The Humanistic Symbolism of Olympia: A Message from Antiquity for Modern Times

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If we want to consider the meaning of Olympia and the role of her far reaching symbolism in human culture, we need first to define the symbol and symbolism as such. When we talk of anything symbolic or symbolism we think about a set of signs, either words or images, and the practice and convention of using them as representations of some ideas or things. A symbol, in turn, according to most dictionaries and encyclopedias, is something which, by convention, can be used for, stands for, or is associated with something else, that it represents or signifies. This word is derived from the Greek symbolon (σύμβολον) which originally meant half of something that was broken in two and which now has a variety of meanings, but the most important seems to be just “sign”. This etymology is one more proof that at least in all European languages the Greek language provided the symbolic meaning of innumerable basic words especially those expressing abstract ideas, institutions, sciences and cultural activities, such as, to give a few examples: system - sistema, politics from Greek politeia, academy – academia (ακαδημία), theatre – theatron (θέατρον), drama – drama (δράμα), museum – mouseion) and music - mousike (μουσική), biology – biologia (βιολογία), technology – technologia (τεχνολογία), philosophy – filosofia (φιλόσοφία). In sport, too, all international languages freely absorbed such words as athletics stemming from the Greek athlesis or athleticos (άθλησις, άθλητικός); stadium – stadion (στάδιον), pentathlon (πεντάθλον) or some modern events which, although not practiced in Ancient Hellas, were built on the principles of the Greek language such as decathlon or biathlon (δεκαθλον; βιαθλον).

But among all Greek words none of them enjoyed such a wide international career as the whole family of nouns and adjectives being derivatives of Olympia, such as the English Olympics, Olympic, Olympiad, Olympian, German Olympisch, Olympiafackel, Olympier, French Jeux Olympique, Olympiade, olympique, Polish olimpiada, olimpijczyk, olimpijski, igrzyska olimpijskie, etc. We could list here innumerable equivalents of all these words sounding according to the phonetic principles typical of a particular language, such as Italian, Spanish,
Russian, Chinese and so many more that it’s impossible to even mention them here.

ANCIENT STADIUM IN OLYMPIA

In pretty well all the languages of the world known to me, the Greek site and its place name Olympia, despite all the phonetic differences in pronunciation or varieties of written forms, means the same: a sacred ancient place symbolizing high human aspirations, where the first regular sporting games were born. Regularity is here a very important factor, because earlier not only in the Greek and Mediterranean world, but also in other cultural areas, such as ancient Korea and China, games of different kinds were staged to celebrate royal weddings or the birth of a successor to the throne, victories in war, funerals of celebrated people, and so on. But it was in Olympia that for the very first time in human history, where staging the games every fourth year became a regular measure of time, a conscious attempt in creating logic and a predictable means of creating a full human being according to educational goals based on religious principles. It was soon followed by other, different Hellenic games, such as the Pythian, Nemeian, Isthmic and many other games. On Cyprus alone there were 7 different games organized on a regular basis at different times. Only among the ancient Celts can we observe a similar regularity in staging their Aonach Tailtean, but this was much later than in Greece. All the ancient Hellenic games, regardless of
where they were staged, followed Olympia and associated their sporting events with a deeper symbolic meaning, well-equipped in one way or another with patterns and rituals full of significant elements, making the games much more than just recreation or spectacle. We cannot meet such deep significance either in the previously mentioned Celtic Games, nor the games of the Hwarangs in ancient and medieval Korea or in the many other games known from human history. The word “Olympia” in this context became in itself a great symbol of a higher stage of human development, equipped with all the spiritual tokens and appearances of refined civility.

Let us discuss some of these symbolic values. Above all others was *ekecheiria* (ἐκεχειρία), that is, the Olympic Truce. There is a legend about a discus on which formula of *ekechiria* was written down by Kings of Pisa, Sparta and Elis. Through centuries it was kept in Olympia as a symbol of Olympic Truce. For ten months prior to and also during the holding of the Games all wars, crimes and serious political conflicts were prohibited and punished. *Ekecheiria* were associated not only with the ancient Olympics, but it was in Olympia that it gained the most important and symbolic weight. Violation of Olympic *ekecheiria* was extremely rare, practically non-existent, at least for as long as free Greek culture based on religious morality remained untouched by the Romans. In 640 B.C. Kylon, a former Olympian in *diaulos*, violated the Olympic Truce when, during its staging he attempted to establish a tyranny in Athens. He and his followers were finally severely punished - by the death sentence. The Olympic Truce was inscribed on a bronze discus held in Hera’s temple and safeguarded the inviolability of Altis, the sacred grove devoted to Zeus. Violating this agreement incidentally happened from time to time, approximately once in every 100–200 years.

