

# Ode to the Games

by John Stringer

*It seems appropriate this week to look at the Olympic Games, and some of the poetry that derives from them, or relates to them, one way or another.*

The Olympic Games was one of the four great national athletic meetings in ancient Greece, which were open to all Greek men; collectively they were called the Panhellenic Games.

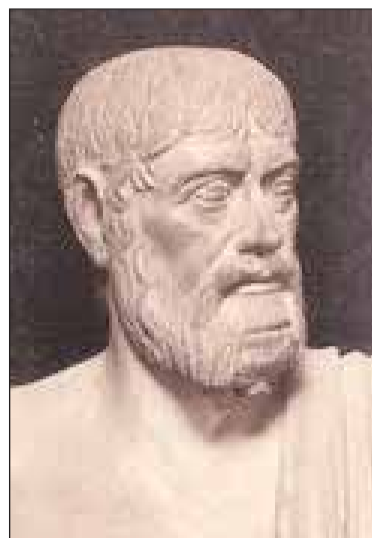
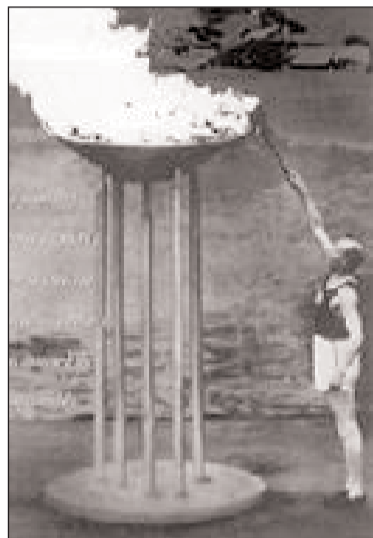
The Olympic Games were held at Olympia (as one might suppose); the Pythian Games were held at Delphi (this name derives from Pytho, the serpent, who was worshipped as god of the Delphic oracle in early times before the introduction of the Olympic deities, after which they were held in honour of Apollo). The Pythian Games were timed, like the Olympics, on a four year cycle; two years after (and two years before) each Olympic Games. They were founded sometime in the 6th Century BCE, and, unlike the Olympic Games, also featured competitions for music and poetry. The music and poetry competitions pre-dated the athletic portion of the games, and were said to have been started by Apollo after he killed Pytho. Otherwise, the athletic events were the same as the Olympic Games, except that there was no four-horse chariot race. It is claimed that women could participate in the Pythian Games.

The games held on the Isthmus of Corinth were called the Isthmian Games, and the fourth Games was held at Nemea. The site of Ancient Nemea lies in an upland valley in the modern Greek province of Korinthia, and in the eastern foothills of the Arkadian mountains. In 573 BCE,

Nemea became the location for a biennial Panhellenic Games. By the late 5th Century BCE, the Games had moved from Nemea, perhaps to Argos. The Isthmian Games were held both the year before and the year after the Olympic Games, while the Pythian Games were held in the third year of the Olympiad cycle. The Isthmian Games were held in honour of Poseidon, and were said to have originated around 580 BCE to celebrate the death of the tyrant Kypselos. Another story states that these Games were founded by Theseus.

The Olympic Games in particular were to become famous throughout the Greek world. There are records of the champions at Olympia from 776 BCE to 217 CE. The Games were abolished in 393 CE by the Roman emperor Theodosius I, probably because of their pagan associations. For the first 100 or 200 years, Olympic champions came from a dozen or more Greek cities, the majority from Sparta and Athens, but athletes in the next three centuries were drawn from 100 cities in the Greek empire, and champions in the final 100 years or so before the Games were discontinued came from as far as Antioch, Alexandria, and Sidon.

Although the first Olympic champion listed in the records was one Coroebus of Elis, a cook, who won the sprint race in 776 BCE, it is generally accepted that the Games were probably at least 500 years old at that time. According to one legend they were founded by Heracles, son of the human woman Alcmene and Zeus. The Games, like all Greek games, were an intrinsic part of a religious festival. They were held in honour of Zeus at Olympia in the city-state of Elis, on a track about 32 meters (35 yards) wide. The racing length was one stade, a



distance of about 192 meters (210 yards). In the early Olympics a race, called a stade, covered one length of the track. Horse racing, which became part of the ancient games, was held in the hippodrome, south of the stadium.

