

Some Commonalities of Two Ancient Fairs: Aenoch Tailteann and the Olympic Games

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Fairs and festivals have played a prominent role in the study of almost any nation. From the social point of view, the fair has become a traditional time when people gather for a singleness of purpose and in an atmosphere of universal camaraderie.

A predisposed interest in the study of athletic contests causes sport historians seldom to refer to the Olympic Games in their entirety as a fair. Yet, the gathering of Greeks every four years at a site near Elis reflected cross-cultural interests of the people, for there were, in addition to athletic contests, other elements. There were ventures in crafts, arts, entertainment and commercial enterprise. The athletic performances may have eventually overshadowed these other elements (particularly in the eyes of the sport historian). Nonetheless, the staging of the ancient Olympic Games was the occasion for displaying other features of the Greek people.

The Tailteann Games of ancient Ireland were first celebrated as funeral games, but soon developed into an annual fair that became the most famous of all Irish assemblies. Throughout the ancient manuscripts, the games are referred to as Aenoch Tailteann — the Tailteann Fair — an important yearly gathering of Irish people. The Ard Righ (High King) used the gathering as an occasion to hand out new laws; parents used it as an occasion to marry off eligible sons and daughters; craftsmen used it to display their talents; and warriors and athletes used it to display their physical skills.

This paper dwells on some underlying similarities other than the athletic contests of Aenoch Tailteann and the ancient Olympics without attempting to make judgments of the superiority or inferiority of one gathering over the other. This study of ancient sport gatherings revealed some rather persistent similarities. The gathering were religious in nature, there was a designated area for the festival, there was a presiding figure or body for the affair, the festivals were well-attended by the populace, there was an expected code of behavior for all, and there were auxiliary activities occurring at the gathering.

The twentieth century skeptic may not understand why and how the ancients held athletic fairs in such veneration. Yet there are some observable commonalities more deeply embedded in human emotions, not those found in history facts. Man seems to have a universal love for a contest. There seems to be a desire on the part of all people to experience tinsel, gaudiness and fantasy of a fair. There is a need for camaraderie and a need to share momentary joys of simple peace and honesty. What better place to find these than in the fair!