

# GENDER AND THE GAMES AT OLYMPIA

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## *Introduction*

When the Olympic Games were revived in 1896 the organisers explicitly referred to the Ancient Greek games. After the festivities a publication, in both Greek and French, was issued which recorded this first modern event and presented the historical sources of the arrangement. The contributions on Antiquity were written by the Greek archeologists Lambros and Politis, and a report of the recent events at Athens given by the secretary of the Olympic Games, Timoleon Philemon, and others. In his introduction Baron de Coubertin celebrated the present in the light of a glorious past. The modern architects of the Olympic games, were thus aware of the exact nature of the Ancient games, and they wished to copy the Greeks. At one point, however, they deliberately ignored the Ancient model: when they did not admit women at their games.

To be sure, women were not allowed to participate at the men's games in Ancient Olympia, the *Olympia*, which were dedicated to Zeus. However, women had their own arrangement, the *Heraia*, dedicated to Hera, and performed their women's games at the same spot and in the same spirit as their male fellows. This fact is mentioned in the publication to which I just referred. But the games of 1896 were an all-male manifestation. We are thus confronted with an instance of selective use of history in the service, I think, of a middle and upper class Victorian ideology. This suspicion is confirmed by the the book's description of the Ancient women's games, which includes a peculiar error. It tells us that girls ran a distance of 30 m, while, in fact, they ran about 155 m (The error cannot be a misprint since both the Greek and the French text refer to the same number of meters).

To ignore female participation in the first modern Olympian arrangement conflicts with Ancient tradition. Our chief source with respect to the Ancient games, Pausanias, focuses on the female games at Olympia, and he explicitly draws a comparison between female and

male arrangements, which show significant resemblances. He also refers to several other female cults that are related to Olympia and even to the male games. In spite of the fact, then, that the *Olympia* and the *Heraia* were dedicated to different deities and assembled males and females respectively, there is some reason to study these festivals in comparison. Such an approach will not only be an aim in itself, attention to the aspect of gender may be indispensable to the question of the nature of the arrangements as a whole. In order to discuss this broad question we must look at the *Olympia* in context, that is, with the *Heraia* and other cults.

The aim of this paper, then, will be to study the symmetries and asymmetries between female and male games and cults at Olympia within the larger question of the nature of the phenomenon of Olympia. My hypothesis is that these gender elaborations were central to the Ancient celebrations and that an investigation into the relationship between female and male arrangements may shed light on the psychological and cultural processes involved in the phenomenon. In exploring such an all-embracing question a comprehensive approach will be necessary, integrating the results of historical, archaeological and philological investigation. In the following argument I will present the main features of the games at Olympia, both female and male with the many mythical and ritual elements that surrounded the events: There were myths that were told, some that were mapped out in the physical surroundings, and those that were exhibited in visible form on the buildings at Olympia. Additionally the myths motivated ritual acts that were performed at the celebrations. It is this complex of symbolic elements that will be subjected to interpretation in order to present a synthesis of the manifold details of the Olympic phenomenon. This concept is to be understood in a wide sense, including not only the male *Olympia* but also the *Heraia*, as well as a number of cults and iconographic elements that seem to be related to it. This interpretation will be held within an anthropological framework, and will draw on archaeological as well as literary sources. In the analysis of the aspect of gender in the Olympia-complex I propose to offer my tentative interpretation of what kind of phenomenon these games were in the Ancient world.

### **Sources**

As mentioned above, our principal *literary* source for the history of the Greek Olympic games and for the topography of Olympia is Pausanias, a cultural historian living approximately 160 AD. He travelled around in Greece and recorded buildings, works of art, with their history and mythology as well as their cult practices. His

presentation of Olympia is among the richest in his work, and we are thus invited to follow this eye-witness record in order to reconstruct the Ancient arrangement. In addition we have rich archaeological finds as a result of the German excavations during the last century. These excavations have greatly advanced our knowledge of the history of the male Olympic festival. Our sources for the female festival are much less extensive. However, references in literature and art to female race contests in several parts of the Greek world suggest that these competitions were wide-spread, especially at Sparta and at Brauron in Attica. Some archaic bronze statuettes dating from the beginning of the sixth century (Lamb 1929, 97 and Pl. 33) and vase paintings from the fifth century, show girls running in typical 'Heraian' dress near an altar. Various literary sources dating from seventh century Alkman, Sappho, fifth century Euripides, and others allude to female footraces. Taken together this evidence supports our hypothesis of the early development of the female games (Sweet 1987, Bernardini 1988). The structure of the arrangement as well as its parallels to other festivals, among which the *Olympia*, strengthens this hypothesis (Scanlon 1984).

