

## The political and religious setting of Olympic contests in Antiquity

Angélique Christaki \*

*Πόλεμος πατήρ πάντων*  
(War is the father of all)  
Heraclites

### Abstract

This article sets out to consider the origins of the Pan-Hellenic contests of Antiquity. It examines the ritual function of the *agon* in the religious and political setting of the Greek city-states, in particular in relation to entry into war and ending war, and its periodicity. It discusses the hypothesis that the institution of the *agons*, via immemorial practices, implicitly commemorates the killing of a sacred child.

**Keywords:** WAR; SACRED TRUCE; POLITICAL-RELIGIOUS; SACRIFICE; ANTHROPOPHAGY

### O Cenário Político e Religioso dos Concursos Olímpicos na Antiguidade

#### Resumo

Este artigo pretende considerar as origens das competições pan-helênicas da Antiguidade. Examina a função ritual do *agon* no contexto religioso e político das cidades-estados gregos, em particular em relação à entrada na guerra e ao fim da guerra, e sua periodicidade. Discute a hipótese de que a instituição dos *agons*, através de práticas imemoriais, comemora de forma implícita o assassinato de um filho sagrado.

**Palavras-chave:** GUERRA; TRÉGUAS SAGRADAS; POLÍTICO-RELIGIOSO; SACRIFÍCIO; ANTROPOFAGIA

### El Entorno Político y Religioso de los Concursos Olímpicos en la Antigüedad

#### Resumen

Este artículo pretende considerar los orígenes de las competiciones pan-helénicas de la Antigüedad. Examina la función ritual del *agon* en el contexto religioso y político de las ciudades-estados griegos, en particular en relación a la entrada en la guerra y al final de la guerra, y su periodicidad. Discute la hipótesis de que la institución de los *agons*, XXX (através) por medio de las prácticas inmemoriales, conmemora de forma implícita el asesinato de un hijo sagrado.

**Palabras clave:** GUERRA; TRÉGUAS SAGRADAS; POLÍTICO-RELIGIOSO; SACRIFICIO; ANTROPOFAGIA

### Introduction

---

\* Associate researcher and research director in human and social sciences, Laboratoire UTRPP, Université Paris 13. Clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst.

Endereço: Avenue Jean-Baptiste Clément, 99 – Villetaneuse, 93430 – Paris, França.

E-mail: [angelique.christaki@wanadoo.fr](mailto:angelique.christaki@wanadoo.fr)

The word "sport" has become a virtually universal signifier. It is derived from the late Middle English word "*disport*", relating to recreation and amusement. This gives rise to the modern era of sport.

It can be noted from the outset that it is difficult to apprehend the historical unicity of sport and its practice, or its present-day assimilation to the category of games. The *agons* and other athletic competitions in Antiquity were far-removed from what we mean today by sport. More specifically, the Pan-Hellenic contests were inherent in a certain conception of war, and in this perspective the status of the athlete was inseparable from that of the warrior and of the citizen.



Illustration on book "Olympic games in Ancient Greek".

### War – a permanent struggle or wrestling contest

In order to consider the Pan-Hellenic contests in Greek Antiquity, we need on the one hand to identify their original, symbolic meaning, mythically rooted in killing, and on the other their ritual meaning, which is subject to a periodicity that divides the time of the city into war-time and peace-time (Jean Marie Brohm, 1981). The sacred truce only has meaning and can only be conceived in relation to the regime of the Greek city-states of Antiquity, which was organised around the virtually perpetual state of war among them. Thus war was not only a commonplace activity engaged in by all citizens, it was also a normal state of affairs in the life of these cities. In this configuration, peace could not be lasting in nature, since its ephemeral nature in itself carried the foretaste of war (Freud, 1915)<sup>(1)</sup>. The sacred truce, as a political institution, is accompanied by other collective practices regulating conflict, in the setting of constant questioning on how to make peace, in a society in which everything tends towards a permanent state of war between city-states (Vanoyeke, 1992).

