

Review

Sociocultural and religious aspects of the ancient Olympic Games

Jemal Dzaganian

Georgian State University of Sport, Vazha-Pshavela Avenue 76b, Tbilisi, Georgia

E-mail: Jemal.Dzaganian@sportuni.ge

Article History

Received: July 10, 2026

Revised: July 13, 2026

Accepted: July 15, 2026

Abstract

This article explores the phenomenon of the Ancient Greek Olympic Games as a pivotal mechanism in the formation of cultural and religious identity within the ancient world. The study analyzes the role of the Games in facilitating peace among city-states (*poleis*), the evolution of athletic disciplines, and the influence of social hierarchy on participant selection criteria. Particular emphasis is placed on the political significance of the "Sacred Truce" (*ekecheiria*) and the multifaceted factors that ensured the continuity of this tradition for nearly twelve centuries. By examining the intersection of athletics, religion, and diplomacy, the paper underscores the Games' enduring impact on Panhellenic unity and the foundations of Western sportsmanship.

Keywords: Olympia, Cult of Zeus, Panhellenic identity, Sacred Truce, Ancient Agonistics.

Relevance of the Research

The study of the Ancient Greek Olympic Games maintains exceptional relevance in modern humanities and social sciences. It provides a comprehensive framework to understand the intricate interplay between physical education, religious worldview, and social organization in ancient society.

The Olympic Games represent a foundational historical precedent upon which sport emerged as a social institution, subsequently shaping its ideological and organizational structures, including the core principles of the modern Olympic movement.

Research Objective

The objective of this study is a systematic Analysis of the historical development,

functional purpose, and ideological foundations of the Olympic Games. The paper aims to decipher the internal structure of the Olympic phenomenon, thereby establishing a theoretical foundation for further research in sports history and the philosophy of Olympism.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes historical-comparative, cultuological, and sociological analysis. The source base comprises texts by classical authors, alongside modern studies in historiography and the sociology of sport.

Introduction

In the history of Ancient Greek civilization, the Olympic Games were far more than a mere sporting event.



They constituted a multifaceted sociocultural phenomenon and a complex institutional system that integrated religious rituals, mythological beliefs, political relations, and the ideal of human physical and spiritual perfection.

The Games were dedicated to the supreme deity, Zeus, and their staging was regarded as a sacred duty. Through this practice, the Hellenes expressed their devotion to the gods and conceptualized the place of humanity within a harmonious cosmic order.

Main Body

The ancient Olympic Games stand as one of the oldest and most significant cultural-religious institutions in human history. Most scholars identify 776 BC as the official beginning of the ancient Olympic Games, the year in which the name of the first victorious athlete—Koroibos of Elis—was recorded.

The Games were held in Olympia, at the foot of Mount Kronos in the valley of the Alfeios River on the Peloponnese peninsula. The heart of Olympia was the *Altis*, a sacred grove hosting a vast complex of religious and athletic structures: the palaestra, gymnasium, stadium, hippodrome, baths, and residential and auxiliary infrastructure.

Olympia was also home to the grand Temple of Zeus, which housed the colossal statue of Zeus sculpted by Phidias—celebrated as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

The competitions were accompanied by ritual sacrifices, festive processions, and prayers. Of particular importance was the solemn oath taken by the athletes before Zeus, which bound their behavior to strict ethical and religious standards.

One of the most vital institutional achievements of the Olympic Games was the "Sacred Truce" (*ekecheiria*). This truce mandated a temporary cessation of hostilities and guaranteed safe passage for all those traveling to Olympia. This practice served as a legal projection of a religious norm, ensuring both the Panhellenic character and the physical safety of the Games.

The ancient Olympic Games were staged on the same grounds once every four years for a span of 1,170 years. This four-year cycle became known as an "Olympiad" and eventually evolved into a calendar system; time was tracked by Olympiads rather than by individual years.

The Games were fundamentally rooted in the principle of *agon* (competition). Initially, the entire event lasted only a single day and consisted of a single event: the *stade* (a short footrace of one stadium length). For nearly half a century (spanning the first 13 Games), this single race remained the sole competition of the Greek festival. In the 14th Olympic Games (724 BC), the *diaulos* (a double-stadium race) was introduced to the program, and from the 15th Games onward, long-distance running (*dolichos*) was added, ranging successively from 8 to 10, 12, and 14 stades.

As the number of athletic disciplines and participants grew, the duration of the Games was extended to five days. The program expanded to include complex disciplines such as the pentathlon, boxing, pankration, and chariot racing.

The criteria for participation in the Olympiad were strictly regulated: only free Greek men were permitted to compete. Women were forbidden from competing or even entering the stadium, with the sole



exception of the priestess of the goddess Demeter. However, separate athletic competitions for women, known as the "Heraean Games," were held in honor of the goddess Hera.

In the ancient Olympiads, there were no second or third places—there was only a single winner. The victor, known as an *Olympionique*, was accorded the highest honors in society. The immediate prize was a branch of a sacred wild olive tree, which had to be cut with a golden knife by a boy under the age of twelve whose parents were both living and of unblemished character. The branch was cut from the tree believed to have been planted by Heracles himself. This wreath symbolically represented supreme honor and glory.

However, the true, material rewards awaited the victor back in his home city-state (*polis*). The *Olympionique* was hailed as a hero; statues were erected in his honor, he was exempted from taxes, and he enjoyed special privileges for the rest of his life. The names of these illustrious athletes and their achievements were meticulously recorded and preserved in gymnasiums and temples.

The youth drew great inspiration from the examples of these heroes, some of whom were eventually elevated to receive divine honors. Historical sources tell of Leonidas of Rhodes, who achieved twelve victories across four consecutive Olympiads between 164 and 152 BC. Remarkably, this record stood unbroken for 2,160 years, until American swimmer Michael Phelps won his 13th individual gold medal at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

Beginning with the 84th Games in 444 BC, competitions in art and rhetoric became an integral part of the Olympic Games. The Greeks did not rigidly separate artistic

mastery from athletic prowess. This integration demonstrates that Greek culture viewed physical and intellectual perfection as a unified ideal. The greatest minds of the era—including Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, and Herodotus—gathered in Olympia. It was during these 84th Games that Herodotus read portions of his *Histories* to the gathered crowds, earning the laurel crown of victory.

Interestingly, the Greek ideal of *kalokagathia*—the harmonious unity of physical beauty and moral/spiritual virtue—bridged any divide between athletes and intellectuals. For instance, history records that Pythagoras won the title of *Olympionique* in boxing, while Plato was an accomplished and successful wrestler.

The ancient Olympic Games were celebrated without interruption for nearly twelve centuries (1,170 years). From 776 BC to 394 AD, they were held 293 times, a record of institutional longevity that is virtually unprecedented in human cultural history. There is likely no other human endeavor that boasts such a long and magnificent continuity.

Nevertheless, like all great historical traditions, the ancient Olympic Games eventually reached their end. In 393 AD, Roman Emperor Theodosius I, as part of his policy to establish Christianity as the state religion, banned the Olympic Games, viewing them as pagan rituals. Sometime later, by decree of Theodosius II, the religious buildings of Olympia were systematically destroyed, and subsequent natural disasters buried the stadium and remaining infrastructure beneath layers of silt and earth.

Today, the ancient Olympic Games remain one of the most brilliant heritages of global civilization, having laid the



foundational concepts of modern sport, peace, and international unity.

Conclusion

The ancient Olympic Games were a unique sociocultural and religious institution that defined the identity and value system of the Hellenic world. By harmonizing religious ritual with athletic *agon*, they fostered Panhellenic unity, served vital socio-political functions, and established a value system anchored in honor, justice, and personal excellence.

The exceptional longevity of the Games over many centuries was made possible by the organic unity of religious belief, social practice, and cultural self-expression.

Thus, the Olympic Games can be understood as one of the primary pillars of ancient Greek civilization, one that exerted a profound influence on the subsequent development of Western culture and continues to maintain its symbolic significance within the modern Olympic movement.

ანტიკური ოლიმპიური თამაშების სოციოკულტურული და რელიგიური ასპექტები

ჯემალ ძაგანია

საქართველოს სპორტის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, ვაჟა-ფშაველას გამზირი 76ბ, თბილისი, საქართველო

ელფოსტა: Jemal.Dzagania@sportuni.ge

აბსტრაქტი

წინამდებარე სტატია იკვლევს ძველბერძნული ოლიმპიური თამაშების ფენომენს, როგორც ანტიკური სამყაროს კულტურული და რელიგიური იდენტობის ფორმირების ერთ-ერთ უმნიშვნელოვანეს მექანიზმს. ნაშრომში გაანალიზებულია თამაშების როლი პოლისებს შორის მშვიდობის დამყარების პროცესში, სპორტული დისციპლინების ევოლუცია და სოციალური იერარქიის გავლენა მონაწილეთა შერჩევის კრიტერიუმებზე. კვლევა განსაკუთრებულ ყურადღებას ამახვილებს „წმინდა ზავის“ (*ekecheiria*) პოლიტიკურ მნიშვნელობასა და იმ ფაქტორებზე, რომლებმაც განაპირობეს ამ ტრადიციის თორმეტსაუკუნოვანი უწყვეტობა.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ოლიმპია, ზევსის კულტი, პანელინური იდენტობა, წმინდა ზავი, ანტიკური აგონისტიკა.

References

1. Berishvili, E. (2019). *Olympic Dilogy*. Georgian National Olympic Committee, Tbilisi. (In Georgian)
2. Dzagania, G. (2004). *History of Physical Education and Sport*. Tbilisi. (In Georgian)



3. Dzagania, G. (2004). *Olympic Games* (Textbook). Tbilisi. (In Georgian)
4. Dzagania, G. (2018). *Everything About the Olympic Games* (Monograph). Tbilisi. (In Georgian)
5. Stolbov, V. V., Finogenova, L. A., & Melnikova, N. Y. (2000). *History of Physical Culture and Sport* (Textbook). Moscow: FiS. (In Russian)
6. Kun, L. (1982). *General History of Physical Culture and Sport*. Moscow: Raduga. (In Russian)
7. Platonov, V. P., & Guskov, S. N. (1994, 1997). *Olympic Sport* (Textbook, Vols. 1 & 2). Kyiv: Olympic Literature. (In Russian)
- 13.
8. Golden, M. (1998). *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge University Press.
9. Miller, S. G. (2004). *Ancient Greek Athletics*. Yale University Press.
10. Pausanias. (1918). *Description of Greece* (W. H. S. Jones, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
11. Reid, H. L. (2011). *Athletics and Philosophy in the Ancient World: Contests of Virtue*. Routledge.
12. Spathari, E. (2000). *The Olympic Spirit*. Adam Editions