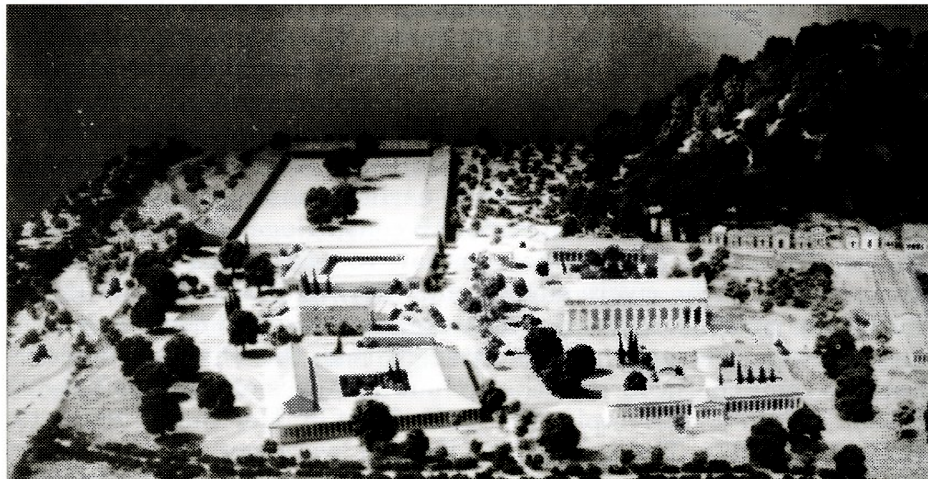
### ***The games***

The Ancient Greek world took shape as a definite Hellenic or Greek culture about 800 BC. This culture lasted for more than 1000 years until it was eclipsed by Christianity. The Olympic games were celebrated during this whole time span. They were organised and recorded beginning in 776 BC and forbidden by an edict of the emperor Theodosius in 393 AD. According to Pausanias the games existed before 776, but at that date they were reorganised and from then on the names of the winners in the footraces were recorded. Recent excavations have shed light on the earlier phases of Olympia, and discovered a grave from an early Mycenaean age just beneath the shrine of the hero Pelops. Most archaic remains have been washed away by one of the rivers surrounding Olympia (Kyrieleis 1992). In the course of this long time-span the games changed their character and prestige. However, it would seem that the Olympic festivals reached their classic form in the archaic and classical period (500-320 B.C.9, Ziehen s.v. Olympia, RE XVII, 2, 3435; Herrmann 1972, 19; Brein 1978, 87). The games at Olympia were not the only sport contests. In the sixth century, important celebrations of a similar nature were inaugurated at Delphi, Nemea and Isthmos near Corinth, although the Olympic games remained the most prestigious and central in the time-reckoning of the Greeks. It is conceivable that the combination of the *Heraia* with the *Olympia* constituted another feature that set Olympia apart from the other arrangements.

In historical time, every four years participants from the whole Greek world assembled at Olympia in order to partake in the contests and to win glory for themselves and for their home lands. For a long period the Greek world consisted of small independent states, called *polis*, often not larger than a city with its farm-land around. But even if these states were politically autonomous, they were part of a wide cultural world, extending from Massilia (Marseille) in the West to the inner Black sea in the East. Many of these *polis*-states waged fierce wars with their fellow Greeks, and in order to conduct the Olympic games a general period of peace (the *Ekekheiria*, or Handshake, Paus. V 20, 1; 26, 2) was proclaimed, allowing the participants to travel safely throughout the Mediterranean. This central, 'Pan-Hellenic', celebration was a men's event. We do not know whether women assembled from all over the Greek world to participate in their games.

The central competition consisted of a footrace held in the stadion. The length of this (male) track was about 192 meters. The name of the winner in the footrace was attached to the Olympic year, and so a list of Olympic stadion winners served as a common chronological standard. The four-year period between the games was called an Olympiad. Time was reckoned by the Olympiads and their subdivisions into single years.