If we refer to the writings of Herodotus and Thucydides, the word peace (*eirini*) is never on its own, but always accompanied by a certain number of qualifiers relating to a whole set of practices and conventions on which peace depends *spondai*, (*σπονδαί*), *xumvasis* (*ξύμβασις*), *ekexeiria* (*εκεχειρία*), *anakochi* (*ανακοχή*). These relate to the political and religious governance of the institution of war (*polemos*). These conventions, which enable the temporary or longer-term cessation of the state of war, indicate two things: firstly, that the organisation of society was not based on an ideal of lasting peace, and secondly that it was not

possible to enter into war and cease making war haphazardly. It can thus be seen that in wartime and peacetime in Antiquity "peace was an agreed interruption in war, while war was not an interruption of peacetime" (Romilly, 1999, p. 275).

Thus, if this society was able to survive despite its permanent state of war affecting all its members, it is because war was "conceived as a tournament" as suggested by Romilly (199, p. 275), so that war was not a struggle to death. Nevertheless it entailed rites and limits while at the same time maintaining the perspective not of the conquest of a neighbouring city but of freedom, which between neighbours was always reduced to "equal resistance" (Thymidine IV, 924, quoted by Romilly (1999, p. 276).

Along the same lines, Heraclites considered that "we will have none who is best among us; if there be any such, let him be so elsewhere and among others" (Heraclites, fragment 121). It is not that there was no victor in the contests, among athletes or in the jousting between orators. What should be understood is that there was a certain conception of politics underpinning the institution of the contests. Indeed, even if it was athletics (*αθλήματα*), the athletes took part as citizens, with the afferent rights, and the right to speak, with everything that this entails in terms of sacrifice and danger. For a man in Antiquity to be able to take part in political life, he had first of all to free himself from the constraints of private life and the home – this was the condition. But this relinquishment entailed an element of risk – not only because in the home every person can be sure of a reasonably comfortable life, but above all because, to be free, an individual had to be ready to take the supreme risk, that of his life (Freud, 1915)<sup>(2)</sup>.

This same risk is encountered when an individual gives his word and keeps it, when that word is a public word. It is this implication of the citizen that converts public space into political space. The individual who was more attached to his life than to freedom had no place in the *polis*, since he had the soul of a slave. This made him a *filopsychos* (*φιλόψυχος*), and *filopsychia* (*φιλοψυχία*) was a vice (Hannah Arendt, 2014)<sup>(3)</sup> that precluded from the condition of citizen, and hence that of athlete. The purpose of the games, as a contest entailing emulation and combat was political, since it was a matter not of being the best, but of being together. Protection against the illusion of being unique did not set out to deny genius or conquest, it concerned the individual who might break up and endanger the social bond, and the ability to live together. This danger arises when words, acts, victory and prowess deprive the exchange or the competition of its meaning of being an end to itself. As Nietzsche (1975/1870-1873, p. 195) remarked, this is the heart of the Greek idea of the contest: it abhors the supremacy of a single person and fears its dangers - as a means of protection against genius what is required is another genius.

Thus athletic contests, jousts and war, on different levels, were engaged in as political modes of shared living. In this respect, the political dimension of conflict should also be noted, a dimension that also runs through the contests taking place in the stadium. The stadium was originally a place of sanctuary, where rites relating to the chthonian and olympic deities were performed. Its symbolic roots can be seen in the presence of the tomb of a god or hero. Nevertheless, in the stadium, during the contest strength is brought to bear on the adversary, who is however neither an enemy nor a victim. The man in the stadium, at the time of the sacred truce, measures his strength with the equal strength of his adversary. It can also be noted that a parallel movement between the decadence of the Classical world and that of the institution of the contests developed between 300 and 80 BC. The decadence of the contests coincided with the political crisis of the 4th century, linked to the political history of Greece.

