

SINN, ULRICH. *Olympia: Cult, Sport and Ancient Festival*. Translation by Thomas Thornton. Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000. Pp.viii + 149. Illustrations (24 b&w, 1 map), bibliography, index. \$34.95 cb., \$16.95 pb.

In 1966 Sinn, director of the German excavations at Olympia since 1985, published *Olympia: Kult, Sport und Fest in der Antike* (Munich: Beck), a slim, unpretentious work which summarized recent discoveries and gave a revised history of Olympia as a site, sanctuary, and sports complex. Written in the style of a European handbook for visitors to the site, this valuable overview is now available in English in an economical format. Most of the text is unchanged and reliably translated. Unfortunately, the one new chapter added to the English version, chapter 6, "The Olympic Competition," is the longest (nineteen pages) but weakest of the eighteen chapters—a derivative survey of the contests with some curious notions (e.g., multiple standing jumps in the broad jump). The black and white illustrations, expanded from ten to twenty-four, are useful but some are regrettably fuzzy. There are only a few notes and citations of ancient sources, but helpful appendices include a Historical Overview, Personalities from Greek and Roman History, Names in Greek Myths and Legends, and an Index of Subjects and Places. The Selected Annotated Bibliography reflects the consensus that the Germans best know the physical evidence for Olympia, but it also recommends some works in English.

The key to unlocking Olympia's history is to use meticulous archaeological research to counter the vexing problems of ancient literary sources. Sinn, therefore, prefers to use ancient artifactual and epigraphic evidence ("authentic documents") to correct retrospective mythologizing and literary speculation. As he states, because of modern archaeology, "today we are better equipped to comprehend the cult's beginnings than were the ancient historians" (p. 8). Sinn does early Olympic history properly—forwards with archaeology not backwards with hindsight. He reconstructs what early Olympia was—not leaping ahead to what it became centuries later. Yes, Olympia became most famous as a site of games, but we must "let go of the assumption that Olympia was a stage for athletic competitions from the very start" (p. vii).

Not especially grand, athletic or unique, early Olympia (11th -8th century B.C.) was but one of several sanctuaries "of strictly local significance" (p. 11) in the Apeus Valley; it housed an oracle and various cults associated with fertility and agriculture. Early festivals may have included competitions (e.g., in dance, music, running) typical of convivial Greek festivals "in a social setting," but these were not "specifically Olympian events" (p. 13). Finds of arms and armor are explained as votives related to military consultations with Olympian oracular seers. Victory monuments and large tripod kettles—rejected as prizes—represent thank offerings for advice and success in war. In sum, agricultural cults and oracular advice—not Olympian athletics—dominated early Olympia.

Sinn distrusts 776 and places Olympia's "major caesura" around 700 B.C. Legends about 776 and earlier games reflect regional struggles to control Olympia, and Hippias invented the supposed truce of Iphitos to bolster Elis' claim to supervise the sanctuary and

games. The crucial stage came with colonization when Olympia emerged as a regular meeting place for Greeks from Italy and Sicily. With increasing numbers of visitors, Elis expanded the sacred area (controlling the Cladeus with a wall), leveled the area southeast of the Hill of Cronos, increased the digging of wells, and built the first stadium. Chariot races soon followed, and the chances of winning widespread fame at Olympia grew for athletes, artists, and writers. By the seventh century athletes "constituted a clearly defined group of specialists" (p. 29), but they were limited primarily to aristocrats until the fourth century.

Emphasizing that Olympia was a sanctuary, that it "was not constructed as a site for athletic competitions" (p. 71), Sinn clearly and concisely surveys the religious and, in time, the athletic facilities at Olympia: the Altar of Zeus as the sacral center and the site of the oracle, the stages of the Stadium, the revised shape and location of the Hippodrome (mistakenly labeled as an aqueduct in fig. 2 on p. 11), the development of the Theater area and a place for athletes' final preparations (behind the Echo Hall), and much more. With an important clarification of the social use of the Festival Meadow south of the Atlis, Sinn shows how Olympia dealt with problems of water supply, sewage, and the feeding and housing of spectators, delegations, tourists, and pilgrims both during and between festivals.

Sinn is frank about the political manipulation of the sanctuary: Elis constructed the great Temple of Zeus, which was not essential to the cult, "in an act of proud self-representation" (p. 62). The great statue of Zeus inside was not a cult statue but a glittering thank offering. Even Sinn, however, cannot resist some idealistic flourishes, notably his praise of the glorious Olympics of 476: "For a brief period of time its incomparable reputation made Olympia even the capital of an almost united Greece" (p. 53). The Greeks established a "neutral arbitrations court" at Olympia to settle disputes; and, although the arbitration court functioned only from the 470s to the 450s, Olympia became "the symbol of harmony among all Greek states" and the term "divine peace" (*ekecheiria*) became associated with the contests (pp. 55-56). Sinn also applauds the cultural and intellectual dimensions (e.g., exhibitions of art and oratory) of the Olympic festival and facilities: "To a large extent the Olympic festival owed its excellent reputation to the cultural part of its program" (p. 102). Noting that the athletes actually trained at Elis before the festival, Sinn feels the Gymnasium was designed for intellectual and educational as well as sporting activities: "The building's primary function was outside the field of athletics" (p. 95).

Reflecting the focus of recent excavation of the Roman and Byzantine eras, Sinn also revises and extends the later history of Olympia. Rejecting the idea of decline associated with athletic professionalism and Roman imperial control, he feels that Romans—even Mummies and Sulla—respected and supported Olympia and that guilds of professional athletes with strict ethical statutes had a positive effect, enforcing rules and drastically reducing earlier corruption (p. 48). Interestingly, Nero is not presented as a prize-grasping "maniac" who stole victories and statues and built himself a place (formerly misidentified as the "House of Nero") at Olympia. Instead, Sinn's Nero is a sincerely philhellenic patron who began the construction of the clubhouse of the athletes' guild at Olympia. With benefactors (e.g., Herodes Atticus and his wife Regilla), respect for old Olympic traditions, and upholding of rules, Olympia remained popular and vital for centuries. Excava-

tion of the clubhouse produced the inscribed plaque that extended names of known Olympic victors from A.D. 277 to 385. It was probably the ban of Theodosius II in the early fifth century (not Theodosius I in the 390s) that ended the Olympic festival. Even after that Olympia had a second life as a Christian settlement and business center until the early seventh century.

Now made clearer by Sinn's efforts and expertise, Olympia's history was indeed long and eventful. I sincerely encourage sport historians and sportscasters and modern Greeks as well, to read Sinn's insightful work—preferably before the Athens Olympics of 2004.

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