

Preface

This little book is addressed to classicists, of course, but also to non-classical scholars such as historians of modern sport and, in particular, to scholars studying the modern Olympics. But it is also aimed at the interested public in general and, in particular, at journalists writing seriously on sport who want an historical perspective on their work. I should be more than pleased if the latter groups find it interesting. I have, accordingly, attempted to make the main text as accessible as possible, for instance by giving *all* Greek texts discussed in translation and including the translations used in the bibliography, unattributed translations being my own. I also sometimes explain ancient customs and practices in more detail than real experts on antiquity need, and I repeat essential information where I find repetition to serve better than a dull cross-reference; in particular, details of the ancient Olympic victory ceremony are discussed in several passages, for which fact I ask here for the reader's forbearance. I have relegated references, given in generous quantity in the hope of guiding the interested reader on to further reading, to footnotes, in the interest of readability, and readers without interest in such references can simply skip the notes. Moreover, at 125-28 I give a list of the often quite bewildering abbreviations used in references to ancient evidence and modern publications by scholars of antiquity. All dates are BCE unless otherwise indicated or obvious from the context. In transliterating Greek names, I attempt to avoid Latinization except where this would make for odd results; thus Athens and Alexander, but Kleonai and Antipatros; however, when ancient authors are treated as *sources* (in contradistinction to historical individuals), their names are Latinized, as convention has it.

Heartfelt thanks go to my former student and present colleague, Kristoffer Maribo (Copenhagen), who took off time in the middle of a hectic semester to comment on my manuscript, and to my old teacher, Prof. em. Jerker Blomqvist (Lund), for useful comments. Moreover, I am deeply grateful to Lillian & Dan Finks Fond who by a generous donation made this publication possible; and to The German Archaeological Institute at Athens for providing me with photographs free of charge: in particular, I must thank Eleni Tzimi of the German Fotothek for excellent help. Thanks are due also to the Greek Ministry of Culture and The Ephorate of Antiquities of Eleia for permission to reproduce the photos. Thanks also to Hans Møller for drawing the map of the festivals of the *periodos* and to Pernille Sys Hansen for producing a camera-ready manuscript.

I dedicate the book to my students, past and present, at the University of Copenhagen who have always gracefully accepted it when I digressed into the details and niceties of Greek athletics.

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The Question

Modern hosts of the Olympic Games have, not surprisingly, almost invariably made use of the event to present themselves in the most favourable light imaginable – though it is undeniable that this light has sometimes been completely misleading. The use of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin by the Nazis is only the most notorious example.¹ It may also not yet have been forgotten how a state such as the German Democratic Republic used the Olympic and other remarkable successes of its athletes to glorify itself and claim international recognition.² What about the classical Greek city-states? Did they use the ancient Olympics to project favourable images of themselves?

In the following, I shall attempt to outline an answer to this question, focusing on the classical period, that is: the period from the final Greek victory over the invading Persians in 479 until the death of Alexander ‘the Great’ in 323.³ This period is both the age of great writers such as Herodotos, Sophokles and Plato and the heyday of the large and famous city-states of Athens and Sparta – as well as the period to which the western world has traditionally looked to contemplate itself as if in a mirror.⁴ It is, accordingly, the period of which non-specialists are most likely to have a reasonable grasp. This, and the desirability of a certain brevity, are my reasons for focusing on the classical period, and my choices do not imply that I subscribe to the by now largely discredited view that the fifth century was the noble and brilliant culmination and flowering of the Greek competitive spirit, which then fell into a deplorable and continuous decline.⁵

1 On the 1936 Olympics, see Mandell 1971; Kanin 1981: 52-55; Guttman 1992: 53-71; Rürup 1999; and Goldblatt 2018: 172-85; see also, in more journalistic veins, Hart-Davis 1986 and Hilton 2006.

2 Carr 1974; Espy 1979: 32-34, 36, 42-43, 59, 67-68, 78-79, 106-9, 131; Kanin 1981: 68-71; Guttman 1991: 177-78, 243-44; Johnson 2008: 170-71. – Striving for international recognition by way of Olympic participation has not, of course, been confined to the German Democratic Republic: see Kanin 1981: 27, 74-75, 98, 104, 118, 139, 142; Riordan 1993; Goldblatt 2018: 101; Cebrián 2020: 49.

3 Modern histories of the Greek classical period include Osborne 2000; Rhodes 2006; and Hornblower 2011. On the Persian Wars: Green 1996; Burn 2002; and Cawkwell 2005. On Alexander ‘the Great’: Green 1991; Cartledge 2004; and Lane Fox 2004.

