
Ancient Elis: The Cradle of the Olympic Games

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The games which were staged in Olympia in ancient times are known throughout the world. Very few people know though, that it was the city of Elis, situated about 60km to the north of the Sanctuary of Olympia, which was responsible for organizing and staging the ancient Olympic Games. Elis was the capital of the state of Eleia, in the northwest of the Peloponnese, when in the 11th century B.C., it was entrusted with the supervision of the Sanctuary in Olympia. It then decided to enhance the games which had been held there for many generations. This enhanced status was also linked to the new significance of the sports contests which were now open to all the citizens of Greek cities and not reserved only for aristocrats, as was the case in the past. For Mycenaean heroes, in older times, contests and excellence were limited to the attainment of victory and fame: “you must always excel and surpass all others,” was Peleus’ admonition to his son Achilles as the young hero was leaving for Troy (**Il. 6, 208**); victory was of course accompanied by magnificent material rewards. In post-Mycenaean times, on the contrary, the importance of the games was directly linked to their beneficial influence which athletic achievements could have on men and society as a whole.

The main representative of this new ideal is Hercules. His labours are something more than simple acts of bravery and excellence. They have a beneficial impact on men and the community, helping them move away from “bestiality” (**Isocr. Pan. 6,28**). Hercules, the best symbol of bravery, tenacity and endurance, killed wild animals and beast-like men and subjugated the frenzied, chaotic forces of nature to the will of the gods and the laws of society. After completing his labours intended to help men, Hercules was admitted to Olympus, in the palace of the gods, while Achilles, the great hero of the previous Mycenaean period, became king of the shadows in Hades.

This new perspective of the games, one of extraordinary historic significance, was adopted by Iphitos, king of Elis in the 8th century B.C. He introduced athletic contests in the stadium of Olympia, starting with foot races, in contrast to Mycenaean times where contests were mostly equestrian and therefore only open to aristocrats. It was then that the great panhellenic centres of Olympia, Delphi, etc. grew in importance; this was also the time - and certainly not by chance - that the city-state was established and citizens became aware of their role and responsibility concerning the fate and progress of their city. These new social changes are corroborated by the ancient testimony that the first Olympic victor in 776 B.C, the Elean Koroebos, was just a simple cook (**Athen. 1x 382b**). The Elean archons, complying with the Delphic oracle, ruled that the victory prize would no longer be

sheep or some other material reward, but the “Kotinos,” a plain wild olive wreath (**Strabo, 8, 3, 30**).

Pausanias’ (V4, 6ff) story about Iphitos, behind which there is some element of historic truth, is fully in line with this new athletic spirit: “At this time Greece was being ruined by civil war and plague; it was Iphitos who asked the god at Delphi for a cure for these troubles and they say that the Pythian priestess gave orders that Iphitos himself and the Eleans were to renew the Olympic Games.” This information is significant for a number of reasons. To begin with, the cure recommended by the Pythian priestess for the reconciliation of the Greeks and the eradication of the plague was simply that they should organize, or rather restore, the Olympic Games. This instruction is certainly the fruit of much wisdom and knowledge on the beneficial effects of sport competition and fair play for men. Just as important was Iphitos’ initiative to consult the Pythia as the representative of not just the Eleans, but of all Greeks, since the whole of Greece was affected by plague and internecine strife. Finally, the oracle that was given to Iphitos recognizes the panhellenic mission of Elis and the sanctuary of Olympia. Elis was called by the ancients, “Zeus’ neighbour;” they considered the sanctuary of Olympia, placed under its protection, the oldest religious centre, so respected that it was given the right to address all the problems which afflicted the whole of the Greek world. Ever since, the sanctuary of Olympia continued to cultivate and promote the spirit of athletics, for the benefit of all Greeks, until the end of the ancient world.

