
Book Reviews

Ancient Elis: Cradle of the Olympic Games by Nicholas F. Yalouris (Athens: Adam Editions, 1996--English translation by Alexandra Doumas). Reviewed by Donald G. Kyle, University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, Texas, U.S.A.

Every year endless busloads of tourists stop at the sanctuary and museum at Olympia, take a guided tour, and purchase postcards and cool drinks; but all too often they then skip the site of Elis and doze as the bus proceeds through the Eleian countryside on its way to other archaeological splendors. Scholars who visit Olympia most often repeat this scenario. Perturbed about this fact, Nicholas Yalouris suggests: "On the whole scholars have paid little attention to the city-state of Elis, since the influence of Olympia, the main sanctuary of Eleia, has for many years virtually monopolized research. Nevertheless, a close relationship existed between Elis and Olympia that went back . . . to prehistoric and mythical times" (70). For interested students of the ancient Olympics, then, Yalouris now provides a broader perspective and a valuable contextualization for the history and operation of the ancient games.

Former General Inspector of Antiquities of Greece, former Director of the National Archaeological Museum at Athens, Greek patriot, fervent exponent of Hellenism and Olympism, internationally recognized archaeologist, and prolific scholar,¹ Yalouris at the age of 78 published this handsomely produced, lavishly illustrated, folio work, the "fruit of many years of research in Eleia and in ancient Elis in particular," with the aim of presenting "concisely the history of this city-state and its singular contributions to shaping ancient Greek civilization" (13). Throughout the text and occasionally in idyllic fashion, he relates the history and contributions of Elis and Olympia, to the Greeks and to posterity, to ideals of friendly competition, international peace, and the harmonious development of body and mind:

Elis was without doubt the cradle of the Olympic Games, the instrument of the Olympian gods for cultivating and promulgating the ideal of noble competition as a means of education. . . . Today the Olympic Games, ancient Greece's precious bequest to mankind, have emerged as the most important institution in the countries of the world, the principal bearer of messages of peace and global cooperation through athletic competition and creative *rapprochement* (13).

Yalouris' ideas may clash at times with mainstream North American scholarship on ancient sport, but any reader will respect the dedication, effort, and autopsy that went into this scholarly labour of love, his *ex-vote* to ancient Elis and Olympia.

Like Yalouris' 1979 book on the ancient Olympics, this work is visually splendid. Covering art, artifacts, architectural remains, modern reconstructions, models, site plans, and topographical views, some 195 illustrations, most in rich color, from full-page photographs to smaller inserts in the margins, comprise about one third of the book. Showcasing the priceless holdings of the Archaeological Museum at Olym-

pia. and the less well known treasures of the Archaeological Collection of Elis, Yalouris delights our eyes with high-quality photographs of marble masterpieces, such as Praxiteles' Hermes with the infant Dionysos, richly textured bronze and terracotta votives, mosaics of the Roman era (e.g. with scenes of the Nine Muses and the Labours of Heracles), and precious "small finds" from jewelry and gold coins to bronze theatre tickets.

After a preface, the work is organized thematically in four chapters (the first two are discussed more fully below).² Chapter I, "The City-State of Elis" (14-67), reconstructs the history of the territory of Elis (or Eleia; Homer's Epeians of "horse-pasturing Elis" (*Od.* 21.347)) from its earliest days--indeed from "prehistoric and mythical times"--until the early Medieval era. Chapter II, "The City-State of Elis and the Sanctuary of Olympia" (68-99), correlates the history of Elis with that of the sanctuary and games at Olympia. Chapter III, "Excavations" (100-127), reinforces chapter one's historical reconstruction with the testimony of archaeology at Elis.³ Chapter IV, "Environment, Society and Culture" (128-191) is an eclectic and eulogistic survey of Eleian geography, natural resources, occupations (e.g. farming, stock-raising), artists, and intellectuals. For Yalouris, Eleia was "the most verdant and intensively cultivated territory" in southern Greece (132), but its contributions to Greek artistic and intellectual greatness have not been fully appreciated.⁴ Notes, Abbreviations, and an Index of Persons and Places complete the volume. The publication of *Ancient Elis* was delayed for various reasons, which may explain the rather limited references to recent scholarship,⁵ and Yalouris may have felt that this was not an appropriate forum for revisionist sport historiography.⁵

