

Olympia and history ¹

by Karl Lennartz



Karl Lennartz was born in Aachen (GER) in 1940. A doctor in philosophy, he has been a lecturer for more than ten years at the Rheinland Teacher Training College. His study on "Olympia through the ages"

covers the period from the banning of the Games proclaimed by Emperor Theodosius in 393 to their renovation decided in Paris in 1894.

If one glances at the many historical accounts of the Olympic Games, especially those published at the time of the 1972 Olympic Games *, one learns little about the knowledge of Olympia in the period between antiquity and 1896.

On reading one notes now and then that

- Emperor Theodosius banned the Games in the year 393,
- Germanic peoples plundered the temples,
- earthquakes destroyed the Altis,
- Richard Chandler rediscovered Olympia in 1766 and Ernst Curtius began excavations there the same year.

Was Olympia, were the Olympic Games really unknown to learned people from the end of the ancient Games until the re-discovery by Chandler? How well was Olympia known in the time after Chandler?

* Karl Lennartz, Bibliography on the History of Physical Education, Vol. 5 Olympic Games, Cologne 1972.

The Middle Ages

During the earthquakes of 522 and 551, Alpheios and Kladeos showered the Altis with a covering of mud one metre thick. In the early Middle Ages, the western part of the Peloponnese was almost uninhabited. The Peloponnese was captured successively by the Awares, Slavs, the Byzantines, the Franks, again the Byzantines, and finally by the Turks.

While Byzantine historians often mention Olympia and the Olympic Games, the Peloponnese itself holds no reminder of the place or of the Games. The Greek topographic descriptions disappear and are replaced by those of the Slavs : Alpheios - Rufia, Kladeos - Lalaiko, Olympia - Andilalo.

These names are to be found on a Venetian map in the Battista Palnese Atlas of 1554.

Mateo Palmieri

In the 14th and 15th centuries, numerous Greek intellectuals left Byzantium to escape the Turks and found refuge in Italy. They awakened a new interest in the West in antique culture. During study of Greek literature, one comes across Greek gymnastics and consequently the Olympic Games. In humanistic writings one also finds the first indications thereof. It is believed that they are first mentioned in 1430 by the Florentine poet and statesman, Mateo Palmieri (approximately 1405-1475), in his work entitled "*Libro della vita civile, dialoghi*" (Book of civil life, dialogues).

The work describes a conversation between several refined Florentines about the duties of mankind. "*Olympia coronati*" (Crowned Olympia) is the theme of the second volume.

Virgilius Polydorus, Marcus Tattius Alpinus

In the year 1491 the lexicon "*De invento-ribus rerum*" (About the invention of things) by the Italian humanist Virgilius Polydorus (1470-1555) was published in Latin, in which the four periodic Games of the Ancient Greeks are described. The work must have reached a wide public as 20 Latin editions and almost as many translations have been recorded.

In 1537, in Augsburg, Heinrich Steyner published the first German edition "*Von den Eryfindern der Dyngen*" (About the inventors of things). This rather free translation

originates from Marcus Tattius Alpinus (Fig. 1).

Pausanias and Pindar editions

In the year 1516 the first Greek printed edition of the “*Voyages of Pausanias*” was published by Musurus in Venice. In 1547 there followed a complete Latin edition by Amasaëus and Loescher after Calderini had edited a partial Latin translation as early as 1500. The editions of Xylander and Sylburg (1583) and Kuhn (1696) should also be mentioned. Both the publishers and every reader had to consider Olympia and the Olympic Games.

The same, of course, also applies to the “*Olympic Songs*” of Pindar. The first printed edition by Aldus Pius Manutius was published in Venice in 1513. Between then and 1776 there followed 10 Greek editions, 18 Greek and Latin, 7 Latin and 12 editions with translations in various modern languages.

Johannes Aquilla, Peter Gunther

In Germany, the Games are first mentioned in the oldest book about the Games, the “*Opusculum enchiridion appellatum Joannis Aquilae ferme de omni ludorum genere, Oppenheim 1516*”. At the end of the introduction there is a poem which describes the fame and significance of the Games.

