



SOME COMMENTS ABOUT THE OLYMPIC GAMES AND PANHELLENIC IN ANCIENT GREECE

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Abstract:

In this study, it is aimed to make current comments about some sports organizations held in Ancient Greece. A literature review was conducted. The ancient Greeks invented some sports and improved others. Today, the origin of the modern Olympics is connected to the sports games organized in ancient Greece. These games are famous as the Olympic games, the panhellenic games, the Hera games in which only women participate, the Pythian, Isthmian, Nemean and Asclepia Games. It is also known as the birthplace of marathon sport. It is known that the Olympic Games started with athletics in 776 BC to honor Zeus, the king of the gods. Later, other sports were added. Sportive games, which started in ancient Greece in honor of the Gods and were celebrated with festivals, continued at certain intervals (Olympics every 4 years). Although wreaths of olive branches were given as awards in the beginning, the awards have changed over time. An interesting situation in the ancient Greek period is that there were sports games exclusively for women.

Keywords: Ancient Greece, Olympic Games, Panhellenic Games, Marathon

1. Introduction

1.1 The Origins of Sports and Games in the Ancient World

The origins of sports and games extend back to the earliest periods of human history. Archaeological, artistic, and written evidence show that sport was not only a physical activity but also a religious, cultural, and social practice. In this context, it is possible to trace the origins of sports and games back to 2500 BC. In particular, the frescoes found in the Knossos Palace in Crete, belonging to the Minoan civilization, shed light on the early

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sports and games culture. The fresco in Knossos, mostly interpreted as a "*bull jumping (taurokathapsia)*" scene, depicts three acrobats interacting with a large bull. This scene is thought to have a religious meaning because of the bull's symbolic connection with Zeus (Kyle, 2015). Similarly, the wall paintings unearthed in Akrotiri (Thera/Santorini), one of the important settlements of the Aegean world, show that young individuals participated in sporting activities from an early age. A fresco depicting two young boxers in gloves reveals that in antiquity, boxing was not only a competitive sport but also an educational and ceremonial practice (Spivey, 2004). These findings prove that sport was a well-developed tradition in the Aegean world even before Ancient Greece. In Ancient Greece, sport acquired a systematic and institutional structure. The organization of the Olympic Games in honor of Zeus in 776 BC is accepted as the official starting date of this organization. However, both mythological narratives and archaeological data show that the origins of the Olympic Games go back much further than this date (Young, 2004).

The games were held in the sacred area of Olympia; athletes offered sacrifices before the statue of Zeus before the competitions and swore to abide by the rules. This clearly shows that sport was intertwined with religious rituals in Ancient Greece. The Olympic Games were initially seen not only as an arena for sporting competition but also as a way to communicate with the gods. Indeed, the Greeks used sporting competitions as a means of expressing gratitude to the gods and gaining their support (Nima *et al.*, 2019). In this respect, sport held a sacred meaning in ancient Greek society, and athletes were perceived as representatives of the gods. Successful athletes not only achieved individual victory but also enhanced the honor of the city-states (polis). The relationship between sport and daily life in ancient Greece was extremely strong. Gymnasiums and palaestras functioned as centers where young men were trained both physically and mentally. In these spaces, physical education, music, philosophy, and moral education were considered as a whole. The understanding that "*a sound mind resides in a sound body*" was one of the fundamental principles of the Greek education system (Golden, 2008). Therefore, sport was seen not only as a means of physical performance but also of character development. Many ancient Greek sports formed the basis of modern sports disciplines. Sports such as running, discus throwing, javelin throwing, wrestling, and boxing are included in both ancient games and the modern Olympic program. However, it is not accurate to say that all sports in the ancient world were invented in Greece. Many sports originated in different civilizations, but were systematized and codified by the Greeks (Crowther, 2007).