According to Greek tradition, Koroibos from Elis was the first to win in the stadion after the reorganisation in about 776 BC (Paus. V



*Fig.1. Model of the sanctuary of Hera and Zeus at Olympia. The temple of Zeus is in the middle, in front of the smaller temple of Hera. Part of the stadion is seen at the far right. The hill of Kronos overlooks the area. In the foreground and to the left are official buildings and training grounds. Model in the British Museum.*





*Fig.2. Vase painting on drinking cup from Athens 500-470 B.C. Male armoured athletes participate in sprinting, the last exercise in the Olympic Zeus games. (British Museum vases E818)*

8, 6). Other branches of athletics were introduced as time passed by, such as boxing, wrestling, horse chariot driving, horse race, combined athletics (the *pentathlon*), and an armed race. After the reorganisation of the games in the 77th Olympiad (472, Paus. V 9, 3) the whole program lasted for five days (Paus. V 8, 6-11). The arrangement committee, the *Hellanodikai* or Hellenic arbiters, was recruited from the nearby city of Elis, (Paus. V 9, 5). The winners were honoured abundantly both in Olympia and at home. At the games they received a crown from the wild olive, Zeus' sacred tree. In early times participants seem to have been recruited in particular from aristocratic families and in their honour a victory song was composed by the greatest poets then living (among whom Pindaros). Winners had the right to erect a statue or other monument in Olympia in memory of their victory, and in their home-city they were honoured with substantial material rewards.

As has been mentioned, (married) women were strictly forbidden to attend the male games. They were show a cliff, *Typaion*, and told that from there women were thrown to their death if they intruded into the male celebration (Paus. V 6, 7). Virgins were, perhaps, not forbidden to attend, nor was the priestess of Demeter *Chamyne* (Paus. VI 20, 9). This

segregation of the sexes in itself invites an investigation into the role of gender in these contexts. Women held, however, their own contests in the same area, but perhaps although in the same year at a later date than the *Olympia* (Scanlon 1984, 78, n. 4). The female games were arranged by the revered Sixteen Matrons of the city of Elis (Paus. V 16, 2-3). Whether or not men were secluded from the women's games is not attested. Nor do we know the course of the whole program of the female games. It seems to have consisted of a footrace for girls only. On the whole, Ancient sources on Olympia seem not to have been interested in recording women's activities. This is a general deficiency of Ancient tradition, and should not serve as proof that women's activities did not exist (Bernardini 1988).

### ***Myth and ritual***

The place called Olympia was a holy area, demarcated by a ritual boundary and located outside any urban centre. The fact that this sanctuary, like Delphi, was situated in a remote area has been noted with surprise by several scholars (e. g. Herrmann 1972, 15, Mallwitz 1972, 17). It seems, as I will attempt to demonstrate that this location was not chosen accidentally. Within the sanctuary there were temples and shrines dedicated to the central gods of the Greek pantheon as well as to other deities. Its name, Olympia, suggests a link with the mythical home of the Olympic gods, traditionally located on top of Mount Olympos in the north. The sacred area is likely to have been experienced as a meeting point between mortals and immortals, and also the realm of the dead as symbolised by Pelops. The principal gods in this universe were Zeus and his wife Hera. In Olympia the central temples were those of precisely Zeus and Hera, by the 5th century at least, which again suggests the significance of gender at this cult site. Zeus being the supreme authority of the divine world, guarantees the orderly functioning of the social world, by his sanctioning of authority and social relationships confirmed by oaths, primary domains of male activity. Elsewhere and in all periods Hera is connected with marriage celebration or the existence of the polis as a whole. Since the cult of Olympian Hera was connected with the celebration of marriage in Pausanias' time, it seems reasonable to assume that the goddess' role had been the same in earlier times as well. These two deities seem, then, to preserve the fundamental order in the polis and the oikos or household.

During the male Olympic games (from the Classical period onwards) there were several days of contests centering around a main event, the great procession and sacrifice to honour Zeus (Paus. V 9, 3; 13, 8; 14, 2). Participants were divided in age categories, boys up to seventeen years and men (Crowther 1988). Large flocks of oxen were



Fig.3. Female athlete from about 560 B.C. Bronze figurine. 11.7cm high. found at Dodona. Epiros. (Athens National Museum, Carapanos Collection 24)

slaughtered on this occasion. and after the bones were burnt at the altar of the god, the meat was consumed by the participants at a joyous celebration.

