

ANCIENT OLYMPIC APOCRYPHA

BY DON SAYENGA

The “First” Olympic Games were not celebrated in 776 BC!

Possibly the most common historical error made by writers describing the Modern Olympic Games, is to include some kind of a sentence alluding to the “first” of the Ancient Olympic Games as having been celebrated in 776BC. For example, the Curator of the new Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Ms. Doris Vanhove, begins with the second paragraph of a magazine cover-story treatise “Olympics In Antiquity” with these words:

“Sports was born in Greece, at Olympia, where tradition holds that the first Olympic Games took place in 776 BC”.
Olympic Magazine Nr. 1 Feb. 1994 Page 18.

Contrary to this statement, there is universal agreement among all the noted ancient authorities that the first Games at Olympia did not begin in 776 BC. Why then are so many people still making this mistake again and again?

Confused by the term “First Olympiad”?

Modern writers are misled by obtuse chronological nomenclature. Their confusion arises from the phrase “Games Of The First Olympiad”. This was a reference title that was assigned by ancient historians and chronologers to the sports festival held at Olympia in 776 BC. The term “First Olympiad”, however isn’t a sports term (i.e. it is not the initial designation of a sequential sporting event such as the “1995 Australian Open” or “Super Bowl XXV”?). It is merely a calendar reference term like “Twentieth Century”, applied to the four year time period that began with the Games at Olympia in the summer of 776 BC. The “Second Olympiad” began with the Games in the summer of 772 BC, the “Third Olympiad” in 768 BC, and so on. The actual sporting competition itself always should be called

“Games of the Third Olympiad”, etc., for clarity.

Numerous surviving works by ancient authors, from the famous Greek poet Pindar to the noted geographer Strabo, describe Olympic Games which were being conducted prior to 776 BC. There is considerable variety in these stories and legends of the early Games. For example, Pindar implied that the original time interval was five years, not four years. The only commonly agreed date in all the stories about the early Games which can be cross-referenced against other calendars (e.g. The Year Of Rome) by all ancient authors is the year 776 BC. After this date a reasonably accurate series of matching dates is available. This is why the Greek historians proposed at a later time to name this the “first” of the reliable “olympiad” periods.

OK! But, if so, when DID the “First” Olympics take place?

No one knows. The poet Pindar, who actually delivered an ode on that specific subject during the Games at Olympia, believed that it was as early as 1200 BC. Furthermore, since his Tenth Olympic Ode was presented in person, before the most critical sort of an audience, right there at Olympia itself, most of his ancient audience must have agreed with his dating or else this particular item of his poetry possibly might not have survived. Pindar even gives the names and home cities of the winners in the Dash, Wrestling, Boxing, Javelin, Stone Throwing, and Chariot Racing in the 1200 BC Games. In his ode, Pindar credited a man named Herakles as the originator of athletic games at Olympia. There are several individuals named Herakles in Greek history and myth, who are often confused with each other.

Much later, several Roman historical commentators meticulously researched the subject, comparing all of the existing records. Their conclusion was that the Games began to scheduled on the 4th-year Olympiad sequence

starting in mid-800's BC. Definite evidence of Games on a regular basis after the year 832 BC was accepted by every authority without a quibble. One of the most meticulous of the Christian historians, Sextus Julius Africanus of Libya, summarized his own conclusions (c.225 AD) with the following very concise statement in his Third Book Of Chronology:

“Now the first Olympiad recorded, which, however, really was the fourteenth, was the period when Koroebus was victor; at that time Ahaz was in the first year of his reign in Jerusalem.”

Another Christian historian, Eusebius Pamphili of Caesarea, expanded the subject with a much broader commentary in his reference book known as The Chronicon (c. 335 AD) written at a time when the Games were still being celebrated at Olympia. Eusebius stated that a man named Iphitos of the city of Elis, who was hoping to end a period of local feuding, re-established an older, original festival which had been abandoned at Olympia. In Eusebius' account, Iphitos announced a 4-year Olympiad cycle in response to a mystical directive from the oracle at Delphi. Eusebius concluded very emphatically that Olympic victors at first were not identified by name or in any special listing:

“...Because of this Iphitos announced the truce...Aristodemus of Elis and his school claim that it was after the 27th Olympiad...athletes began to be listed, those who were the victors that is. Before that no one was listed, no attention being paid to those who were the victors in earlier times. In the 28th Olympiad, Koroebos of Elis won the stadium dash and became the first victor to be listed. From this event the Greeks date their calendars. And Polybius has recorded the same report as Aristodemus. Calimachus, however, states that 13 Olympiads elapsed after those Games arranged by Iphitos, without any of the victors being listed until the 14th Olympiad when Koroebos won. Many other writers assert that from the founding of the Olympic Games by Herakles son of Alkmena down to the First Olympiad of the record-keeping was a period of 419 years.”

The best modern treatise on the subject available to American authors is Sources For The History Of Greek Athletics In English Translation by Rachel S. Robinson (Cincinnati 1955). Her conclusion is expressed on Page 33:

“Ancient opinion leans heavily to the view that the Reorganization (or Revival) of the Olympic festival took place about 884 BC.”
