

THE OLYMPIC GAMES AS AN INTEGRATING ELEMENT OF PANHELLENISM

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This is Olympic year. In the hot month of the hecatomb, the Greeks are under the joyful urge of a powerful wish, viz. Olympia. In the blue remoteness of the sky, beyond their plains and mountains, the sacred and fertile Olympian Valley is graven on their minds like an unreal mirage with an irresistible power of seduction. None of those who have already seen it can resist the compelling effect of its magic. Those who have not yet seen it guess it and dream under the spell of the passionate reports of those who have come back from there.

The roads leading to Olympia are made of glistening stones. Paths of illusion full of travellers on a festive, jubilant pilgrimage. Their brave bodies do not show the hardship of travelling days, nor does the overpowering summer heat wear them out. The Sanctuary is so greatly worshipped and the Competition so fascinating that fatigue fails to deplete their endless and ever-renewed energy.

The Alpheus Valley is quivering again, like four years ago. The quiet of its groves, hitherto the mere property and exclusive estate of bird-song, is resounding with the talk and voices of men who, in thousands, are converging upon the Holy Precinct, making up a colourful, bright flood.

Zeus, the father of gods and men... the master and king of Olympus... who holds lightning... the creator of the Universe... Let him be seated on his throne. His countenance is imposing and serene, kindly and fatherly. There, facing his statue, is the Greek of the 5th century B.C., lost in meditation, insistent in his pleading. Outside the temple, the sun is blinding and overwhelming. The figures that make up the Western Façade look as if they might, at any moment, break out from the static dynamism of their marble bodies. They contain the whole profound meaning of the Hellenic ideology. It is the struggle between good and evil, the beautiful and the misshapen, the just and the unjust, between what is Greek and what is barbarous. The men from Lapithae, with their serene and handsome faces, their strong and flawless bodies, radiate spiritual subtlety and noble ideas. They are the superior

beings in Creation, the direct bearers of the flame of the gods. At their sides, in bulky contrast, are the Centaurs. Their horrendous faces and their monstrous and misshapen bodies, their flabby and repulsive flesh embody brutality and sensuality. They incarnate wild untamed nature... But the visitor has come to worship Zeus and watch the group events which are organized for this purpose. From the slope of the Stadium, he watches the course of the events, absorbed and keen. Men with statuesque bodies compete with ardent nobility. The exhausting race, dangerous boxing, technical fighting, dreadful pancratium ! No other show can equal this. The public shout until they are hoarse, shouting victory to the lucky winner.

Night has spread its mantle over the valley. The water of the Alpheus river has turned silver. Some night cicadas are still engaged in their monotonous concert. In the hot summer night, the moon - an enormous star - lights everything with its transparent clarity. The sacrificial smoke rises to the sky, accompanying the hymns and songs of the grateful beneficiaries. May the Olympic winner be among his own people... His radiant face seems to have changed since the herald proclaimed him as the winner and engraved his name in the stone, thus launching him into the unfathomable space of future centuries. True, the training has been hard, the sacrifices bitter and difficult and, harder still, the final desperate struggle for triumph. But it has all been worth it. At the end and after so many penalties, he has seen his greatest wish come true,

i.e. the victory is his. And they have also handed him the precious reward : an OLIVE WREATH...

This is what Olympia stood for in the world of the ancient Greeks. The "religion of sports" took the direction and path of its noble ideology. With it and on it the Greeks based the subsequent chronological evolution of their most important national events. This is why the year 776 B.C. was not merely the beginning of the history of sports, but also the history of Europe. Pierre Louys says : "Whereas the Romans considered the foundation of Rome their first year, the Christians the birth of Christ, the Muslims the origin of Islam and the revolutionaries the proclamation of the Republic, the Greeks began to count from the day when the priests of Olympia engraved the name of Chorebos into the plate of glory. They no longer know in which year they conquered Troy, nor when they beat the Atridae, nor in what century Homer died, but they write Chorebus' victory with 192.27 metres on white marble and transmit the date to us.

The thing is that, to the Greeks, the Olympic Games were something so solemn that we have no equivalent to them today. The basic features of Lourdes and Mecca are religious pilgrimages. Mayreuth stands for music. Deauville for worldly sports. The Paris Exhibition is no more than an artistic attraction for foreigners. Olympia was all this and much more.

