

The Great Games and the Greeks

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The first evidence of physical culture of the ancient times can be traced to Africa and Asia.

In the Old Testament mention has been made about the physical culture of the Jews, and according to other sources, our knowledge of the physical culture of Persia, India and China is also very broad.

Races in Ancient Greece

To honor Zeus and the other Gods not only altars have been erected, but also Games and Competitions were held. In this manner the Gods and the Games came in touch with each other and the festivities were started. With the growth of the Greek States, the improvement of men's physical and mental capacity was considered strongly. This way, the Greek educational system was set up and in it the coexistence of physical and mental perfection, the kalokagathi rules. To achieve this coexistence, the training of the body have been linked to philosophy, literature, music and art.

The Greek physical culture developed first of all in Sparta and Athens. "To obey and to win" was the fundamental educational theory in Sparta. In Athens, the children from age seven to fifteen were raised in the palaestra, from fifteen to eighteen in the gymnasia (which were the school of physical education) and then for two years were educated in the army.

The body movements of the Greeks have been many sided as it was shown in the popular pentathlon (running, broad jumping, discus throwing, javelin throwing and wrestling). One of the favorite exercise was swimming.

Next to gymnastica, agonistica (competition) became more and more important and it was valued for teaching me youth endurance. Its training was very advanced.

In the palaestras and gymnasia the students were under the watchful eyes of a physician. They knew exactly what shape of body was needed for each sport.

It was the coaches duty to know everything about their charges and to know the science of medicine involved.

The Games

Very little authentic data is available from the beginning of the Ancient Games, but the Legends are many. The most well known is that of Hercules, the symbol of youth and strength. The son of Zeus, he is said to be the one responsible for the start of the Games.

Because the beginning of the Games is so confused and foggy, it is advisable that the date 776 B.C. is taken as the start of the Ancient Games, and everything before that should be regarded as the forerunner or prehistory which precipitated the start of the Ancient Games.

The participation in the Games was limited to free citizens. Slaves, women and barbarians were excluded, since their presence would have dirtied the sacred place.

The Games became so important, that even time was determined after them. From approx. 776 B.C. the four year period between the Games was named after the winner and during the first year of the next period the new Game was held.

Site of the Games

Olympia can be restored and reconstructed from the works of Pausanias about ancient Greece and from modern day excavations.

Elis lies 15 kilometers from the Ion sea, 275 kilometers from Athens. From Elis a 55 kilometer long Holy road leads to Olympia, more accurately to Altis, the grove of Zeus, which was covered with oak and olive trees, and here the Games were held.

From Altis a 32 kilometer long tunnel lead to the stadium where the races were held, with the exception of the horse and chariot races. The stadium was 214 x 32 meters and the trainers and judges had their separate sections. There was no entrance fee. The seats for the spectators were built into the side of Kronos mountain, total capacity between 40-50,000.

Southeast from the stadium stood the 770 x 200 meter Hyppodromos, where the horse and chariot races were held.

Program of the Games

In 776 B.C. the Game consisted of only one race, the stadium running, and lasted only for a day. With the broadening of popularity more races were initiated and the Games became longer. From the 33rd Olympiad (648 B.C.) the Games took five days.

On the first day of the Games the representatives of all the Greek States marched to the alter of Zeus, offered him a sacrifice and took the Olympic oath.

The winners only prize was the wreath of olive branch. According to the Greeks the olive tree is the symbol of the new and of the beginning and will protect in trouble. The ceremony was held on the last day in the temple of Zeus.

Fine arts

It is important to remember the fine arts competitions, which were not organized, but still were large.

Scholars, writers and artists took part and within these intellectual games oratory and singing competitions were held, historical, philosophical and literary works have been read as well as paintings and sculptures were exhibited.

Downfall of the Games

After the age of the flourishing Greek civilization came a general decline, which included the physical culture too. The Games degenerated into amusement and the theory of kalokagathi disintegrated.

Of course for a long time to come the Games were still held every four years in Olympia, only the tradition suffered. All the rituals remained the same, but less and less respect was given to the gods.

A new god was created, the athlete, who competed for a price — something which could be compared to today's professionals.

Loose life style and materialism dominated the athletes.

For awhile a second bloom of Greek physical culture occurred, but lasted only a short time and the downfall of Olympia was rapid until it finally came to a point of total disintegration.