4 Murray 1988: 461.

5 Kyle 1990; Christesen & Stocking 2021: 5-6.

The Greek City-State Culture

One fundamentally important fact about ancient Greek culture, in particular Greek political and religious culture, which must be kept firmly in mind throughout the following exposition, is that the Greek world throughout classical antiquity was composed of a veritable multitude of micro-states in the form of city-states, or, in Greek, *poleis* (singular: *polis*). Whereas the Greeks as such may reasonably be considered to have constituted a people, this people was in the area before the Roman Empire never united into a single state. The Greeks shared ethnicity, language, religion and life-style,¹ but they did not share a common political framework, a state. They were, on the contrary, subdivided into more than a thousand city-states,² and formed what modern historians of ancient Greece term *a city-state culture*.³

The numerous Greek city-states were located not only in the geographical area, which forms the territory of the modern nation state of Greece, but on the contrary, along most of the coasts of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Accordingly, there were Greek city-states in modern Spain, France, Italy – not least on Sicily – in the territory of modern Greece itself, on the shores of the Black Sea, on the western coast of modern Turkey – Asia Minor – and on Cyprus and Crete as well as a few in Syria and Egypt. The center of the utmost cultural importance for the culture of this far-flung world was the area of modern Greece and Asia Minor, and the city-states in areas such as Southern Italy and Sicily are often described by modern historians of ancient Greek culture as ‘colonies’ founded by city-states, mother-cities, in the ‘homeland’. The term should not be taken to imply that these ‘colonies’ were dependent satellites of the founding cities, and in Greek they were described by the term *apoikia* (ἀποικία) which means roughly ‘a settlement far from home’. Such settlements far from the homeland were not subject to control by the city-states of the homeland but functioned as individual city-states in their own right. Some of them, in fact, were among the wealthiest and most powerful of Greek *poleis*, e.g. Syracuse on Sicily and Kyrene on the coast of northern Africa. But they looked to the ‘old country’ for their prehistory and identity as Greeks and maintained an emotional attachment to their metropolis and to the great homeland sanctuaries of the gods such as Delphi and Olympia. These were also the chief athletic centers of the Greek world, as we shall see, and athletes from the ‘colonies’, in particular the city-states in Southern Italy and on Sicily, were frequent entrants here.

1 Hdt. 8.144, on which see e.g. Nielsen 2007: 8-10.

2 Descriptions of every known *polis* of the archaic and classical periods may be found in Hansen & Nielsen 2004.

3 On the Greek city-state culture, see Hansen 1994: 12, 2000b and 2006a. On other city-state cultures in world history, see Hansen 2000a and 2002.

The basic characteristic of a Greek city-state as a political entity was that it was a micro-state based on, mostly, a single urban center which functioned as the economic, social, and political center of the state. In the present context, it is the quality of such cities as states, which is of importance. As a state, a Greek *polis* was almost exclusively a male affair, only adult men being citizens in possession of full political rights and duties. Not only women and minors were excluded from political influence in the city-states, but so were slaves and immigrants. Greek city-states usually accepted immigrants, but these were only very rarely naturalized as citizens and always purely on the basis of individual merits. Immigrants were allowed to live and work in the city, but had to pay a minor tax as *metoikoi*, ‘people who had changed their residence’, and could not own property except by special permission. Slaves were unfree and the possessions of either citizens or *metoikoi*.

The basic political institutions through which the citizens ran the state were a usually minor council (*boule*), which among other things prepared and conducted the meetings of the larger assembly, usually called *ekklesia* or something similar,¹ which made most decisions on such issues as religion and foreign policy.

Though the city-states were in a number of crucial respects quite similar and clearly belonged to the same basic type of state, they were at the same time different from each other in some other respects. Thus, there were substantial differences in terms of e.g. size² and constitution.³ Another area in which there was considerable variation among Greek city-states was religion. It would be hard to improve upon the formulation of Bremmer:

Was there ever such a thing as ‘Greek religion’? It may be an odd question ... but it should be absolutely clear ... that Greek religion as a monolithic entity never existed. When Greece emerged from the Dark Age around 800 B.C., different communities had developed in very different social, political, and economic ways, and this development was reflected also on the religious level. Every city had its own pantheon in which some gods were more important than others and some gods not even worshipped at all. Every city also had its own mythology, its own religious calendar and its own festivals. No Greek city, then, was a religious clone. Yet the various city-religions overlapped sufficiently to warrant the continued use of the term ‘Greek religion’.⁴

Each city-state, then, had its own ‘pantheon’, that is, selection of gods honoured with cult. There was, however, a great degree of uniformity in the way the

1 The known institutions of every attested city-state of the archaic and classical periods are described in Hansen & Nielsen 2004.

