

# The Role of Theodosius The Great and Theodosius II in the Closure of The Ancient Games: Fact and Fiction

MAXWELL L. HOWELL

REET HOWELL

School of Human Kinetics

University of Ottawa

Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5

The ancient Olympic Games were held on the sacred site of Olympia every four years from 776 B.C. to 393 A.D. or 394 A.D. In the literature the end of this magnificent quadrennial festival is generally credited to an edict of Emperor Theodosius the Great. On the other hand, some scholars have maintained the posture that the Games ended during the reign of the younger Theodosius, possibly as late as 408 A.D., following an edict of his. Further, we do know, for example, that games were held in Antioch up to the sixth century, and that the revised code of Justinian in 528 still maintained a section on athletes and on conditions under which they were excused from civil obligations.

The purpose of this historical study is to present the fact and fiction about the closure of the Games. The lives of Theodosius the Great and Theodosius II are delineated. Also researched are their convictions and edicts against paganism which, combined with other factors, helped to weaken and destroy the ancient Games. Indeed, factors such as natural disasters, barbarian invasions, and economic decline figured significantly in the gradual demise of the ancient games just as they did in the demise of the Roman Empire. It is by no means clear that the Olympic Games ceased in 393 A.D or in 394 A.D. Moreover, it is certainly not the case that athletics and athletic festivals were abolished by edicts during the reigns of Theodosius I and Theodosius II.