

Griechische Heiligtümer als Handlungsorte

Zur Multifunktionalität supralokaler Heiligtümer
von der frühen Archaik bis in die römische Kaiserzeit

Herausgegeben von
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Inhaltsverzeichnis

Vorwort.....	VII
<i>Matthias Haake</i>	
Feiern, opfern, schänden, handeln, inszenieren ... Supralokale Heiligtümer in der griechischen Welt als Handlungsorte – ein Aufriss.....	I
<i>Christoph Ulf</i>	
Merkmale supralokaler und überregionaler Heiligtümer im Kontext der Formierung der Polis	31
<i>Ioanna Patera</i>	
Variations de la pratique sacrificielle dans les sanctuaires supra-locaux	57
<i>Fritz Graf</i>	
Lead Invocations in Greek Sanctuaries	75
<i>Klaus Freitag</i>	
Griechische Heiligtümer als Handlungsorte und die Ausbildung von Wissenskulturen im antiken Griechenland.....	87
<i>Marie-Kathrin Drauschke</i>	
Die gemeinsame Aufstellung zwischenstaatlicher Vertragsurkunden (<i>koinē stēlē</i>)	121
<i>Angelos Chaniotis</i>	
Display and Arousal of Emotions in Panhellenic Sanctuaries in the Shadow of Rome	137
<i>Kai Trampedach</i>	
Der Gott verteidigt sein Heiligtum in Delphi (nicht)	155
<i>Clarisse Prêtre</i>	
Diaphonie et symphonie. La propagande polyphonique du sanctuaire d'Asklépios à Épidaure.....	175



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<i>Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge</i> The Politics of Olympus at Olympia.....	187
<i>Tonio Hölscher</i> Die Statuenausstattung des Heraion von Olympia. Museum für Bildungsreisende oder Rahmen für Kulte von Frauen?.....	207
<i>Sebastian Scharff</i> In Olympia siegen. Erische Athleten des 1. Jahrhunderts v. Chr. und die Frage nach der Attraktivität der Olympischen Spiele im späten Hellenismus	227
<i>Alain Bresson</i> Slaves, Fairs and Fears. Western Greek Sanctuaries as Hubs of Social Interaction	251
<i>Andrew Lepke</i> Vor fremden Göttern? Religiöse Handlungs- und Repräsentationsorte im Spiegel der Freilassunginschriften des 2. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.	279
<i>Katharina Knäpper</i> „With a Little Help from my Friends“ oder das Asylliederby zwischen Magnesia am Mäander und Milet.....	303
<i>Robert Parker</i> Concluding Remarks.....	323



The Politics of Olympus at Olympia*

Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge

The traditional date of the foundation of the Olympic games, 776 BCE, is an a posteriori result of the chronological compilation by Hippias of Elis in the fifth century BCE. The Elean writer certainly enhanced the role of Elis in this context and it remains difficult to establish the 'pre-Elean' situation in terms of cults and athletic contests. Rather than recovering absolute dates for a period where few are available, I would like to propose some reflections on the spatial reorganisation of the sanctuary from the early sixth century BCE to the end of the fifth and to connect these changes with the mythical narratives focusing on some of the various founders at Olympia, both for the games and the cults performed there, in honour of Zeus himself, or of the 'Olympic' pantheon around him. The intertwined identities involved at Olympia – local, regional, 'Panhellenic' – are at stake in each 'reading' of the past in the famous sanctuary. Such an analysis should help to illuminate the Elean impact on the sanctuary from a different perspective than usual and, more specifically, the issue of girl-races for Hera at Olympia as well as the geographical extension of their attendance.

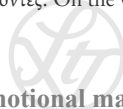
I. Olympus on earth: Olympia and its region

The name of the sanctuary of Olympia is so well known that one would almost forget that it refers to the mountain where the Greek gods were supposed to live. It directly reflects the 'Olympian dwellings' of the epic tradition.¹ In the human sphere, Olympia is the place *par excellence* where the father of gods and men reigns, the Zeus of the Olympus, the *Olympios*. The name of the place where the Altis is located makes of this sanctuary the mirror of the heavenly home of the gods.² The lexicographers of the Roman period referred to this relation between Olympia and mount Olympus. Some of them rooted the epiclysis in the name of the place which Zeus was supposed to have obtained

* This paper is partially based on some considerations presented in French in the book *L'Héra de Zeus* that I recently co-authored with Gabriella Pironti: Pirenne-Delforge/Pironti 2016. I warmly thank Jan-Mathieu Carbon for correcting my English and giving me invaluable comments on a first draft of this study.