In Chapter I Yalouris pieces together information on Eleia like a traditional archaeologist, industriously trying to reconcile the testimony of myth and legend, historical and literary sources, and archaeology to detail a long and complex history for Elis. He also favors a long and episodic history for the early Olympic Games: early games under Oxylus, a period of disruption, a revival by Iphitus of Elis in 776, a shift to control by Pisa from 668 to ca. 580, and a final return to Eleian control from 580 on. He admits that the evidence is often problematic or limited but he perceives a "kernel" of historical truth (24) in the legends of early Eleia that filtered down to be recorded by various authors (e.g. Xenophon, Strabo, Polybius, and especially Pausanias--his most frequently cited authority).⁷ Accordingly, he accepts the legends of early migrations and kings (e.g. Augeas, Pelops) as reliably suggesting ties to Thesaly, Crete and Asia Minor. Yalouris feels there is sufficient evidence to accept as "historical fact" the generally discounted tradition of an early synoecism (unification as a state) of Elis by Oxylus (ca. 1100 B.C.), and he sees tenth- and ninth-century Elis emerging as a significant settlement that dominated other Eleian territories including the Sanctuary of Olympia.

Although recently contested, "776" remains solid for Yalouris.⁸ He accepts the ancient tradition that the Delphic Oracle told Iphitus to renew the Olympic Games and to establish the famous truce, according to which Eleia was made sacred to Zeus, no entry under arms was allowed, and all wars between Greek states were to stop during the Games. The truce was "observed throughout the Hellenic world for several centuries" (25), letting early Eleians live a "peaceful and carefree life" in their "sacred

and inviolable land” (27) for many decades. The “second” (more historical) synoecism of Eleia in 471 brought urbanization, increased central authority over nearby areas and Olympia, and the building of the Temple of Zeus (470-456 B.C.), which consolidated “the prestige of the sanctuary of Zeus and the state of Elis that was its guardian. Olympia was now enhanced as centre and hearth of the Hellenic World” (34).

With less enthusiasm, Yalouris goes on to discuss Elis’ complex relationships in the classical era, its later domination by Macedon and Rome, and finally its demise in late antiquity. In the fifth century Elis retained its old friendship with Sparta, became embroiled in the Peloponnesian War, shifted sides to Athens in 421, and was invaded by Sparta in 420 and in 401. The fourth century brought more shifting alliances plus invasions by Arcadia in 365-364. Elis later allied with Macedon after 338 and with Rome in 199, and it became part of the Roman province of Macedon in 146 B.C. Although there were benefactions from some Roman emperors and patrons, the Late Roman Empire and the Byzantine eras experienced a series of disasters, human and natural (e.g. plague, invasions by the Goths, looting by the Vandals, earthquakes), before occupations by the Franks and finally the Turks.

In chapter two Yalouris details the history of Olympia and its intimate connections with Elis. As he says, paradoxically, Eleia “played not even a mediocre role in the political and military life of Greece” (70), but it made invaluable contributions to Greek religious life, above all by fostering the cult of Zeus and the panhellenic sanctuary at Olympia. Indeed, from the Agora of Elis, with its buildings (e.g. two gymnasia, a palaestra, Hellanodikaion, Stoa of the Hellanodikai) dominated by functions relevant to the games, to the Altis at Olympia, where numerous Eleian officials attended to an array of ritual duties and athletic responsibilities, the ancient Eleians were intensively involved and admirably successful in operating the games.

Applauding what some doubt as legendary “invented traditions”, Yalouris embraces ancient stories crediting Iphitus and Lycurgus with restoring the games with a new aim and character: the Pythia told Iphitus “... that competition at Olympia should not be *meleios* or *chrematites* but *stephanites*, in other words that the winner’s prize should not be livestock of money but the humble *kotinos*, a branch of the wild olive or oleaster” (72). This “more spiritual conception of the renewed games” changed their aims from the earlier Mycenaean ideal of manly virtue: “... the meaning of contest (*athlos*) was no longer confined to being first, which was also accompanied by valuable prizes . . . Its meaning now was awareness of its beneficial effect on society as a whole. The Delphic oracle to Iphitus: ‘to renew the Olympic Games’, in order to restore peace and prosperity to men and to the world around them, encapsulates the new meaning of contest” (72).