We, living in modern times, could only dream about such incidental violations of peace. During the last Olympic Games in Athens, it was counted, at least 14 wars and dozens of lesser military conflicts were ongoing. It was once said that whereas the ancient Greeks suspended wars for the period of the Olympic games, in modern times we suspend Olympic Games in periods of war. At least three Olympics could not be staged because of two World Wars: in Berlin in 1916, in Tokyo in 1940 and Helsinki in 1944. The boycott of the Moscow Olympics in 1980 was also based on a reaction towards an earlier war in Afghanistan. This gives us cause to ask if our technologically splendid, so highly-developed civilization is equally well-developed morally? Certainly, at least in this respect we still are unable to reach the level of ancient Greek morality. During one war involving the Athenians they captured and held their enemy Dorieus of Rhodos. They set him free instantly when they recognized in him an Olympian in boxing. In 1940 the Nazis, then occupying Poland, arrested Janusz Kusocinski, an Olympic gold medallist in long-distance running (Los Angeles Olympics, 1932). They put him in front of an execution squad, killing him without trial as a member of a resistance movement. Could this be considered a measure of our modern, so to speak “humanity”?

The Olympic symbolism of *ekecheiria* has been stripped of its ancient moral power, although in some dramatic circumstances it still works, albeit in a much diminished format. For instance, during 1972, when the Munich Olympics were hurt by the infamous terrorist action, the IOC President, Avery Brundage decided to continue the Games after just one day’s break. Although it did not erase the
effects of that dishonorable terrorist attack, his famous “the Games must go on” at least recognized the priority of a peaceful event over the disgraceful actions of Olympic violators. At least a small remnant, a scrap, of the magnificent ancient rule was retained.

Avery Brundage, The President of the IOC 1952-1972, great defender of the modern Olympic Truce

All of us know, that the ceremony of the torch relay was introduced to the Olympic Ceremony in 1936 thanks to the initiative of the German scholar Carl Diem, whose stella is located here, in the area of the IOA.

Carl Diem (1882-1962), initiator of modern torch relay for the first time performed for The Olympic Games in Berlin, 1936 and stella commemorating his Olympic merits erected in Ancient Olympia
The first modern Olympics had no torch relays and this can mean that we overlook the fact that this element of Olympic symbolism also stems from ancient times, although not only in Olympia. Ancient torch races, *lampadedromia* (λαμπαδηδρομια), were initiated in Greece on a religious basis even before the first Olympic Games were staged. But it was precisely during this same first ancient Olympic Games in 776 B.C. that torch races were introduced. When pilgrims arrived at Olympia to worship Zeus they competed for the privilege of lighting the flame for the great sacrifice in Zeus’s honor. In order to select such a person there was a race of nearly 200 meters, ending at the spot where the High Priest waited, holding the torch in his hand. Then the torch was passed to the winner of the race and he was awarded the honor of lighting the fire at the altar. This is the basic difference between the ancient and contemporary Olympic flames – the ancient one was used in the temple, while the modern one is lit directly at the stadium.

![Image](image_url)

**Ancient Greek Torch Relay - lampadedromia**

In modern times the torch was employed for the very first time by Pierre de Coubertin himself during the Stockholm Games in 1912.
It was a solution to the well known, so-called “flag conflict”, when Austria and Russia protested against the use of the national symbols of Finland, then under Russian occupation, and also those of Bohemia and Hungary, considered as provinces of as Habsburg Empire. We can see how this problem was solved with help of torches in Coubertin’s own words taken from his Memoirs: “The questions of flags was solved as follows: in case of victory, a torch with the Czech or Finnish colors would be lit above the Austrian or Russian flags” [1, 138]

The torch in Stockholm Olympics of 1912 was lit nine times over the Russian flag, due to nine Finnish victories, while the Russians themselves did not win any. Hungarians won 3 golds, while, because the Czechs did not win a single gold medal, it did not trouble the Austrians, who by the way were unable to win then any events themselves.

