Olympic Self-Sacrifice

*With the Sydney Olympics up and running, **Paul Cartledge** explores the radical cultural differences between our present-day interpretation of the Games and their significance in the ancient world.*

The modern Olympics seem so much part and parcel of our modern world—all those accusations of drug-taking and financial chicanery—that it is hard to remember they are only just over a hundred years old. Their founder, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, wished to foster both athletic excellence and international harmony, and as a conventionally educated French aristocrat he looked back to the ancient Greek Olympic Games for inspiration, believing fondly that that was exactly what they too had done, and why they had been founded. In fact, de Coubertin was wildly wrong: not only about the peaceful diplomatic mission of the ancient Games, but also, and more crucially, about their essential nature. The original Olympics, as we shall see, were desperately alien to what we understand by competitive sports today.

First, however, a brief recapitulation of what the ancient Games actually consisted of by the time they were definitively reorganised in the aftermath of the Persian Wars (490–479 BC). They were held then, as always, before and since, at Olympia, in the north-west Peloponnese, a relatively insignificant and inaccessible location. They were under the presidency of the local city-state of Elis, again not one of the major players in the ancient Greek league. So far as the sports component went, there were by then nine main events, all for male competitors only: the *stadion* or one-lap sprint (about 200 metres); *diaulos* or 400 metres; dolichos or 'long' distance (24 laps); *pentathlon*; boxing; four-horse chariot race; *pankration*; horse race; and race-in-armour. But the sports component was only one part, and not the most important, of the five-day festival, held at the second full moon after the summer solstice. The festival began with a swearing-in and oath-taking. It was punctuated by religious rituals and communal singing of victory hymns. And it ended with a religious procession to the Temple of Olympian Zeus, where the victors were crowned, followed by the sacrifice of many animals, feasting and celebrations.

It was indeed the Greeks who invented the idea of competitive games or sports. Their word *agon*, meaning 'competition', gives us our word 'agony', which is a fair indication of the spirit of ancient Greek competitiveness. But they did so within a specifically religious context. We sometimes say today, metaphorically, that for some, sport is a religion. But for the ancient Greeks the sport of the Olympic Games was quite literally a religious exercise—a display of religious devotion and worship. The Olympic Games, the grand-daddy of all the many hundreds of regular and irregular athletic festivals held throughout the Greek world, were in origin part of the worship of Zeus Olympios (Zeus, the mighty overlord of Mt Olympos), far away to the north in Thessaly.

Parallels in this respect can be drawn with the development of the theatre. It was the ancient Greeks, and more especially the Athenians, who invented what is recognisably our idea of theatre, but they did so within the context of religious festivals in honour of the wine-god Dionysos. 'Theatre' at, for example, our Edinburgh 'Festival', bears little obvious trace of its origins in the festivals of Dionysos at Athens (apart perhaps from the consumption of alcohol).

To show how heavily the Games impacted on the Greeks' everyday consciousness, mentality and behaviour, I shall consider four allegedly historical examples, three of them taken from the not (to us) so obviously religious fields of war and politics away from the sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia. It does not matter whether the incidents happened exactly as reported. The point is that the Greeks unquestioningly assumed they could have done, since they fitted in with their established, conventional outlook. They help us to understand the nature of the religious atmosphere and ritual that the Games enshrined, and to answer the question of in what sense and to what extent they remained a religious festival, despite a certain process of secularisation.

The first example concerns a man from the island of Rhodes, who was given the nationalistic name of Dorieus, 'the Dorian'; something akin to our call-

ing a Scottish boy Scott, or an Irish-American girl Erin. This Dorieus came from a family of extraordinarily successful gamesmen. His own speciality was the *pankration*, a notoriously gruelling mixture of judo, boxing and all-in wrestling, with practically no holds barred. In 432, 428 and 424 BC, as we learn from contemporary documents, he won no fewer than three Olympic crowns in a row. These were in addition to eight victories at the Isthmian Games, another Panhellenic (all-Greek) games festival which was held every two years; seven at the Nemean Games (also biennial); and one, by a walkover—the Greek for which was 'without dust'—since no one would challenge him, at the Pythian Games, which were held every four years at Delphi. The fact that he won at all four of the so-called 'Circuit' Games entitled him to claim the special accolade of 'Circuit Victor'.