This further highlights the decisive role of Ancient Greece in the history of sports. In ancient times, sporting activities were mostly carried out within the framework of religious holidays and festivals. In addition to the Olympic Games, the Pythia, Isthmia, and Nemea games stood out as panhellenic organizations dedicated to the gods. These festivals increased cultural interaction between different city-states and contributed to the formation of a common Greek identity (Karakullukçu and İmamoğlu, 2021). In this context, sport was not only an individual or local activity, but also a social element that united the entire Greek world. This study argues that sports and games in the ancient world were not merely about physical competition. The aim is to demonstrate that it is a

multifaceted phenomenon with religious, social, educational, philosophical, and political dimensions.

2. Development and Conclusion

The Beginning and Development of Sport in Ancient Greece: It is difficult to give a precise date for the beginning of sport in Ancient Greece. The main reason for this is that sport emerged long before written history, and information from early periods is largely based on archaeological and mythological sources. However, current findings show that the origins of sports culture in Ancient Greece extend to the Bronze Age, or even earlier periods. The oldest known evidence of the existence of sport in Ancient Greece comes from archaeological artifacts belonging to the Minoan civilization. Pottery, seals, and wall paintings from the Minoan period, found especially in and around Knossos on the island of Crete, date back to around 3500 BC and clearly depict sporting activities. The most striking sporting event in these artifacts is the bull leap, called Ταυροκαθάψια (taurokathapsia). Taurokathapsia involved extremely dangerous acrobatic movements such as leaping, tumbling, and jumping over a moving bull while holding onto its horns. It is believed that this sport was not only a physical display but also held religious and ceremonial significance. The sacredness of the bull figure in Minoan culture suggests that this activity was seen as a means of communicating with the gods (Kyle, 2015; Castleden, 1990).

Another important source regarding the early stages of ancient Greek sports is Homer. The Patroclus Games, as described in Homer's *Iliad*, reveal the close relationship between sport and rituals of heroism, honor, and death. Organized by Achilles in memory of his closest friend Patroclus, who died in the Trojan War, these games included many sports such as running, wrestling, boxing, discus throwing, and chariot races. These narratives indicate that sporting competitions existed as early as 2000 BC. It is thought to date back to the 12th century and to be a part of the aristocratic warrior culture (Homer, *Iliad*; Golden, 2008). By the Archaic Period (8th–6th centuries BC), sport had gained a more systematic and institutional structure in ancient Greek society. During this period, the Greeks believed that a man should be competent in all areas of life—physical, mental, and moral. This understanding was expressed with the concept of arete (virtue/perfection). The Olympic Games were established in 776 BC with the need to honor the gods and to strengthen the common Greek identity. This date is accepted as the official beginning of the Olympic Games and is also considered one of the fundamental reference points of Greek chronology (Nima *et al.*, 2019; Young, 2004).

The great interest and success of the Olympic Games quickly led to the emergence of similar organizations. The Panhellenic Games system was formed in the 6th century with the organization of the Pythia (Delphi), Isthmia (Corinth), and Nemea games. These games were comprehensive festivals that included not only sporting competition but also religious ceremonies, poetry, and music contests. Thus, sport became both a physical activity and a cultural and religious institution in Ancient Greece (Crowther, 2007). In the Classical Period (5th–4th centuries BC), the ideology of sport was summarized by the

expression “Νοῦς ὑγιής ἐν σώματι ὑγιεῖ” (a sound mind in a sound body). This idea is mostly associated with Thales and later Plato; it emphasizes that physical and mental training are an inseparable whole. Gymnasiums and palaestras became centers where young men received both athletic and intellectual development (Biyik and Yazıcı, 2023a; Golden, 2008). From the 3rd century BC onwards, with Rome becoming the dominant power in the Mediterranean world, the character of sport began to transform. The Olympic Games and other Panhellenic games continued for several more centuries; however, they were now open not only to Greeks but also to athletes from other regions under Roman rule. This contributed to the spread of sport among different civilizations and increased cultural interaction. Thus, sport transcended the borders of Ancient Greece and became a common cultural heritage of the Mediterranean world (Kyle, 2015). A significant portion of our knowledge about ancient Greek sport comes from the works of ancient writers such as Herodotus, Homer, Pausanias, and Philostratos. In addition, paintings on ceramics, sculptures, and archaeological finds of sports equipment (such as discus, javelin, and barbell) provide concrete evidence of the history of sport. The discovery of stone and bronze discs, particularly those used in discus throwing, helps us understand the technical and competitive aspects of this sport (Spivey, 2004; Ermiş *et al.*, 2023).

