this severe

The temple of Hera at Olympia from the south-east. The champions of the Heran Games carved their names on clay tablets encrusted in special casts which can be seen today at eye-level on the columns of the temple.



regulation is concerned. Through him we know of the penalty inflicted, the place of execution of the condemned women (Mount Tipeon), the absence of cases in which the sanction was applied. and, finally, the absolution of the only known offender, Kallipateia, Pherenice, Aristopateia or Callipateira, according to the various references. At the trial to decide the application of the penalty, the Olympic Senate possibly showed comprehension and compassion in the face of the sublime maternal love of the accused, who risked her life solely to see her son compete. It no doubt understood the irresistible call leading her to the forbidden act; the blood in her veins of a family used to the crowns of triumph and the memory of her father Diagoras, her brothers Damagetos, Akusilaos and Dorieus, and her own son Peisirrodes, all Olympic champions, no doubt led the solemn Elean magistrates to pronounce absolution²⁸.

The only result of the famous case, of which we learn in the same passage, was a new law stipulating that henceforth trainers wishing to attend the Games had to be naked in the part of the stand reserved for them. Apparently the aim was to stop the loose tunic with which the leaders of the gymnasium covered themselves being used again as an accessory to an offence. But it could also be that the story of Callipateira was only put forward to justify the strange custom requiring the trainers to remain naked²⁹. However it may be, it is possible that the origin of this practice can be found in the example given by the sports trainers who showed that not only were they capable of training energetic, capable young sportsmen, proof against the vicissitudes, heat and fatigue, but that they themselves could hold out for hours, naked and motionless, in the stands of Olympia, underneath the unrelenting heat of the sun³⁰.

4. However, young girls could preside over the Games. Pausanias³¹ confirms this, thus causing confusion since, according to the same author, the status of the married woman was the essential condition in order to preside over the competitions. It is again possible that the famous and industrious reporter of antiquity, who has told us such a lot about Olympia and its religious, political and sports world, lost



Monumental head of Hera, autochthonal goddess of Olympia. The Heran Games were held in her honour. About 600 BC. Olympia, Archaeological Museum.

himself in his appreciation of the source of information, unless the direct and personal version itself was wrong. Mezö stated³² that the contradiction we have just pointed out could come from the fact that Pausanias, in addition to his personal observations on the sites he visited, had used various sources which did not always agree. He acknowledged however³³, basing himself on a text by Dion Chrysostome³⁴ who lived one generation before Pausanias and according to whom all women, even those of bad repute, were admitted to the Pan-Hellenic Games, that this authorisation—if it existed—probably only concerned single women.

Furthermore Suetonius, a Roman historian and jurist, famous for the customs and anecdotes he described in his book and those he experienced personally, half a century before Pausanias, tells how, for the athletic Games organised by Nero in

the “style” of the Olympic Games, “the vestal virgins were invited to attend the encounters of the athletes since the priestesses of Ceres³⁵ at Olympia enjoyed the same right.”³⁶

From this concise and accurate information we can deduce that the priestesses’ attendance at the Games was manifestly an exception to the general ban concerning women, whatever their status.

In addition, on the subject of Callipateira, Piernavieja wonders why she disguised herself as a man if, as a woman, she was able to preside at the Games? And if only girls were admitted, how could her virginity have been determined among so many other female spectators? We must therefore accept the ban on women whatever their status as an unmistakable fact with the priestess of Demeter Camine as the sole exception.³⁷

A final supposition in favour of the preceding argument would be to consider that girls had the Heran Games for their exclusive participation. They were organised and controlled by women in the Sanctuary of Hera—divinity parallel to Zeus—according to liturgical practices and a particular ceremonial. Inversely, men were apparently excluded³⁸.

In another passage of his work the same author finds himself in contradiction with his own version of the facts concerning the ban we are studying. For when he describes the ritual of the great sacrifice in honour of Zeus, he states that “girls as well as women could go up to the prodisis seeing that they were not forbidden entry to Olympia.”³⁹ This phrase therefore dispels all doubt as to the categories of women concerned by the ban. Moreover the ban mentioned here can only be the one pronounced at the Games. Women could go up to the prodisis for any sacrifice to Zeus except for the solemn ritual of the quadrennial Olympic sacrifice.

