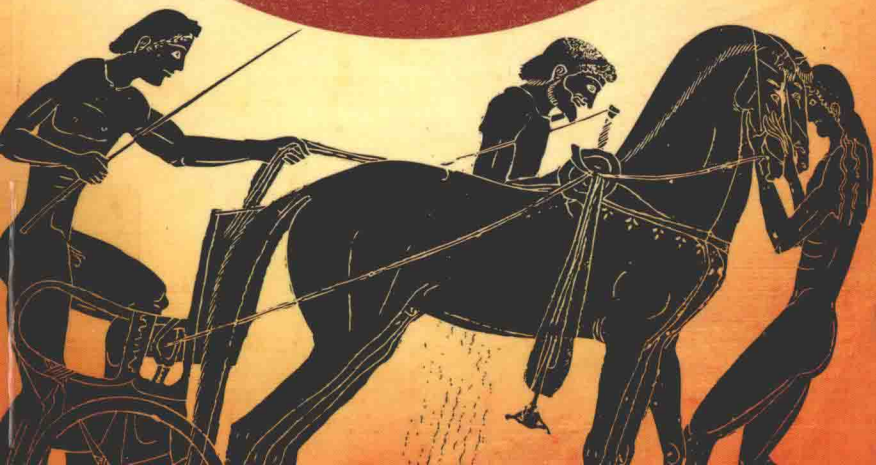


NEIL
FAULKNER

A
VISITOR'S
GUIDE
TO THE
ANCIENT
OLYMPICS



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OLYMPICS

Neil Faulkner



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A
VISITOR'S GUIDE
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**THE ANCIENT
OLYMPICS**

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PREFACE

What was it like going to the Olympics 2,400 years ago? Instead of London 2012, how about Olympia 388 BC? Would a modern visitor to the ancient Olympics find it all very familiar, or would he (virtually no women were allowed in) be overwhelmed with culture shock?

In the Olympic Stadium, there were no stands and no shade: you sat on a grassy bank under the searing heat of the midsummer sun. Naked athletes competed in foot-races, the pentathlon, horse- and chariot-races, and three combat sports: wrestling, boxing, and the almost no-holds-barred *pankration*, the crowd's favourite, because there were virtually no rules and it was all blood and pain.

Half the Olympic programme was given over to religious ritual: processions, hymn-singing, incense-burning, gory animal sacrifice, and strange incantations by exotically-attired priests. The Olympic site was not just a sports stadium; it was part-sanctuary, part-art gallery, part-heritage trail. In the Temple's inner sanctum, behind a dazzling colonnaded façade, sat a colossal gold-and-ivory statue of Zeus, divine master of ceremonies. Outside was a mountainous heap of ash: an altar formed of a thousand sacrifices. All around were shrines, altars and statues.

Fringe events included philosophy lectures, poetry readings, and sundry charlatans and cranks offering to predict the future. The nightlife was yet more exotic. No-one got any sleep, as parties went on through the small hours, and hundreds of prostitutes, both women and boys, were busy touting their services until dawn.

The Olympic Village was a vast, tented encampment, with inadequate water supplies, heaps of stinking refuse,

and huge, open, improvised latrines. The air was alive with millions of flies, mosquitoes and wasps. By the end, no-one had washed properly for a week, and you could smell the Games a mile away.

Welcome to the ancient Greek Olympics. A stranger in a foreign land, a time-traveller visiting another age, a sports fan and a pilgrim at a once-in-a-lifetime extravaganza, you are going to need a guide-book. This is it. It tells you everything you need to know about such essentials as how to get there, where to stay, and what to eat; about the historical background and rich history of the Games; and about the celebrities, the contests, and the rituals that make up the ancient Olympic programme.

I am inviting readers to adopt a role: that of a tourist visiting the Olympics in 388 BC, much as tens of thousands of tourists will visit the London Olympics of AD 2012. My assumption is that the reader may know little or nothing about ancient Greece, but that he or she wishes to learn something now – because of the London Olympics, and because these, like all Olympics, are a conscious imitation of things presumed to have happened as long ago as 776 BC.

The book is written in the form of a travel guide. I wanted readers to imagine themselves to actually be there. So you must allow yourself to believe it is 388 BC – 2,400 years ago – when the ancient Olympic Games were at their peak. As far as I have been able – as far as the evidence allows – I have attempted to reconstruct the Games exactly as they might have been in that year.

My approach is not an altogether ‘reputable’ academic procedure. It involves four things that would be inadmissible in writing a scholarly paper for a learned journal. The first is to draw heavily on what we know *generally* about ancient Greece in reconstructing what might have happened *specifically* at the Olympic Games. Let me give an example. We probably know as much about

ancient Athens as we do about the rest of the ancient Greek world put together. We know a lot, for example, about what the ancient Athenians ate and drank, and about their meal-times and table manners, whereas we know very little about these matters at the Olympics. To imagine that eating at the ancient Olympics was in many ways similar to eating in the ancient city of Athens is quite a leap. But in the absence of any other evidence, it seems legitimate if the aim is to give the reader a sense of what it might have been like on the basis of the little we do know. At any rate, it is either that, or leave great gaps.

