

Origins

While myths are certainly entertaining and can be informative, stories of **Theban Herakles**' mucking out of the **Augean** stables, or **Herakles the Dactyl**'s race with his brothers, or **Pelops**' victory over **Oinomaos** don't help us understand how the ancient Olympics came about. The games developed slowly over time, rather than springing up overnight as the myths would suggest. So how, and why, were the ancient Olympics created? Unfortunately, there's no one definitive theory, since the development of the games likely originates in an early period of Greek history for which written evidence is scarce. Historians have therefore constructed hypotheses based on archaeological and literary evidence, specifically the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by the 8th-century BCE poet **Homer**.

Funeral Games



Ajax and Achilles Playing Dice at Troy, Greek, Attic, late 6th century BCE, Terracotta, 2004.033.002, Atlanta, Michael C. Carlos Museum

The most popular hypothesis is that the ancient Olympics developed from funeral games held during the Bronze Age (ca. 3000-1150 BCE) to celebrate deceased persons. Homer describes funeral games held for Patroklos in Book 23 of the *Iliad*, which included similar events to those of the ancient Olympics: a chariot race, boxing, wrestling, a footrace, and spear-throwing. The

circumstances of the two types of games also parallel one another: disparate, often squabbling groups of people briefly united to observe a religious practice. Despite being allies against the Trojans, there was constant infighting on the Greek side, especially when Achilles refused to join battle after his war-prize was taken by Agamemnon. The funeral games, then, hosted as they were by Achilles himself, represented a reconciliation through mediated conflict. So too did the ancient Olympics provide the constantly warring Greek city states a lower-stakes outlet for their differences.

But how do we get from funeral games to the Olympics which, for all of its similarities, has a considerably different context? Over time, funeral games went from spectacles honoring an individual who had recently died, like Patroklos in the *Iliad*, to yearly competitions celebrating civic heroes claimed by one *polis* or another, be they mythological figures or real people who died in battle. These civic funeral games, according to theory, eventually evolved into athletic competitions held during religious festivals honoring the gods, rather than heroes.

The Boxer Rhyton via Wikimedia
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Minoan and Mycenaean Athletic Competitions

A second, less popular, theory proposes that the ancient Olympics originated from athletic competitions held in the palaces of the Mycenaean and Minoan civilizations during the Bronze Age.

Excavations of Bronze Age sites have revealed evidence of spectacles involving chariot racing, bull-jumping, wrestling, and foot-racing. A horn-shaped drinking vessel found in Hagia Triada, Crete, and now known as the Boxer Rhyton, depicts different sporting events including boxing, wrestling, and bull-leaping that perhaps took place at a festival.

Furthermore, the iconography of columns and banners alludes to the scenery of Minoan sanctuaries, adding a religious component to the athletic feats being performed. Here already, then, we can see parallels between the context of these contests and the Olympic games.

A second parallel can be found in the function of these competitions. Evidence of such activities have been found across multiple palaces, suggesting that athletic competitions worked to create a cohesive identity across palaces. As with Patroklos' funeral games, these Mycenaean and Minoan competitions provided unification for otherwise disconnected groups, a unification that the Olympics also sought to provide. Of course, it is difficult to say whether these parallels are mere coincidence or indication of the beginnings of athletic games that would culminate in the Olympics, but it appears that at the very least, from the Bronze Age onwards,

there existed a common theme in using artificial conflict to bring different groups of people together to stave off much deadlier conflict.

Ritual Game Hunting



Votive Bull, Minoan, ca. 1500-1000 BCE, Bronze, 2003.044.001, Atlanta, Michael C. Carlos Museum

game, including cows and horses (pg. 7, 10, 12). As the feral forms of these animals began to go extinct due to excessive hunting, a new ritualized competition was created: the Olympics (pg. 12). Patay-Horváth defends this position by pointing out that the very first event included in the Olympics, the *stadion*, or footrace, seems an odd choice for a successor to funeral games, since surely later events, such as wrestling and chariot-racing, would have been a more appealing option (pg. 12). Instead of mirroring competitions that would take place at funeral games, then, Patay-Horváth argues that the *stadion* echoes a ritual race that would take place at the end of a hunting expedition (pg. 13).

Another piece of evidence for this theory has to do with the timing of the Olympics, which took place during the hottest part of the summer. If, as Patay-Horváth asserts, aristocrats were assembling at Olympia to hunt and perform associated rituals, the summer would be an appropriate time to do so, as the mating season for their quarry. For much of the year cows and bulls lived separately, only coming together to mate, so hunting at this time would make catching prey significantly easier (pg. 13).

A recent (2020) paper written by András Patay-Horváth, “Greek Geometric Animal Figurines and the Origins of the Ancient Olympic Games,” presents a third hypothesis: that the ancient Olympics arose from ritual game-hunting at Olympia. Patay-Horváth argues that animal figurines excavated from Olympia were not, as has previously been suggested, **votive** dedications left by locals, but were rather dedicated by foreign aristocrats who had travelled to Olympia in order to hunt rare wild



Diana, Roman, 2nd century CE, Terracotta, 1999.002.019, Atlanta, Michael C. Carlos Museum

Patay-Horváth next turns to two features of the Olympics that differentiated them from the other **Panhellenic games**. The first, the awarding of olive crowns, points out a hole in the funeral game theory: winners of funeral games received substantial prizes, from tripods to oxen. Why, then, did Olympians only win a crown? Patay-Horváth connects the practice to Artemis, who was associated both with wild olive trees and hunting. Going a step further, he suggests that ritual hunting may have been performed as a way to honor the goddess, giving the

practice a ritual aspect that would later be found in a festival honoring Zeus (pg. 14). The second unique feature of the Olympic games was the barring of married women as spectators, even though they were allowed to attend other **Panhellenic games**. The desire to protect women from violence and nudity, therefore, couldn't explain this rule. Instead, according to Patay-Horváth, this exclusion is due to religious taboo. In a continuation of the hypothesis that ritual hunting was performed as part of the cult of Artemis, married women were barred from the Olympics to exclude them from rites honoring the virgin goddess, just as they were excluded from the cult of Ephesian Artemis (pg. 15). This theory diverges from the previous two, suggesting that rather than serving as a mediated, cathartic method of conflict resolution, the Olympics were created to continue on a tradition that, due to excessive hunting, had to be abandoned in its previous form.

The ancient Greeks themselves grappled with the question of how the Olympics originated, hence the varied myths surrounding the games' origins as discussed in the previous section. There is no definitive explanation for how the Olympics came about, and each theory has its merits and flaws. From what can be gleaned, the only common ground scholars have found is that a long tradition of athletic competition in one form or another that developed into, or inspired, the games as the ancient Greeks knew them.

Suggested Further Reading

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