Dorieus, as his name suggests, was fanatically pro- the Dorian Spartans and anti- the Ionian Athenians. Towards the end of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC) between Sparta and Athens, when Athens had almost lost its control of the east Mediterranean, Dorieus fought on the Spartan side with his own ships. But the Athenians captured him and brought him alive to Athens. They were about to put him to death as an enemy, when it became known to the Assembly who he was. Whereupon 'they changed their minds and let him go without doing him the least ungracious action,' as one Athenian source puts it. Would we have treated a captured German athlete in 1944 in quite so gracious a manner, I wonder?

My second example also concerns the Athenian treatment of a successful Olympic competitor, but this time one of its own citizens, the pin-up glamour-boy Alcibiades. In 415 BC he was the leading spirit behind the imperialist gamble of invading and, ideally, conquering all of Sicily. The gamble, we know, ended in total disaster two years later, but at the time, when Alcibiades stood up in the Assembly to speak in its favour, he was on a high and Athens was on a bit of a roll. In addition to the more practical political and military reasons Alcibiades gave for the Athenians to vote in favour of his proposal, he threw in an extraordinary argument based on his recent success in the Olympic Games.

Can we imagine Tony Blair arguing in favour of war in Kosovo on the grounds that he owned a horse that had won the Derby?

He was, he said, the sort of man who had achieved the unprecedented feat of not only winning the four-horse chariot race at the Olympics, probably in 416, but also of entering no fewer than seven chariot teams in all, which between them gained second, fourth and seventh places as well as the crown itself. Alcibiades had not, of course, personally driven the winning team; as in the Palio, the horse race held at Siena since the Middle Ages, professionals were hired to act as drivers. But he had put up the money—an enormous amount. He even persuaded Euripides to write a commemorative ode about it. Can we imagine Tony Blair or Bill Clinton arguing in favour of war in Kosovo, say, on the grounds that a horse of theirs had won the Epsom or Kentucky Derby?

My third example is not an individual, but rather a city, namely Sparta, which was Athens' major rival or enemy for much of the Classical period. In 480 the Persian Great King Xerxes had led a mighty expedition into Greece by land and sea from the north and east. It was not quite as mighty as Herodotus would have us believe (1,700,000 land troops; 1,207 ships), but it was nevertheless a huge armament to pit against the relatively puny and very disunited Greek resistance. Early in 480 the handful of Greek cities that could actually agree to co-operate, up to a point anyway, decided their first land strategy should be to defend the passes from Thessaly into central Greece. One of these ran through Thermopylai, the 'Hot Gates'. Yet Leonidas, the Spartan king appointed to defend Thermopylai, set off from Sparta with a mere 300 men, champion fighters all, of course, but still only a tiny task force. Why so? Because the Spartans were an exceptionally religious people, and it happened to be the Dorians' sacred month *Karneios* (in honour of ram-god Apollo), so they felt unable to send out a full force until the *Karneia* festival was over. The other allies found this a completely convincing explanation, since they too had a religious reason for sending out no more than advance forces of their own—as Herodotus put it, 'there was the Olympic festival, which fell in at just the same time as this outbreak of war.' When Herodotus came later to offer a definition of Greekness, it is no surprise to find that central to it was the Greeks' common religious outlook and practice.

Finally, we come to Kleomedes from the tiny Aegean island of Astypalaia, who was victor in the boxing at the Olympics of 484. Let me quote the relevant passage of Pausanias, a religious travel-writer of the second century AD, but one who used much earlier sources:

> They say Kleomedes of Astypalaia killed a man called Hikkos of Epidauros; he was condemned by the judges and lost his victory, and went out of his mind from grief. He went home to Astypalaia and attacked a school there where there were sixty boys. He overturned the pillar that held up the roof, and the roof fell in on them. The people stoned him and he took refuge in the sanctuary of Athene, where he climbed inside a chest and pulled down the lid. The Astypalaians struggled in vain to get it open, and in the end smashed in its wooden sides. But they found no trace of Kleomedes either alive or dead. So they sent to the Delphic oracle to ask what had become of Kleomedes, and they say the Pythian priestess gave them this oracle: 'Astypalaian Kleomedes is the last of the heroes. Worship him—he is no longer mortal.'