At the female games, called the *Heraia*, one or more cows were sacrificed to Hera and consumed in a common meal. Female participants as well were divided into age groups, but only girls up to the age of about eighteen competed, and winners received a crown of the wild olive tree. The female winners were also conceded the honour of commemorating their victory (Paus. VI 16) and in the columns of the temple of Hera marks have been detected (Dörpfeld 1935 I. 170), where it is believed that women winners left their portraits. The



*Fig.4. Bronze figurine from about 540 B.C., found in Albania, exhibiting the dress and hairstyle of the athletes at the Heraia, as recorded by Pausanias. Height about 11 cm. left leg has been restored. British Museum Bronzes no.208.*

magistrates responsible for both games, the Sixteen matrons and the nine Hellanodikai, purified themselves with the blood of a piglet and water of a sacred spring (Paus. V 16. 8). There are, then, striking parallels between the male and the female celebrations (Scanlon 1984). Since the temple for Hera was built as early as approximately 600 B.C. the conclusion seems inevitable that some cult involving women existed at an early date. Sources that show female participation in footraces in several parts of archaic Greece strengthen the possibility that the Hera-races as recorded by Pausanias are part of a general tradition and date from an early period. Pausanias mentions that "the Eleians trace the maidens' games to ancient times" (Paus. V 16. 4). The *Heraia* were probably reorganised about 580 BC (Scanlon 1984, 86). This is not to say that the female games remained a copy of the male games. It seems more likely that, while the *Heraia* preserved the characteristics of local initiation rites, the *Olympia* evolved into a celebration of a more



secular and Pan-Hellenic nature. According to Bernardini the *Heraia* remained a pre-marriage ritual for young girls, and never became a proper contest. (Bernardini 1988).

In the course of time, then, it seems that the female festival preserved its archaic character of initiation ritual, while the male arrangement attracted a number of other interests and functions. In the absence of some national state structure, single states addressed the officials of great sanctuaries such as Olympia in order to obtain redress from injustice in war time, relying on the effect of divine sanctions against the aggressor (Siewert 1981). As the most central public space within the Greek world, Olympia attracted public speakers who sought an audience for their historical or political messages (Herrmann 1972, 17). As a centre for confirmation of Hellenic identity, Olympia acquired special importance for tribes living at the margin of this world. In particular the Macedonian kings emphatically asserted their relationship with the Greek world in Olympia (Slowikowski 1990, Romano 1990). In the Hellenistic period Greeks felt a special need to assert their Greek identity in a foreign environment (Pleket 1978).

Whatever the numerous secondary interests were, there can be little doubt that the primary motive for coming to the *Olympia* was *philotimia*: the wish to gain honour. We should not wonder at the fact that people who at the same time might be involved in war, gathered at Olympia in order to meet in peaceful contest. War in the Ancient world seems to have been conducted according to strict rules, allowing ritual practices to guide the course of action. It seems, then, that the realm of athletics was not sharply distinguished from the realm of war, both depending on strict rules of conduct (Brellich 1961).

We might still expect that the fierce spirit of competition must have split this already utterly divided Greek world. Apparently, however, that the games united the Greeks. We possess a literary source which tells us that the same men who warred furiously against each other met at Olympia as "relatives" (*syngeneis*) around the central altar (Aristophanes, *Lysistrate* 1128 ff). Even if the participants met in aggressive competition, they were united in their adherence to the same set of rules (Lonis 1979, 25), and, we may assume, in admiration for the Olympic victors. I would point to the fact that Pausanias is careful in describing how frightening the cult statue of Zeus *Horkios* or "Protector of the Oath" was, with thunderbolts in each hand (Paus. V 24, 9). Next to this statue the Olympic oath was sworn by all athletes, their trainers and fathers, promising to respect the rules of the games. Heavy fines were exacted from those who tried to corrupt the judges. The specially appointed *Nomophulakes* or "Lawguardians" supervised the program and instructed the participants in the Olympic rules (Paus. VI 24, 3). All this should not

induce us to believe that foul play never occurred, witness detailed regulations from an early date to witness the need to prevent participants from breaking the rules (Siewert 1992, 115).