At the meeting in 776 BCE there was apparently only one event, the stade, but other events were added over the ensuing decades. In 724 BCE a two-length race, diaulos, roughly similar to the 400-metre race, was included, and four years later the dolichos, a long-distance race possibly to be compared to the modern 1,500- or even 5,000-metre event, was added. Wrestling and the pentathlon were introduced in 708 BCE. The latter was an all-around competition consisting of five events—the long jump, javelin throw, discus throw, foot race, and wrestling. Boxing was introduced in 688 BCE, and in 680 a chariot race. In 648 the pankration (from Greek pankration), a kind of all-strength, or no-holds-barred, wrestling, was included: kicking and hitting were allowed; only biting and gouging (thrusting a finger or thumb into an opponent's eye) were forbidden. Between 632 and 616 BCE events for boys were introduced. And from time to time further events were added, including contests for fully armed soldiers, for heralds, and for trumpeters. The program must have been as varied as that of the modern Olympics, although the athletics (track and field) events were limited; there was no high jumping in any form and no individual field event, except in the pentathlon.

Until the 77th Olympiad (472 BCE) all the contests took place on one day; later they were spread, with perhaps some fluctuation, over four

days, with a fifth devoted to the closing-ceremony presentation of prizes and a banquet for the champions. Sources generally agree that women were not allowed as competitors or, except for the priestess of Demeter, as spectators. In most events the athletes participated in the nude.

The prizes for the victors in the Games were wreaths. In the Olympics, the wreath was of wild olive; in the Pythian Games, the wreath was laurel; in the Isthmian Games, the wreath was wild parsley or pine; and in the Nemean Games the wreath was of wild parsley.

The cultural achievement most directly tied to the Olympic Games was poetry commissioned in honor of athletic victors. These poems, called epinicion odes, were written by the most famous poets of the day, including Pindar (518 – c.440 BCE), Bacchylides (c. 520 – 450 BCE), and Simonides (c.556 – 468 BCE), and they were extremely popular. Proof of this is that the playwright Aristophanes portrays an average, not especially literary Athenian man who asks his son to sing a particular forty-year-old epinicion poem composed by Simonides. The poem, and the athlete, lived on in people's memories long after the day of victory. The epinicion odes were written to immortalize the athletic victors, and they have lasted longer than many of the statues and inscriptions which were made for the same purpose.

Simonides came from Ceos, and is credited with originating the epinicion ode. His epinicion of 520 BCE is the earliest known of the form. (His lines on the Spartan rear guard that held the pass of Thermopylae against the

Persians in 480 BCE are a particularly memorable epitaph.) Bacchylides was his nephew, and they both used primarily what is called the dithyrambic form, which is impassioned chanted poetry, with a solo singer and a chorus. Bacchylides called himself 'The Nightingale of Ceos'.

I have talked about the poetry of Pindar before, and you may remember that generally the Odes consist of a set of triads; each triad involves three stanzas: the strophe, the antistrophe, and the epode. The strophe and the antistrophe have identical lengths and meter; the epode is slightly different. Subject to this structure, each Ode has its own meter, different from any other Ode.

Pindar wrote fifteen Odes relating to victors at the Olympiads; twelve relating to the Pythian Games; eleven for the Nemean Games; and eight for the Isthmian Games.

The first Poem of the Week this week is the Olympian XIV: for Asopichus of Orchomenus, Winner of the Boys' Foot-Race. This is a very short Ode, and it is different from the standard form I have described above, in that it consists of only two strophes. The date of the victory and of the Ode is uncertain, but it is thought to date from 488 BCE, when Pindar was thirty years old. If so, it is the earliest of his Olympian Odes. I have also mentioned before about the difficulty of translating poetry. The translation I have chosen to use for the Poem of the Week is by Geoffrey S. Conway (1972). However, I found a very different version on the web:

I

*The waters of Kaphisos belong  
To the place of fine horses where  
you dwell,*

*Queens of song, in sparkling  
Orchomenos,  
Graces, who watch  
Over the ancient race of the  
Minyans,*

*Hear, when I pray. By your help  
All sweet and delightful things  
Belong to men; if anyone  
Is wise or lovely or famous.  
For without the holy Graces  
Not even the Gods rule dances  
or feasts.*

*They dispose all that is done in  
Heaven;*

*Their thrones are set  
At the side of Pythian Apollo, the  
golden-bowed,  
And they worship the everlasting  
glory  
Of the Father on Olympos.*

*to be continued tomorrow*

