Mythology

The myths surrounding the founding of the ancient Olympics are many but can be divided into two categories: one attributing the founding of the games to Greek hero Herakles, the other to the mythological king Pelops.

Herakles

There are two different Herakleses are associated with the foundation of Olympic games. The first, known as the Theban Herakles, was the heroic son of Zeus forced to complete twelve seemingly impossible labors. The Greek poet Pindar, in his tenth Olympic Ode, credits the Theban Herakles with founding the Olympic games following his defeat of the nephews of Augeas, the owner of the flesh-eating horses whose stables Herakles was forced to muck out as his fifth labor:

Intaglio with Bust of Youthful Herakles,
Roman, mid 1st Century BCE, Banded Agate, 2005.080.084, Atlanta, Michael C. Carlos Museum

The laws of Zeus urge me to sing of that extraordinary contest-place which Herakles founded by the ancient tomb of Pelops [25] with its six altars, after he killed Cteatos, the flawless son of Poseidon and Eurytos too, with a will to exact from the unwilling Augeas, strong and violent, the wages for his menial labor. (Pindar, Olympian, 10.24-30, trans. Diane Arnson Svarlien)

Roman author Pausanias, on the other hand, records a myth connecting Herakles the Dactyl to the games. The Dactyls were a group of male spirits ranging in number from five to ten, often credited with the
discovery of metalwork. In the myth recorded by Pausanias, Herakles, the eldest of the Dactyls, challenged his four other brothers to a footrace and established a tradition of holding games every four years:

[7] Heracles, being the eldest, matched his brothers, as a game, in a running-race, and crowned the winner with a branch of wild olive, of which they had such a copious supply that they slept on heaps of its leaves while still green… Heracles of Ida, therefore, has the reputation of being the first to have held, on the occasion I mentioned, the games, and to have called them Olympic. So he established the custom of holding them every fifth year, because he and his brothers were five in number. (Pausanias, Description of Greece, trans. W. H. S. Jones, 5.7.7; 5.7.9)

Pelops

While there is only one Pelops credited with founding the ancient Olympics, his mythology is just as varied and convoluted as Herakles’. The basic story is as follows: Oinomaos, the king of Elis, had a beautiful daughter named Hippodameia, who many wished to marry. Oinomaos required that any would-be suitor defeat him in a chariot race; the price of defeat was their life. Pelops accepted Oinomaos’ challenge and was able to defeat him, leading to the older man’s death. In thanks for his victory, Pelops established the Olympic games to honor Zeus. This is the storyline that myths agree on. However, Oinomaos’ reasons for wanting his daughter to remain unmarried and how exactly Pelops managed to win the race change from version to version. According to Pseudo-Apollodoros, Oinomaos lost because his charioteer Myrtilos didn’t tighten the wheels of
the chariot. This was at Hippodameia’s request, with whom Myrtilos was enamored, but who was herself in love with Pelops:

So Pelops also came a-wooing; and when Hippodamia saw his beauty, she conceived a passion for him, and persuaded Myrtilos, son of Hermes, to help him; for Myrtilos was charioteer to Oinomaos. Accordingly Myrtilos, being in love with her and wishing to gratify her, did not insert the linchpins in the boxes of the wheels, and thus caused Oinomaos to lose the race and to be entangled in the reins and dragged to death. (Pseudo-Apollodoros, Epitome, trans. James George Frazer, 2.6-8)

Pindar, in his first Ode, attributes Pelops’ victory to the aid of Poseidon, his former lover, who gave him a golden chariot with magical horses:

Pelops said to the god, “If the loving gifts of Cyprian Aphrodite result in any gratitude, Poseidon, then restrain the bronze spear of Oinomaos, and speed me in the swiftest chariot to Elis, and bring me to victory… So he spoke, and he did not touch on words that were unaccomplished. Honoring him, the god gave him a golden chariot, and horses with untiring wings. He overcame the might of Oinomaos, and took the girl as his bride. (Pindar, Olympian, trans. Diane Arnson Svarlien, 1.75-79; 1.85-89)

A third explanation of Pelops’ success is found in an ancient scholar’s commentary on Homer. According to this version, Killos, a defeated suitor, appeared to Pelops in a dream, asking that the latter arrange for funeral rites on his behalf. In gratitude for the lavish funeral Pelops arranges for him, Killos ensured his victory over Oinomaos:

The latter [Killos] appeared in a dream to Pelops, who was in a state of extreme grief over him. Killos lamented his own destruction and asked for a funeral… Even after his death, moreover, Killos seemed to assist Pelops in overcoming Oinomaos in the race. (FGH 115 F350, trans. William Hansen)
Equally varied are the explanations for Oinomaos’ reluctance to marry off his daughter. According to versions by Pherekydes, Pseudo-Apollodoros, and Hyginus, Oinomaos was attempting to ward off a prophecy that he would be murdered by his son-in-law, a prophecy that he ended up bringing about by virtue of his attempts to avoid it. Pseudo-Apollodoros also notes that according to some writers, Oinomaos was in love with Hippodameia himself.

Zeus

Pausanias writes of another potential founder of the Olympic games: Zeus. The Roman author reports that some believed the site of Elis was where Zeus wrestled with his father, the titan Kronos, for control of the universe, and that Zeus instituted the Olympics as victory games:

Now some say that Zeus wrestled here with Cronus himself for the throne, while others say that he held the games in honor of his victory over Cronus. The record of victors includes Apollo, who outran Hermes and beat Ares at boxing. (Pausanias, Description of Greece, trans. W. H. S. Jones, 5.7.10)

According to this view, then, not only do the games honor Zeus, but they celebrate the transition of power from the Titans, the children of Gaea (Earth) and Uranos (Sky), to the Olympian gods.

The mythology of the ancient Olympics is no simple thing, the product of countless conflated versions that are the result of authorial and civic agendas. Throughout these myths, however, there is one common thread: the games are a celebration of an unlikely victory, a celebration with religious implications. This
mythological foundation will provide important context for understanding the function of the Olympics during the Persian and Peloponnesian wars.

Recommended Further Reading

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