More specifically, according to Jacqueline de Romilly (1999, p. 290), Athenian politics in the 5th century BC endowed war with a new character, based on the will to achieve sincere union, but hinging on a moral disaffection that compromised any means for common

action. In this political divide, Philip II found the opportunity to stave off these uncertain attempts to its own profit. The Peloponnesian War finally signalled the demise of the Greece of its city-states and the political function of war as it developed in the Classical world. It is indeed noteworthy that it was in this same period that the relationship with otherness and war also changed. After the conquests by Alexander and the change in the way the city was viewed, a new conception of war emerged, and with it a new mode of functioning for the Pan-Hellenic contests. In Greece at this time a taste for the spectacular developed, prefiguring the Roman games. The Olympiads took on the trappings' of a spectacle, and Menander began to refer to fairs, markets and amusements to describe this new phenomenon, increasingly distanced from its political and religious roots.

### **The political and religious context of the Sacred Truce**

The first Pan-Hellenic contests probably took place between 2500 and 2000 BC (Finley Moses. I., Pleket. H.W., 2004). They symbolised the struggle between cities, pitting male citizens one against another. Slaves, metics and married women were excluded from the contests, as were barbarians, murderers, perpetrators of sacrilege and citizens who had contravened the law. Women took part every four years in September, with their own contests, they took part in the Herean contests in honour of Hera, the wife of Zeus, and according to Pausanias sixteen women were entrusted every five years with weaving a veil for Hera.

Alongside the Olympiads, Delphi organised the Pythian games every four years in honour of Apollo, and in the third year of each Olympiad from the 580s BC. The Isthmian games were instated from the 49th Olympiad in the isthmus of Corinth in honour of Poseidon, and the Nemean games were organised from the 53rd Olympiad, in the winter of the second olympic year and in the summer following the fourth.

These athletic activities, in their mythological origins and subsequently in the life of the Greek city-states were part of a complex social and political fabric, the foundations of which were always religious, as we have seen. Their function was neither recreational nor physical, but political and ritual.

However in the Ancient Greek world there was no power without sacrificial practices. The *agons* accompanied the funerals of heroes – funeral processions linked to ceremonies, the ritual, religious and commemorative nature of which are confirmed by the presence of numerous sacrifices. The origin of the contests is always linked to ritual killing or to blood spilt in a struggle. The issue underpinning these contests, very probably instigated to commemorate a crime, could be a killing which was subsequently collectively commemorated by the institution of the *agons* in the then civilised city. The contests were celebrated close to the tombs of certain heroes – Pelops in Olympia, Melicert in Corinth, Python in Delphi, and Opheltes in Nemea where the magistrates wore mourning during the contests

In a passage by Aristotle returned to by Aristides in a scholion on the panatheniatic stadium (fragment 637, Rose p.395. 11 sq) it is noted that the Olympic contests were founded by Heracles in honour of Pelops. This attestation is the earliest, apart from Pindar, mentioning a link between the founding of the Olympic contests and the veneration of Pelops, thus positioning the contests directly in the category of funeral rites. In the words of Pindar, "Today, present in the celebrations where the blood of victims is spilt, he [Pelops] resides on the banks of the Alpheus, and the guests succeed one another around the most revered of all tombs" (Pindare, 1970, I, 90-96).

The Pelops cults were part of the religious and cultural trappings of the sanctuary of Olympia alongside the cult of Zeus. These two cults coexisted in contrasted mode in the sanctuary. The older, Pelops cult, was related to the Chthonian sacrifice, characterised by the

blood of a ram. The cultic reference is to the episode of the sacrifice of the child Pelops by his father Tantalus. This relates to the anthropophagic feast, and to the taboo of anthropophagy appearing in the civilised city. The Zeus cult, for its part, was related to the Olympian divinities.

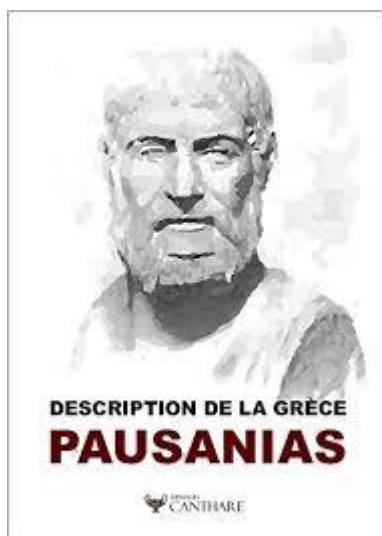
Pelops belongs to the lineage of the Atreidae. He was the son of Tantalus, who sought to test the omniscience of the gods by inviting them to a feast at which he served his son Pelops, previously cut up into pieces. The gods realised the nature of the meal, with the exception of Demeter who, distressed because his daughter had been abducted, had time to consume the child's shoulder.