According to tradition, while restoring the games, Iphitos decided, together with the Spartan king and legislator, Lycurgus, to proclaim Eleia as the “sacred land of Zeus” and institute the truce, the holy truce. The first provision of the truce stipulated that any person crossing the borders of Eleia who refused to lay down his arms before entering the land, as he was supposed to do, and retrieve them as he left, would be treated as a felon. In accordance with the truce’s second provision, all hostilities or war between Greek cities should stop for the duration of the games at Olympia. These two provisions/agreements were respected for many centuries, even by the powerful city-states of every period. Strabo (**8, 3, 33**) writes that individuals, too, were treated as felons who did not offer all necessary help to Eleia if it were attacked: “all had agreed, under oath, that Eleia was the sacred land of Zeus and any person using weapons against or failing to defend would be treated as a felon.” This means that the agreement between Iphitos and Lycurgus was binding, not just for the parties to it, i.e. the Eleans and the Spartans, but for all Greeks. It is difficult to pinpoint with precision the exact date when the truce was instituted and the sacred character of Eleia proclaimed. However, the historic origins of this act are confirmed by Aristotle, who knew of the existence of the bronze disk of Iphitos on which the agreement between the two kings had been inscribed and which was kept in the temple in Olympia.’

The question that logically comes to mind, though, is why was Eleia afforded this favourable treatment, as it was far away from the big centres of Southwestern Greece, isolated on one side by the abrupt mountains of Arcadia and on the other by the often stormy Ionian Sea. More importantly, its role in the political and military life of Greece had been rather insignificant. So, what were the reasons that led to the establishment of the most ancient and venerated sanctuary of Greece in the region of Elis? Here are a few possible explanations.

The region of Elis was the birthplace of some of the most fundamental myths and one of the most widespread cults of the ancient Greek religion. First of all, there is a direct link between Elis and the gods of Olympus, Zeus in particular. According to a version of the legend, the Kouretes hid the newborn god in Olympia to protect him from his father, Cronos. So, Strabo was right when he called Elis and the whole of Eleia, “the neighbour of Zeus” (**68, 5, 6**). Again in Olympia, Zeus, who was now the sovereign of Olympia, defeated Cronos in a wrestling match, while Apollo beat Ares at boxing and outran Hermes in foot racing (**Paus. V7, 10**). And in Olympia, too, the Idaian Hercules invited his brothers, the Kourestes-Daktyloi to compete in a foot race and he crowned the winner for the first time with the “Kotinos”, the branch of wild olive, thus establishing athletic contests in the region (**Paus. V7, 6 and 8, 1**).

Equestrian events were also held in Elis, organized by Hercules from Thebes, the son of Amphitryon. The example set by the gods and Hercules was followed by the kings of the region. The first to introduce athletic contests in his kingdom, they say, was the founder of the Elean dynasty, Aethlios, son of Zeus and Protogeneia, daughter of Deucalion and grand-daughter of Prometheus and Pandora. His name itself implies the notion of athletic feats (**Aethlis - athlos athletics**) and fair play, an ideal that enthralled all Greeks since the dawn of history and would bring them together from the four comers of the Greek World. It is also worth noting that Aethlios’ ancestor, Prometheus, who offered men the most valuable of gifts, “the sacred fire”, was also the one who taught them gymnastics (**Philostr. 270, 18**). This is another link that connects the Elean dynasty to athletics.

The second king of Elis, Endymion, son of Aethlios, continued to celebrate the games which his father had established. In fact, when he wanted to appoint his successor to the throne, he staged a foot race between his three sons. The winner, Epeios, became king of the land. And, Tantalus’ son, Pelops, defeated Oinomaos, king of Pisa, in a chariot race and introduced equestrian events in Olympia. He left there to found the dynasty of the Pelopides which ruled over the rest of the Peloponnese. His descendants, who “were scattered from Elis all over the rest of the Peloponnese” (**Paus. V, 8, 2**), became the monarchs of the great kingdoms of the peninsula, with the centre of their dynasty in Mycenae.

But there were also other Elean heroes and kings who are considered to be the founders of the Olympic Games. Later royal dynasties and the leaders of the different tribes that finally composed the population of Eleia, vied for that honour. In addition to Aethlios and Endymion, Amythaon, Endymion's cousin, is also mentioned as the organizer of the games, as well as Pelias and Neleus, son of Tyro and Salmoneus: "They held the Olympic Games," Pausanias (5,8, 2f.) tells us. Oxylos was the last in the line of the mythical kings who celebrated games in Olympia. After his rule, it would appear that the games stopped for a rather long time.

