

Two Sanctuaries: Olympia and Delphi

Carl Seaquist

(Slide 1) Welcome to Carl Seaquist's lecture on the sanctuaries at Olympia and Delphi. These were two of the most prominent sanctuaries in the Greek world, with some of the finest temples. Both were Panhellenic rather than local, and both were sites of games held every four years.

(Slide 2) Olympia is located in the northwest Peloponnese, readily accessible to those coming from all areas of Greece, including the West Greeks of Italy and Sicily. In fact, many of the cities that build treasuries at Olympia were from West Greece; others were Cyrene in North Africa and Byzantium in Anatolia. Delphi lies in Phocis, just north of the Gulf of Corinth with easy access to both the Peloponnese and Attica. Both lay far enough from major city-states that they were able to serve as relatively neutral venues for worshippers and competition between cities.

(Slide 3) The main god worshipped at Olympia was Zeus. A wall was built in the fourth century to define the extent of the temenos, with the athletic venues (the stadium, gymnasium, palaistra, or wrestling school, and hippodrome) lying just outside of this wall. The so-called "Temple of Hera," which may have been dedicated to Zeus, was built around 590 BC on the site of an older temple, of which the foundations survive. It represented a transitional period in Greek architecture: the classical temples that survive to the present were built of stone, but in the Early Iron Age temples had been built of wood and mud brick. Apparently the Temple of Hera was partially stone. Pausanias, a traveller writing in the second century AD, says that even in his time one of the columns was still wooden. The larger Temple of Zeus was built in the first half of the fifth century, and featured a monumental statue of Zeus, made of gold and ivory. Also within the sanctuary were a temple to the Mother of the Gods (or the Metroön) and a grave mound to Pelops, the alleged ancestor of the Atreid family (which included Agamemnon and Menelaus) – figures well-known from the poems of Homer and from Attic tragedy.

(Slide 4) But as a site of worship, Olympia contained much more than just temples. There were stoas, or open-air buildings with a back wall and a roof supported by columns. These served the needs of travellers, who could spend the night in them and escape the worst of the elements. One stoa bordered the sanctuary to the east, while a later and more grand one, called the Leonidaion because it was paid for by Leonidas from the island of Naxos, lay to the southwest. The Prytaneion was an administrative building that contained a large dining hall.

Other Hellenistic structures include the Philippeion, paid for by Philip and Alexander of Macedon; and the palaistra. Between these buildings archaeologists have found the workshop of Pheidias, the sculptor of the great statue of Zeus.

(Slide 5) Olympia is best known today for its athletic competitions, and these were important in antiquity as well. In fact, in the early sixth century a cycle of four Panhellenic competitions developed, of which the Olympian games were the most prominent. One method of dating events made use of cycles called Olympiads: one could speak of the third year of the second Olympiad to refer to the seventh year (counting inclusively) since the founding of the games. Of course, to translate this into our AD/BC scheme, one has to know what year the games were founded. In the fifth century, Hippias of Elis identified the founding of the games as having occurred in what we call the year 776 BC. But the Olympiad system was an independent means of identifying absolute dates, using our 776 BC rather than our year 1 AD as the starting point.

(Slide 6) According to the scheme that developed in the sixth century, the Pythian games were held in the third year of each Olympiad, thus once every four years, with both the Isthmian and Nemean games being held biennially – in different months of the years that intervened between the Olympian and Pythian games, or put differently, in the second and fourth years of each Olympiad. Since these games were all held at Panhellenic sanctuaries, each game was associated with the chief god of the sanctuary. Pythian and Isthmian games are said to have been instituted in 582, and the Nemean games, held every two years, began in 573.

Competitions were a part of Greek religious ritual going back into the Early Iron Age at least. Homer's *Iliad* tells of games being held at the funeral of Patroclus, and since the main myth associated with the origin of each of the four sanctuaries involves the death of a local hero or monster (Pelops at Olympia, the Python at Delphi, Palaemon at Isthmia, and Opheltes at Nemea), some scholars have speculated that the games in each case have their origin in funeral games.

Poetic competition is also associated with Greek cults. Athenian tragedies and comedies were staged competitively at a festival of Dionysus. Musical competitions were said to have been held every eight years at Delphi before the establishment of the Panhellenic games cycle. A hymnic competition is said to have preceded the athletic contests at Olympia, and the poet Hesiod describes taking part in such competitions.

(Slide 7) The athletic competitions were phased in over time, with the foot race alone constituting the first games. Eventually, however, a wide variety of competitions was established, with separate contests for boys. We can tell a lot about Greek society by looking at the various races. In the hoplite race, competitors ran wearing some military gear; since armies at this time were composed of citizen levies, every free male who could afford to probably possessed a helmet and shield. Horse and chariot racing, in contrast, were the preserve of the wealthy. The prize in these events was given not to the athlete but rather to the owner of the team, who paid for the care and training of the horses. Although married women were prohibited from even watching the contests, the sister of a Spartan king, Kyniska, won the chariot race in 396 and again in 392 BC. She commemorated this victory by dedicating a sculpture to the god, on the pedestal of which was an inscription that boasted "I say I am the only woman in all Greece to have won this crown."

Delphi

(Slide 8) The sanctuary at Delphi was known across the Greek world and beyond for the oracle stationed in the Temple of Apollo. Throughout Greek literature and history we hear of people coming here seeking advice. The responses of the oracle had to be interpreted by the priests of the temple, and the responses were notably enigmatic. When Croesus of Lydia was wondering whether he should attack the Persians, the Delphic oracle responded that if he did so, he would destroy a great empire. Only too late did he discover that the empire would be his own.

The sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi is centered around the main temple, which was damaged and rebuilt a number of times, and the path or "sacred way" (identified in the illustration by the arrows) that led up to it. Along the Sacred Way monuments and treasuries were set up, to maximize the number of worshippers who saw them. The sanctuary contains at least 30 treasuries, though only a dozen or so have been identified.

(Slide 9) The sanctuary seems to have been in use by the tenth century, though the earliest dedications that have been found may be dated to around 800. A great temple to Apollo was destroyed in 548 BC, and not rebuilt until near the end of the century. This temple, paid for by the Alkmeonid family of Athens, was destroyed by an earthquake in 373 BC. The Alkmeonids were one of the wealthiest and most prominent families in Athens, and they rebuilt the temple at Delphi at about the same time that the Peisistratid family was building the great temple to Athena on the acropolis of Athens. As with the monuments and treasuries that dotted the sanctuary at Delphi, again a gift to the god was used to express competition, this time between families rather than cities.

(Slide 10) The Temple to Apollo contained a great statue, as was common, but it was unique in other ways. It held a stone known as the omphalos, or “belly-button” of the world, held by the Greeks to lie at the center of the earth. Here was a tripod on which the Pythia sat. A fault in the rock lies beneath the temple, from which gases apparently rise. Scholars have vacillated as to whether to accept a naturalistic explanation according to which these fumes made the priestess drunk, as it were, and thereby they explain the ecstatic state in which she prophesied; or else they argue that the institution of prophecy was purely culturally conditioned. Down the hill and southeast of the sanctuary is a temple to Athena, known as Athena Pronaia because her temple is – and this is the literal meaning of pronaiā – “in front of the temple” of Apollo. Most notable here is the circular tholos of Athena, built in the fourth century.

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