2.1 The Philosophy and Social Dimension of Sport in Ancient Greece

In Ancient Greece, sport was considered not only a physical activity but also a philosophical, social, and cultural phenomenon. Some sports were directly invented by the Greeks, while others were developed and systematized by adopting elements from different civilizations. Sports such as wrestling (pale), discus throwing, javelin throwing, and pankration were both technically advanced and practiced within specific rules in Ancient Greece. In this respect, Ancient Greece is considered one of the first civilizations where sport was institutionalized and placed on a philosophical foundation (Crowther, 2007; Kyle, 2015). In Ancient Greece, sport was an integral part of daily life. Gymnasiums and palaestras were not only places where physical training was provided; they were also centers where philosophical discussions took place, and young men were educated mentally and morally. Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle argued that physical training should be considered together with the development of the mind and soul. This understanding is explained by the concept of “kalokagathia,” which forms the basis of Greek sports philosophy. Kalokagathia expresses that physical beauty and moral virtue form a whole (Golden, 2008).

However, it cannot be said that sports were equally accessible to everyone in Ancient Greece. Participation in sporting events was largely dependent on social status. Slaves were forbidden from participating in competitions, and poor individuals were largely excluded from sporting activities because they could not find the necessary time and financial resources. The vast majority of athletes participating in the Olympic Games and other Panhellenic organizations came from aristocratic or wealthy families. This situation reveals that sports were also an indicator of prestige and status in Ancient Greece (Biyik and Yazıcı, 2023b; Young, 2004).

The place of women in sports life was extremely limited. In general, women were forbidden from participating in the Olympic Games, or even as spectators. However, Sparta was an important exception in this regard. In Sparta, women received almost the same physical training as men; They participated in events such as running, discus throwing, and javelin throwing. This approach of the Spartans was based on the belief that strong mothers would raise strong warriors. In this respect, Sparta offers a unique model for women's participation in sports in the ancient Greek world (Pomeroy, 2002). One of the best indicators of the importance of sport in Ancient Greece is that the Olympic Games were organized to honor the Olympian gods. These games, dedicated to the gods, especially Zeus, reveal that sport had a sacred quality. Athletes competed not only for physical achievement but also to demonstrate their devotion to the gods. This shows that sport was intertwined with religious rituals and played a central role in Greek life (Nima *et al.*, 2019). Another important aspect of ancient Greek sports is their close relationship with warfare practice. Many sports, such as wrestling, javelin throwing, running, and chariot racing, served to develop the skills necessary for the battlefield. Artworks, ceramics, and sculptures clearly demonstrate how these sports were intertwined with military preparation. One of the most striking examples of this is the statue of Eniochos (the Charioteer), located within the bronze statue group dedicated to the sanctuary of Delphi. Depicting a young man participating in a chariot race, this statue symbolizes the concepts of sporting discipline, control, and honor (Yazıcı and İmamoğlu, 2023; Spivey, 2004).

2.3 Ancient Greek Sports Acquired Mythological Characteristics

Mythology was the foundation of the ancient Greeks' thinking, and everything around them had a story to tell. In antiquity, the Greeks explained all physical events and strange things with a wonderful story, all connected to gods and heroes. For example, lightning was the symbol of the mighty Zeus, who used it when it rained. But they also wondered how and why Zeus possessed this power. We can easily say that they tried to explain almost everything around them through mythology. Of course, this was the beginning of many great philosophical debates conducted by Aristotle, Plato, and other philosophers. They also attempted to answer questions about more recent events, such as the creation of the universe and even the origin of the Olympic Games. Sometimes more than one mythological story was believed because all these stories were passed down from generation to generation (George, 2016; Doğan and İmamoğlu, 2025a).