The religious contribution of Eleia was just as important. Some of the more important worships were born here; first of all, the worship of Zeus, as an oracle god initially, and later as a patron of the games. The cult of another god, Hades, also had deep roots in Eleia. There were many sanctuaries, such as the ones in Pylos, Eleia and Triphylia, where this implacable god was worshipped with special and mystic ceremonies. The worship of Hades, as in the case of Dodonea in Epirus, was undoubtedly carried by the Eleans to Thesprotia, where they founded the renowned Nekyomanteion. In Eleusis too, the worship of Hades - Pluto and Persephone seems to be connected with another migration, of Pyliaans this time, from the house of Neleus, who moved to Attica. Among them was the grandson of Nestor, Melanthos, who introduced the worship of Hades - Pluto and Persephone in Eleusis.²

The limited space I have at my disposal does not allow me to describe this worship in detail, or that of other gods, like Demeter, Helios and Selene. However, I must say a few words about the worship of Dionysos which was practiced in Eleia since very ancient times. Pausanias (**VI, 26, 1**) informs us that: "the worship of Dionysos is one of the principal Elean cults." The Homeric hymn to Dionysos describes how his mother, Semele, gave birth to the god of wine and inspiration close to the Alpherios (**Hom. Hymn, Dion. 1,3 ff**) and it was there, on the banks of the river, close to Olympia, that the vine first grew, according to another legend (**Ath. I 61a**).

Athenaios' information that male beauty contests were organized in Elis is extremely interesting (**Athen. XIII 565ff-566**). The prize which the winner received was to carry the sacred objects of the goddess; the runners-up could drive the animals to sacrifice, while the third prize was to place the sacrificial animals on the pyre. At this contest, which was considered as very important, the winner was also given arms as a prize, which he then dedicated to the goddess Athena. Long before that, however, there were beauty contests among the women. Athenaios (**XIII 610a**) tells us that, according to information supplied by Theophrastos, in certain regions of Eleia there were contests where women were judged "on wisdom and economy . . . but also on beauty, which should also be honoured."

The Greek tribes which settled very early in the fertile land of Eleia and came from practically all parts of Greece - Thessaly, Epirus, Aetolia, Boeotia, Attica and from Crete and Asia Minor - brought with them memories from their former homeland, memories and ties which time, it seems, could not erase. Let me simply recall, indicatively, the names of rivers and mountains in Eleia of Thessalian origin: Peneios, Enipeus, Olympus, Ossa; and the names of Thessaly heroes: Hippodameia and Lapithas. Names of Attic origin included the Ionian Nymphs, daughters of Ion, who were worshipped in Ion's precinct in Triphylia and the hero Alesios. Finally, Pelops is of Asia Minor descent, and the Idaian Daktyloi of Cretan origin.

At the dawn of historic times, the land of Eleia was the melting pot where all these races intermingled and their traditions and religious cults blended. A melting pot which contained the seeds of a panhellenic conscience which these people of different origin carried.³ The conditions for shaping a common Greek conscience were therefore present. These conditions, under the guidance of the wise priests and seers of Eleia, made the Sanctuary of Olympia the foremost religious centre of the Greek world and Eleia, "the neighbour of Zeus", a sacred and impregnable region.

So these must have been the reasons, or some of them at least, which caused Olympia and Elis, in this remote part of the Greek peninsula, to become the most important and most ancient cultural and athletic centre of Greece. Historical and cultural factors prevailed over geographic considerations.

But let us return to the Sanctuary of Olympia and the Olympic Games. For as long as the games had only one event during the early Olympiads, they lasted just one day. As events were added with time, however, the number of days increased accordingly, until the festival lasted five to six days. At least ten months before each Olympiad, the state of Elis sent its official heralds, the spondophoroi, to all the city-states of continental Greece, the island and colonies to the East and to the West, to announce the exact date of the opening of the Games. This also marked the beginning of the truce which lasted for about three months. During that period, all hostilities had to stop between Greek cities to allow people who attended the games as competitors or spectators to travel from their homeland to Olympia and back, even through enemy territory, without any risk.

