
Important features of the Greek chariot-races

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the date 776 B.C. as the beginning of the ancient Olympic Games should be regarded with extreme caution. Tradition holds that the foot-race was the only event held at Olympia from 776 to 724 B.C. and that chariot racing was introduced at the year 680 B.C., but this is highly unlikely. The archaeological evidence clearly indicates that chariot-races were held at Olympia long before and after the 776 B.C. date. Pindar's statement that from the very beginning the contests were many, including chariot-races, is closer to the truth. It appears that Pausanias statement is not very convincing, since the Greek nobility of the period was a cavalier one, and it seems unlikely that a hippic event was introduced as late as 680 B.C. The evidence shows that chariot-races were part of the Olympic Games since their early beginnings, were always aristocratic in nature, very exciting and dangerous. This proposition, that is, the existence of chariot-races in the early Greek Games found support from the material evidence not only from Olympia but from many other Greek districts and regions as well.

KEYWORDS: chariot-races, charioteers, aristocratic, dangerous.

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Introduction

The evidence from archaeological and literary sources shows that for the Greeks Olympia was a sacred place where athletic games and festivals were held long before the traditional date of 776 B.C. and that chariot-races actually were practiced even before that date. Ancient, as well as modern researchers have emphasized the difficulties involved in regard to the early history of the Olympic Games and the events held at that time. Indeed, such an investigation is a very difficult undertaking due to the lack of proper evidence and mainly to conflicting traditional sources. In order to undertake such a difficult task, contributory help from various disciplines such as ancient Greek history, archaeology and ancient Greek religion is absolutely essential.

Method

In undertaking this research a number of methods have been employed: analytical and synthetic process, comparative and historical approach, descriptive and interpretive procedure.

Chariot-races and the early history of the ancient Olympic Games

According to tradition, for the first thirteen Olympiads, that is, for 52 years the only contest in the Olympic Games was the foot-race, the so called *stadion* [32] and this gave rise to the widely accepted assumption that the winner of this event gave his name to the Olympiad. Pausanias [32] also informs us that an Olympic truce was

enacted by the king Iphitos of Elis at the first Olympic Games. We also learn from Pausanias [32] that among the dedications at Olympia was the so called, “discus of Iphitos”, on which were written the conditions and provisions of the truce that was announced at least one month before the beginning of the Olympic Games.

Modern authors have expressed serious doubts about Pausanias statement that for thirteen Olympiads, the only event of the Olympic Games was the foot-race. They based their reasoning upon the fact that the Elean aristocracy was an equestrian nobility, so it seems improbable that an equestrian event became part of the Olympic Games as late as 680 B.C. [10, 12, 16, 23, 25, 26, 27]. Pindar [34], our earliest source for the beginning of the Olympic Games mentions that five heroes won the five events, held for the first time at Olympia. The lyric poet [35] mentions the five events including chariot-race. According to Pindar [34], two other events, namely the pentathlon and the pankration were introduced later, thus making it clear that the first five events were in fact, the primary ones in the program of the Olympic Games. Gardiner [10, 11, 12] called Pausanias’ statement an “improbable story” and agrees with Pindar that the events from the beginning were five, including of course chariot racing. Other writers in favor of Pindar’s statement are of the opinion that of the five events mentioned, the chariot-race was the first and most esteemed of all [16, 25]. It is true that this opinion finds assistance and confirmation from archaeological evidence not only from the site of the Olympic Games but from other locations as well. Among the votive offerings by the victors of the events before and after the 8th century B.C., are many horses made of clay and bronze charioteers as well as yokes belonging to horse-chariots [14, 26]. If we agree with Pausanias that for the first thirteen Olympiads, the only event was the foot-race (*stadion*) and that the chariot-race was introduced as late as 680 B.C., then we will be in a difficult position to solve the problem or account for the existence of horses and chariots among the votive offerings of the victorious athletes at Olympia. It appears rather improbable that the athletes who won the *stadion* during the first Olympiads dedicated horses, chariots and charioteers as thank-offerings to the sacred place of Olympia [26]. Furthermore, there are many scenes of chariots and chariot-races depicted in the art of the 8th century B.C. [18, 38]. It has been pointed out that the Greek society of the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. was aristocratic and so were the athletic events in general and the chariot-races in particular and that the games of this period were closely connected with

the aristocracy [26]. It is difficult indeed to escape the conclusion that Olympia, from the beginning was a place for athletic contests, particularly chariot racing. We learn from Homer [15] that at Olympia or Buprasion as it was known, Nestor king of Pylos competed in the funeral games of Amaryngkeus. It is rather evident that the Olympic Games remained aristocratic for a long time and that they changed their aristocratic character only when aristocracy changed [26]. It is true however, that the chariot-races remained always aristocratic, regardless of the character of the Olympic Games. It appears that the nobles of the ancient Greece were the only ones rich enough to breed horses and to pay for the expenses of chariots. With regard to the Olympic truce, which was written on the so-called “discus of Iphitos” it is clear that in 776 B.C. when according to tradition the truce was written, writing was not in existence. Experts in Greek language and writing have pointed out that writing was not in existence at such an early date. They believe that writing did not come into use before the 700 B.C., at the earliest [6, 7, 9, 17, 19, 26, 31]. It is rather evident that the story of the discus of Iphitos was an invention and forgery of later times in order to serve the Elean story that their king Iphitos established the Olympic Games.