2.4 The Mythological Origins of the Ancient Olympic Games

The origins of the Ancient Olympic Games are explained by both historical and mythological narratives. This shows that in Ancient Greece, sport was not only a physical competition but also carried a religious and symbolic meaning. There are two main mythological narratives regarding the emergence of the Olympic Games, and these narratives reveal that sport had a sacred basis in the Greek worldview. The most common of these mythological narratives is based on the legend of Pelops. According to the legend, Pelops wanted to marry Hippodameia, the daughter of King Oinomaus of Pisa.

However, King Oinomaus learned from a prophecy he received from the famous oracle Pythia in Delphi that whoever married his daughter would cause his own death. Therefore, Oinomaus began to use a cruel method against Hippodameia's suitors. He held chariot races with every man who wanted his daughter; he killed those who lost the race. Oinomaus's invincibility in these races stemmed from his possession of extremely fast horses, gifted by the god Ares, and an experienced charioteer. Pelops, however, took a different approach. With the help of Hippodameia and Oinomaus's charioteer Myrtilos, the race was rigged; the wheels of the king's chariot were sabotaged. During the race, Oinomaus's chariot was destroyed, and the king lost his life. Following this victory, Pelops married Hippodameia and became king of Pisa. According to the legend, after this success, Pelops organized great games in Olympia to express his gratitude to Zeus, thus laying the foundation for the Olympic Games (Spivey, 2004; Kyle, 2015).

For the ancient Greeks, this legend was not only a story explaining the origins of the Olympic Games; it was also a symbolic narrative that made sense of the relationship between human behavior, fate, and divine will. The depiction of gods in human form and their portrayal with human emotions is a fundamental characteristic of Greek mythology. Gods feel jealousy, joy, anger, and can make mistakes. In this respect, the Peloponnesian myth demonstrates how the Greeks understood the universe and human actions (Mendot *et al.*, 2021). Another narrative regarding the mythological origins of the Olympic Games is related to Heracles. According to this narrative, after conquering the region of Elis, Heracles organized athletic competitions in honor of Zeus and defined the boundaries of the sacred area in Olympia. It is also accepted that Heracles determined the distance of the stadion run. This narrative further reinforces the sacredness of the games by directly linking them to a hero of divine origin (Young, 2004). These mythological narratives explain why the Olympic Games were so highly respected in ancient Greek society. The games were not only a field of sporting competition but also part of sacred rituals dedicated to the Olympian gods, primarily Zeus. Before competitions, athletes offered sacrifices to the gods, made vows, and promised to abide by the rules. This demonstrates that sport was perceived as a religious responsibility and a moral obligation (İmamoğlu and Koca, 2024; Nima *et al.*, 2019).

2.5 Where Ancient Greeks Trained

Ancient Greeks trained in sports facilities, and those wishing to participate in various sporting events usually had a coach who was a former athlete. Daily life was generally more difficult than we might imagine due to the strenuous training and numerous hands-on exercise activities. The Olympics are a prime example; competitive athletes were required to be at the sports facilities in Olympia six months before the Olympics to prepare. Until the 4th-3rd centuries BC, various philosophers and historians argued that physical fitness and mental clarity were two sides of the same coin, and that athletes and soldiers should care for both. Sports facilities were secure and provided space for all sports. The gymnasium was a long, large structure where sporting activities such as wrestling, running, boxing, jumping, discus throwing, and gymnastics were practiced. The palaestra was an open area where wrestling was taught and practiced. It was

surrounded by tall columns. In front of these porticos were changing rooms, baths, and rooms for storing sporting equipment. Stadiums were typically long and narrow, U-shaped, and included ample space for spectators. Athletes competed naked in running events (<https://www.kidslovegreece.com/en/greece>).

