

**ANDRÁS PATAY-HORVÁTH**

**THE ORIGINS OF THE  
OLYMPIC GAMES**



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*Front Cover*

The lower course of the Alpheios (photo: Ridi Graz)

*Back Cover*

Geometric bovine figurine from Greece (New York, Metropolitan Museum)

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## Preface

“one should disregard the ancient stories both of the founding of the sanctuary and of the establishment of the games ... for such stories are told in many ways, and no faith at all is to be put in them”  
(Strabo, *Geogr.* 8.3.30, English translation by H. Jones)

Although nowadays Olympia is generally connected with its famous athletic contests, this was originally not the case and it is by no means evident why the famous games were established here at an early date, which is traditionally referred to as 776 BC. The archaeological record shows beyond reasonable doubt that during the Early Iron Age the sanctuary existed and flourished for a long time without the games and there is nothing to prove that it would have been established originally or primarily to house sports events. Even after the games became popular, the sanctuary remained an important location for victory monuments celebrating military successes.

It was controversial already in antiquity, when and why the Olympic Games were established and by whom. Modern scholarship has also advanced a great number of hypotheses on the origins of the games, but a really convincing reconstruction has not been formulated yet. Admittedly, the subject is a very complex one. Different kinds of evidence should be treated cautiously and related problems can only be dealt with in a monograph which is, however, apart from a rather problematic one, missing so far. The present volume seeks therefore to fill this gap by presenting a new overall explanation for the phenomenon. This explanation is admittedly a hypothetical one, based mainly on the interpretation of the archaeological material and some ethnographic parallels, but due to the complete absence of contemporary written evidence, it cannot be otherwise. And although it is essentially a simple one, it must remain, as with any other previous similar theory, beyond definitive proof. And although it seems to the present author a fairly probable one, it is meant to further the discussion and “any who raise complaint have an easy remedy: to offer something better, something coherent and constructive.”

One question which was frequently discussed in previous scholarship, i.e. the reliability of the traditional foundation date 776 BC, is completely and deliberately left out of consideration here, because it seems quite obvious (at least to the present author), that during the Early Iron Age, no single decisive

foundation could have taken place. The date was established or calculated, as is well-known, only centuries later, and there is no hope of retrieving the exact methods or principles underlying it. Anyway, one can safely assume that all the dates appearing in our sources are artificial ones and, similarly to the many myths surrounding the foundation of the Olympic Games, it is not particularly likely that they would directly reflect historical reality. Instead of a single foundation date, a period of formation is more likely and can certainly be dated, even if only in an approximate manner, to the Early Iron Age including the Protogeometric, Geometric and Early Archaic periods and ranging in terms of absolute chronology approximately from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Instead of debating or searching for the exact date, it is more important and more interesting, I think, to reconstruct the way in which the games were established and the circumstances, which allowed or caused their widespread and early popularity as well as the high prestige attached to them.

After having clarified the title and the scope, it remains to acknowledge the help of many institutions and persons to whom I am greatly indebted. The basic idea came during a research stay at the Freie Universität, Berlin, financed by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. During the past two years, the substantial financial support of the Hungarian National Research Fund (OTKA ref. no. 101755) and the János Bolyai postdoctoral fellowship provided by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences contributed in many different ways to elaborate the theory presented here.

I greatly benefited from the advice, comments and encouragement of Gy. W. Hegyi, Zs. Simon, L. Bartosiewicz, P. Siewert, M. Kiderlen, S. Lewis, W. Puchner and M. Golden. I have presented various parts of these ideas at different venues and received some valuable comments from the audiences at Budapest, Berlin, Paris, Pécs and Edinburgh. The feedback from different renowned journals and anonymous reviewers rejecting earlier drafts of some chapters also helped to elaborate the argument, and I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all of them.

## Photo Credits

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