The aristocratic nature of the Greek chariot racing

Some scholars [14, 22] have pointed out that description and portrayal of athletic and equestrian contests are as old as Greek literature. Indeed chariot-races appear in early Mycenaean art and takes up by far the longest portion of the funeral games for Achilles’ friend Patroclus who was killed in a confrontation with Hector, the most important Trojan warrior [15]. First in order, esteem and significance among the events is the chariot-race. The chariot used is not the four-horse, but the two horse-chariot that the Homeric heroes employed in real war conditions. Aptness and skillfulness in the Homeric chariot racing was as significant as quickness according to the old charioteer Nestor who advises his son, Antilochos, one of the contestants, to keep as close to the turning post as he can during the game.

Archaeological evidence both from Greece and Cyprus supports the Homeric notion of chariot racing. A thirteen century B.C. larnax from Tanagra shows chariot racing in honor of a deceased important warrior [4, 14]. It has been asserted that throughout the funeral games of Patroclus, described in the Iliad, the real picture emerges of a society that lived in the nature, possessed excellent physical condition, delighted in exhibiting physical vigor as an expression of arete [24]. This is probably

the reason that Homer's account of the funeral games of Patroclus is considered "the most beautiful and precisely observed description of its kind from the whole of ancient Greek literature" [8]. Chariot racing more than any other game, was connected with the passing of the dead into the underworld. Only the well-to-do aristocrats could afford to pay for chariots and horses in order to enable them to continue their noble pursuit in the afterlife. Their chariots and horses were sometimes buried or cremated along with them as the material evidence from the Mycenaean times clearly shows [4, 27, 38, 40]. Kimon, the father of Miltiadis, the winner at Marathon, won the four-horse chariot-race with the same team of mares (at three consecutive Olympiads in 532, 528 and 524 B.C.). His horses dignified not only with bronze statues but with proper burial ground in the family grave. Pausanias [33] notes that Kleosthenes of Epidamnus set up status of himself, his charioteers and his horses, inscribed with their names. Often the names of horses were also given in painted scenes of chariot racing. There is a major difference between the Homeric chariot-race in the funeral games of Patroclus and those of the Classical period. In the first, the noble princes themselves were the drivers in the race, in the second, however the driver was usually a professional charioteer. Regardless of who drove the chariot, the winner in the chariot-races or horse racing was the owner of the horses and chariots. In fact, his name appeared in the list of the Olympic victors. There is a significant exception to the rule that the charioteers were the hirelings of the owners of the chariots and the horses since the latter sometimes entered the competition. So it can be said that in ancient Greek chariot racing or horse racing, the charioteers were rather rarely the owners of their teams and chariots. It was regarded very virtuous and estimable for a noble to drive his own horses and chariots in competition. Pindar [34] rejoices with Herodotus of Thebes for doing this: "Now, I, composing for Herodotus a gift in honor of his chariot, the reins of which he handled by himself..." Pindar [34], again congratulates Thrasybulus, another Olympic victor in chariot racing. Thrasybulus probably drove his father's chariot, according to the account given by ancient testimony. An inscription dated to the beginning of the 5th century, now in the Museum of Sparta (Spartan Museum Catalogue: 440) records that a certain Damonon is very proud for he won some races where he was his own charioteer. Horses and chariots were rarely entered competition not in the name of individuals but of cities. In 480 B.C. the public horse-chariot of the city of Argos won the competition at Olympia. Eight years

later the Argives were successful in the Olympic Games [30]. According to Pausanias [33] Lichas, entered his chariot in the name of the people of Thebes, as Laconia, his state, was excluded from the Olympic Games at the time. When his chariot won, Lichas crowned his charioteer with a ribbon as was the custom.