1 E.g. Hom. *Il.* 1,18; 2,13, 30, 67; *Od.* 20,79; 22,167; Hes. *theog.* 963; *erg.* 81, 110, 128; *Hom. h. Cer.* 135.

2 Hesych. ο 650,1–2, s. v. 'Ολύμπια δώματ' ἔχοντες. On the various mountains called Olympus in ancient Greece, see Parker 2011.



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as a lot during the allocation of Greek places to each of the gods.³ Other ancient commentators considered that the naming operated in reverse: the toponym was rooted in the epiclesis.⁴ Earlier, in the *epinicia* of Pindar, the sanctuary on the bank of the river Alpheios is named Olympia, as well as Pisa: the poet uses alternately both toponyms⁵ which are, however, absent from Homeric epics.⁶ The term “Olympia” refers to the divine world and its divine king, while the name of Pisa is linked to the region around the sanctuary and its inhabitants, the *Pisatai* or *Pisaioi*, who were supposed to administrate the sanctuary before Elis took it over.⁷ Little is known of a possible archaic Pisatan state and even less of a possible city-state named “Pisa” at this time because the toponym first occurs in an inscription dated to the early fifth century BCE and in epinician poetry.⁸ In both cases, it is closely connected with the sanctuary itself. After Pindar, Herodotus refers once to the sanctuary as “Pisa”, but he calls it Olympia in most cases.⁹ This is a sure sign that, in the mid-fifth century BCE, Olympia has become the established name of the place, while Pisa is now mainly a poetic reference available for scholarly discussion (from Antiquity to modern times). For example, Strabo challenges the idea that Pisa was ever a city by itself and interprets the name as the ancient way of referring to Olympia.¹⁰ A majority of modern scholars suspect that he is right and consider that the city did not exist before the fourth century BCE and the short period of independence of the “city of Pisa” between 365 and 362. However, the fact that Pisa was not a city as such in the archaic period does not imply the lack of any regional identity for the settlements south of the river Alpheios, unless we deny any toponymic consistency to the name of “Pisa” used by Pindar, an extreme point of view that we do not adopt.¹¹

In summary, a toponym rooted in the Olympian dwellings of epic poetry was used for centuries to officially name the sanctuary of Zeus Olympios, whereas the

3 *Etym. m.* 623,13–18, *s. v.* Ὀλυμπία.

4 *Steph. Byz.*, *s. v.* Ὀλυμπία.

5 *E. g.* Pisa: Pind. *O.* 1,18,70; 2,3; 3,9; 6,5; 8,9; *N.* 10,32; Olympia: Pind. *O.* 1,7; 2,53; 6,26; 7,10; 8,83; *P.* 5,124; 7,15; 11,47; *N.* 11,23.

6 On this absence, see Kóiv 2013, 346 n. 215.

7 *Strab.* 8,3,31; *Paus.* 5,4,7, 6,1, 10,1; 6,22,2–4.

8 Minon 2007, no. 12 (*IvO* 11): a field “in Pisa” is confirmed as the property of a certain Deucalion, who is now a “Chaladrian” (on this people, see *e. g.* Nafissi 2003, 43–45). Cf. also *Sch. Pind. O.* 10,55a (*Drachmann*): the name “Pisa” is given to the place where people attending the *panegyris* stay during the Olympic games.

9 *Hdt.* 2,7 (ἐς Πισαν), 160; 6,122; 7,170; 8,134; 9,81 (ἐν Ὀλυμπίῃ); 5,22; 6,127 (τὸν ἐν Ὀλυμπίῃ ἀγῶνα).

10 *Strab.* 8,3,31.