2 Nielsen 2007: 6 n. 4.

3 Nielsen 2007: 6 n. 6.

4 Bremmer 1999: 1; see also Mikalson 1983: 4.

gods were honoured: temples,¹ animal sacrifices,² processions³ and spectacular festivals⁴ were standard and ubiquitous phenomena in Greek cults. The festival, in fact, was the festive framework into which other rites, in particular the animal sacrifices, were incorporated. This fact is of fundamental importance in the present context, for two reasons. First, religion, including, accordingly, the great festivals which were the most important expressions of public Greek city-state religion, was subject to direct control by the citizen assemblies, that is: subject to political control by the *polis*.⁵ Thus, at Argos, the great city-state in the north-eastern Peloponnese, special sessions of the assembly were devoted exclusively to *ta hiera*, sacred matters,⁶ and at ordinary sessions *ta hiera* was always the first item on the agenda.⁷ At Athens, twenty sessions of the assembly every year had the item *tria hieron*, “three of the sacred matters”,⁸ first on the agenda.⁹ This political control of religion was the norm in the classical Greek world, and though it may perhaps seem improperly profane to modern sensibilities it cannot be said to constitute abuse of religion. In fact, there was in most cases no other authority to direct public religion. Second, this being so, sport, too, was under the direct political control of the city-state, since sport was, in the classical period, almost invariably incorporated as recreational and festive spectacles into the great festivals staged in honour of the gods.¹⁰ Again, there was, practically speaking, no other authorities in existence which could stage athletic competitions, and this state control of sport was, accordingly, beneficial rather than detrimental to ancient Greek sport. The frequently-aired modern sentiment that sport and politics should be kept separate¹¹ was thus incomprehensible in an ancient Greek context.

Such, then, is the general background on which the following exposition should be read.

1 On Greek temples, see e.g.: Coldstream 1985; Burkert 1988 and 1996; Gruben 1986; Sinn & Leybold 2005; Spawforth 2006.

2 On Greek animal sacrifice, see e.g.: Hermary & Leguilloux 2004; Bremmer 2007; Osborne 2016; and the essays collected in Hitch & Rutherford 2017.

3 On Greek processions, see e.g.: Burkert 1985: 99-101; True *et al.* 2004.

4 On Greek festivals, see e.g.: Burkert 1985: 99-109; Cartledge 1985; Chaniotis 2011; Parker 2011: 171-223; see also the essays collected in Brandt & Iddeng 2012.

5 Chaniotis 2011: 9.

6 *SEG* 11.316.44-45 (ca. 450); *IG* IV².1 69+ (fourth century).

7 Piérart 2000: 303.

8 Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 43.6; cf. Hansen 1987: 27-28.

9 Zaidman & Pantel 1992, 93; Rhodes 1993, 529; see also Mikalson 1983: 13 and Martin 2016: 281-87.

10 Nielsen 2018: 22-84.

11 Horne *et al.* 1999: 194.

Some Fundamental Characteristics of Ancient Greek Athletic Festivals

The Olympics and Other Big Events

The answer to the question posed in the introductory section must clearly be in the affirmative: Yes, the Greek city-states did use the ancient Olympics to project favourable images of themselves. However, some fundamental features of the way in which the ancient Olympics (as well as other athletic festivals) were celebrated caused such use and abuse to be less extensive and less intense than is the case with the modern Olympics. The modern Olympics are beyond comparison the greatest, most prestigious and most profitable of all sport events celebrated. In antiquity, too, the Olympics were by common consent the most prestigious of all athletic festivals.¹ However, the ancient festival was not in any way remotely near being as monetary profitable to the host and organizer as the modern Olympics have come to be, at least sometimes; and, it may not have been the greatest festival in terms of proportions. Thus, the *Panathenaia* at Athens,² for instance, had a more extensive programme than the Olympics,³ and this may also have been the case e.g. at Nemea: at both the *Panathenaia* and the Nemean Games competitors were subdivided into three age-classes,⁴ not simply two as at Olympia.⁵ At Greek athletic festivals, competitors were divided not into weight-classes but into age-classes, and the specifics of age-classing varied from one festival to another; a festival with three age-classes will (as a rule) have had a more extensive programme, then, than one with two, as the Olympics.⁶