I have listed these four incidents in reverse chronological order, because I want to show the religious content increasing with each instance. For the ancient Greeks, however, religion was so

intimately intertwined with every other aspect of their lives that they did not actually have a word corresponding to our 'religion' (which we have taken from Latin). The nearest they got was a circumlocution meaning, literally, 'the things of the gods'.

A victor in the Olympic Games, in other words, whether or not he actually won in person, and whether or not he had to kill his opponent to win, was regarded as having been touched by divinity, as being raised above the station of a mere mortal. He might even, as in the case of the Houdini-like Kleomedes, receive hero-cult, a form of religious worship, after his death. I stress too the gendered 'he'. This was strictly men-only sport. In fact, women, apart from a priestess, were banned even from watching the Olympic sports. A doubtless apocryphal tale had it that a female relative of Dorieus tried to sneak in to watch her male relations carrying off all those crowns. She was forced to go in male disguise, but alas tripped over, her *chiton* (tunic) rode up, and all—or all that mattered—was revealed.

Gender-disguise and bodily revelation offer an appropriate point of departure for our enquiry into the precise religious nature of the Games. They probably did begin, chiefly as a local Peloponnesian festival, some time around their alleged starting date of 776 BC. But their ultimate origins are lost in the mists of time. All athletes competed at Olympia entirely naked, *gumnos*, whence our word 'gymnastics'. Aetiological stories to account for this practice differed; according to one, in 720 the eventual winner of the *stadion* race (hence 'stadium') or 200-metre dash, then still the only event, crossed the finishing line wearing rather less than when he left the starting sill. In other words, his kit unravelled and fell off, but he won, and ever after all competitors, whatever the event, ran or boxed or threw, or whatever, stark naked (apart from a truss).

In reality, this literally gymnastic practice was not adopted because it was ergonomically more efficient, nor because the ancient Greeks were devoted naturists. Nor, I suspect, was it a survival from those far-off Palaeolithic days when 'Man the Hunter' allegedly hunted in the nude. This was, rather, a case of ritual nudity, marking the sacredness of Olympic space and time, a crucial part of the religious ritual within which the running and (later) other events were enfolded.

The Olympic truce was simply a practical device for ensuring that competitors and spectators could attend the Games in safety.

Another sign that the Olympic Games were religious, and indeed specially religious, was that the prizes awarded were always symbolic tokens—simple crowns made of olive leaves taken from trees growing wild in the Altis, or sacred precinct of Zeus. Olympic competitors did not compete for money nor for other intrinsically valuable objects. (In contrast, bronze tripods were awarded at the games in honour of Hera at Argos, and oil-filled decorated jars donated at the Athenian Panathenaia.) Competitors at Olympia were therefore technically amateurs, although they could earn a fortune at other, value-prize games, so perhaps we should rather say they were shamateurs. At any rate, the ideology of amateurism and religious devotion was crucial to the ancient Games. Pierre de Coubertin was not then completely off-beam in insisting that his new, revived Olympics should be for amateur as opposed to professional athletes ('athletes' comes from Greek *athlon* meaning 'prize').

He was, on the other hand, totally wrong in his interpretation of the spirit in which the ancient Greeks competed. What seems to have especially misled him was the sacred Olympic truce which ran for a month on either side of the five-day festival. This was not a symbol of the amity then reigning among the comity of Greek nations, but a severely practical device for ensuring that the competitors and spectators could get to the Games safely, and that the Games could then be held without interruption from the otherwise endemic Greek inter-state warfare. This explains the precise name given to the truce: *ekekheiria*—'a staying of hands' or armistice. Actually, even the declaration of the truce was not always foolproof. In 364, warfare spilled over into the Altis itself.