11 To the inscription mentioned above (n. 9), one can add the eponym Pisos who is present on the chest of Cypselos described by Pausanias in Olympia (*Paus.* 5,17,9), an element which cannot be completely neglected in the discussion about an archaic Pisatan territory (Nafissi 2003, 32 and n. 80). – For a century, scholarship has passed from one conviction to another: on the one hand, the certainty that during the archaic period, the Pisatans were the inhabitants of the Alpheios’ valley and a coherent ethnic group subdued and finally stripped of control of the Olympian sanctuary and its contests by Elis (*e. g.* Meyer 1950, 1736–1743; Roy 2004, 501–502); on the other hand, the radical denial of any Pisatan ethnicity before the fourth century BCE (*e. g.* Nafissi 2003, 28–40; Luraghi 2008, 79; Giangiulio 2009 and already Niese 1910). Roy 2002a; Roy 2002b; Roy 2004; Roy 2009 exemplify the oscillation between both points of view. A well-balanced analysis in Kóiv 2013.



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toponym possibly anchored in local geography became the “poetic” label to designate the same place as early as the end of the archaic period. This issue, rarely addressed in these “toponymic” terms, is closely connected with the controversies about the early expansion of Elis outside its original home in the valley of the river Peneios (the *koilē Elis* of Thucydides).¹² The name of Olympia itself and the reorganisation of the Altis between the very end of the seventh and the early sixth century BCE could give some clues to address this issue from a different angle than usual.

According to the last excavations held in Olympia, a deep reorganisation of the site started at the end of the seventh century and continued in the next. At least a part of these architectural transformations could be seen as a criterion of substantial change,¹³ such as some sort of control by the Eleans,¹⁴ who progressively confirmed the sanctuary of Zeus Olympios as a Panhellenic venue, on the one hand, and turned it into an extra-urban centre of their own political and religious life, on the other. At some point in this period, the Elean state added to its proper territory, along the Peneios valley, the northern part of the lower Alpheios river, the so-called “Pisatis”.¹⁵

In this perspective, the names of Pisa and Olympia, which Pindar uses alternately, could reflect more than a *variatio sermonis* based on poetic necessities and metrical demand. The alternation could be a poetic sign of the progressive introduction of the name of Olympia to designate the sanctuary henceforth controlled by Elis. Even if there were no city-state named Pisa in the archaic period, the various settlements of the region – whatever they were – probably administrated the sanctuary of Zeus in the first centuries of its existence, welcoming the worshippers coming from the neighbouring regions.¹⁶ If this hypothesis is correct, the name of Pisa preserves the memory of a regional context and Olympia becomes the Panhellenic sanctuary *par excellence*, referring to the ‘Olympian dwellings’ of the epic poetry. The pantheonic organisation of Olympia and its mythical traditions have to be set against this “Pisatan/Elean” background, which also gives some clues to understanding the different levels of the participation in the rituals of the Altis.

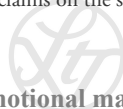
12 Thuk. 2,25,3.

13 This chronological issue is much debated, notably regarding the date of some archaic inscriptions found in Olympia (see Minon 2007, 274–279). There is no document firmly attesting a non-Elean phase of administration on the sanctuary but, as M. Kóiv stated (Kóiv 2013, 319): “when no proof can be expected, the lack of proof proves nothing.” In view of this uncertainty, I base my argument concerning the deep reorganisation of the Altis on the evidence of archaeology (see below).

14 *Contra* Kyrrieleis 2006, 54–55, who does not relate the reordering of the site to a political change but to changes in architectural forms (“Wir tun also gut daran, für die bauliche Neuordnung Olympias um 600 v. Chr. nicht nach einem bestimmten politischen Anlass zu suchen, sondern sie als Teil der allgemeinen Entwicklung zu monumentalen Formen zu verstehen ...”). Cf. Scott 2010, 146–180, who assumes a “rebuilding” of the Hera temple around 600, even if Mallwitz strongly argued, as already as 1966, against the existence of any previous temple: Mallwitz 1966, 325, 328.

15 Roy 2009, 490.

16 Diod. 15,78,2, mentioning the reference, by the Pisatans in the 4th cent. BCE (provisionally independent from Elis between 365–362, as mentioned above), to ancient traditions (τις μυθικαῖς καὶ παλαιαῖς ἀποδείξεις χρώμενοι) for supporting their claims on the sanctuary. Cf. Morgan 1990, 57–89; Kóiv 2013 for an extensive discussion.



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