The second sin is the temporal equivalent of the first. If it is questionable to assume that practices recorded for another place can simply be transferred to Olympia, it must be equally questionable to assume that practices first recorded at another time can simply be transported back to 388 BC. To retain the food theme, can the dishes described by the fourth-century BC gourmand Archestratos of Gela (in Sicily) be taken as evidence for what might have been eaten at the beginning of the century at Olympia? The same defence applies as before: I have chosen to run with the evidence available in order to make the composite picture as full as possible.

The third sin is to ignore all academic controversy and uncertainty, such that matters on which scholars are agreed and matters on which they argue are left indistinguishable in the text (though you can find good summaries of the debate and evidence if you follow up the references). Let me give one or two examples to illustrate the depths of depravity to which I have sunk. Though we are certain which events were included in the ancient Olympic programme, we are not certain on which days they took place. A guide-book that cannot even tell you whether the foot races are on day three or day five is not much use – but to introduce the haziness would break the illusion of present time. If we were actually there, we would know. In some cases of uncertainty I have been able to pass over

the matter in silence, but in other cases, when it could not be avoided, I have plumped unequivocally for one of the alternatives.

The fourth sin may be the worst. It is to make use of what R.G. Collingwood called 'the historical imagination'. This does not mean making things up in the manner of a novelist. It does mean filling in some of the gaps in the historical and archaeological record with some informed guesswork. What would it have been like living for a week in the ancient Olympic Village? There are passing comments in the ancient sources – about the heat, the flies and the lack of adequate water, for example. The fuller picture that I offer incorporates those observations and builds upon them on the basis of common sense and 'historical imagination'.

Enough of sin. I have chosen it – with all its consequences – so we may as well enjoy it. As best I can, I have tried to describe the ancient Olympic Games as I think they might have been, drawing on direct evidence, near-contemporary parallels and historical imagination. Any reader can readily check the relationship between evidence and claim by reference to textual notes and the relevant sources. I hope that scholars and students will enter into the spirit of the book, and take it for what it is: a sincere attempt to reconstruct a past historical reality as a lived human experience. And I hope that general readers, especially those new to ancient Greece, will enjoy it as an introduction to another world.