During the Olympics of Antwerp (1920) and Paris (1920) there was no Olympic flame above the stadium. There was one however in Amsterdam (1928) and Los Angeles (1932). Those torches were lit without any greater ceremony and without, of course, any relay. It was in 1936 during the Berlin Olympic Games that the Olympic Torch, as suggested by Carl Diem, was initiated and continued until today, finally linking the modern tradition with ancient lampaderomia.
According to Henri Pouret, the Olympic Torch is a symbolic gift which Greek antiquity has passed to us. Pouret rightly associates the Olympic flame with the myth of Prometheus: “the symbol of the Hellenic legend teaches us that fire was stolen from the Gods and offered to the humans”. And he continues: “What a beautiful symbol for men and for Olympism, this relay-race, which becomes reality, a connecting link between the athletes.[…]

Spiridion Luis, historic Greek winner of Marathon of 1896 - several decades later took part in the first modern torch relay in 1936.

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Yoshinori Sakai, born on the very day when atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, ignited Olympic Flame at the stadium of Tokyo Olympics in 1964 as symbol of human want for peace

The Olympic flame brings to all people of good will an image of purification and elevation. For the human destiny, it represents a kind of hour-glass where the sand
flows upward. In the main, the flame and its tribulations symbolize the fate of the responsible man with his feet on the ground and a life of verticality towards heaven, as far as the heart and the spirit are concerned. We could think endlessly on the symbolism of the flame” [5, p. 140]

Recently, however, the political factor entered the scene when this year some attempts were made to hurt the Torch Relay. The torch relay traveling this year to Beijing experienced probably the biggest threat and turmoil ever. Whatever effects it will have on the 2008 Olympics, I can only agree with the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who was the first politician to defend the immunity and inviolability of the Olympic flame. He said that the Olympic Torch must not become a hostage of the protesters. Why attack a beautiful and idealistic tradition which is certainly not guilty of the political situation in the world? This most beautiful Olympic tradition of the Sacred Flame should not be hurt just to fulfill current political expectations, even if they are right.
One of the most characteristic features of ancient games was crowning the winners with wreaths made from the leaves of different trees. In games devoted to Apollo, such as the games in Delphi, it was a laurel wreath (Lat. Laurus) while in Olympia it was a kotinos (κότινος), an olive branch intertwined in such a way as to form a kind of crown.
There is conflicting information at what moment of the ancient Olympic Games victors were crowned. Some sources say that it was done immediately after a victory, while some others maintain that all of them were collectively crowned at the end of the Games. Perhaps both pieces of information are right but pertain to different times in the development of the ancient Olympics. In the case of collective crowning, winners were gathered together, marching towards the temple of Zeus, with their heads surrounded by a red woolen ribbon and holding a palm-branch in their hands. The band of red wool in Hellenic tradition was used to adorn sacred objects and distinguish them from ordinary things. Worn on the forehead of winners it signified transmitting sacred power to them. While marching towards the temple, the crowds on either side of the path showered the winners with leaves and flowers, which was called *phylllobolia* or *phyllopholia* (φυλλοβολία or φυλλοφολία - throwing of leaves) and symbolized the ancient cult of vegetation on which the games were established. Crowns made of olive branches were kept in the so-called prodomos of the temple of Zeus. When the winners approached the temple, one by one they were crowned.
The custom of crowning victors has so far been irregularly introduced and continued at different modern Olympic Games. In Berlin (1936) leaves of oak were used instead of olive branches or laurel leaves. At the Olympics in Athens 2004 the kotinos tradition was renewed, and it was bestowed together with the gold medals. Apart from its use in the awards-ceremonies, the kotinos was chosen as the 2004 Olympics emblem.
Speaking about contemporary Olympic symbols one might observe that apart from some of them, such as the Olympic Torch Relay, they are seemingly not associated with Olympia but were created in modern times independently from ancient symbols. I said “seemingly” because all of them, not necessarily directly, stem in one way or another from the ancient spirit and ideals of Olympia, or at least from more general traditions of Greek antiquity. But, primarily, it is the mere adjective “Olympic” alone, that links them with the tradition of Olympia sufficiently enough. Let us discuss them briefly.

From the means of their expression they can be divided into several categories: those expressed by language, music, images or plastic representations, and also practical activity.

Typical of the symbols expressed in language is the Olympic motto “Citius-Altius-Fortius”, or “faster, higher, stronger”, introduced to the Olympic tradition by father Henri le Didon.