Athletes who wished to take part in the games at Olympia had to stay in Elis for at least one month to go through the necessary testing procedure. First of all, to qualify for the games they had to be Greek citizens and never have been sentenced for murder, sacrilege, atheism, or for violating the truce. They also had to prove that they had trained for ten months prior to the games. Finally, during their stay in Elis they had to train in the city's spacious gymnasia and palaestra

and be briefed on the rules which governed the games. They were then divided into groups and categories depending on their age (boys, or adults) and the event in which they would be competing. It is worth noting that from the moment an athlete was admitted to the games and entered in a specific age group for an event, it was strictly forbidden for him to withdraw; any transgressors would be severely punished.

The hellanodikai were responsible for ensuring respect of the rules and the staging of the whole programme. They were assisted in their duties by other officials chosen from among Eleans with the highest moral standards and wisdom. Their headquarters was at the Hellanodikeion, a building in the agora of Elis. The hellanodikai appointed for each Olympiad would learn the details of their duties (**Paus. VI 24, 1-3**) at an early stage. The impartiality and integrity shown by the hellanodikai in the exercise of their duties had always been praised by all throughout antiquity. The Eleans' sensitivity about the work of the hellanodikai is confirmed by the fact that when the Elean Troilos was the winner of the two horse chariot race (pairs of foals) during the 112th Olympiad (332 B.C.), while being also an arbiter, the Elean officials, simply for reasons of susceptibility, passed a law that forbid Eleans to compete in the games if they had been appointed as hellanodikai (**Paus. VI 1, 4**). Moreover, if a competitor felt that he had wrongly not been declared the winner by the hellanodikai and appealed to the supreme court of the "mastroi,"⁴ even if he was vindicated - in which case the court would punish the hellanodikai - the decision of the hellanodikai remained irrevocable. In addition to the hellanodikai, the law guardians (**Paus. VI 24, 3**), "nomophylakes," the "mastroi", the seers, and many other officials were involved in the organization of the games. Their offices, strictly connected with the games, were among the most important and most ancient in the city. There were of course other public officials such as the "boularchos" and "boulographo"- the head of the Boule and secretary, respectively - as well as the generals, Polemarchos and Hipparchos, who led the Elean army. But these secular functions, at least until the 5th century B.C., were of secondary importance compared to the task of celebrating the Olympic games, especially since the people lived in total peace in their "sacred and impregnable" land (**Polybios, IV 23, 10**). I believe that all I have told you, clearly shows that the civic government in Elis was at the service of these panhellenic games at all times. The other political, administrative, judicial, and social activities had been delegated to the demes and communities of the Elean state, which enjoyed considerable autonomy⁵.

Among the many important characteristics of this decentralisation, I mention to you only one, the operation of the law courts of Eleia. Unlike the situation in the other city-states of Greece, law courts were not based permanently in the capital, but were itinerant. They toured the whole state, judging disputes between citizens on the spot, in every deme and community. This institution, which meant that litigants did not have to leave their farms and other activities to waste time in the capital probably dated back to the 6th century B.C., if not earlier, and did not change until late antiquity. It continued to operate at least in Late Hellenistic times; the relevant testimony is of Polybius, who records that

"Elis is much more thickly inhabited and more full of slaves and farm stock than any other part of the Peloponnese. Some of the Eleans in fact are so fond of country life, that though men of substance, they have not for two or three generations shown their faces in the law-courts, and this because those who occupy themselves with politics show the greatest concern for their fellow-citizens in the country and see that justice is done to them on the spot, and that they are plentifully furnished with all the necessities of life."

This method of administering justice was also adopted by Peisistratus in Athens, but more to keep the citizens in their fields, far from the city, and so to preempt any attempt to overthrow his tyranny.

The state's major concern was the impeccable organization of the games in the Sanctuary of Olympia. Elis was also the first "Olympic Village" to use this term from modern Olympic times. Every four years and for a number of months, Elis became the primary athletic center of the Greek world. Once all procedures had been completed during the monthly stay in Elis, a delegation left in a procession for Olympia - competitors and officials - for the competitions in the stadium and the hippodrome.