From historical sources we gather that the conditions for participating at the Olympic games were to be freeborn, and born sons of Greek parents (Herodotos, *Histories* V 22). From all over the Greek world, then, men travelled to the Olympic centre, and, we may assume, felt like meeting in a crucial celebration of unity. Even if we do not know in detail how people behaved during their voyage, they participated in a ritual gathering. In an unpublished law for trainers and participants at Olympia, restrictions are issued for the use of carriages “either within the city of Elis or for the great procession from Elis to Olympia before the opening of the games” (Siewert 1992, 116). Even if a number of participants must have travelled over sea, precluding any orderly grouping, at least immediately before the celebration all met thus in an initial procession to wander to their distant destination Olympia.

Upon arrival at the sacred centre, they gathered in contests and in a large procession and sacrifice at the altar of Zeus, where they honoured the god as their common protector and as the guarantor of social order. As I have noted, scholars wonder at the location of Olympia and it has been argued that this location, outside the inhabited world, was due to the wish to avoid one city gaining undesired prestige over another, because of its control of the games. I would suggest that this is a too common-sensical explanation, and propose to compare this arrangement with the phenomenon of “pilgrimage”. Breaking up from their daily business, and dissolving the normal state of affairs, war, Greek men travelled a long way from their profane homes to a common cult centre. They did so in order to revitalise their membership in one cultural group, the Hellenic and Greek world. Olympia (as well as other similar centres, especially Delphi) was really situated in the margins of the urban world, and the group may have needed a deserted location, in order to return to its ‘origin’. In Victor Turner’s terms they participated in a liminal process and travelled back to a “sacred space-time” (Myerhoff 1978, Turner 1977, Turner & Turner 1978).

It is noteworthy that the area where the cultic space is laid out was called “Cronos’ hill”. Cronos was the father of Zeus, he had been deposed by his son and relegated to some realm in the underworld on the Islands of the blessed. In cult, as well as in myth, the figure of Cronos represents some early stage after the creation of the world, the “Golden Age”, an age when people lived in a paradise-like state, when the earth provided plenty of food without anybody having to toil. Social differentiation and hierarchy had not been introduced, nor had the hierarchy between the sexes been established. At that Golden Age,

Pausanias tells us, Zeus was born, and while he grew up, his guardians, the Couretes, invented athletic contests (Paus. V 7, 6). The winner was crowned with branches of the wild olive tree, as were the victors in historical days. This may seem surprising, as the cultivated olive branch might seem to be more suited as a symbol of civilisation (Vidal-Naquet 1983, 20, 26). We might, then, interpret this use of the wild species as one more symbol of the return to the primordial past, before civilisation was established. It was, Pausanias tells us, brought from the land of the Hyperboreans, a mythical people living "Beyond the northern wind" (Paus. V 7, 7). In Greek imagination the Hyperboreans are a god-like tribe, who are distinguished by their longevity and their exceptional righteousness. It is to this land the god Apollo travels in order to restore his power to create the social order and justice every year.

Before sailing out to their new settlement, Greek colonists used to consult the oracle of Delphi for guidance in religious matters (Pugliese Carratelli 1992). The Greek communities in the West, Southern Italy and Sicily demonstrated a strong interest in the sanctuary of Olympia, as is evidenced by the treasury-houses they erected at the site. It seems that these settlers felt a special urge to return regularly to the symbolic 'origin' and centre of their culture, the space where the 'Olympic' and human world met. A voyage to Cronos' hill meant not only a return to primordial time, but an act of anchoring their community to *common* time, as measured by the Olympic stadion-winners. A central rite was celebrated for Hestia, the power of the hearth (Paus. V 15, 9). Day and night offerings were made at her altar and the ashes were added to the ash-altar of Zeus, connecting each day with 'Olympic time'. In addition I would suggest that the cult of Pelops structured the realms of the living versus that of the dead in a cult segregating those who sacrificed to Pelops from those who sacrificed to Zeus, stressing the opposition between black and white, night and day (Paus. V 13, 1 ff; Burkert 1983).

The group's need to be incorporated into a common universe may well have remained partly unconscious and overshadowed by the immediate urge to win glory. Likewise, other cultural needs may, unconsciously, have been involved as well. The group has to organise its existence and continuity, *and to anchor this organisation in the metaphysical world*, sheltering the 'sacred truth' against questioning (Moore and Myerhoff 1977). The individual is not only dependent on belonging to a common universe, (s)he must be defined and situated in a social category as well. In spite of the great variety of their constitutions and political functioning, Greek polis-states were primarily organised around the institutions of monogamous marriage and warfare. And beneath professional distinctions between individuals remained their pervasive common 'nature' as women and men.