It symbolizes the immemorial human eagerness for achieving the ideals of being quicker and more proficient and dexterous, looking for more ambitious ideals (higher), generally being better adapted to life. We have, of course, more Olympic mottos, like for instance, the famous statement that “not winning but participation is most important thing” formulated first by bishop Ethelbert Talbot during the 1908 Olympics in London in his sermon delivered at St. Paul’s Cathedral and repeated later by Coubertin himself.
The Five Olympic Rings were invented as an element of the white Olympic Flag in 1912-14 by Coubertin himself. According to him “The Olympic flag […] has a white background, with five interlaced rings in the center: blue, yellow, black, green and red […]. This design is symbolic, it represents the five continents of the world, united by Olympism, while the six colors are those that appear on all national flags of the world at the present time” [2, II, 470].

“Le drapeau olympique […] est tout blanc avec, au centre, cinq anneaux enlaces : bleu, jaune, noir, vert, rouge […]. Ainsi dessiné, il est symbolique; il représente les cinq parties du monde unies par l’olympisme et ses six couleurs d’autre part reproduisent celles de tous les drapeaux nationaux qui flottent a travers l’univers de nos jours” [2, II, 470].
This symbol is, however, most frequently overused, roughly since the first “anti-Olympic” political posters and drawings of John Heartfield, executed during the Olympic Games in Berlin (1936). Before and during almost all Games, Olympic symbols are frequently used in caricatures and cartoons. The Olympic Rings in particular are frequently employed as the wheels of dangerous bulldozers, destroying the Olympic idea, or of tanks, aiming their gun-barrels at human aspirations, then an element of blood-stained hand-cuffs or a chain, enslaving people, or even more recently – five human skulls linked together, instead of Olympic Rings. Let me leave aside the political reasons for such usage of Olympic symbols and conclude with the statement, that in whatever way politics enters the principles of Olympism, it hurts its idealistic principles.
In music the Olympic Hymn, also called the Olympic Anthem (Olympiakos Ymnos - Ολυμπιακός Ύμνος in Greek), plays an important role. Its history is, however, somewhat complicated. Originally, at the first Olympics in Athens, 1896, for the Olympic Movement a musical piece was performed, composed by Greek composer Spiros Samaras. The words were written by the Greek poet Costas Palamas who was asked to do this by the first President of the IOC Demetrios Vikelas. The text openly alludes to ancient times and is deeply symbolic:

*Immortal spirit of Antiquity,*  
*Father of the True, beautiful and Good,*  
*Descend, appear, shed over us thy light*  
*Upon this ground and under this sky*  
*Which has first witnessed thy unperishable fame.*

During the following Olympiads the Olympic Hymn was either entirely omitted or, somewhat later, particular hosting nations were obliged to commission new cantata for their own edition of the Olympic Games. The quality of these compositions was either poor or melodically too difficult for those who wanted to sing it. This is why in 1957, during the yearly Session of the IOC, the composition of S. Samaras with the text of C. Palamas was restored and remains to the present day. It is also used as the official Anthem of the IOA.

There are other musical elements used during the Opening Ceremony of the Games like short musical interludes composed by different composers for different Olympics. Most of them allude directly to Archaic Olympia or other elements of Ancient Greece. For instance, during the 1972 Olympics there was a short interlude titled *Ekechiria,* composed by Krzysztof Penderecki. At the 1924 Olympics Coubertin himself selected for performance the last part of the 9th Symphony of Ludwig van Beethoven, commonly known as the *Ode to Joy,* calling for universal brotherhood in the text written by 18th century German poet
and playwright Friedrich Schiller. It has been played at the Opening Ceremony ever since. At the Closing Ceremony, a fanfare is played before the final singing of the Olympic Anthem. In more recent decades popular songs are usually composed on the occasion of the Olympics, always including a symbolic element. The most memorable, and in fact the most melodious I think is Sayonara Tokyo sung by Kyu Sakamoto in 1964, and Hand in Hand by Dire Straits heard in Seoul in 1988.