Yalouris contrasts this early golden age of Elis and the games with the familiar, formerly canonical story of the decline of Olympia, “for which the Eleians themselves were partly responsible” (81). As Elis deviated from its earlier sacred life,⁹ abandoned its neutrality, and became embroiled in shifting alliances and recurrent warfare, the character of Olympia also changed and became secularized.¹⁰ “The spirit of the Games was no longer the same, since professionalism slowly began to creep in among the athletes” (83). “Truly the greed for territorial gains and material goods altered the spirit and mission of both the Sanctuary of Olympia and the state of Elis”

(84). Some may wish that he had expressed fewer of these conventional sentiments (e.g. on Olympia and peace, sacrosanctity, inviolability, impartiality, and professionalism); but Yalouris does admit that even Olympia was not immune to political and military interference,¹¹ and he documents several invasions of Olympia¹² and plunderings of the sacred Treasuries.¹³

For Yalouris, ancient Olympia still speaks to us about peace, concord, and virtue.¹⁴ Despite interstate rivalries and the decline blamed on greed and materialism, his Olympia, the “navel of Hellenism”, accomplished its “mission” and remained, as it has been from the dawn of historical times, the centre and bearer of panhellenic consciousness (76-77,84-85). The last step came when the Edict of Caracalla in A.D. 212 brought the “transformation of the Olympic Games from panhellenic to ecumenical” (48).¹⁵ Caracalla opened the Olympics to “those who were Roman citizens and recipients of Greek education. The Olympics now belonged to the whole world” (85). The work closes on an even grander note:

Above all . . . it was the image of Man and the powers within him, which found its most brilliant and convincing conception and expression at Elis and Olympia. There, through acquiring self-awareness and through exercise, man came closest the boundaries of divinity, he got to know his divine self. It is this knowledge that Elis, ‘neighbour of Zeus’, bequeathed to Mankind, a heritage that still enthral the whole world (147).

To scholars today, who are often too narrowly focused and too prone to criticism and cynicism, Yalouris’ “history” and his “contributions”- his breadth and his passion- may make him appear as the type of figure Homeric characters sincerely revered as a “man of old” (e.g. *Il.* 23.790; *Od.* 8.223). Such a man was “great-hearted” or “high-hearted” Nestor (*megathumos*, *hyperthumos*: e.g. *Il.* 5.565, 23.302), who, quite appropriately, at the funeral games for Patroclus recalls his several victories years ago in funeral games at Bouprasion in Elis (*Il.* 23.630 ff.). Like Antilochus and Achilles in *Iliad* 23, we should listen to and pay due honor to this Nestorian archaeologist for his experience, his wisdom, and his victories. This Nestor, however, no doubt would prefer that Antilochus had not shown questionable sportsmanship in pursuing his chariot-racing prize so single-mindedly, and that Achilles present him not with a valuable material prize (a two-handled bowl) but rather with a simple wreath (*stephanos*) of olive leaves.

Endnotes

1. E.g. with B. Ashmole, *Olympia: The Sculptures of the Temple of Zeus* (London, 1967); entry on Elis in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites* (Princeton, 1976); ed., *The Eternal Olympics. The Art and History of Sport* (New Rochelle, 1979); guidebook with A. Yalouris, *Olympia. The Museum and the Sanctuary* (Athens, 1995). In 1998 Yalouris delivered an address to the Joint International Session of the International Olympic Academy in Greece and also the Ion P. Ioannides Memorial Address at the International Centre for Olympic Studies in Canada.