(Free) women were 'naturally' defined by marriage and men were 'by nature' warriors. The cultural basis of these arrangements was never questioned (apart from exceptions such as Plato and the Cynics) and the values attached to them were taken for granted. It is this 'matter of course' nature of fundamental facts of culture that may obscure to us the fact that they need revitalising. The emotional qualities with which basic cultural institutions have imbued have to be renewed. It is the property of symbolic expressions to serve this end, creating emotional effects in the participants and thus charging institutions with new value. It seems, then, that a number of myths, images, and arrangements at Olympia were part of an unconscious symbolic process, creating a common basis for Greek social life and a Greek 'nature' specified for females and males. It is within this perspective that we should consider some prominent aspects of the phenomenon of Olympia.

The temple of Zeus was adorned with mythical sculptures. These temple decorations are commonly interpreted as commemorating the victory of Elis over the city of Pisa, which originally controlled the games. They are also seen as monuments of the victory over the Persians in the Persian wars or as a more abstract expression of order versus chaos (e. g. Stewart 1983). It is, however, attractive to interpret them at a more concrete level.

At the west pediment of the temple of Zeus, Apollo is presented, while he is commanding the rebellious Centaurs to obey his rule. This unruly race of horse-men is caught in disrupting the wedding of the righteous Peirithoos, the king of the Lapiths. The Centaurs are unable to control themselves, and they attack the wives of their righteous relatives the Lapiths, thus disrupting the social order of monogamous marriage. On the other side of the temple, Zeus is depicted while supervising the athletic contest between Oinomaos, the king of the country and his future son-in-law Pelops. The myth is frozen at the moment when the two are engaged in preparations for the horse-chariot race, a race in which every suitor to the king's daughter had to participate. These contests had ended fatally up to that point, because of Oinomaos' condition that suitors had to win over him in order to have his daughter. The king had already killed thirteen suitors when Pelops arrived. This last suitor wins the contest, thus ending the massacres as well as removing the obstruction to the princess' marriage. Tersini has drawn attention to the prominence of marriage themes in Olympia (Tersini 1987).

On both sides of the temple, then, the dramatic theme of the myth presented is some contest or conflict in which the gods will prevail and the just will overcome. However, implicitly the institution at stake is marriage. The proper order of society, a girl's destiny in marriage (Hippodameia) is obstructed and the monogamous relationship



between the Lapiths and their wives is disrupted. I would thus suggest that this is no accident, and that the correct order of the social world is brought out through the principle of *inversion*. By presenting a disrupted order of society the symbolic representation acts upon its spectators and provokes emotions of outrage, which in turn revitalise the spectators' 'natural' feelings of the proper order. Greek society was based upon a network established through the relationships of marriage between families which regulated the distribution of property in the present and maintained this state of affairs for the future through exchange of brides. The institution of monogamous marriage requires respect for other men's wives. It is taken for granted, as is, it may be argued, the duty to defend the proper order of society by conquering its violators (the Centaurs).

There are other examples of similar symbolism as well. Inside the temple of Zeus stood the huge statue of the god, resting on a base which was decorated with mythical scenes (Paus. V 11, 8). One line of interpretation considers the *hieros gamos* between Zeus and Hera to be the underlying theme (Giglioli 1921). A central image was the birth of the goddess Aphrodite, the power of erotic forces, and not infrequently connected with marriage. Here the newborn goddess is surrounded by a number of divine couples and other pairs of gods who suggest the crucial transitions in the life of males and females, Apollo and Artemis, and the forces of male and female spaces, Hermes (the outside world) and Hestia (the central domestic hearth). (Vernant 1983).

The temple of Zeus, then, presented a number of mythical scenes focusing on the theme of marriage. The temple of Hera, on the other hand, contained a sculpture of Zeus wearing a helmet, an unusual attribute for the god, who normally is presented as a king with his royal paraphernalia, at Hera's side. (Paus. V 17, 1). This crossing of realms in the decorations of the temples is surprising when seen in relation to the athletic games that were held. At the male *Olympia* prowess and proficiency in war were celebrated. From 520 onwards the last exercise in the program was a race in armour. From early times on the cult of Zeus in Olympia centred on warfare. The whole sanctuary was, in addition, a preferred area for erecting war memorials and trophies (Paus. V 14, 4-15, 11). Here the largest amounts of war booty were found offered as votive gifts to Zeus. Early figurines of the god show him as an armed warrior with a helmet, stressing an additional function of the god of authority and social order (Mallwitz 1972, 20 ff. examples in Mallwitz-Herrmann 1980. Byrne 1991). In Olympia the famous families of seers, the Iamids and Clytiads, specialised in sacrificing and giving advice before battle, having knowledge of Zeus' will (Siewert 1992, 117).

