

‘How do the Ancient Olympic Games differ from the Modern Olympic Games? Which do you think is more impressive?’

The main difference between the Ancient and Modern Olympics is that the former were religious and the latter were secular. This difference underlies almost every facet of the games. For the Greeks the Olympics, as everything else, were religious. “Almost every activity in the Greek world had its spiritual dimension”¹. There is in fact no ancient Greek word for religion.

The Ancient Olympic Games were first and foremost a festival for Zeus. The games at Olympia were a small part of a larger religious festival, much like the dramatic competitions at the Great Dionysia. An individual athlete might well compete on only one day of the five. The whole festival was steeped in religious ritual and myth. These included the procession along the sacred way, the funeral rites of the hero Pelops and the sacrifices to Zeus. The site of Olympia was Zeus’ sacred citadel, and Herakles had decided the length of the stadium.

Just as religion expresses the ideals of a society, so the religious games express these ideals. Only men were allowed to compete (the games of Hera, with only one event perhaps show the inferiority of women in Greek society). They also expressed ideals of physical beauty and perhaps mathematical and rational thought.

“[the artist] seems concerned with the physical beauty of the human beings as an end in itself. Polykleitos...allies aesthetics with mathematics...he suggested the perfect human body... reflected ideal mathematical proportions”¹

The games expressed (if only officially) the Greek ideals of modesty, and the avoidance of *υβρις*. The prizes of olive crowns were simple yet symbolic. The crowns came from the sacred olive tree allegedly planted by Herakles. Olympic victory was believed to mean divine approval. Pindar describes victory as “when God sheds a brightness”². Alcibiades even used his Olympic victories to support an argument in the Athenian assembly.

The religious root shows itself in the seriousness with which the Games took place. Our word agony, which is derived from the Greek word for competition - *αγων*, gives an idea of the spirit in which the Ancient Games were contested. There was no second place, no weight categories and no records. The judges impartiality (reputedly extremely good) was bound by the Olympic oath which was sworn before the statue of Zeus Horkios, the most ferocious of Zeus’ forms.

For us the Games are social, economic and cultural events. The Sydney Olympics cost around £1.2 billion pounds, but this was almost certainly made up in ticket sales, Television rights and sponsorship deals. Hosting the Olympics is also a chance for countries to exhibit themselves, most famously in the 1936 Munich Olympics. After the most recent commonwealth games Manchester’s performance was seen by many as an indicator of a revival of the north. By contrast the Ancient Olympic games were static, and local wealthy men supported them. The only financial reward for Olympia were gifts for the temple.

¹ Charles Freeman, “Egypt, Greece and Rome : Civilisations of the Ancient Mediterranean”

² Pythian VIII

The Modern Olympic Games are primarily a cultural event. As such they represent many of the values of the international community. They are inclusive and tolerant. In fact athletes from small countries are often given special favour if they win. Not only can women compete, but there are also 12 mixed events. The ideals of the games are enshrined in the motto, "Faster, higher, better".

In the Modern Olympic Games the country has almost taken the place of the god. Athletes (supposedly) compete for the glory of their country. They wear their country's colours, and when they have won they have their country's flag and anthem displayed. They thank their fans on national television instead of putting up statues thanking Zeus for 'shedding a brightness'. Their victory is also seen as a tremendous personal achievement. Any religious aspect is strictly up to the individual and the official line is pluralist.

Personally I find the Ancient Games far more impressive. They were a religious occasion, steeped in years of history and religious mythology. The Modern Olympic opening and closing ceremonies are routinely ridiculed. They are also ridiculed because of their politically correct attitude, and for trying to please everybody. The Ancient Olympics were panhellenic, and were about (perhaps the only!) thing that the Greeks agreed on: religion.

I also prefer the purer form of the events in the Ancient Games. With no weight categories, no 2nd place and no records, competition at the Ancient Olympics must have been all the more committed. The events themselves were also simpler. The pankration, with fights until submission is far more accessible than Olympic Judo, with its array of confusing Japanese terms.

But most of all the Ancient Olympics were more personal. In the modern Olympics our athletes compete thousands of miles away from home, often in the middle of the night, in a strange country. In the Olympic games people from all over the Greek world came together in a celebration and confirmation of their distinct identity. The victors were raised to levels far above those of modern competitors: they would give their name to the games, they would have songs composed to them, statues put up, coins struck and they would gain influence and prestige in society almost unimaginable to modern athletes.