2. The approach makes some redundancy unavoidable: e.g. on Oxylyus and synoecism, Iphitus and the Olympics, Augeas' stables and Eleian stock-raising, Elis as a self-sufficient, decentralized state with itinerant law-courts, etc.
3. Archaeologists in admittedly intermittent and incomplete excavations, including some rescue archaeology in 1965-70, have pursued references in Pausanias' account of Elis with some success: e.g. excavation of part of the Agora with the Stoa of the Hellanodikai; two classical gymnasia and a palaestra have been located but not excavated; excavation of the theatre north of the Agora in its stages from the late fourth century B.C. until its decline in the Late Roman Empire. However, "hardly anything" is known of the rest of the city before the Roman era (111).
4. Notable here are arguments concerning Eleian ties to Athens (140-142, on the creations of Pheidias and others in Elis) and praise of native Eleians (e.g. Libon, architect of the Temple of Zeus, the sophist Hippias, the Sceptic philosopher Pyrrhon).
5. The extensive notes mostly cite ancient testimonia, *RE* articles (e.g. V2 s.v. Elis (Swoboda)), and archaeological reports. There is no bibliography but the "Abbreviations" refer to ancient texts and authors and some (predominantly Greek and European) publications. E.g. Yalouris cites (e.g. n. 50 on 202, n. 37 on 208, ns. 48, 50 on 209) M. Koumouzelis' Ph.D. dissertation, "The Early and Middle Hellenic Periods in Elis" (University of London, 1980), but not Wendy J. Raschke, ed., *The Archaeology of the Olympics. The Olympics and Other Festivals in Antiquity* (Madison, 1988). Cf. my "Athletes and Archaeologists: Some Recent Works on the Sites and Significance of Ancient Greek Sport," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 8 (1991) 270-283.
6. E.g. on various points (e.g. judges' impartiality, qualifying for the games, male beauty contests) the publications of N.B. Crowther, for one, disagree with Yalouris' conventional positions. For recent discussions, see the special edition of *Nikephoros* (vol. 10, 1997) with articles by Crowther and others on the Olympic Games, and the special edition of *Classical Bulletin* (vol. 74.2, 1998) on Greek sport.
7. "The ancient testimonies on the prehistory of Elis and its kings are an amalgam of mythical tales and memories of historical events" (17). Knowledge of Eleian politics is "scant and fragmentary" (28). "Information on the cultural and social organization of ancient Eleia . . . is scant and disparate" (130).
8. E.g. Yalouris, n. 51 on 209, knows of but dismisses the work of C. Morgan, *Athletes and Oracles. Transformation of Olympi and Delphi in the Eighth Century B.C.* (Cambridge, 1990), notably her argument that Olympia became Panhellenic only after ca. 725 B.C.
9. Early Elis was a "theocratic" state (78-81) preoccupied not with war and politics but only with its organization of the games, a state whose religious officials, the

Hellanodikai and priesthoods, ranked above political offices.

10. The shift of the stadium beyond the sacred Altis around 450 B.C. is said to express "... the distancing of the Games from their religious substrate" (82-83).
11. E.g. when Sparta violated the truce by invading Eleia during the Games in 420, Olympia fined Sparta and then banned Sparta from the contests when it refused to pay. Despite the ban the Spartan Lichas entered the chariot race using a Boeotian charioteer but was discovered and whipped. The Eleians' anti-Spartan stance led them to allow the Naupactians and Messenians to establish the Nike of Paeonius at the Sanctuary to celebrate their victory over Sparta in 421 (36, n. 111 on 197).
12. E.g. enmity between Elis and Sparta led Agis to invade Elis twice in 401 and, by one account, the Spartans reached as far as the Altis at Olympia. In 365 and 364 the Arcadians invaded Elis and occupied the Sanctuary of Olympia, fortifying themselves on the Hill of Cronos.
13. E.g. in 364 the Pisatans used gold from Olympia to mint coins; in 331 the sanctuary lost 120 talents to pay a fine to Macedon, and in 87 Sulla looted the Treasuries.
14. Cf. the non-traditional arguments of D.C. Young, especially in *The Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics* (Chicago, 1984). Most recently, for Mark Golden, *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 1998), Greek sport was rife with tensions and differentiation rather than harmony and unity.
15. Earlier participants from Asia Minor and Syria, Yalouris suggests, n. 78 on 204, perhaps were Greek-speakers and Greek-educated "and were thus acknowledged as Greeks."