The female games, however, were instituted by the first bride at Pisa, Hippodameia, in recognition of her blessing by the goddess Hera, who gave her in marriage to Pelops (Paus. V 16, 4). The whole arrangement seems to have been under the auspices of the powers of marriage. The athletic contests were held at the same race track as the male games, the stadion (Paus. V 16, 2-3). However, the female participants ran their footrace over a shorter distance than the males, the female race being, according to Pausanias, 1/6 shorter than the male one. Romano has compared the dimensions of the temples, and found that these differed in the same proportion as the stadion lengths (Romano 1983, cf. Romano 1981). This may be due to the fact that buildings in Ancient Greece were built on the basis of a foot measure, which differed from place to place. There seems in addition to have been a standard relationship between the length of temple and stadion, the proportion being 1:3 or 200 to 600 feet. Hera's foot, her temple and her stadion thus were 1/6 shorter than Zeus' foot, temple and stadion, that is, 25 cm, 50 m, 150 m and 32 cm, 64 m and 192 m respectively (Romano 1983). Girls participating at the *Heraia*, then, ran a distance of about 155 m, while their male fellows ran 192 m. A common-sense explanation has been suggested as to why females did not run the same distance, namely that, "The difference in the lengths of the men's and the women's stade may *simply* reflect the fact that women's average stride is shorter." (Scanlon 1984. 79, emphasis added). This ignores the fact, of course, that females are not limited in the number of steps they can take. I would suggest an interpretation that fits into the overall symbolic context. These systematic differences, once established by the traditions of religious architecture, were incorporated in the symbolic elaborations implying a 'natural' hierarchy between the sexes.

Even though our information as to the precise arrangements is very fragmentary, we can catch glimpses of other symbolic expressions that support our line of interpretation. In accordance with the ritual calendar at Olympia the priests of Elis performed a series of sacrifices following a strict temporal order (Paus. V 14, 4). The ceremonies started with the goddess of the central hearth, Hestia, after that Olympian Zeus was honoured followed by a number of deities that guided warriors on their campaigns, first and foremost Athena and Artemis. Athena was the inventor of ordered warfare, and among her cult-names in this ritual sequence appears Athena Leitis, the Goddess of Booty. Lonis has interpreted both deities as "kourotrophic", nurturing the warrior from infancy and in adult life (Lonis 1979, 200 ff). Vernant, on the other hand, interprets Artemis as a force between peace and war, the power that inhibits savagery in combat, urging warriors to preserve their balance between necessary killing and senseless slaughter (Vernant 1988).



*Fig.5. Marble figure of girl dressed as an athlete. Original, or copy, of the classical or early hellenistic period. Height 124cm. (Paris, Musée du Louvre MA522)*



In connection with the male festival a female ritual was held. According to Pausanias, at some distance from Olympia the women of Elis held celebrations based on women's social role. They gathered on a definite day at the beginning of the male Olympic games at a place where the competing athletes were mustered. This area was called "The grave of Achilleus". There, in the evening as the sun was setting, they mourned the death of the mythical hero, honouring with their ritual lament this "greatest of all warriors in history" (Paus. VI 23, 3).

Elsewhere Pausanias refers to the cult of Eileithuia, the power of birth, and of Sosipolis (Paus. VI 20, 2-3). Archaeological investigation has as yet not found the exact location of the shrine. According to Pausanias it was situated within the Olympic sanctuary on the Hill of Cronos, and it is identified by some with the "Idean grotto", which refers to the mythic birth-place of Zeus (Dörpfeld 1935 I, 38 f; Hampe 1951; Herrmann 1972, 31). Women met at the shrine of the goddess and an aged woman priest, who had to live in celibacy, performed the rites for the birth goddess and the divine child Sosipolis. During her performance women and girls met outside and sang a hymn to the goddess and sacrificed incense. The author explains the meaning of the name, adding the myth of this divine power. Once the people of Elis were engaged in war with the people of Arcadia. The enemy was already near, when a woman from Elis ran into the battle field carrying her newborn son. She told the Eleian commanders that she would sacrifice her son in order to protect the city. The commanders accepted the child and laid it naked on the ground. He immediately was transformed into a snake and severely frightened the approaching Arcadian army. The enemy fled and the child was hailed as *Sosipolis*: "Saviour of our *polis*." The myth may however be considerably older than the historical war between the two states in 364 BC (Ziehen RE 35, 55 f).