5. At Olympia a woman could be proclaimed champion in the equestrian categories. The ban we discussed earlier did not exclude the possibility that the equestrian triumph could be awarded to a woman, since the person proclaimed victor of the competition was not the rider or the

charioteer, who often risked their lives in the dangerous struggle, but the often moneyed owner of the horses.

The most famous woman champion at Olympia was Kynista of Sparta, daughter of King Archidamos and sister of Agis and Agesilas. The latter, wishing to show that the value of equestrian triumphs

Young girl running. Hellenic copy in marble of a fourth century BC bronze. When we contemplate the sculpture of the beautiful young athlete we can guess the pulsation of her veins under the skin. Rome, Vatican Museum.





The stadium of Olympia from the north slope. In the background, the stand of the hellanodics, the judges of the Olympic competitions. In the foreground, the seat of the priestess of Demeter Camine, the only woman able to attend the Games. Other women were deprived of this right on pain of death.

declined each time the possibility of victory was more dependent on money, which allowed the breeding of horses to be improved rather than skill or personal value, persuaded his sister Kynista to practise the noble equestrian arts. The horses of the daring, headstrong Spartan princess, famous throughout Greece, were victorious at Olympia during the 96th and 97th Olympiads (393 and 392 BC). And to commemorate her victories Kynista dedicated a bronze quadriga which was placed on the pronaos of the Temple of Zeus “to the entrance”, and another sculptural group, the work of Apeles, representing a chariot with horses and charioteer, and Kynista herself, which bore the following inscription:

“The kings of Sparta were my fathers and my brothers

But since with my chariot and my fiery horses
I, Kynista,
Have won the victory,
I offer here my effigy
And proudly I declare
That, of all Greek women, I am the first
to have worn the crown.”⁴⁰

Belistiche of Macedonia, the favourite of Ptolemy Philadelph of Egypt, was also victorious with her horses in the quadriga competition in the 128th Olympiad (268 BC) and in the foal biga in the 129th, a discipline which was introduced then for the first time. The Egyptian monarch, full of enthusiasm by the victories of his brave wife, ordered that she be deified and dedicated a temple and a cult under the invocation of Aphrodite Belistiche to her.

Other women were extolled for their Olympic victories: the Spartan Eurileone and the Eleans Timarete, Theodote and Kasia Mnasitee.

C. D.



¹ See “Olympic Review” No. 101-102.

²¹ Pausanias: V, 6, 7-8.

²² Pausanias: VI, 20, 9.

²³ Diem, C.: Op. cit. page 220.

²⁴ Mezö, Ferenc: Geschichte der Olympischen Spiele, Munich, 1930, page 54, note 19.

²⁵ Drees, L.: Op. cit. page 16.

²⁶ Diem, C.: Op. cit. page 219.

²⁷ Pausanias: VI, 20, 9.

²⁸ Pausanias: V, 6, 7-8 and VI, 7, 1-7. Pindar: The Olympics, Madrid, 1967. Olympic VII.

²⁹ Drees, L.: Op. cit. page 56.

³⁰ Paleologos, Cleanthis: The ancient Olympic Games. International Olympic Academy, Olympia, 1964, page 69.

³¹ Pausanias, VI, 20, 9.

³² Mezö, F.: Op. cit. page 178.

³³ Mezö, F.: Op. cit. page 63.

³⁴ Dion, Chrisostome: Orations LXVII.

³⁵ Divinity symbolising the fertility and richness of cultivated earth. Roman version of the Greek goddess Demeter.

³⁶ Suetonius: The Twelve Caesars. Nero XII. Barcelona, 1935.

³⁷ Piernawieja, M.: Op. cit. page 416.

³⁸ Pausanias: VI, 20, 7 and V, 16, 3-4.

³⁹ Pausanias: V, 3, 10.

⁴⁰ Pausanias: III, 8, 1; V, 12, 5; VI, 1, 6; Plutarch; Agesilas, 2; Xenophon; Agesilas, IX, 6.