Hans Sachs

Hans Sachs (1494-1576), who describes the physical exercise of his time in many works, discusses the origin of the Games in a poem written in 1545 “*Der Fechtspruch. Ankunft und Freiheit der Kunst*” (The fencing motto. Arrival and freedom of art).

Hieronymus Mercurialis

The humanist Mercurialis, whom one might expect to mention the Games most since he reported extensively on the Ancient Games, only mentions the Games incidentally three times in his “*De arte gymnastica* (About the art of gymnastics), Venice 1569”.

Robert Garnier and Thomas Kyd

For the first time in French, one finds mention of the Games by the dramatist Robert Garnier (1544-1599).

In his tragedy, “*Cornélie*”, (published in 1574) Cassius says :

*Comme un qui veut paroistre honorable des siens,
Pour le prix de la lutte, aux jeux Olympiens,
Devant qu'entrer en place oingt les espauls
d'huile,
S'exerce longuement pour estre plus agile.*

This work was translated by Thomas Kyd (1554-1595) and was published in London in 1595 under the title “*Pompey the Great, his faire Corneliaes Tragedie*” :

*Like them that (tryuing at th'Olympian sports
To grace themselves with honor of the game)
Annoynt theyr sinewes fit for wrestling,
And (ere they enter) use some exercise.*

John Milton (1608-1674)

In his epic “*Paradise Lost*” which he wrote in 1667, he mentions the Olympic Games :

*Part on the Plain, or in the Air sublime
Upon the wing, or in swift Race contend,
As at th'Olympian Games or Pythian fields;
Part curb thir fierie Steeds, or shun the Goal
With rapid wheels, or fronted Brigads form.*

Bernhard de Montfaucon

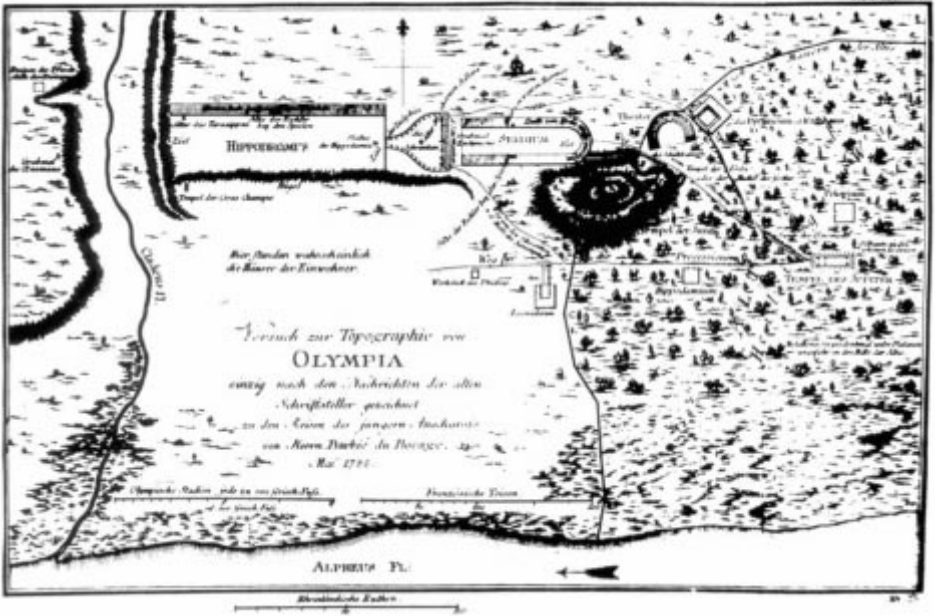
The French priest and classical philologist, Bernhard de Montfaucon (1655-1741) is the first to express the idea of looking for the Olympic areas and to excavate there. On 14th June 1723 he writes to the man who is later to become Cardinal Quirini, and who' was also a researcher of antiquity and had just been appointed Archbishop of Corfu :

C'est l'ancienne Elide où se célébraient les Jeux Olympiques, où l'on dressait une infinité de monuments pour les victorieux, statues, bas-reliefs, inscriptions. Il faut que la terre en soit toute farcie, et ce qu'il y a de particulier, c'est que je crois que personne n'a encore cherché de ce côté-là. C'est pourtant à votre porte.