In the literary text mentioned above a woman expresses her anger at the fact that women are excluded from political decision-making:

We carry a double burden. First we give birth to our sons  
and then we send them into war (Aristophanes, *Lysistrate*  
589f).

I will suggest that the female rites performed at Olympia provide a precise expression of this fundamental truth. Women lamented the warriors when dead and they gave birth to the next generation of warriors. In addition every four years the Sixteen Matrons of Elis started weaving the sacred robe of Hera including this 'natural task of women' in their religious duties (Paus. VI 24, 10; V 16, 2-6).



The whole complex of rites, myths and iconography as well as physical arrangements suggests that Olympia was the symbolic centre of the Hellenic world. Here mortals and immortals met at the altars of Zeus and Hera. At the great male Olympic festival, time was suspended and the primordial condition when Cronos ruled was reestablished. Chronological time was anchored in a space where human beings touched the world of the Olympic gods. Innumerable gestures and ceremonies seem to have ordered the universe, that is, the Hellenic world, giving a central anchoring to a completely dispersed group of communities.

We know that in Sparta only women who died giving birth and men who died on the battlefield were honoured with a grave monument, thus establishing a dichotomy and equivalence between female and male 'nature': child-birth and war (Loroux 1981). According to Pausanias king Oinomaos, the father of the bride Hippodameia in whose honour the women held their athletic games, used to sacrifice to Zeus Areios. Warlike Zeus, before challenging her suitors, among whom Pelops, the hero of the male games (Paus. V 14, 6). The separation and interrelationship of female and male gods and humans in Olympia confirmed this social dichotomy. In addition the physical ordering of the race distances established a hierarchy of the sexes. A number of rites, myths and arrangements created an absolute foundation for their respective 'nature', and served literally to incorporate, that is, to embody, these truths in their very nervous system. Calame's study of the intertwining of Theseus myth and rites in Athens may illustrate this point (Calame 1986).

The question of the nature of the games at Olympia has been discussed for a long time. Often this question has been directed to the search for origins. Although the historical dimension should never be neglected, an investigation of the functions of the athletic celebrations seems important. Studies like those by Pleket, Poliakoff, Sansone and Evjen have contributed to this (Pleket 1978, Poliakoff 1987, Sansone 1988, Evjen 1992). Poliakoff underscores the violence of the male games, suggesting that an important function was to provide "an outlet for the highly competitive and individualistic impulses Greece developed" (115). Sansone defines Ancient sport as "ritual sacrifice of human energy" (75). Pleket examining the ideology around the male games, is struck by the persistent emphasis on the masculine and military values (301), while Evjen who reviews a number of theories, thinks athletics was a useful background for military service.

However, not only methods focusing on individual psychology and sociology should be applied. The force of symbolic structuring seems to have been at work shaping 'the Olympic phenomenon', requiring an anthropological framework. Not only the needs of individuals were

met. the group had a need to create itself as a group and anchoring its sacre

Larmour draws attention to the similarities between Greek theatre and the athletic games (Larmour 1990). Both manifestations, I would claim, played a central part in the cultural process, creating and revitalising fundamental institutions of the Greek social world (des Bouvrie 1990).

In his study of the modern Olympic games, MacAloon has observed that different 'genres', rite, festival, and spectacle, with their specific moods operate within the same celebration (MacAloon 1984). Indeed it is plausible that many functions may have been at work at the same time. And a long-lived tradition like that in Olympia must continually have been transformed. I would, however, suggest that the fundamental motive for assembling at Olympia was this cultural need, in the perspective of Mary Douglas' *group-grid* model, to anchor one's central Greek 'truth' and to exclude those who were not Greek (Douglas 1982) and to create oneself as a Hellene, man or woman.

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