Ancient Greek aristocrats entered equestrian competition in order to establish an excellent panhellenic image. A victory in the Olympic Games not only cast honor on the city, but must have been a very good proclamation. Kings, famous politicians and very rich people loved to enter chariot-race or horse competition. Hieron, tyrant of Syracuse (478-467 B.C.) won the Olympic horse-race in two successive Olympiads in 476 and 472 B.C. and the chariot-race in 468 B.C. Philip II king of Macedonia, Alexander's father won three victories at Olympia, first in the horse-race, then with the four-horses chariot and finally with the two-horse chariot. Alkibiades, athenaeon politician entered at least seven chariots at Olympia in 416 B.C. and won first, second and third places. The Spartan king Damaratus entered the chariot-race competition at Olympia and won. Even though women were prohibited from attending the Olympic festival, they could however take part in the equestrian events at Olympia by their own charioteers. Kyniska, the sister of King Agesilaos of Sparta, won in the chariot-races at Olympia in 396 B.C. According to Plutarch [37], the king persuaded his sister Kyniska to enter a chariot in the Olympic Games, for he wanted to show the Greeks that an equestrian victory was the result of wealth and expenditure, not in any way the result of skillfulness dexterity or ability. Agesilaos persuaded his sister not only to enter chariot-races at Olympia but also to be involved in hippotrophy. In Athens, Aristophanes, through his comedies gives important testimony about athletics. Modern authors have used the *Clouds* of Aristophanes [2] as evidence that the Athenian aristocrats were persuaded to get involved into hippotrophy that required more money than ability [20]. For the athenian nobles hippotrophy was nothing new, since it was always regarded as a remnant of aristocratic privilege [1, 4, 20, 24, 28].

Chariot racing: popular and risky

Chariot racing was a very popular sporting activity both in prehistoric and historic Greece. The archaeological evidence from different Mycenaean centers clearly indicates the popularity of the event. The Greek prehistoric society was aristocratic and so were the games, but no event could compare in splendor, pre-eminence and fame with the chariot-race, the contest

of nobles in the ancient world. Chariot racing was an event associated in particular with nobility and in general with persons of the higher classes [29]. It has been emphasized that the chariot-race is plainly an exaggerated form of the running contest, in which everything is elevated. The level of tension and passion generated in the spectators is accordingly greater and this helps to explain the immense popularity of chariot racing in the ancient world [21]. In Homer, one finds himself in an atmosphere of true competition, a rivalry for the true love of physical endeavor and exertion [10]. The description of the funeral games of Patroclus in the *Iliad* unmistakably shows the popularity of chariot-race, the most aristocratic of all the events, the exclusive possession of the Homeric noble warriors who went to war in chariots, and in addition used and connected with great funeral games [10]. Apparently, chariot racing was a popular event connected, from the prehistoric times, with the Greek aristocracy, the rich and the well-to-do. In historical period chariot racing became one of the most popular event among the Greek aristocrats and the common people alike. Chariot racing remained always aristocratic because the nobles were the only ones rich enough to pay for the expenses involved in the maintenance of chariots and breeding of horses, so it was an event open only to wealthy [1, 4, 13, 14, 24, 28]. In the Olympic Games the chariot-race was the opening event after the first day of preparation and pray. In other words the Games were officially opened with the most spectacular and expensive of all the events. Some scholars have expressed some doubts about the opening of the games with the chariot-races:

To us that may appear bad planning, for the chariot-race seems perfect for the climax rather than the beginning of the Games. The idea seems to have been open with competition that offered the greatest opportunity for pomp and splendor, and no subsequent entry parade or contest was comparable on that score [8].

The equestrian events were the most pleasing, admired and praised by the nobles of all periods in Greek antiquity. They entered the equestrian events not only for their splendid character but also in these events alone the nobles were not expected to compete in person. In addition, defeat in the chariot or horse-races could always be blamed not on the owner of chariots and horses but on the charioteers [8]. In Classical Greece some lyric poets wrote epinician odes to celebrate the victories of the aristocratic owners in the equestrian events. Despite the snobbery of the equestrian events (and the chariot-race in particular) they were very popular in the minds

of the Greeks and sense of that popularity appears in the art, particularly in vase paintings [1, 4, 12, 24, 28, 29, 40]. In these paintings clearly appears the owner of the horses receiving all the glory, including the victor's wreath, while the charioteer had to be satisfied with the victory ribbon [40].

In 500 B.C. a mule chariot-race or mule-cart race (*απήνη*) was introduced into the Olympic program. A pair of mules pulled a low cart carrying a seated charioteer [32]. There was no ancient origin or beauty attaching to the carts, and Elis was under an ancient curse if the beast (mule) was even born in their country: the carts had a couple of mules instead of horses. So the animal was thought to be undignified, thus the *απήνη* was last held at Olympia in 444 B.C. [24, 40]. The Eleans, having the presidency of the Olympic Games, did not agree of the introduction of the mule chariot-race, but the influential Greeks from South Italy wanted very much to enter competition since their cities were famous for their mules [40]. It is rather evident that *apene* was not aristocratic enough, so it was abolished at the first opportunity.