Furthermore, despite the wishful imaginings of the anglophile de Coubertin, the events at the ancient Olympics were not conducted in any 'gentlemanly' British spirit of 'fair play'. They were more like a paramilitary exercise, 'war minus the shooting', as George Orwell once described modern professional sport. From the gender point of view, moreover, they were in the fullest sense a display of *andreia*. This literally meant 'manliness', but it was also the general Greek word for 'courage' in the sense of martial pugnaciousness. The unintended death of Hikkos in 484 at the hands, or rather fists, of Kleomedes was, predictably, not a one-off occurrence.

To conclude, let me focus briefly on why this article is entitled 'Olympic self-sacrifice'. Sacrifice, derived from the Latin, means in general a 'making-sacred'. Specifically, it is a term used by scholars of ancient religions to describe those acts of ritual dedication and devotion whereby something is given up or offered up by mankind to a god or the gods in exchange for an expected return. It refers to an act of communication or communion between human and superhuman, mortal and divine, but also an act that marks the unbridgeable gap between the two. Almost anything could in principle be sacrificed in this way—even bodily sweat, if you believe David Sansone's theory explaining the origins and meaning of the *stadion* race at the Olympics as a ritual expenditure, or sacrifice, of sweat as the runners dashed towards their goal, the altar of Zeus, in a ritual designed to ensure the goodwill of the Father of Gods and Men.

Less fanciful, and historically better attested, is the religious significance of the undoubted climax of the ancient Olympic festival. This was not in fact any of the athletic events, but the concluding grand procession to the altar of Zeus outside his temple by all participants and spectators, led by the winner of the *stadion* race (who gave his name to

the whole Games—thus 720 BC was the Games of Orsippos of Megara). This rit-·al procession was followed by a great .ood-sacrifice of a *hekatomb*, 100 oxen, provided by the organising city of Elis. Such was the antiquity of the festival, and so numerous were the cattle slaughtered ritually over the years, that the great altar of Zeus was not built as usual out of stone, but composed simply of the burnt animals' ashes congealed with blood and fat.

That is perhaps not a very enticing thought, but then ancient religion is often desperately alien to our way of thinking. To the Greeks, however, it all seemed the most natural thing in the world. And they had the texts to back them up—above all the poems of Hesiod (*Theogony* and *Works and Days*) in which they had heard, no doubt many times, the origins-myth of how the Titan Prometheus had once tricked the younger (that is, more recently created) god Zeus on behalf of mankind in the matter of animal blood-sacrifice. Thereafter, the Olympian gods were entitled to receive only the smell of the animal sacrifice, which rose up to them from the burning of the animal bones wrapped in fat, whereas men got to eat the meat and innards, which thanks to Prometheus's theft of fire they were able to cook to a turn. They then ate the cooked meat in a communion meal which reinforced their sense of common identity as sharers in the ritual feast. In the very special case of the Panhellenic Olympics, it also reinforced their sense of national identity as Greeks.

FOR FURTHER READING

Exhibition Catalogues of the Olympic Museum, Lausanne: D. Vanhove (ed.) *Olympism in Antiquity* vols. 1–3 (1993, 1996, 1998); Pausanias (ed. & tr. Peter Levi), *Description of Greece,* 2 vols. (Penguin 1971); Paul Cartledge, *The Greeks* (revised edition OUP, 1997); M.I. Finley and H.W. Pleket, *The Olympic Games: the first thousand years* (Chatto & Windus 1976); Mark Golden, *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece* (CUP, 1998); Michael Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World* (Yale UP, 1987); David Sansone, *Greek Athletics and the Genesis of Sport* (University of California Press, 1988); Judith Swaddling, *The Ancient Olympic Games*, 2nd edition (British Museum Press, 1999); A. and N. Yalouris, *Olympia: the Museum and the Sanctuary* (Ekdotike Athenon, 1987); CD-Rom: 'Olympia, 2,800 Years of Athletic Games'—Finatec Multimedia (Athens) media@athena.compulink.gr

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