

THE USE OF OIL IN THE GREEK OLYMPICS

By Frank Cosentino

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I don't know if anyone else has ever found it odd that the ancient Greeks oiled their bodies prior to their sporting activities, both in and out of the Olympic Games, but I have.

After all, anyone who has ever been to Greece, has experienced the hot, burning sun; it is both constant and relentless. Today, people seldom venture outdoors without their sunscreen and its high PABA number filtering out the hurtful ultra-violet rays. So how does one explain the Greek phenomenon?

Gardiner (*Athletics in the Ancient World*) tells us that oil was given as prizes in competitions along with tripods or other objects of value, cloaks, shields, all or part of the sacrifice to the gods. He reinforces the expense and the scarcity of oil and yet informs us, as do other writers, that the athletes rubbed themselves liberally with it prior to exercise.

Harris (*Greek Athletes and Athletics*), another noted classicist who investigated Greek sport, informs us that the matter was a practice of hygiene; to keep sand and dirt out of the skin's pores. He rejects the "greased pig" suggestion of some that the use of oil was to render the body slippery, allowing for ease of escape as well as strengthening of the arms, hands and fingers of the holder. Harris' assertion is that a dusting of fine powder spread over the oil by the competitors counteracted that possibility. Other writers deal with Greek sport but these two probably summarize the most common and prevalent thinking on the subject.

But is there a deeper meaning? Is the use of oil yet another example of "what is known to everyone is seldom described"? (Harris, p. 25)

Perhaps the answer is found in another characteristic of the Games. First and foremost, they were religious in nature, albeit more so in the accepted beginning (776BC) and less so as Greek society became more secular. The Greek pantheon of gods residing on Mount Olympus played a dominant role in every facet of early Greek life, less so as the future unfolded into an era of new conquerors and new influences.

Is the answer for the liberal use of oil to be found in the characteristics of the early games? They were, first and foremost, religious and spiritual exercises. It's not necessary to go into details for members of the International Society of Olympic Historians - only to summarize. The supreme god being honoured by the Games was Zeus. The climax of the early festival was the offering made to him. The "sacred" olive tree was said to be that of the chief Olympic deity. The crown of olives, prize for the victor, was a symbol of Zeus' favour. The Olive tree was the most powerful sign of the god's gift to the Greeks. More than the food it provided, it was the source of magical oil guaranteeing the sacred fire which brought light and initiated heat and nourishment. This sacred character of olive oil, not only in Greece, but throughout the Mediterranean world, offers a more compelling clue to the original reason for the use of oil among Olympic athletes.

Anointing by oil has long been a part of Mediterranean culture. The Christian descriptor of the Jewish Jesus is "the Christ": the anointed one. In her book *Much Depends on Dinner* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986) York University Professor Margaret Visser includes a chapter on Olive Oil: *A Tree and Its Fruits* (p224+). In it she writes: "Anointing was a sign of respect in the ancient world." Oil was poured over the head of an honoured guest; the dead were anointed, it revitalized the feet of the tired traveler. Even stones were anointed: the Omphalos stone at Delphi, the navel of the earth, the Ka'bah at Mecca, the sacred black rock at Mecca; the Ark of the Covenant. Moses had been instructed by God to anoint all altars, vessels and candlesticks in the temple: "You shall consecrate them that they may be most holy; whatever touches them will become holy. And you shall anoint Aaron and his sons that they may serve as priests" Visser continues: "whatever is anointed is set apart; anointing initiates it into a new and singular state."

It is a key point. When Nicholas Yalouris describes the athlete on a vase as Hegesias "pouring oil from an

aryballos into his hand in preparation for anointing his body" (*The Olympic Games in Ancient Greece*, Ekdotike Athenon SA, 1982, p 119) and when Paidotribes are described as "aleiptes" or anointers (H .A. Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics*, London: Hutchinson, 1964, p 171) a deeper meaning than a therapeutic massage is conveyed. It recalls a time when the athlete was set apart, was seen to be the favoured of the gods, sought to invite the god to dwell within him, to infuse him with his spirit and in so doing visit with his people once again. Surely the crown of victory, the idealized statues erected of the winners, the treatment of cheaters, akin to sacrilege the parades and breaching of the city state walls were all a reminder of the original sacred character of the Games. The meaning of the use of olive oil has been similarly lost as society moved farther away, for better and for worse, from those prayerful beginnings and closer to our secular world.

Apology

"The ideals of Olympism"

In the last issue of the Journal of Olympic History, Janet Cahill's abstract "The ideals of Olympism" was incorrectly credited to Vitaliy Smirnov, Russian Olympic Committee President.

The editorial team expresses its great regret for this oversight and apologises to both Ms Cahill and Mr Smirnov.

The editorial team

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