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- 1 Golden 1998: 34-35, 80-81. – The fact of the superiority of the Olympics is clearly expressed in Pindar's *First Olympian Ode* (3-7): My heart, if it is of games that you wish to sing, | look no further than the sun: as there is no star | that shines with more warmth by day from a clear sky, | so we can speak of no greater contest than Olympia (translation Verity 2007).
 - 2 On the *Panathenaia*, see Neils 1996 and 1992a; Palagia & Choremi-Spetsieri 2007; Shear 2021a and 2021b.
 - 3 For a convenient table setting out the Panathenaic programme as it was in the 380s, see Shear 2021b: 100.
 - 4 *Panathenaia*: Shear 2001: 242; Shear 2021a: 171-211; Shear 2021b; Miller 2004: 134; Nemea: Neumann-Hartmann 2007: 14.
 - 5 Shear 2001: 242.
 - 6 On age-classes in Greek athletics, see Petermandl 1997 and 2012.

Moreover, there were more events at Nemea than at Olympia.¹ The Olympics, then, though they outshone all other athletic festivals in prestige, were not the only big athletic event in the Greek world. In fact, most city-states probably celebrated religious festivals, which included athletic competitions as spectacles. The classical Greek world did not know of weekends and vacations, but the great religious festivals in honour of the gods were in a very real sense holy days during which labour often ceased.² In the classical period, athletic competitions were almost invariably incorporated as recreational spectacles into the religious festivals in the belief that what pleases man pleases gods;³ accordingly, athletic competitions at a religious festival both increased the honour paid to the presiding divinity – they were “an added honor”, as Parker⁴ says – and served as recreational merriment for the spectators.⁵ As the philosopher Demokritos said, “a life without festivals is like a journey without inns.”⁶ At least 155 festivals with athletic competitions on their programmes may be identified in the late archaic throughout the classical period (i.e. ca. 550-323);⁷ and some of these, such as the *Panathenaia* at Athens, the *Hekatomboia* at Argos, and the *Herakleia* at Thebes, were more than merely local events, attracting athletes from even remote areas of the Greek world.⁸

The Name of the Games

In antiquity, athletic competitions were – at least from the sixth century – almost without exception embedded into religious festivals,⁹ as already outlined, and this fundamental sociological characteristic is quite often reflected in the names given to competitions, as is also the case with ‘the Olympic Games’. In Greek, they were called τὰ Ὀλύμπια (*ta Olympía*, “the Olympics”), for the following reason: The Greeks held that the great gods resided on the mighty

1 At Nemea, e.g., there was a foot-race called *hippios*, which was not contested at Olympia: Miller 2004: 32; it was, however, contested at the *Panathenaia*: Shear 2001: 247; on the race: Romano 2021: 214.

2 Chaniotis 2011: 17-18.

3 Murray 2014: 312. See e.g. *Hom. Hym. Apoll.* 149-150, 169-170 where song is said to please Apollo as well as humans.

4 Parker 2011: 201.

5 Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1160a19-20, 24-25; Cartledge 1985: 100-1; Parker 2011: 176; Nielsen 2022: 72-73.

6 Democr. fr. 230 (DK) (cited in Bremmer 1999: 38).

7 Nielsen 2018: 11-167.

8 The *Panathenaia*: Nielsen 2014a: 104-5, 111-12; the *Hekatomboia*: Nielsen 2014a: 103, 110-11; the *Herakleia*: Nielsen 2014a: 99-100, 108.

9 Nielsen 2016: 34-36. – Athletic competitions were, particularly in the archaic period, also staged at aristocratic funerals (Roller 1981 and Nielsen 2018: 15-22); campaigning armies also staged athletic competitions (Mann 2020).