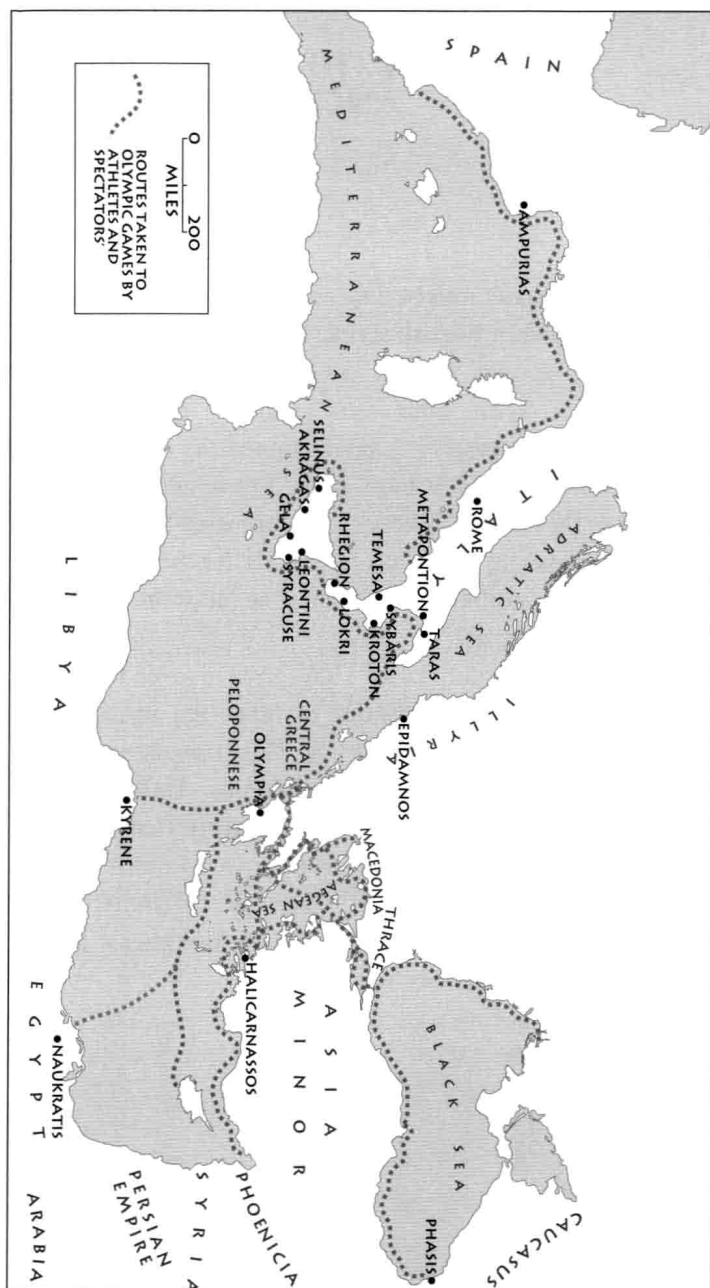
Neil Faulkner

July 2011

A NOTE ON THE PRESENTATION OF ANCIENT GREEK WORDS

There is no standardised way of rendering Ancient Greek words in modern English script. Most letters are the same, and many sounds similar, but there are some awkward differences. With some very familiar names – like Aeschylus or Socrates – I have retained the conventional, Latinised form. But in most cases, I have adopted a form closer to the Ancient Greek, using, for example, ‘k’ in place of ‘c’ (for Ancient Greek has no ‘c’), ‘ch’ for the Greek letter chi (pronounced like ‘ch’ in loch), and ‘ai’ rather than the Latin diphthong ‘ae’.

In one particular matter, I have tried to avoid following the almost universal practice of rendering upsilon, the Ancient Greek ‘u’, as an English ‘y’. This strange convention merely encourages mispronunciation. Unfortunately, it is so deeply embedded in the literature that it would merely compound confusion to alter well-known names, so Odysseus, for example, remains Odysseus. With ordinary words, however – those given in italics – I have transliterated upsilon as ‘u’.



Map 1. Map of the Greek world showing city-states and other places mentioned in the guide and the routes taken by athletes and spectators attending the Olympic Games.

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1 THE BASICS

GETTING THERE

OVERLAND

So you want to go to the Greek Olympic Games? You may be disconcerted to learn that getting there is far from straightforward. This may be the premier event in the Greek sporting calendar, but it takes place in a remote rural backwater located a good distance from any major thoroughfare.

The Games are hosted by the city of Elis, a minor state tucked away in the northwestern Peloponnese, and Olympia itself, the sacred site where the contests are held, lies some thirty-six miles to the southeast. This means the site is a long way from all the major Greek cities. If you are coming from Central Greece, Athens is 120 miles distant, Thebes 110; if from within the Peloponnese, Corinth is seventy-five miles away, Argos and Sparta both sixty. (These distances are approximations: there are no accurate long-distance measurements in ancient Greece.)

The actual travelling distance is much longer, as few of the roads are straight, and many wind through hill country. The 'roads', moreover, are atrocious – just rough tracks – which makes travelling in any sort of vehicle slow, uncomfortable and expensive. Carts drawn by mules, oxen or horses (in ascending order of cost) are available for hire, but usually only for short distances across local plains; you will then have to walk the hill-country and hire again on the far side. An alternative, especially if you are heavily laden with baggage, is to hire a donkey or mule, which may take you the whole way. The problem – apart from the expense – will be finding one, with tens of thousands of

people on the move. Anyone on a tight budget is likely to find themselves walking. You can certainly assume that those passing you on the road on horseback or in horse-drawn chariot are rich.

The Greeks are used to walking. Life is simple, most people relatively poor, and the terrain arduous, so it is often the best way. People tend to reckon the distances between places in walking-time. The workers in the Peiraeus Harbour consider a trip to Athens and back, around nine miles in total, an easy day. An army is expected to march between fifteen and seventeen miles in a day. The thirty-six mile procession from Elis to Olympia at the start of the Games takes two days. If you are a good walker, you can probably manage fifteen to twenty miles a day, even on cross-country tracks.¹

Is it safe? This is the question that everyone asks. Greece is divided into some 1,000 independent city-states. Many are bitter rivals, warfare is endemic, and it is quite common for there to be several local wars being waged in different parts of Greece at the same time. To give an idea, over the last century Athens has been at war three years out of every four.

Despite this, travelling across Greece to the Olympics is relatively safe. Because Greek armies are citizen-militias made up of ordinary farmers, military campaigns are usually restricted to spring and summer – that is, between sowing and harvest. Most campaigns do not result in pitched battle, and if they do, it is often by pre-arrangement between belligerents. Even when territory is being laid waste, with crops cut down and buildings demolished, civilians are rarely targeted, and religious sanctuaries hardly ever plundered.² Moreover, anyone en route to the Olympics is considered a pilgrim, under divine protection, such that any kind of hostility or violence amounts to violation of a strict religious taboo.

It is as well to know this, since travelling any distance overland will involve crossing numerous borders, and in