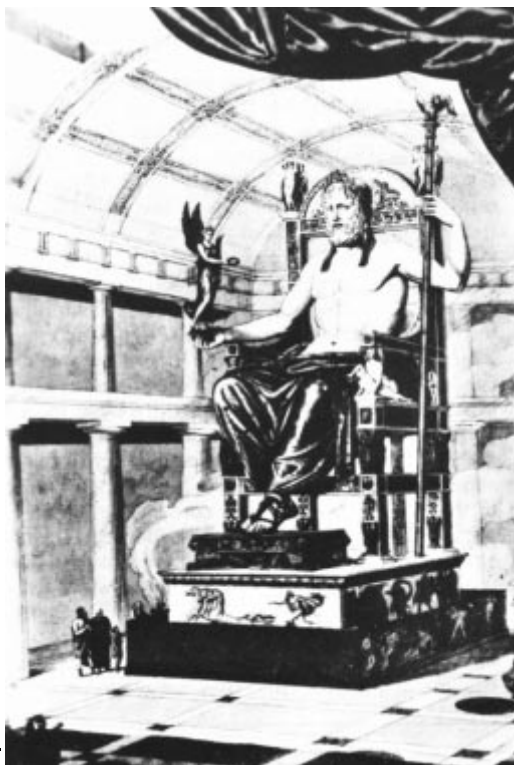
Indeed, in Olympia and in the course of its successive Games, a close feeling of oneness began to slowly grow among the Greeks who attended them. The aggressiveness based on mutual unfamiliarity and the traditional lack of understanding were slowly replaced by a mutual feeling of solidarity shared by all. In addition, the language, race, shared problems, a growing trust in

the value of their civilization are suitable paths leading to that end. But what would happen to these means without a force to summon individual protagonists to a voluntary national assembly where instinctive individual superiority could not help affecting national unity ?

Olympia was the meeting place of this assembly which was held every four years and to which all Greeks looked forward in joyful anticipation. Themistocles whom the spectators considered the saviour of the race and its culture at the time was applauded and celebrated in Olympia. Herodotus, the first to have told the historical events of his period in the Ionian language was also praised and extolled in Olympia. Olympia also booed Dionysios, the tyrant of Syracuse, when the rhapsodes tried to recite his poems. And he was booed because the whole audience knew about his intrigues with the Persians who were the "national" enemies of Greece at the time. Lastly, it was in Olympia that unification was mentioned for the first

Zeus, the father of gods and men... Lord and master of Olympus... Holder of lightning... Creator of the cosmos... Is sitting on his throne. His face is imposing and serene, kind and fatherly.

Reconstructed statue of the Olympian Zeus which, at the time, was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and which was the work of the Athenian sculptor Phidias.



The struggle between Lapithae and Centauros involves the plastic expression of the Hellenic ideology of the time. It is the struggle between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, justice and injustice, Greek and barbarian...



*Lapithae and Centauros
Western façade of the temple of
Zeus. Around 456 B.C.
Archaeological museum of
Olympia.*

time at the beginning of the 4th century B.C. Following a course initiated during previous games by other orators, the narrator Lysias expressed and gave shape to that feeling of "common opinion" which began to be felt several decades earlier. In his speech, he pleaded with the Greeks to be united and to fight tyrants. The much desired unity could not, however, be achieved yet. But time passed and the idea that had been launched gradually matured. Years later, a sage from Athens, Isocrates, turned to the head of a young and flourishing State which had only just been founded, i.e. Philip of Macedonia. His admonitions are almost identical to those made by Lysias many years earlier. He suggests that Philip should be the supreme leader of the destiny of Hellas and consolidate the much desired unification

of all peoples inhabiting it. Isocrates came from Athens, but he knew that his beloved city was not in a position to assume the difficult task of unification. This is why he bravely disregarded his great love for Athens and tried to persuade Philip of something which he considered far more than mere regional party spirit. At that moment, Isocrates went beyond being an Athenian and thinking as an Athenian. He became something more, namely a Greek.

The idea of unity therefore saw the light in Olympia. Philip devised a strategic plan which was to be implemented by his son and successor Alexander the Great.

C.D.