However it only remained a suggestion. Quirini never arranged a search at Olympia.

Michel Fourmont

A few years later it might in fact have come to the first excavation operations in Olympia. At the command of Louis XV, the orientalist and epigraphist, Michel Fourmont (1690-1746) travelled through Greece between 1728 and 1731 and began to dig



in several locations. In so doing, he destroyed more than he discovered. However, before he could start operations in Olympia he was summoned back by the court in Paris just when he was at the frontier between Arcadia and Elis. He had fallen into disgrace and did not receive any assistance for the publication of the findings of his journey.

Universal Lexicon

The "Great Complete Universal Lexicon of all Sciences and Arts", too, published an article "Olympia" in its 25th volume which appeared in 1740.

Gilbert West

The first extensive monography by an archaeologist written on Olympia and the Games was published in 1749 within a Pindar edition as "Dissertation on the Olympick Games" by Gilbert West (1703-1756). West bases his work principally on Pausanias and Pindar. He treats extensively the origin of the Games, the religious ceremonies, the temples, the sports arenas, the activity of the umpire and the course of the individual competitions.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

In his biographical novel, "Emile" (1762), Rousseau recommends many types of physical training. When he speaks of running, he also mentions the Olympic Games once :

A peine étaient-ils dans la lice, que tous les passants s'arrêtaient pour les voir : les acclamations, les cris, les battements de mains les animaient : je voyais quelquefois mon petit bonhomme tressaillir, se lever, s'écrier quand l'un était près d'atteindre ou de passer l'autre; c'étaient pour lui les Jeux Olympiques.

Johann Joachim Winckelmann

Winckelmann follows in the steps of Montfaucon 50 years previously.

In various letters he informs his friends of his plans. First of all, he was to travel to Greece in the company of Freiherr von Riedesel and the Marseille citizen Guys. Thereafter, however, he intended to make a special trip to Elis to start digging there. Winckelmann is not able to realise his plans either.. On a journey to Germany he is murdered in Trieste on 8th April 1768.

Richard Chandler

About the same time the Society of Dilettanti in London sends researchers to the Orient with the task of looking for antiquities there. The leader of the expedition is the theologian and archeologist, Richard Chandler (1738-1810). Revett, the architect, and Pars, the artist, accompany him. In 1764, they set out and visit Ionia, Attica, Argolis and Elis. They return in 1766. Chandler reports on the journey in two books "*Travels in Asia Minor, Oxford 1775*" and "*Travels in Greece, Oxford 1776*."

In August 1766, Chandler comes to Elis with his companions again and then wanders further in the direction of Olympia.

Early in the morning we crossed a shallow brook, and commenced our survey of the spot before us with a degree of expectation from which our disappointment on finding it almost naked received a considerable addition. The ruin, which we had seen in the evening, we found to be the walls of the cell of a very large temple, standing many feet high and well-built, the stones all injured, and manifesting the labour of persons, who have endeavoured by boring to get at the metal, with which they were cemented. From a massive capital remaining it was collected that the edifice had been of the Doric order. At a distance before it was a deep hollow, with stagnant water and brick-work, where, it is imagined, was the Stadium. Round about are scattered remnants of brick-buildings, and vestiges of stone-walls. The site is by the road-side, in a green valley, between two ranges of even summits pleasantly wooded. The mountain once called Cronium is on the north, and on the south the river Alpheus.