Spiridon Louis

(1873-1940),
historic winner of the first modern Marathon Race at the 1896 Olympic Games in Athens

The Marathon Race has symbolic value through the actual running following the ancient tale of the battle of Marathon, when the independence of Greece was successfully defended against invaders, and one runner, as legend says, in full armor, covered the distance from the place of the battle to Athens crying “Ours is the victory”, after which he died of exhaustion. This tradition was introduced on the suggestion of Michel Breal, classical scholar and friend of Coubertin to the very first modern Olympics following the Coubertinian formula, staged in Athens (1896). Its symbolic meaning, representing the human need of freedom, was well recognized even before it was introduced to the Olympics. For instance, in the Poland deprived of her independence between 1795-1918, a poet, Kornel Ujejski, wrote his long poem titled precisely Marathon, where he used this ancient battle to express Polish dreams of liberty. For similar reasons, it was used by other European poets, such as Gabriele D’Anunzio in Italy (L’alloro di Maratona, 1903).
The role of unofficial Olympic symbol has been frequently played by *Discobolos* by Myron of Eleutherai. This famous masterpiece has been photographed, drawn, painted and described in literature, and especially in poetry, innumerable times. There is probably no other piece of sculpture world-wide employed so many times for different purposes associated with sport. For instance, historically, the first Polish Olympic poster of 1912 contained a simple drawing of *Discobolos*, while the same sculpture was used many times in the poetic genre called *ekphrasis*. In Polish literature this includes the sonnet titled *Discobolos* by the poet Kazimierz Przerwa-Temajer, which is counted among the most artistically valuable masterpieces of Polish literature in its entirety, not just sporting pieces. In 1970, I was able to publish a long, 3-piece journal paper on the theme of the *Discobolos* in European literature and art, in which I analyzed several dozen paintings and literary motifs found in the most important European literatures. It was published in Polish monthly titled just “Dysk Olimpijski” - “Olympic Discus” just to commemorate symbolic value of this Olympic sport and its symbolic meaning. [4]. By the way, in 1936 a novel titled in the same *Dysk olimpijski – Olympic Discus* by Jan Parandowski, a wonderful metaphor of ancient sport, was awarded bronze medal at the Olympic Literary and Art Competition.

It is impossible to analyze more precisely all the symbolic elements of the Olympic Games and Movement, such as the releasing of pigeons, symbolizing peace during the Opening Ceremony, then the Olympic Oath of the competitors and officials. The Olympic salute was abandoned after 1945, due to its similarity to the Nazi salute.

But one element should be mentioned for its colorful character and simple meaning. It is the Olympic mascot. Certainly, it was unknown in antiquity. But in most cases it passes on to us the ancient Olympic ideals of fraternity, respect and a peaceful attitude to others. For most people, however, Olympic mascots, usually
animals, seems to be just nice creatures with their open smiles and gestures inviting all to the Olympic Games. Perhaps in most cases it is so. But there are also mascots, representing even deeper sense of humanity.

In my opinion the most significant mascot of this kind was the Korean Hodori, a tiger, which was mascot for the Seoul Games of 1988. It is something more than just a nice, smiling animal. In the tradition of Korean culture the tiger is a symbol of strength and masculinity. Additionally Hodori is equipped with sangmo, a cap borrowed from the tradition of the Korean musical theatre kwanno. At the end of the spectacle an actor with a sangmo on his head enters the circular arena and, whirling his head, causes the rope attached to his cap to force all the participants of the spectacle, actors, musicians and the audience to follow direction of the rope in common play and dancing.
On the other extreme of this wonderful and memorable mascot we can find the unfortunate example of a creature having an absolutely negative if not abusive appearance. It was Wha-Is-It, then changed to Whatizyt or finally, in much simplified form, as Izzy of the Atlanta 1996 Games. This extremely ugly mascot could be forgotten as unimportant, but its specific features force us to discuss it as a negative example to be avoided in the future. Izzy has five Olympic Rings located in a rather trivial and even insulting way. Two of the Olympic Rings are placed on its ears, which could be ignored or at least accepted. But the rest of the rings are put on Izzy’s tail, close to its behind i.e. a place commonly recognized as not very honorable. How could it be that the great Olympic symbol was treated in such a primitive and offensive way?

Outside Olympism there is no other sports movement in the world so rich in significant symbols pertaining to different human and universal values. This Olympic symbolism, regardless of whether it stems from Greece or more modern creations, but taking its general spirit from Antiquity, should be defended at any price. Forgetting what Olympic symbols signify means forgetting about the deep sense of human ideas, prospects and hopes. Meanwhile, as I showed earlier, the Olympic Rings are used for partisan cartoons, the Torch Relay is allowed to be disturbed on political grounds and even the Olympic mascot can be treated in an offensive way. We can only hope that the great symbol of Archaia Olympia and her humanistic influence will be able to defend itself against all present and future distortions.

REFERENCES:


