



## BOOK REVIEW

*Mésogeios. Méditerranée 24* (2004), Vassily I. Kuzishchin (sous la direction), "Les Jeux Olympiques dans l' Antiquité." Editions: HERODOTOS, Paris 2005, ISBN: 2-911859-21-9, ISSN: 1284-1935.

The year 2004 was undoubtedly a year of pride for the Greeks, as the long desired 'return' of the Olympic Games to the country where they originated became a reality, successful against many odds and skeptical criticism. Alongside the promotion of the athletic spirit and the inevitable promotion of the achievements of Greece, contemporary and ancient, there came a rush in publications regarding the revival of the Games. I daresay that a great number of these publications varied from the commonplace to the pointless rumination of time-worn descriptions of the ancient games and the projection of their cultural value to the modern society. In the worst cases, hasty publications of so-called experts catered for the lowest denominator, without presenting any scientific background, form or aspiration. So be it. This was unavoidable. However, amongst the best – as there were some truly exemplary – publications on the subject one should place the 24<sup>th</sup> issue of the international scientific journal *Mésogeios. Méditerranée*, published by the editions HERODOTOS (Éditions Hérodotos, 42, rue Monge, F 75005 Paris; found in <http://www.mesogeios.net>; contact: [stamoulis@wanadoo.fr](mailto:stamoulis@wanadoo.fr)).

The director of the journal, Dr. Sophia-Tamani Stamoulis (docteur en histoire sociale, Paris), accorded to the general interest for the Olympics giving space for the publication of research undertaken by a special academic group established at the Faculty of History of Lomonosov Moscow State University several years ago, responsible for the study of various aspects and problems of the ancient Olympic Games. The work of dedicated young scientists, under the supervision of prof. Vassily I. Kuzishchin, is published in the issue 24 of the journal, which can definitely stand on its own, as an autonomous, scientific and utterly informative book about the Olympic Games. Each of the seven articles can be read on its own, but all of them put together comprise a structured survey not only of the form of the Games, but also, of their political essence in their contemporary environment, from the classical period until the Hellenistic era, with the appropriation of the Games by Alexander the Great for the promotion of his globalizing policy. Most of all, this is done with utter respect for the academic profile of the journal in which the articles are published – something that deters not the interested

reader without academic background, provided one is familiar with both French and English [the articles are published either in French with an English summary (3), or in English with a French summary (4), introduced by a short review of the 'phenomenon of the Olympic Games in the ancient Greek and in the world culture' by Vassily I. Kuzishchin in English (p.7-8)].

A glance at the *curriculum vitae* of each of the contributors (p. 209-12) reveals their experience with substantial academic publications. More important, one is soon convinced of their enthusiasm, their fresh view on hackneyed material and their devotion to the study of various aspects of the Olympic Games, which V. Kuzishchin summarizes thus: a) the Olympic tradition as a consolidating factor of the ancient Greek ethnic and cultural unity; b) the peacemaking character of pan-Hellenic feasts at Olympia; c) the formation of the pan-Hellenic Olympic religion and mythology based on the synthesis of local cults, and the influence of this process on the entire cultural development of Greece; d) the Olympic and pan-Hellenic games and the health of Greek common-wealth, including the formation of Olympia and its influence on the development of the Greek art; f) the chronology of the Olympic Games, from the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. till their formal end in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.; g) the ancient time-reckoning according to *olympiades*, extrapolated by the Romans and among the foundations of the Christian time-reckoning.

The first article - one could refer to it as 'chapter 1' - contributed by Pavel A. Evdokimov is titled 'The Olympic rules: a contribution to the study of their contents and history' (pp. 9-31; in French with English summary). As the title indicates, the author investigates the evolution of the Olympic rules, which, unlike the modern Olympic Charter, were not a structure created in one moment but

underwent various alterations and additions. Evdokimov approaches the subject referring to different kinds of evidence. He concludes that these changes are relevant to the status of Olympia itself in the system of relations between the Greek states.

The second article is composed by Lyudmila Ju. Gerasimova, who investigates 'The artistic design of Olympia as an aesthetic expression of Greek unity and the idea of peace between the Greek states' (pp. 33-65; in English with French summary). In this article Gerasimova argues for the promotion of a notion of unity amongst the Greeks reflected by the architectural and sculptural ensemble of the Olympic sanctuary. As expected, J. Boardman and H.-V. Hermann are cited frequently and the author is clearly convinced by the arguments of J. Boardman in his *Greek Sculpture: the Archaic Period* (Lodon 1987). The political potential of art is not a novel idea. One can recall the works of Nigel Spivey (*Greek Art*, Phaidon Press Limited, London 1997) and the electronic debate between K. Cavalier ('Did not potters portray Peisistratus posthumously as Heracles?', in *Electronic Antiquity: Communicating the Classics*, Vol. 2, nr. 5, March 1995) and R. Hannah ('Peisistratos, the Peisistratids and the introduction of Herakles to Olympos: an alternative scenario', *Electronic Antiquity: Communicating the Classics*, Vol. III, nr. 2, September 1995). In the present article, however, novelty lies within the context in which the author investigates the political potential of art. The Games serve as the most appropriate environment for socio-political instruction.

The following article, by Tatjana B. Gvozdeva poses a most interesting question: 'The Great Panathenaia and the Olympic Games: why did not the Panathenaia become the Panhellenic festival?' (pp. 67-96, in English with a French summary). Indeed, the

question becomes compelling once the position of Athens is considered throughout the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. An important notion of panhellenic games, that of *ekecheria* applied also to the Panathenaia; the Panathenaia presented a rich and diverse range of events (both athletic and cultural) and, most of all, there was a certain political parameter in a panhellenic victory – a kind of excellence of the aristocrats, as argued by K. K. Zelyin (1962) – that could not be neglected by rulers such as Peisistratus, who gave the Panathenaia the glory by which they are renowned today. As the author concludes, it was the Peisistratids' policy, of appropriating various social groups, not only aristocrats that made them pay more attention to a panathenaic festival. After all, the war between Athens and Sparta and Athens' former allies, could not vouch for a panhellenic dimension of games organized by Athenians.

Sergei V. Koudriachov investigates 'The system of Olympic values in the Odes of Pindar and in inscriptions in honour of Olympic winners' (pp. 97-125, in French with English summary). Koudriachov examines the evolution of the basic agonistic principles for the classical and Hellenistic Olympic Games, drawing from the Pindaric views about the Games. Pindar's aristocratic views are commonly expressed in his odes, when he glorifies and the aristocratic winners of the Games and the values that are promoted by his odes are the values that govern aristocracy. The article is in accordance with the views of Gvozdeva, who argued for the aristocratic aspect of the Olympic principles and it gives a good lead in to the article that follows.

Vassily I. Kuzishchin's article picks up an idea argued briefly by Gvozdeva, that of *ekecheria*, and discusses it in length in his article 'The Olympic Games in the Antiquity as the peace-making factor in the history of

ancient Greece. The institution of sacred armistice (*εκεχειρία*)' (pp. 127-160, in French with an English summary). In this article Kuzishchin makes obvious the structured consecution of the previous articles – and thus, the thematic vinculum of the journal's articles – by setting up a comprehensive framework of the peacemaking principles of ancient olympisme. Gerasimova's previous arguments about the role of the aesthetic-artistic design of the Olympic sanctuary are echoed here, while the author convincingly categorizes the function of the peacemaking mechanism of the Games and their true potential in a Pan-hellenic state level.

The following article by Ivan A. Ladynin comes as the most appropriate closure to the line of argument conveyed by all the previous articles. Ladynin researches 'The Olympic Games of 324 B.C. and the unification of lands under Alexander's sway' (pp. 161-183, in English with French summary). Following nicely the argument of Kuzishchin, Ladynin suggests that 'the Olympic Games of 324 B.C. enabled Alexander to address all the Hellenes as a cultural and religious unity, which did not have a political framework but was wider and undoubtedly more renowned than the Corinthian League'. It is interesting to note the fact that Alexander chose that venue to proclaim important reforms that he had launched at Opis – 'a most remarkable episode of propagandistic activities'. The article shows, once again, the political potential of the Games.

Appropriately, the final article by Igor E. Surikov, 'Athenian nobles and the Olympic Games' (pp. 185-207), deals with the exploring of a notion already used as a basis for the argument of many of the previous articles – the close connection between athletics and aristocracy. Perhaps, a suitable position for this work could have been before or after Koudriachov's article; nevertheless,

here it serves as a recapitulation and an emphasis to an idea that runs through all the previous articles and informs the character of the volume: the political potential of the Olympic Games could not have been ignored by one of the most politically-minded societies of all times, that of Ancient Greece.

On the whole, the issue is presented with unity, scalable structure and well-documented arguments that compound the most elementary issues regarding the Olympic Games with specialized views and questions. The result is an informative linkup of scholarly approaches to a subject that is yet to be exhausted.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 2005 – following a slight delay due to the Athens Olympics in

summer 2004 – the former President of the Greek Democracy, Konstantinos Stefanopoulos, awarded *Mésogeios. Méditerranée* a distinction for its role as the best mass medium of information published for hellenism abroad. The award is definitely justified, once the full course of the journal is taken into serious consideration; furthermore, the 24th issue of the journal suffices on its own to justify its academic prominence.

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