

# 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** 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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



Terracotta Plaque with Pelops and Hippodamia, Roman, 27 BCE-68 CE, Terracotta, 26.60.32, New York City, Metropolitan Museum of Art

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**. [7]

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



Tetradrachm of Alexander the Great, Greek, 336-323 BCE, Silver, 2018.010.1155, Atlanta, Michael C. Carlos Museum

**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**

Pausanias. "Elis 1"; "Elis 2". In *Description of Greece*. Translated by W. H. S. Jones. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918.

Pindar. "Olympian 1"; "Olympian 10". In *Olympian*. Translated by William H. Race. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

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#### **Secondary Sources**

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Hansen, William. "The Winning of Hippodameia". In *Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974-2014)*, 19-40. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

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