



Then and now

by

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Exhibition essay

1000 years of the Olympic Games: treasures of ancient Greece

The ancient Olympic Games began in 776 BC and ran for longer than a thousand years. They petered out during the rule of the Roman empire and as a consequence of the rise of the Christian religion, with which they were not compatible. Buildings in Olympia itself were converted for church use from about AD 400 but by that time Olympia was a ghost of its former self.

The traditionally accepted date for the origin of the games, 776 BC, has been established from a fascinating mixture of evidence. Information was first collected by the scholar Hippias who came from the district of Elis in which Olympia is situated. Hippias belonged to that intellectually glittering fifth century BC movement, the Sophists, who wandered through the ancient Greek world as probably the first ever professional teachers and helped to give Greek society its literally sophisticated texture. A century later, Aristotle improved on Hippias' information and it is the work of these two scholars that forms the basis of the historiography of the Olympic Games, including the listing of names of individual winners of specific events. As you would expect, archaeological finds also supply a wealth of information, particularly the clearly drawn pictures on Athenian pottery. Thus the objects in the Powerhouse Museum's exhibition, which this book accompanies, provide primary evidence of a centuries-long tradition that our modern Olympics attempt to emulate.

If 776 BC is the generally recognised date for the beginning of the formalised or codified Olympic Games, such events were well known on the mainland of Greece, among the Aegean islands and the coast of Asia Minor for a much longer period, perhaps another thousand years beforehand.

The region of Elis on the west coast of the Peloponnese was inhabited for a couple of millennia BC and Olympia emerged as a sacred site around 1000 BC. It was never a city. From an Australian perspective, it is tempting to see similarities between Canberra and Olympia. Both were virtually empty sites chosen for great things because they were politically neutral or, better still, innocent. The choice of Olympia as the site of the greatest series of athletic events in the history of humanity neither favoured nor gave advantage to any developed political or social entity.

But if an innocuous backwater near the west coast of the Peloponnese gave its name to the Olympics, it should be remembered that this great athletic tradition was by no means restricted to Olympia itself—athletic contests took place at centres throughout the Panhellenic world. The name Olympia is worth dwelling on because it holds the key to the most important condition of the ancient Games, one that distinguishes them radically from the modern series that began in 1896.

Olympia (and the Olympics) takes its name from Mount Olympus, which is well to the north and about a degree to the east of Olympia, on the border of Thessaly and Macedonia. Mount Olympus was the home of the gods, reigned over by the greatest god—Zeus. Long before the first games, Olympia was a rural shrine, devoted to the worship of Zeus. No one knows why Olympia should organise a racing event in 776 BC but it may well have been the introduction of a new concept, the notion of an athletic contest as a divine or sacred act. (The first meeting consisted only of a single running race and it was won, appropriately, by a local man, an Elean.)

The central and cardinal fact here is that the Olympic Games were sacred and every aspect of them was of sacred significance. Nothing could be more different from our modern Olympics, which are entirely secular—no aspect of them is of any religious significance. Once this is understood, many other remarkable conditions of the ancient games begin to make sense, principal among which is their vital importance as a binding or cohesive factor essential to the texture and longevity of Hellenic culture.

It is well known that the many different political entities that made up the ancient Greek world, city-states, lived in a state of tension and conflict. They were frequently at war with one another. But the sacred nature of the games was respected by all and it guaranteed immunity to enemies. While the games were on, a truce was on. The benefits of this to the survival of Hellenic culture are inestimable. The link between contest and immunity from war (I carefully avoid the word ‘aggression’) is reinforced by the fact that when that immunity, having lasted for a millennium, was no longer necessary, the games themselves lost meaning and impetus. Under the Romans and the famous Pax Romana, factional warfare was simply not possible and this was one of a few important conditions that brought about the demise of a very long tradition.

The connection between the ancient Olympic Games and military prowess is another element that distinguishes them sharply from the modern Olympics. Of course, nowadays, wars are increasingly fought via push-button computer technology. Missiles in the ancient Greek armoury had to be thrown by hand. Thus the connection between the javelin event in the ancient games and warfare is unmistakable. Even more obvious is hoplite racing: Greek foot soldiers raced wearing armour and carrying shields in one of the most popular contests in the games.

Chariot racing, an event that has not survived into the modern games, also resonated with military significance. In the Powerhouse exhibition, a magnificent Pentelic marble relief shows a chariot event, fearsomely dangerous, in which a helmeted, shield-carrying athlete clings on with his right arm outstretched to stabilise himself before he leaps clear of the vehicle and its left wheel (**cat. no. 43**).



Fragment of a votive relief depicting a race for Apobatai
National Archaeological Museum, Athens NAM 1391
(cat. no. 43)

It is clear from innumerable painted vases that armed combat was extensively practised in the gymnasia, the training centres for athletes. Athletic training in the ancient world was hard, disciplined and dedicated, as it is today. Unlike today, however, ancient Greek athletes were also schooled in philosophy and the meaning of life, which were considered inseparable from the training of the body. The gymnasium occupied a central role in society at large. It was a meeting place, an institution of prominence and significance in the community.