Mt. Olympos in Thessaly in northern Greece.¹ The Zeus at Olympos had, from the mountain, the epiclesis (epithet or ‘surname’) *Olympios*,² and from Thessaly the cult of Zeus Olympios spread to numerous localities in the Greek world:³ it is found at e.g. Akragas,⁴ Selinous,⁵ Syracuse,⁶ Lokroi Epizephyrioi,⁷ Corinth,⁸ Megara,⁹ Athens,¹⁰ Chalkis,¹¹ Eretria,¹² Pharsalos,¹³ Naxos,¹⁴ Miletoupolis¹⁵ as well as in numerous other places. But, the cult of the god at Elis in the northwestern Peloponnese developed to become his most significant, for reasons that are not fully understood.¹⁶ Perhaps the accessibility of the actual sanctuary for the great and wealthy city-states of Southern Italy and Sicily contributed to the importance of this particular cult.¹⁷ The location of the cult was called Ὀλυμπία (*Olympía*) after the epiclesis of the god: it means roughly ‘sanctuary of Olympian Zeus’.¹⁸ This sanctuary, then, was by the classical period the prime sanctuary of Zeus Olympios, and here the city-state of Elis celebrated a penteteric festival – that is, it was celebrated every four years¹⁹ – in honour of Zeus Olympios. The festival was called τὰ Ὀλύμπια (*ta Olympia*), again after the epiclesis of the god. The sense is ‘the festival of Zeus Olympios’, and it was more or less standard for Greek city-states to name festivals after the divinity honoured, in particular after his or her epiclesis.²⁰ Embedded in this festival as spectacles were the great athletic and equestrian competitions which have become famous as ‘the Olympic Games’; in Greek, they were simply referred to by the name of the festival itself and thus called τὰ Ὀλύμπια, which when applied to the competitions means ‘the contests in honour of Zeus Olympios’.

1 Hom. *Il.* 1.221-222; 2.13-14; 5.868; 11.75-77; *Od.* 6.42-47. See Nilsson 1932: 228-31.

2 On such ‘surnames’ of the gods in Greek religion, see Mikalson 2010: 33.

3 Farnell 1896: 51. – This seems to me to be the most reasonable explanation of the fact that the epiclesis *Olympios* (and the toponym *Olympos*) is widespread in the Greek world, but see Nilsson 1932: 235-37 and Drees 1968: 12.

4 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 188.

5 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 223.

6 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 229.

7 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 276.

8 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 468.

9 Paus. 1.40.5.

10 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 635.

11 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 649.

12 Rutherford 2013: 89.

13 *CEG* 2.792.

14 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 762.

15 Hansen & Nielsen 2004: 989.

16 Cartledge 1985: 105.

17 Sinn 2021: 71-72; Barringer 2021: 17.

18 Siewert 1991: 66.

19 Such periodicity was standard in Greek religion, festivals being celebrated every year, every two years or every four years: Iddeng 2012: 15-16.

20 Chaniotis 2011: 14.

Olympiad-year	Modern year	Festival
75.1	480	<i>Ta Olympia</i>
75.2	479	<i>Ta Nemea</i>
75.2	478	<i>Ta Isthmia</i>
75.3	478	<i>Ta Pythia</i>
75.4	477	<i>Ta Nemea</i>
75.4	476	<i>Ta Isthmia</i>
76.1	476	<i>Ta Olympia</i>

This, then, was the ancient Olympic Games, and it will be clear from the exposition above that they were *always* celebrated at Olympia and *always* arranged by the city-state of Elis.¹ Similarly, the *Panathenaia* were always arranged by and celebrated at Athens, the *Herakleia* always by and at Thebes, and the *Hekatomboia* by and at Argos.

The Periodos

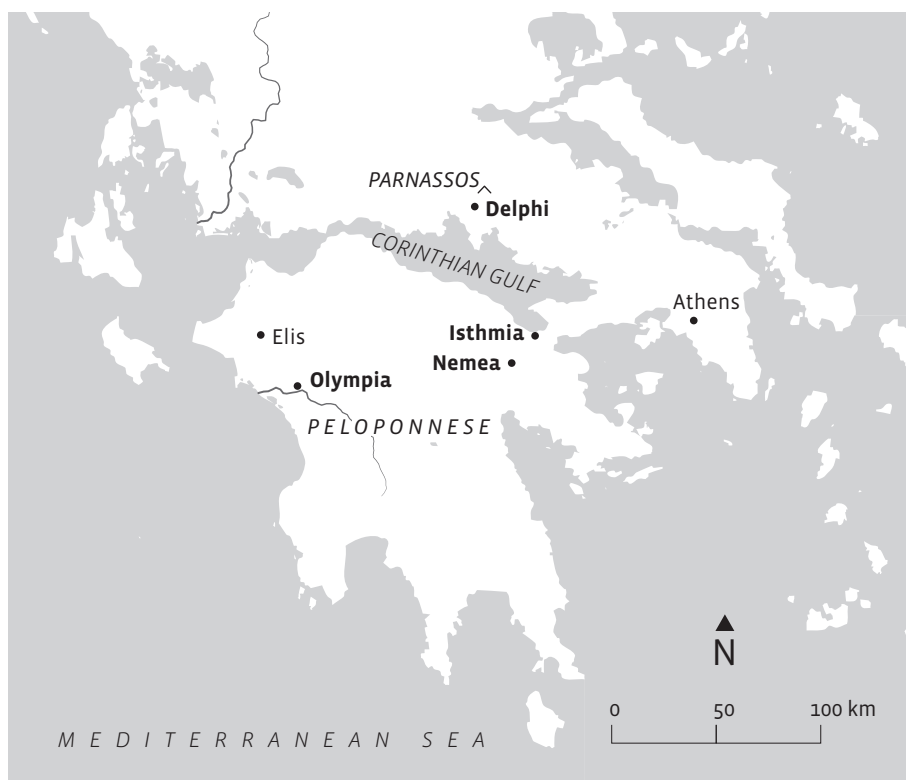
Most city-states celebrated religious festivals incorporating athletic competitions and, as pointed out above, some of these competitions were quite prestigious. But, no other festival quite matched the Eleian Olympics in terms of prestige. However, three other festivals at least resembled the Olympics in prestige: At Delphi, also known as Pytho, were staged the *Pythia* in honour of Apollo Pythios, arranged by the city-state of Delphi in collaboration with the so-called Amphitiktiony, a large organization comprising numerous *ethne* ('peoples') and *poleis* (city-states);² on the isthmus of Corinth, this city-state staged the *Isthmia* in honour of Poseidon Isthmios; and, finally, at Nemea the city-state of Kleonai celebrated the *Nemea* in honour of Zeus Nemeos. With the Olympics, these festivals constituted the *periodos*, 'circuit',³ and were the most prestigious group of all athletic festivals. They were scheduled with an eye to each other in such a way that every year saw one or two celebrations of festivals and competitions in this prestigious group.⁴ The pattern looks as illustrated in the table above,

1 Except for a very few occasions when Olympia had been conquered by a foreign enemy, most conspicuously in 364 (Nielsen 1999: 55-56 and Crowther 2003a).

2 Nielsen 2008: 202-5 with references.

3 The term *periodos* itself appears in our sources only in the Hellenistic period (that is, after the death of Alexander 'the Great' in 323), but the reality it describes is much older: Nielsen 2018: 12-13.

4 Nielsen 2018: 11. – Greek years did not run from winter to winter, but began in summer or autumn; accordingly, Greek years span parts of two modern years.



The Festivals of the Periodos. Map drawn by Hans Møller.

taking the 75th Olympiad (= the four-year period between two celebrations of the Eleian Olympics) of 480-476 as an example.¹

Every year, then, saw the celebration of a festival in this the most famous group of athletic festivals; in fact, every second year there were *two* celebrations since the festivals at the Isthmos and at Nemea were trieteric (i.e. celebrated every second year) and not penteteric like the festivals at Olympia and Delphi. In this situation, a celebration of, say, the Olympics must have been a less striking and significant event than the celebration of the modern Olympics, which are staged only every four years and have no real rival when it comes to prestige and popular appeal. From the preceding it will, to restate an important point, be clear that the ancient Olympics were always celebrated at the same site – that is, at Olympia – and was not an itinerant event travelling the major cities

¹ Based on Golden 1998: 10-11.

of the Greek world, in the way the modern Olympics travel the metropolises of the globe.¹

This means that the city-state of Elis did not, like modern hosts,² have to campaign extensively and invest massively in order simply to bring the games ‘to town’, as it were: the Olympics were at home in Elis by definition. Similarly, it was always the Corinthians who arranged the *Isthmia* and the Thebans who ran the *Herakleia*. This fact probably had as a major effect that Elis did not have the same indomitable urge to emphasize its own brilliance by means of the Olympics as that habitually displayed by modern hosts: It was always a given that the city would have to run the next Olympics – and the next, etc. However, Elis did use the games for its own non-sportive purposes, and so did other Greek city-states. In what follows, I shall begin by discussing Elis’ use of the games and then turn to the use made of the Olympic festival and its site by other Greek city-states and ‘their’ athletes.

1 Kanin 1981: 29-30.

2 Guttman 1992: 21; Burroughs 1999; Toohey & Veal 2007: 65-67; Goldblatt 2018: 364, 371.