THE PHILANTHROPISTS

Friedrich Gabriel Resewitz

It is quite natural that the philanthropists, who borrowed those aspects of Greek gymnastics which seemed to be useful and necessary for their ideas on physical training, often studied the Olympic Games. There are, however, only a few noteworthy references thereto in their works. The earliest mention is made by a friend of Basedow, Friedrich Gabriel Resewitz, on page 222 of the second edition of his book "*The upbringing of the citizen*" which appeared in Copenhagen in 1776.

Christian Heinrich Wolke

The next to mention the, Olympic Games was Christian Heinrich Wolke (1741-1825). He speaks of "*sundry games, some similar to the Olympics*".

Johann Christoph Friedrich Guts Muths, Georg Ulrich Anton Vieth

Guts Muths (1759-1839) makes a very extensive study of Greek physical exercise in his "*Gymnastic for Youth*" and, in so doing, also of the Olympic Games. He gives a detailed description of the course of the festivities.

Guts Muths examines the "*Hindrances of objections which might be raised against gymnastics*," as, for example, the lack of training facilities, teachers, etc. He calls on the state princes to raise "*those holy exercises to the level of national festivals*" and then describes a similar festival to that given for the students of the Philanthropine by the Prince of Dessau.

Barsekow indicates that there exist two further descriptions of the festival in Wörlitz—the letter of a schoolboy to his mother and a report by Wolke. In neither description is there a comparison with the Olympic Games. One might suppose that the remark by Guts Muths—to see the Olympic Games brought to life—does not mean that the people of Wörlitz consciously tried to copy or arrange Olympic Games. Guts Muths merely uses "Olympic Games" as a comparison, as a support for his desire that similar national festivals be organised where physical training might be carried out. It is possible that Georg Ulrich Anton Vieth also sees a relationship between the Dessau Festival and the Olympic Games.

Moravian Brothers

After the description of the Wörlitz Festival, Diemsky writes: "*Not at all far from there in Niesky near Wörlitz where the Moravian Brothers had their school which had been founded by Bohemian emigrants, the students were invited in 1779 to participate in running and jumping competitions under the name "Olympic Games."*" Having received a request for sources the Zinzen-dorf Grammar School of the Moravian Brothers referred the researcher to the

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archives of the Brüder-Unität in Herrnhut/Oberlausitz.

Louis François Sébastien Fauvel, Foucherot

A few years after Chandler, two Frenchmen come to Olympia—the artist and archaeologist, Louis François Sébastien Fauvel ((1753-1838), and the architect and engineer Foucherot. On their journey through Greece which lasts from 1780 till 1782, they arrive in Olympia in December 1780. Seven years later, at the request of the French envoy in Constantinople, Fauvel travels through the Peloponnese and reaches Olympia in April 1787 for the second time. The travel reports which Fauvel wrote were not published ; only the manuscripts are to be found in the Paris National Library. One can draw valuable information about Fauvel's discovery in the work by Barbié du Bocage entitled "*Recueil de cartes géographiques, plans, vues et médailles de l'ancienne Grèce relatifs au voyage du jeune Anacharsis ; précédé d'une analyse critique des cartes*" in the "*Voyage du jeune Anacharsis en Grèce dans le milieu du quatrième siècle avant l'ère vulgaire*" by Abbot Jean Jacques Barthelemy and in F.H.L. Pouquevilles' description of his first journey to Olympia. Fauvel identified the ruins, which were being used again by the inhabitants as a quarry, undoubtedly as the temple of Zeus. While Chandler correctly locates the stadium to the east of the temple. Fauvel believes the hippodrome stadium' to be to the west of the temple of Zeus and Kronos Hill in the direction of the Kladeos.



¹ Essay on the origin of all sports.

² It is ancient Elis, site of the Olympic Games, where no end of monuments to the victorious—statues, bas-reliefs, inscriptions—were raised. The ground must be full of them, and what is remarkable is that I do not think anyone has yet searched in that area. It is however on *your* doorstep.

³ Scarcely were they lined up than all the passers-by stopped to watch them ; shouting and applause spurred them on ; sometimes I could see my little man jump up and shout when one was almost level with or even passing the other ; for him it was the Olympic Games.