Chariot racing was not only a popular sport among the Greek nobles but a very risky event as well. According to Greek tradition, Glaucos, son of Sisyphus and the father of Bellerophon was killed by his horses in a race at the Isthmian games [33]. Glaucos was torn to pieces by the madness of his mares, when he was thrown from his chariot. In myth, Pelops, the hero who gave his name to Peloponnese, advised the charioteer Myrtilos to tamper with the linch-pins of the chariot of Oenomaos at Olympia with the well-known results. In Homer [15], Eumelos, one of the contestants in the chariot-race, comes to grief when the yoke smashed and was thrown out of his chariot. Sophocles [39] vividly portrays the dangers involved in chariot-races. Orestes participates in the chariot-race at the Pythian Games with nine other competitors of whom only one survived. Orestes' chariot crashed at the turning post. As a result of this accident, one chariot shattered and crashed into another, until the whole hippodrome of Crisa (Delphi) was filled with the shipwreck of chariots [21]. Orestes, unfortunately did not escape death. Representations of accidents in chariot racing like this described in the case of Orestes are often depicted in the art of the 6th and 5th centuries B.C. [3]. Pindar in his *Pythian Odes* [36] describes a chariot-race at the Pythian Games in 462 B.C. The poet informs us that only one chariot completed the race out of forty-one entered the competition. According to Diodorus Siculus [5] in the Olympic Games of 388 B.C. some of the four-horse chariots (*tethrippon*) of the tyrant

Dionysios crashed, while other abandoned the race. It is believed that the typical Greek took some delight in accidents involving chariots and that in the case of the games described by Sophocles [39] the spectators reacted sympathetically to the destiny of Orestes who was killed at the turning post [3]. According to Pausanias [33] at Olympia on one side of the hippodrome stood an altar to *Taraxippos* (horse-scarer) which was a title of Poseidon of horses. Glaukos, son of Sisyphos at the Isthmian games is also a horse-scarer: they say he was killed by his horses when Akastos held the games for his father's funeral. At Nemea, Pausanias says, in the Argive country there was no divine hero who hurt the horses, but there were red-colored rocks that reared up above the turn of the race course, and the light on them panicked the horses just as if it were fire. Pausanias believed that the horse-scarer at Olympia was much worse panicker of horses. Miller's comments on the horse-scarer (*Taraxippos*) are interesting:

The presence of such psychological hurdles emphasizes the basic difference between the hippikos and gymnikos agon. They have little to do with competition, appearing more as spectacle. The need for wealth, the lack of direct participation by the people who received the victory crowns, and the possibility that owners could shift the odds in their favor for entering more than one horse or team set the horse-races in a different category from the competition between men. The horse-races were a popular component of the games, but more for their entertainment value than as an expression of arete. The crowd might enjoy a chariot-race, but it honored the individual who had developed his talents and use them to their limits [24].

Chariot racing was a very dangerous event and of course very popular. It remained throughout its history an aristocratic pastime, since the Greek nobles were always willing to cover the expenses involved. It was the sport of kings, tyrants and eminent politicians. The ordinary people have nothing to do with it, except as enthusiastic spectators.

Conclusions

Greek tradition connects 776 B.C. date with the beginning of the Olympic Games. According to this tradition for the first thirteen Olympiads the only contest was the *stadion* that is, the foot-race. By this tradition, a sacred Olympic truce was established by king Iphitos of Elis at the same time when the Olympic festival began. In addition, among the offerings at the Olympic site was the so-called discus of Iphitos on which were inscribed

the conditions of the Olympic truce. It appears that tradition, on this matter, is not very convincing for a number of reasons:

- a) The chariot-races from the very beginning were closely connected with the Elean nobility. It is difficult to believe that the Elean nobles waited for 52 years in order to introduce chariot-races into the Olympic program.
- b) Archaeological evidence before and after 776 B.C. from Olympia indicates that chariot-races were part of the games from the very beginning.
- c) Pindar, in his *Olympian Odes* gives the names of victors and the events they competed. The events were five, including chariot-race.
- d) The very existence of king Iphitos is in question since ancient and modern authors are very skeptical about the time he lived and his connections with the Olympic Games. So they believe that the so-called Iphitos' discus was rather a forgery of later times.

There is no doubt that chariot-race remained throughout their history the monopoly and the prerogative of Greek aristocracy because the Greek nobles were the only ones to pay for the expenses of horses and chariots. Chariot-races were for the aristocrats of the Greek city-states a noble occupation and an event to prove their superiority and excellence. Through this sporting activities they would exhibit their wealth and consequently display their noble birth. The importance of chariot racing it is clearly exposed in the funeral Games of Patroclus held by his friend Achilles, since they take up by far the longest part of these games. As opposed to the Homeric games, where the nobles were driving their own chariots, in historical times, with few exceptions, they used their own charioteers, but the winner was the owner of the horses and chariots. There is a general agreement between ancient and modern authors regarding the risky nature of the chariot-races. Indeed they were very dangerous events as the evidence, both material and literary shows.

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