

The Legendary Origins of the Olympic Games

By Riemer Faber

As most readers will recall, in 2004 the Olympic Games returned to Greece, their country of origin. What precisely the ancient origins of the Olympic Games are, however, remains a matter of some speculation. According to Greeks in antiquity, the games were established formally in 776 BC, at Olympia; the first recorded victor is a certain Coroebus of Elis, who won the footrace. However, as the Greeks themselves reveal, the games go back in time much farther than the Archaic Age. The archaeological evidence from Olympia shows that around 1000 BC there was a shrine to the god Zeus, and that at the sacred precinct there were regular sacred festivals which may have included sporting events. However, other archaeological evidence, and surviving literary and epigraphical sources, reveals even earlier proof for athletics and competition.

Readers of Homer's *Iliad*, on which the recently-released movie "Troy" is based, will know that when Patroclus, the dear friend of Achilles, was slain by the Trojan Hector, Achilles staged athletic competitions in honour of the deceased warrior. These competitions included a two-horse chariot race, foot-racing, boxing, wrestling, and weight-throwing. It appears that that the heroes of the *Iliad* participated as eagerly in the sporting contests as they did in the individual combats that characterize the poem. Scholars have posited various reasons for the staging of these 'funeral games'. Some think that they were held in order to honour the deceased, to celebrate life in the face of death, and to obtain glory. If so, the games reflected the military ethos of the culture, as the heroes fought on the battle-field for the same reasons.

In *Odyssey* Book Eight the informal competitions of the people of Phaeacia show a developed athletic program. Taken together with the evidence from the *Iliad*, it may be tempting to conclude that athletic competitions and sports were features of the Mycenaean culture which Homer purports to portray. Most scholars, however, think that the games were not characteristic of the Late Bronze Age period in which Mycenaean culture flourished, but of Homer's own society in the eight century BC. Regardless of the relevance of the Homeric evidence, it is striking that several types of competitions in the later Olympics appear in these early epics.

The ancient origins of the games at Olympia are attested also by the legends of the Greeks. Some myths tell that the gods Zeus and Cronos wrestled there for control of the Earth; the games practiced by mortals commemorate the victory of Zeus, who became the supreme god for the Greeks. Other myths recount that in earlier times, when it gods roamed freely over the earth, Apollo outran Hermes and out-boxed Ares, the god of war. Other myths tell of the founding of the games by mortal kings or rulers. Various kings of Elis, the region in which Olympia is located, are credited with starting them. Perhaps the most well-known story in this regard is that of king Oenomaos and his nubile daughter Hippodamia. Oeneomaos offered his daughter, and his kingdom, to the man who could beat him in a chariot race. Some thirteen hopeful suitors were slain before Pelops came along. He bribed king Oenomaos' charioteer to sabotage the royal chariot. Just as the pursuing horses were nearing Pelops' chariot, the axle broke, sending king Oenomaos to his death. Pelops won the hand of Hippodamia, and obtained the kingdom. To commemorate his victory, the myth tells us, Pelops established the games at Olympia.

Another version of the myth holds that in order to purify himself from the stain of murdering Oenomaos, Pelops established the games in his name. Hippodamia, in turn, established the *Heraia* (games honouring Hera) the foot-race for girls, following Pelops' victory. Whatever the origin, the games encouraged athletes in their search for immortality through competitive sports.

Archaeological and other evidence suggests that the games at Olympia were local in origin and scope. During the upheavals in the Dark Age (1200-800 BC), however, these older cults at Olympia were replaced with the one honouring Zeus. The so-called Dorian invasion towards the end of the Mycenaean era is often cited as the cause for the formation of the Olympic games in the eighth century. The incursion or return of the so-called sons of Herakles (the Heraklidae), as the Greeks referred to these peoples, is linked to a change in the nature of the games and an increase in their reputation. These people, associated with the Spartans, were known for their military and physical prowess. At any rate, there is considerable evidence from the art of the early archaic period to suggest that the Dorians promoted athletic competition in the Peloponnese. A certain Iphitos is credited with reorganizing the games following the restructuring of the communities in Elis, while Lycurgus, king of Sparta, played a role in reforming the games at Olympia.

It is clear from this summary that the question from where the Greek interest in competitive sports arose has been subject to much discussion. While it is difficult from our vantage to determine precisely when and where the games originated, it is certain that the achievement of excellence in physical skills and the celebration of life have been the goals of the Games since ancient times.

As the Olympics were held in Greece this year, much information has been made available recently to those curious about the games in antiquity. For those who would like to read more about Greek sports generally and the Olympics in particular, I recommend the following new publications:

1. S. G. Miller, *Ancient Greek Athletics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
2. N.J. Spivey, *The Ancient Olympics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

The Web offers several good sites with wonderful images and useful texts on the topic. A special exhibit of the Perseus Digital Library Project is available at:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/Olympics/>

The Museum of the University of Pennsylvania at Pittsburgh has a site at:

<http://www.museum.upenn.edu/new/olympics/olympicintro.shtml>

A third recommended site is hosted by Dartmouth College; you have to register (for free) in order to access the information available there, but, as a quick glance will show, it is well worth the effort:

<http://minbar.cs.dartmouth.edu/greecom/olympics>

Lastly, there is the special feature of the journal called *Archaeology*, available at:

<http://www.archaeology.org/online/features/olympics>