The ancient Olympics featured a number of close-contact events of the kind that are still popular today but were then considerably more savage. Boxers didn't wear gloves but taped up their wrists and hands with leather straps for some minimal protection. The marble profile of a boxer from Kerameikos Museum, Athens, shows his taped hand raised next to his head (**cat. no. 41**). The remarkable bronze arm from the Athens National Archaeological Museum affords a graphic illustration of a boxer's taped hand.



Fragment of a grave stele of a boxer
Kerameikos Museum, Greece, P1054
(cat. no. 41)

Wrestling was a major Greek sporting event that survives in the modern Olympics but nobody has yet dared to introduce the dreaded *pankration*. This was an all-in fight in which practically nothing was barred, although the judges, representing Zeus, frowned on biting. It was not unknown in these ferocious events for the winner to be declared posthumously.

Winning was all that mattered in the ancient Olympics. ‘Winner takes all’ is a phrase that certainly applies (**cat. no. 52**). Modern events have placings: silver for second place and bronze for third. The Greeks had no interest in or conception of prizes for anything other than winning. The only occasions when placings were recognised at all were equestrian events and then only when the same person owned all placed horses: first, second and third.

Modern events have records. We have watches; the Greeks didn’t. But neither did they care whether an athlete won by a wide margin or edged in. It was all the same to them. All you had to do was win.

Nonetheless, there are clearly recognisable similarities between the ancient games and the modern Olympics. I have already mentioned the javelin but we have also copied the discus event. In the Powerhouse exhibition is part of a magnificent relief from the National Archaeological Museum of a discus thrower in Parian marble that shows a large sun-like discus framing the athlete’s head (**cat. no. 28**). From Olympia itself the exhibition shows a bronze figurine of a discus thrower and a bronze discus (**cat. nos 27 and 29**).

The Greeks had several footrace events just as we do. They were run over different distances based on the length of the stadium. Though it sounds like stating the obvious, there was a starting line and a finishing line, just like today. It is still possible to go to Olympia and stand at the starting line just as thousands of sprinters did over a thousand years. The Greeks also mixed up five events together to produce the pentathlon, another of their ideas that we have copied.

One event that differed slightly from the modern version was the long jump. Greek jumpers carried weights that were carved to provide a convenient grip, one in each hand. These weights were jettisoned at a critical point in the jump to achieve lift and momentum (**cat. no. 26**).

If a modern spectator were able to time-travel back to, let's say, the fifth century BC (to take everybody's favourite epoch) to the stadium at Olympia, he would notice a number of similarities between the games at Olympia and the Sydney 2000 games and he would also spot some differences. You will notice that I haven't used inclusive language, because in the main it would have to be a he! No married women were allowed in, though it seems that unmarried women may have been an exception. All participants however were male. Another startling difference that would astonish our time-traveller is that all the athletes were naked. And for that matter, all training was done in the nude, except for hoplites wearing plumed helmets, shields and greaves (or leg armour) up to the knee. Interestingly enough, it was the nudity of the Greek games that led the tut-tutting Romans to put an end to them, among other reasons.

Today, no one knows why ancient Greek athletes trained and competed in the nude. There have been many scholarly and fanciful explanations, chief among which is that in some way nakedness equated with idealism or with the sacred. However, anyone familiar with the graphic art of ceramic decoration or with bronze and marble sculptures from ancient Greece cannot escape the glaringly obvious conclusion that there was an enduring theme of homoeroticism throughout ancient Greek athletics and ancient Greek art.

In the matter of duration, the modern tradition has a long way to go before it catches up with that of the ancient Greeks—at least another 900 years! Even that wouldn't come close, in a sense, because the modern Olympics are staged once every four years. That is an interval, a periodicity, that was borrowed direct from Olympia, where the games were quadrennial. But in addition to the countless stadia across the Hellenic world, Olympia was the first and pre-eminent of four 'premier league' centres. The other three were Delphi, Nemea and Corinth. The Pythian Games at Delphi were also quadrennial; the Nemean Games were biennial and so were the Isthmian Games at Corinth. These major events were staggered so that there was at least one every year, and, as I have said, that went on without a break for centuries.

The great four were known as the *periodos*, or the circuit. And since the games were sacred, each of the four was ruled by a presiding deity. Apollo was the patron god of the Pythian Games, Corinth was devoted to Poseidon and Zeus himself found time to look after Nemea. All aspects of the Olympic traditions were championed by patron deities. Thus Herakles, hero-cum-immortal, was the champion of training, of the *gymnasia*. A

particularly fine statue of Herakles in Pentelic marble comes from the National Archaeological Museum in Athens to the Powerhouse exhibition (**cat. no. 16**).



Statue of Herakles
National Archaeological Museum, Athens, NAM 253
(cat. no. 16)

Just as we have a cultural Olympiad today, so, in the original games, the Greeks took artistic events outside the stadium seriously. Women could participate in these events, and they did, with just as much competitive vigour as the male athletes on the inside. Whether it was wrestling, poetry or playing the lyre, for the Greeks, winning was all.



This essay is reprinted with kind permission of the author and the full version is also available in the Exhibition catalogue, 1000 years of the Olympic Games: treasures of ancient Greece, Measham, Spathari, and Donnelly, Powerhouse Museum, 2000.