Although no rite at the opening of the Olympic contests was specifically attached to the Pelops cult, Pelops remains a tutelary figure of the *agons*. Thus, via the ancestral underpinnings attached to the places and the cults organised there, what is recalled is the link between the rituality of the *agons* and the killing of the sacred child (Burkert W., 1983)<sup>(4)</sup>.

In fact all the Pan-Hellenic games (Isthmian, Nemean, Pythian) were accompanied by funereal processions originating in the death of a sacred child (Violaine Vanoyeke, 1992, p. 76). They can thus be seen as being inseparable from the ancient chthonian cults (Ibid., p. 77) on which sacrificial rites in the city were subsequently based, rituals that commemorated a founding killing.

Alongside the official political and religious system there was the development of Orphism, in which we can see a whole set of rituals relating to the taboo of anthropophagy. It can be recalled here that orphism places anthropogony at the centre of its system, as opposed to the Hesiod's theogony. Anthropogony does indeed find its source in the killing of a sacred child – Dionysos, who was cannibalised by the Titans.

The Titans, wearing plaster masks, lured the young child by showing him fascinating objects – a spinning top, a rhombus, dolls, a game of knuckle bones, a mirror. And while Dionysos was contemplating his own image in the polished metal the Titans struck him down, cut him into pieces and embarked on a strange culinary preparation, unlike Greek culinary tradition. The victim's limbs were thrown into the cauldron and boiled. After that the Titans took the pieces, put them on spits and roasted them. They then ate this preparation, with the exception of the heart which was stolen and thus preserved from destruction. The thunder sent by Zeus reduced the Titans to ashes, and from these ashes arose humankind (Detienne Marcel, 1998)<sup>(5)</sup>.



Pausania (1970) relates the myth of the slaying of Dionysos by the Titans, who dismembered, cooked and ate him – three acts to which Pausanias refers as "all sorts of dangers".

It is also mentioned that the cooking process involved "half-cooking" the child. This appears as a dilemma between the savage anthropophagy of the maenads - *diasparagamos* (*διασπαραγμός*) - and sacrifice as an offering to the gods – the ritualised sacrifice as it occurred in the civilised city. The origins of the sacrificial system are not clearly conceived or expressed. Sacrifice in the city, as part of the political and social life of the city, was related to a shared knowledge, but also entailed an unexpressed and possibly unspeakable symbolism, instilling itself in the institutions of the city in secret or implicit manner. Likewise, the sacrifice that was part of the ceremonies connected with the games acted as a mythical operator, carrying with it gestures deriving from an immemorial practice (Détienne, 1987).

Detienne notes that "the human city is founded on killing, it draws life from the blood that is spilt. The crime is an institution, the living eat one another, it is the reign of legal anthropophagy [...] The regime of the city generalises cannibalism, the cannibalism that the Titans, the ancestors of humanity, founded by devouring Dionysos, the sacred child"(Détienne, 1987, p.15).

The contests, as the institution of war and peace, thus appear to be related to killing, a crime that humanity will endlessly take part in so long as it has not recognised its Titanic filiation.

The symbolic anchoring of the *agons* as a commemorative and ritual institution is to be found in the bloody sacrifice of the sacred child. This commemoration, by way of the sacrificial rituals introducing the contests, corresponds to a mourning of the founding murder, and entails a collective appropriation of the taboo of anthropophagy. Indeed, in Orphism, the anthropophagic delusion underpins the sacrificial gesture, omophagy (eating raw meat) is often close to allelophagy. The equivocal nature of the word omophagy can be noted here, since in Greek ομοφαγία means at once eating raw food and eating fellow humans.

### Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that the contests of antiquity are set in a temporality that divides up the time of the city into times of war and times of peace. From this characteristic emerges their symbolic function in the city, obeying rituals that order the political and religious space. In the Greek world politics coexisted alongside sacrificial rituals, the meaning of which originated in ancestral cults and practices; at the same time these rites had a regulatory function with regard to violence and destruction among humans. Ultimately, the sacrificial practices accompanying the rituals of the *agons*, endowing them with their symbolic weight and their pacifying potential in the life of the city, are difficult to apprehend in their fundamental meaning by modern man. The places and venues linked to this heritage do nevertheless enable us to reflect on them and discuss them.

### Notas

- (1) In 1915 Freud, in a short text entitled *Ephemeral destiny (1915)*, noted that when we envisage the ephemeral nature of an object, it carries with it a foretaste of mourning.
- (2) This is strangely reminiscent of Freud - in his text *Thoughts on war and death (1915)* he wrote that life becomes impoverished and loses its interest from the moment when in the game of life it is no longer possible to take the supreme risk, that of life itself, so that "it becomes as shallow and empty as, let us say, an American, flirtation".
- (3) According to Hannah Arendt, the excessive love of life became a reproach from which the Greeks sought to protect themselves, and against which the tragic and epic authors tried to immunise their characters. The love of life was commonly attributed to servants and slaves as an inferior trait that distinguished them from free men. H. Arendt, *The Promise of Politics (2007)*.
- (4) Walter Burkert points to a contrast between the chthonian sacrifice and the Olympic sacrifice. The bringing together of the Zeus cult and the Pelops cult is noted by Pausanias, but the Pelops cult arose at a later date than the Zeus cult.
- (5) See the work by Marcel Détienne, *Dionysos mis à mort*, Paris, Gallimard, "Tel", 1998, where the place of this myth in the Orphic system is discussed.

### References

- Arendt, H. (2007). *La politique a-t-elle encore un sens?*. Paris: L'Herne.
- Brohm, J.M. (1981). *Le Mythe Olympique*. Paris: Christian Bourgois.
- Burkert, W. (1983). *The anthropology of ancient Greek sacrificial ritual and myth*, USA. University of California press.
- Chapus, E. (1854). *Le sport à Paris*. Paris: Librairie de la Hachette.
- Détienne M., Vernant J. P. (1987). *La Cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Détienne. M. (1998). *Dionysos mis à mort*. Paris: Gallimard,.
- Finley Moses, I., Pleket H. W. (2004). *1000 ans de jeux Olympiques. 776 av. J.-C./261 ap. J.-C*, Paris: Perrin.
- Freud, S., (1991). Éphémère destinée (1915). *Résultats, Idées, Problèmes*. Paris: P.U.F.
- Freud, S. (1991). Considérations actuelles sur la guerre et la mort (1915). *Essais de psychanalyse*. Paris: Payot.
- Héraclite. (2011). *Fragments*. Paris: P.U.F.
- Nietzsche, F. (1975). *La joute chez Homère. Écrits Posthumes (1870-1873)*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Pausanias (1970). Παισσανίου, Ελλάδος Περιήγησις. Description de la Grèce de Pausanias, traduction nouvelle par M. Clavier, A. Bobée, imprimeur de la société Royal Académique des Sciences, livre 7, 18., 2-7. (Obra original 1821).
- Pindare. (1970). *Olympiques*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Romilly, J. “Guerre et Paix entre Cités » dans *Problèmes de guerre en Grèce ancienne* ( sous la dir. De Jean-Pierre Vernant) Paris : Editions de l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.
- Vanoyeke, V. (1992). *La Naissance des Jeux olympiques et le sport dans l’Antiquité*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Vernant. J. P. (1999). (supervised by Jacqueline de Romilly). *Guerre et paix entre cités, in Problèmes de la guerre en Grèce ancienne*. Paris: Éditions Écoles des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales.

**Citação/Citation:** Christaki, A. (2018) The political and religious setting of Olympic contests in Antiquity. *Trivium: Estudos Interdisciplinares* (Ano X, Ed.1), p. 96-102.

**Recebido em:** 10/07/2017

**Aprovado em:** 28/10/2017