



AKADÉMIAI KIADÓ

**Acta Archaeologica
Academiae Scientiarum
Hungaricae**

74 (2023) 1, 187–189

DOI:

[10.1556/072.2023.00013](https://doi.org/10.1556/072.2023.00013)

© 2023 The Author(s)

BOOK REVIEW



Judith M. Barringer: *Olympia: A cultural history*

András Patay-Horváth^{1,2*}

¹ Institute of Archaeology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Eötvös Loránd Research Network, Tóth Kálmán u. 4, H-1097, Budapest, Hungary

² Department of Ancient History, Faculty of Humanities, Eötvös Loránd University, Múzeum krt. 6–8, 1088, Budapest, Hungary

Barringer, J.M. (2021). *Olympia: A Cultural History*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. p. 336. Ebook. ISBN 9780691210476.

This is a useful and very well-written book. The author has published several papers related to the monuments of Olympia and has spent many years preparing this volume. Moreover, a comprehensive and thorough treatment of Olympia in English like this one was lacking since decades.¹ The richly and well-illustrated monograph by Barringer (B.) is therefore a welcome addition for every library, whether public or private.

As indicated in the subtitle, the volume offers a cultural history and B. clearly explains in the introduction (5) what she intends to offer. The book ‘focuses on the development of Olympia from the period of its first monumental architecture c. 600 B.C. until the late Roman period, when pagan cult practices were officially abolished by the Christian emperor Theodosius in 393 A.D.’ and presents ‘a new way of viewing Olympia to answer the primary questions of how and why the site developed as it did over this long period of time. In particular, my focus is on how sculptural monuments (both architectural and free-standing) related and responded to each other; what messages patrons intended; and what interpretations were available to viewers.’ In this truly ‘holistic interpretive work’, B. uses ‘all available evidence – material and written – ... to obtain a coherent understanding of the site as it developed, not just in terms of its architecture but also in terms of meaning, to understand why objects were placed where they were.’

Basically, this is an excellent agenda and the methodology is perfect but the lower time limit seems questionable. While it is certainly appropriate not to concentrate on sport history when dealing with Olympia, it is problematic, I think, to exclude the emergence of the Games which certainly predates 600 BC. Given the geographical setting of the sanctuary, i.e. its obvious remoteness from the main political centers of Early Iron Age Greece, it is an intriguing question in terms of cultural history (or even the most important one), how the sanctuary became so popular and why the Games became so prestigious already at such an early stage. The problem of origins is admittedly not a fashionable topic nowadays, but it is of central importance and would have deserved some discussion especially because sculptural monuments, even if small scale bronze and terracotta figurines, are abundant already at this early period. They were often discussed from various perspectives and play a central role in a relatively recent monograph about the origins of the Olympic Games,² so it is perhaps not only the author of this review who would have been interested in learning B’s opinion on their role in the development of the sanctuary.³ And as argued convincingly by

¹The latest thorough monograph on Olympia in English is [Gardiner \(1925\)](#). [Drees \(1968\)](#) is a richly illustrated but problematic volume translated from German. Its omission from B’s bibliography is fully justified. [Sinn \(2000\)](#) is also mainly a translation and although much better than Drees, it is primarily a popular introduction. [Swaddling \(1980\)](#) deals (as many other books e.g. most recently [Waterfield, 2018](#)), mainly with the Olympic Games and not with the sanctuary and its remains.

²[Patay-Horváth \(2015a\)](#).

³The figurines dedicated during the Geometric Period are mentioned and they are also illustrated (17–18) and there is also a brief section on the earliest games (29–31), but B. seems to ignore the basic problems, i.e. what these figurines represent and why they were dedicated in such high numbers at Olympia. For these problems see [Patay-Horváth \(2020, 2021a\)](#).

*Corresponding author.

E-mail: pthorv@gmail.com

Rambach (2002), monumental architecture was also present at Olympia during the Early Iron Age, so well before 600 BC.⁴

The book is made up of a prologue (13–33) dealing with the period preceding 600 BC and chapter 1 (34–62) discusses practical matters like water and food supply, dining and accommodation. The remaining chapters are devoted to single periods (Ch. 2 ‘The Archaic Period’, Ch. 3 ‘The Fifth century B.C.’, Ch. 4 ‘The Fourth century B.C. and Hellenistic Period’ Ch. 5 ‘Roman Olympia’) and the final one (Ch. 6 ‘The Last Olympiad’) reads like an amalgam of a conclusion and an epilogue summarizing the main themes and presenting the destruction of the site during Late Antiquity.⁵

The detailed and clear presentations of the stadion and the treasuries (75–89), the Philippeion (163–172) and various other monuments (e.g. 177–183) are helpful for newcomers and experienced students or researchers alike. In some cases, (e.g. the original designation of the ‘Heraion’, 68–72), B. prudently leaves it to the reader to decide which theory should be preferred. There are very few mistakes which deserve to be mentioned⁶ and one could of course add a few more titles to the vast bibliography⁷ but the text is informative and objective in general.⁸ There are, however, some striking omissions which seem to be unjustified: several titles are cited from a volume on the temple of Zeus at Olympia, but those contributions which contradict B’s

ideas are simply omitted without any discussion;⁹ the problem of the arrangement of the east pediment is mentioned very briefly (126) without the most recent contributions to the subject;¹⁰ the historical circumstances of the temple building are just hinted at in the case of the temple of Zeus (121–122) and the ‘Heraion’ (69) but are entirely neglected in the discussion of the Metroon.¹¹ It would have been also logical to consider the political and economic history of Elis (and Pisa) in more detail.¹²

Given the focus on sculptural works, it is perhaps surprising that the sculptural decoration of the temple of Zeus is discussed quite briefly and that too much weight is given (136–137) to a new idea concerning a strange down-dating of these sculptures to the end of the fifth century BC. As mentioned by B. (9), there is an ongoing work by Christina Leypold on the sculpture bases of Olympia and it is legitimate to ask why B. has not awaited the publication or at least the completion of this work.¹³ Concerning the Achaean Monument (109–110), I have to add two recent titles, which appeared almost simultaneously with this book.¹⁴

All in all, most students and scholars will certainly be very grateful for B. and her monograph will remain a standard reference work in matters related to Olympia.

REFERENCES

- Ashmole, B. and Yalouris, N. (1967). *Olympia. The sculptures of the temple of Zeus*. Phaidon, London.
- Bourke, G. (2018). *Elis. Internal politics and external policy in Ancient Greece*. Cities of the ancient world. Routledge, New York.
- Drees, L. (1968). *Olympia: Gods, artists and athletes*. Pall Mall, London.

⁴This important fact is also acknowledged by B. (17) only in passing.

⁵The recent geological findings concerning the catastrophic destructions of Olympia (Vött, 2013) are completely ignored.

⁶In the figure captions to inscriptions Fig. 4.19 and 5.4 there are some minor mistakes in the transliterations, on p. 187 Hieron is erroneously credited with a victory in the chariot race of 476 BC (while on p. 154 it is correctly said that he won in the single horse race) and on p. 125 it is said that Myrtilos ‘threw himself, or was pushed, off a cliff’ into the sea, although the suicide version is not attested as far as I know. It is also quite inaccurate to say as B. does repeatedly (p. 52, n. 60, p. 101, 125–126) that the chariot race of Pelops and Oinomaos was considered by Pindar in his first Olympian ode or by some other authors as the founding event of the Olympic games. The sources which attribute the founding of the Olympic Games somehow to Pelops are quite late and agree, except for Kastor of Rhodes (FGrH 250 F3), that he was by no means the very first one to organize the famous contests. In the long list of founders given by Pausanias (5.8.1–5), Pelops is by no means prominent and is preceded by Klymenos and Endymion and in the much shorter sequence given by Phlegon of Tralles (FGrH 257 F1) he is also the second founder of the games after Pisos, the eponymous founder of Pisa. This is the only source mentioning that Pelops celebrated the games in honor of his dead father-in-law. According to the most widespread and indeed much earlier attested version (also endorsed by Pindar’s 10th Olympian ode), the games were first celebrated by Heracles honouring either Zeus (as Pindar says) or Pelops (according to Aristoteles fr. 637 or Dionysios Halicarnasseus 5.17.4).

⁷I would have most probably also included e.g. Ashmole and Yalouris (1967); Moustaka (1992); Ulf (1997); Kyrieleis (2006); McWilliam et al. (2011); Kankaleit (1994).

⁸Unfortunately, B. occasionally makes use of the term ‘unconvincing’ without giving any reason or further references (p. 43 n. 21 or p. 69 n. 13).

⁹Contributions by A. Hennemeyer, T. Hölscher and J. Taita are cited from the volume Patay-Horváth (2015b), but B. does not even mention the papers of the editor from the same volume. The statement on p. 125 n. 84 that ‘there is no evidence’ for the alternative interpretation of the east pediment completely ignores these papers and also a previous one by the same author (Patay-Horváth 2005).

¹⁰Patay-Horváth (2013a). B. seems to ignore in this context a previous contribution by the same author (Patay-Horváth, 2008) as well and continues the old but totally unjustified tradition of using arguments taken from the interpretation for establishing the reconstruction.

¹¹Patay-Horváth (2013b).

¹²Bourke (2018) is not mentioned at all and the existence of archaic Pisa is taken for granted although it has been observed that ‘everyone now agrees that it has never existed as an independent political entity before being created by the Arkadians in 365 BC.’ (Luraghi 2008, 79) Thucydides 5.49–50 and the abundant literature concerning this passage (most recently Patay-Horváth 2016) is equally absent.

¹³Perhaps B. became tired of waiting and decided to publish her own work because the ‘mammoth project’ started by Leypold is still far from completion/publication. B. cites (p. 109, n. 20) a relatively recent, but still unpublished lecture by Chr. Leypold which is available online and refers to personal communications (p. 49, n. 52).

¹⁴Sensi (2020) and Patay-Horváth (2021b).



- Gardiner, E.N. (1925). *Olympia: Its history and remains*. Clarendon Pr., Oxford.
- Kankeleit, A. (1994). Die kaiserzeitlichen Mosaiken in Olympia. Eine Bestandsaufnahme. In: Batalla, C.M. (Ed.), *VI Coloquio internacional sobre mosaico antiguo, Palencia-Mérida, octubre 1990*. Asociacion Espanola del Mosaico, Valladolid, pp. 135–147.
- Kyrieleis, H. (2006). Paros und Olympia. Zu den Skulpturen des Zeustempels in Olympia. In: Stampolides, N.Ch. (Ed.), *Γενεθλιον. Αναμνηστικός τόμος για την συμπλήρωση είκοσι χρόνων λειτουργίας του Μουσείου κυκλαδικής τέχνης*. Goulandris Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens, pp. 183–201.
- Luraghi, N. (2008). *The ancient Messenians. Constructions of ethnicity and memory*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- McWilliam, J., Taraporewalla, R., Stevenson, T., and Puttock, S. (Eds.) (2011). *The statue of Zeus at Olympia. New approaches*. Cambridge Scholars Pub., Newcastle upon Tyne.
- Moustaka, A. (1992). Μορφή και συμβολισμός της Νίκης στην αρχαία Ολυμπία. In: Coulson, W. and Kyrieleis, H. (Eds.) *Proceedings of an international symposium on the Olympic Games, 5–9 September, 1988*. Deutsches Archäologische Institut, Athen, pp. 39–43.
- Patay-Horváth, A. (2005). Die Frisur der weiblichen Protagonisten im Ostgiebel des Zeustempels von Olympia. In: Ganschow, Th. and Steinhart, M. (Eds.) *Otium. Festschrift für Volker Michael Strocka*. Greiner, Remshalden, pp. 275–283.
- Patay-Horváth, A. (2008). Zur Rekonstruktion und Interpretation des Ostgiebels des Zeustempels von Olympia. *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung*, 122: 161–206.
- Patay-Horváth, A. (2013a). The virtual 3D reconstruction of the east pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia an old puzzle of classical archaeology in the light of recent technologies. *Digital Applications in Archaeology and Cultural Heritage*, 1: 12–22. [online]. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212054813000039> (Accessed: 4 October 2022).
- Patay-Horváth, A. (2013b). Das Metroon von Olympia als Stiftung von Elis. *Bonner Jahrbücher*, 213: 17–26.
- Patay-Horváth, A. (2015a). *The origins of the olympic games*. Archaeolingua, Series minor, 36. Archaeolingua, Budapest.
- Patay-Horváth, A. (2015b). New approaches to the temple of Zeus at Olympia. In: *Proceedings of the First Olympia-Seminar 8th–10th May 2014*. Cambridge Scholars Pub., Newcastle upon Tyne.
- Patay-Horváth, A. (2016). Lepreon during the 5th century BC. In: Szabó Á. (Ed.), *From polites to Magos. Studia György Németh sexagenario dedicata*. Hungarian polis studies, 22. University of Debrecen, Department of Ancient History, Debrecen, pp. 243–254.
- Patay-Horváth, A. (2020). Greek geometric animal figurines and the origins of the ancient Olympic Games. *ARTS*, 9(1) [online]. Available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0752/9/1/20> (Accessed 4 October 2022).
- Patay-Horváth, A. (2021a). Geometric bronze animal figurines at Olympia – who dedicated what and why? In: Baas, Ph. (Ed.), *Proceedings of the XXth international Congress on ancient bronzes. Resource, reconstruction, representation, role*. British archaeological reports, International series, 2958. British Archaeological Reports, Oxford, pp. 287–297.
- Patay-Horváth, A. (2021b). Descendants of Pelops in the fifth century BC. *Hermes*, 149: 260–279.
- Rambach, J. (2002). Dörpfelds Bau VII in der Altis von Olympia. Ein früheisenzeitliches Apsidenhaus und Haus des Oinomaos. *Archäologischer Anzeiger*, 2002(1): 119–134.
- Sensi, G. de (2020). Sul donario degli Achei a Olimpia: neutralità e identità achea fra VI e prima metà del V secolo a.C. In: Spadea, R., Lo Schiavo, F., and Lazzarini, M. L. (Eds.), *Tra Ionio e Tirreno: orizzonti d'archeologia. Omaggio a Elena Lattanzi*. Scienze e Lettere, Roma, pp. 39–56.
- Sinn, U. (2000). *Olympia: cult, sport, and ancient festival*. Markus Wiener, Princeton.
- Swaddling, J. (1980) *The ancient olympic games*. British Museum, London.
- Ulf, Ch. (1997). Die Mythen um Olympia – politischer Gehalt und politische Intention. *Nikephoros*, 10: 9–51.
- Vött, A. (2013). *Neue geoarchäologische Untersuchungen zur Verschüttung Olympias: Eine Einführung in die Olympia-Tsunami-Hypothese*. Trierer Winckelmannsprogramm, 23. Harrasowitz, Wiesbaden.
- Waterfield, R. (2018). *Olympia: The story of the ancient olympic games*. Head of Zeus Ltd., London.

