

# A dusty Glasto without Portaloos

The first comprehensive cultural history of Olympia in English

**MICHAEL SCOTT**

**OLYMPIA**

A cultural history

**JUDITH M. BARRINGER**

344pp. Princeton University Press. £28 (US \$35).

**A** MAN FROM the Greek island of Chios was angry with his servant, or so the story goes. "I won't," he said, "but you to work in the mill, I'll take you to Olympia." This anecdote is recorded in the later second or early third century CE by the writer Aelian, who went on to explain: the slave owner thought it a worse punishment for the slave to be taken to the Olympic Games than to be put to work at the mill.

This is my favourite story about the ancient Olympics, because it cuts through the hyperbole that so often surrounds the Games and focuses our attention on what it must have been like to attend. The moment you stop to think about it, the Chian slave owner has a point. Greece in the summer is often nearing 40 degrees Celsius. Throw about 50,000 people into a large, open, flat space, camping for five or more days (with all their belongings, cart animals and food supplies), add quite a lot of physical exertion and barbequing of a good number of animals in honour of the gods, and fate away any notion of sanitation or drainage apart from two nearby rivers, and I give you the ancient Olympics: a dry, dusty glastony without Portaloos and with animals and wrestling. No wonder one of the altars at Olympia was dedicated specifically to Zeus, with the epithet *Apomaius*, "the Swatter of Flies".

In her new book on the development of the archaeological site of Olympia, Judith M. Barringer begins by focusing on the experience of attending the ancient Games. Her version is a rosier one (Aelian's slave punishment doesn't make it into the book, nor does Zeus as Swatter of Flies), with her visitor greeted by "the rich palette of materials, hues, and sounds at Olympia". Barringer does, however, get into practical matters: she covers key topics such as how drinking water was provided (for each set of games they dug wells around the sanctuary, which were filled in with rubbish afterwards) and how there was enough food for so many. Every time we look at a map of the Olympia sanctuary, we need to populate the empty open spaces around the dazzling temples, treasures and race track with an open-air market full of stalls and small campfires cooking food as far as the eye can see. (More iron spits, for roasting meat over a fire; have been excavated from around the site of Olympia than anywhere else in the Mediterranean.) Then there was the question of accommodation. Most people brought tents, and some tried to show off. The wealthy tyrant of Syracuse, Dionysios I, came to glamp at Olympia in 388 BCE in a particularly luxurious mobile home, and we are told by the historian Diodorus Siculus that he

was so hated by the crowd that they trashed it. And despite the rather thin information on exactly how many animals were sacrificed at the Olympics in honour of the gods, Barringer points to the archaeological evidence for tethering posts for animals, particularly in the area around the great altar of Pausanias, from the second century CE, was made up purely of the burnt ash remains of sacrifices to the gods from previous Games, and was by his time about 17 metres high).

While barrages do not seem particularly keen to emphasize the unpleasant side of experiencing the games, she does underline that Olympia was not just about sport. This is a welcome reminder of the key difference between the ancient and modern Olympics: the ancient Games were a religious festival honouring the gods - and not just the obvious ones. Barringer does a great job of drawing our attention to the plethora of deities worshipped at Olympia. My favourite was the little-known altar of Artemis to the south of the stadium, surrounded by stone pillars perhaps to protect it from wagon traffic dashing to the hippodrome for the chariot races.

*Olympia: A cultural history* opens with a slightly chaotic smorgasbord of short discussions on the administration of Olympia by the city of Elis, the development of cults at the site from 900 to 600 BCE, the system of oracular consultation, the different festivals celebrated there and an overview of the athletic Games and their association with warfare. This is followed by "practical matters" in chapter one, which also includes a discussion of how we should use Pausanias as a source, and how the

"Alis" (the traditional name given to the key religious area of the Olympic sanctuary) was bigger than often thought, but the meat of Barringer's study is a chronological review of the architectural and artistic development of the site.

What makes this detailed discussion so welcome is the fact that this is the first comprehensive cultural history of Olympia to be published in English. Olympia has, since its first excavation, been principally excavated by the Germans. Most archaeological sites in Greece where excavations began in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were allocated to different European nations, which continue to dominate the work, now alongside their Greek counterparts, at these sites even today. So most of the archaeological scholarship on Olympia is in German. (Similarly, much of that on Delphi is in French, as it has been excavated by the French since the 1890s.) Barringer not only brings together all the latest discoveries, nuances and uncertainties of the German scholars who know this site inside out, but engages with that work critically, usefully discussing and evaluating it. The only pity, given this particular history of excavation, is that she chooses to end the book with Olympia being covered over by metres of silt in the ninth century CE, rather than dedicating a final chapter to the intricacies of its modern rediscovery.

Barringer does a fine job in her main chapters of taking us through the development of the Olympic site, starting around 600 BCE. Her key achievement is taking a site that can seem immobile, and is so often viewed through the map of what it was like when Pausanias came to visit in the second century CE, and showing how so much of it was under

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constant construction, reconstruction, realignment and renewal, and how many of its prize statues and precious offerings were often being moved around (and on occasion carried off entirely). She confidently acts as ringmaster while the stadiums, temples, altars, endowments, treasuries, statues and other architectural and artistic structures and objects dizzyingly shift around her.

Nothing symbolizes this better than her insistence on calling what is traditionally known as the Temple of Hera, in the northwest corner of the Alis, the "Herion", in quotation marks, throughout - as she points out, it is actually uncertain to whom it was dedicated originally, or what Hera's status was along side the other gods who were shoehorned in there over the site's long history. As for the grand Temple of Zeus, this probably had to be altered only a decade after it was created, in order to accommodate Pheidias' huge gold and ivory statue of the god; and its pedimental sculpture may have had to be totally recreated after an earthquake. (That is not to mention damage from further earthquakes and more alterations by the Romans.)

We are left with the impression of a site characterized by constant dynamic change, responding not just to natural disasters, but to the needs of its owners, users and the wider Greek and Mediterranean worlds. It was a place not grand and eternal but shifting and uncertain, displaying the insatiable desires of athletes, prominent individuals, cities and rulers to exert and prove their value, power and might in any way that was possible. Yes, I hear you say, I too would prefer a turn in the mill rather than five days of that. ■

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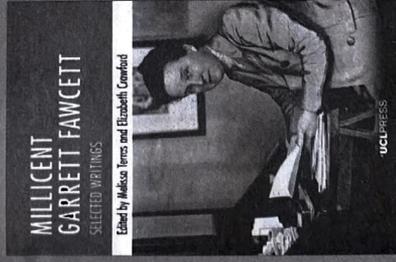
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