2.6 Equipment Used

Most sports used equipment not so different from what athletes use today. For example, boxing involved leather straps and himants. In javelin throwing, they carried a wooden spear, and in the long jump, athletes held reins while jumping. Dumbbells were weights held in each hand to help athletes jump longer distances.

2.7 Ancient Greeks Dedicated to Sport and Their Gods

It is now quite clear that the ancient Greeks were athletic and trained rigorously not only for competitions like the Panhellenic Games but also for warfare. Furthermore, ancient Greek culture and traditions included ways of honoring their gods because they were very religious, and sport was one of them. Their culture was always part of their mythology, and therefore, they wanted to show their gratitude to the gods. Over the centuries, they managed to change and develop sporting events dedicated to gods and heroes (Mendot *et al.*, 2021).

2.8 Panhellenic Games

The Panhellenic Games were held in four locations, each containing a sanctuary of a patron deity. People built these sanctuaries to honor the gods, and each was dedicated to a major deity. However, we know that other gods were also worshipped in these sanctuaries (<https://www.kidslovegreece.com/en/greece>).

3. Olympic Games (Olympia)

The Olympic Games were established in 776 BC to honor Zeus, the king of the gods. The Games were held every four years. They started with a single sport, competitive running, but gradually other sports like pentathlon and boxing were added. If you go back in time to Olympia, you can see the main temple of Zeus, where the magnificent 3-meter-long ivory statue of Zeus stood. We consider it one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, but it was destroyed. Other temples and sports facilities also existed (<https://www.kidslovegreece.com/en/greece>).

3.1 Hera Games

These were sports games exclusively for women. As you can imagine, women were not allowed to participate in athletic competitions at the Olympics. There probably weren't any competitions at all... But the Hera Games were also held every four years in Olympia. The Hera Games were athletic competitions held in honor of Hera, the goddess and wife of Zeus. Only young and unmarried girls were allowed to participate, and the sport consisted of running races (<https://www.kidslovegreece.com/en/greece>).

3.2 Pythian Games (at Delphi)

The Pythian Games were held at Delphi, which included a sanctuary dedicated to Apollo, the god of light and music. Delphi was considered the center of the world (omphalos) and was a sacred, political, and cultural center. According to legend, Apollo saw the location of Delphi and was very impressed. He wanted to build a sanctuary there, but a serpent named Python prevented him. They fought, and Apollo won. His priestess, Pythia, and the Games take their name from this serpent. Pythia was the most famous oracle of the ancient world. Similar to the Olympic Games, the Pythian Games were held every four years. The Games probably began around 582 BC. Initially, and for many years, it was a music competition. Greeks participated with great enthusiasm in the major games held at Olympia and Delphi, and sporting competitions were also held at many other festivals throughout Greece (Dilek *et al.*, 2018; Koca and İmamoğlu, 2025).

3.3 Isthmian Games (Corinth)

In Corinth, people celebrated the sea god Poseidon every two years. There are many legends about the origin of the Isthmian Games. The most important of these says that Poseidon himself created them, while another says that the founder of the Games, which aimed to honor Poseidon, was the Athenian hero Theseus. The games began in 582 BC as the Pythian Games. Athletic competitions consisted of equestrian sports. The horse was a sacred animal for Poseidon, who, according to legend, created the horse, one of the most beautiful animals, to impress Demeter, the goddess of agriculture. Later, other competitions such as music and painting contests were added to the Isthmian Games (<https://www.kidslovegreece.com/en/greece>).

3.4 Nemean Games (Nemea)

The Nemean Games were the last of the four Panhellenic Games and were held in Nemea. According to legend, they were founded by the seven kings of Argos in memory of the infant Opheltes, who died. Another legend says that Hercules founded them himself when he defeated the Nemean lion in one of his tasks. The Games were held every two years and probably began in 573 BC. Athletic competitions included sports such as chariot racing, wrestling, and boxing (Yamaner and İmamoğlu, 2024; <https://www.kidslovegreece.com/en/greece>).