It is also interesting to note that there were many public buildings in Elis directly associated with the games: two Gymnasia complexes, a Palestra, the Hellanodikaion (the Court of the Arbiters) and the Portico of the Hellanodikai. There were also numerous temples, altars and statues of gods and heroes. There was, however, not one building available for public and political functions. This is why the peoples' representatives met in one of the Gymnasia, the Lalichmion. Even the Elean market-place was called Hippodromos (the Horse-track), as Pausanias tells us (**VI, 24, 2**), adding that: "the local people do in fact school their horses there." According to Pausanias again (**VI, 24, 10**) the "sixteen Elean women as they call them also had a building in the market-place where they weave the robe offered to the goddess Hera

during the festival in honour of the goddess, the Heraia, when girls' contests were held in Olympia, the famous Hera's games."

The celebration of panhellenic sports contests in Olympia and the spirit of peaceful coexercise and emulation which dominated during every athletic and cultural activity, helped the Greek world to become fully aware of its common identity and conscience which did not result simply from a common origin and language but also from shared ideological objectives and a uniform perception of divinity, a divinity that awakens man's inexhaustible potential, bringing him closer to god. Is it not the direction indicated by Hercules through his labours? If Delphi was the navel of the earth as the Greeks declared, Olympia and Elis were the navel of Hellenism. The Greeks, however, never kept their outstanding achievements to themselves, nor did they ever allow themselves to conceitedly believe that they were "the chosen people." On the contrary, they disseminated their cultural and intellectual achievements to the East and West, wherever they settled. The Athenian orator and teacher, Isocrates (436-338 B.C.) who, like many others, had urged the Greeks gathered in Olympia to remain united and work closely together, was the first to expand the concept of "Hellenism". He was the first to proclaim that Greeks were not only those who were "born" Greeks, but also those who "shared Greek education", thus making the ideal of Greek education an ideal of an all-human education based on the cultivation of the spirit of contest. Another man who shared these convictions was the Elean philosopher Hippias (late 5th century B.C.). His philosophy is basically characterized by cosmopolitanism.

When Greece became part of the Roman empire, Roman officials and even emperors would take part in the games at Olympia, competing against one another for their knowledge of the Greek language and culture. When Caracalla, in 212 A.D., extended Roman citizenship to all the subjects of the Roman empire, they also were able to compete in the Olympic games. Now, in addition to the Greeks, Italians, as well as Egyptians, Syrians, Armenians, Spaniards and others, provided they were citizens of Rome and had received a Greek education, could become Olympic victors. The Olympiads had become the property of the whole world. The Olympic Games were now universal. As a result, the Games lost their strictly Greek character and developed into a world festival. Competitors, however, still had to remain in Elis for one month prior to the games, for the preliminary formalities. In Pausanias' times (2nd half of the 2nd century A.D.), apart from the traditional training of athletes and distribution into age groups and events, they also "held performances of impromptu speech and literature of every kind" (**Paus. VI, 23, 7**).

There is no doubt that the original character of the games had changed; professionalism which made its appearance at the end of the 5th century B.C., was severely criticized and censured by many philosophers of that period. However, the ideal of balanced training, the symmetrical cultivation of the body, mind and soul, was still praised by Plato and Aristotle. For most athletes, the games remained a means to educate their soul, not an end in itself. This is why many Greeks who had been proclaimed winners at Olympia in their youth, distinguished themselves in politics, military life, the letters, sciences and arts as mature men. Plato himself had competed as a young man in Nemea in the event of wrestling, and was proclaimed as winner.

The spirit of fair play and the glory of athletic achievement and victory remained alive until the late Roman period. This is confirmed by a funerary stele of the 3rd century A.D. that was excavated in the vicinity of Olympia. It was dedicated to an athlete called Kamelos from Alexandria and the inscription reads: "Kamelos from Alexandria, a boxer and victor at the Nemean games died here in the stadium, while he was boxing, after he prayed to Zeus, to give him either the crown or death. He was 35 years old. Farewell."

Endnotes

1. Nicholas Yalouris, *Ancient Elis: The Cradle of the Olympic Games* (Athens, 1996), p. 25f.
2. N. Yalouris, a.o. 74ff. See also N. Yalouris, LIMC IV 1,388 s.v. Hades. See also R. Boehme, *Der Lycomide* 1991, 36ff. Usff. 53.
3. N. Yalomis, a.o. 76ff.
4. *Suppl. Epigraphicum graecum* (Se6) 31, 358.
5. N. Yalouris, a.o. 29f.

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Il. = *Iliad* by Homer, cited by Book and line number.

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