3.5 Marathon

The classic Marathon race is inspired by the story of a soldier. Pheidippides was a soldier who participated in a great battle at the Battle of Marathon. It was 490 BC when the Athenians fought the Persians. The battle was brutal, but the Athenians managed to win! So they sent Pheidippides back to Athens to tell the Athenians about their victory. He ran non-stop for about 42 km to deliver the message of victory! He then died from exhaustion. This story was passed down from generation to generation until the Frenchman Michel Breal proposed "*repeating the famous route of the soldier Pheidippides*" at the first modern Olympic Games. Breal was unaware of the distance! By the time he learned the distance, it was too late to back down because the race had already been included in the official

program of the Games and sent to many countries!
(<https://www.kidslovegreece.com/en/greece>).

3.6 Other Competitions Related to Greek Culture and Sports

These are, of course, just a few of the many cultural sporting events held in ancient Greece. Many sporting competitions were held annually in Greece. They were all associated with gods and heroes, as anyone who could win a sporting competition in ancient Greek society enjoyed eternal fame and respect.

3.7 Asclepia Games

Epidaurus on the Peloponnese was the site of the sanctuary of Asclepius, the god of healing. Initially a place of worship, from the 4th century BC onwards it housed patients seeking relief from their illnesses. In 480 BC, the Asclepia festivals began. This event was dedicated to Asclepius, the god of healing. The festivals included the pentathlon (running, long jump, discus throwing, javelin throwing, and wrestling), chariot races, and musical competitions. Similar to the Olympic Games, the event was held every four years (<https://www.kidslovegreece.com/en/greece>).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Ancient Greece offers one of the most prominent historical contexts in which sport was institutionalized and placed at the center of cultural life. Starting with the Minoan civilization and continuing through the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic periods, sport developed intertwined with mythology, religion, and social structure, and spread to the Mediterranean world during the Roman period. In Ancient Greece, sport served the purpose of honoring the gods as an integral part of religious rituals; it contributed to social integration and the construction of a common identity through the Olympic and Panhellenic Games. At the same time, sport was considered an indicator of individual excellence (*arete*) and collective prestige; athletes represented not only their own achievements but also the honor of the polis to which they belonged. In this respect, sport also functioned as a political and social tool in Ancient Greece. From a philosophical perspective, the Ancient Greek understanding of sport is based on the unity of body and mind. In line with the idea that "*a sound mind resides in a sound body*," sport became one of the fundamental components of the education system. Gymnasiums and palaestras were not only places where physical education was provided; they were also centers where moral, intellectual, and social values were transmitted. However, the relationship between sport and war preparation is also noteworthy; many sports, such as wrestling, javelin throwing, and chariot racing, served to develop military skills. The mythological origins of the Ancient Olympic Games explain why sport held a sacred meaning in the Greek world. The myths of Pelops and Heracles symbolically reflect the relationship between sport and fate, divine will, and human dignity. Thanks to these mythological foundations, the Olympic Games have survived for centuries and become a symbol of religious and cultural unity in the Ancient Greek world. Consequently, the ethical,

educational, and institutional foundations of today's modern understanding of sport were largely shaped in Ancient Greece; sport has gained continuity throughout history as a common cultural heritage of humanity. Recommendations: The intercultural interaction dimension of sport should be examined more comprehensively by comparing Ancient Greek sports culture with Roman, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Turkish civilizations. Including more emphasis on the philosophy of Ancient Greek sport in modern sports education programs will contribute to considering sport not only in terms of performance but also in terms of values education. The mythological origins of sport, particularly in the context of the Olympic Games, should be explored more deeply in studies of sport history and sport sociology. Written sources, as well as archaeological finds such as ceramics, sculptures, and sports equipment, should be evaluated more systematically in research on the history of sport. The socially integrative and educational functions of sport in ancient Greece can be reinterpreted to offer a historical perspective on contemporary sports policies.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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