Elis and the Olympics: The Economics of Entertainment

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Abstract

Critics argue that the Modern Olympic Games, while waning in prestige, place an economic burden on the hosting nation. But was its ancient Greek inspiration as costly? As a religious athletic festival often analyzed for its symbolism, little to no discussion of the event's economic impacts have been raised within academic circles. As a quadrilinear festival, these games permitted Elis, the consistent owner of Olympia, to showcase the excellence of Greek athletics within the Mediterranean world – eclipsing other Panhellenic games. This article argues that the ancient Olympic Games' prestige, mythology, and ever-increasing tourism fostered economic development within Elis, creating a consistent, millennia-long tradition that demonstrates the financial benefits of the ancient festival. A benefit realized through the existence of a single festival site.

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Introduction

Analyses of the ancient Olympic Games focus on the fervent religiosity and identity of the event as a Panhellenic festival. The festival's athletics are these evaluations' foci, with these events honouring the gods. In its modern counterpart, analysts ignore gods, as finances usurp religiosity. These analysts focus on the financial burdens of recent Olympic iterations, as sporting infrastructure, housing, and safety costs strain the host nations' economies. Occasionally, these costs benefit the country, bringing millions of tourists into the host nation. However, especially recently, critics deem these costs too steep compared to the prestige of hosting the games, leading some to rescind their bids.[1] But why do we only focus on the economic ramifications of the modern Olympic Games? How did the original Panhellenic festival affect the economy of the Elean *polis*? Was it a benefit or a burden? While initially costly, the Olympic Games strengthened Elis' economy through the festival's prestige and authority, enabled by mythological origins and bolstered through tourism, conspicuous consumption, and the Olympic truce sanctioned by the religious event.

This paper employs a combination of ancient and scholarly sources to examine the ancient Olympic Games. Ancient sources include archaeological evidence, such as small finds and monumental architecture at Elis and Olympia, acting as primary sources. Literary sources will be employed as both primary and secondary sources, respectively functioning to display firsthand accounts and historical beliefs.[2] These accounts further detail Elis and the Olympics, filling in archaeological silences and providing contemporary descriptions of the site. Scholarly sources contextualize these ancient ones, offering overviews of Olympian and Elean history through archaeological and literary evidence.[3] Together, these ancient and modern sources provide a foundation for analyzing the economic impacts of the ancient Olympic Games on Elean society.

Olympia and the Games' history are critical to understanding the festival's magnitude within antiquity. Elis retained control over Olympia from at least 550 BCE onwards and administered the sanctuary's finances, festivities, and games into the 5th century CE.[4] Greeks of antiquity attributed the establishment of the games to either Herakles, Zeus, or Pelops, all for various deeds.[5] Pausanias claims the Delphic oracle ordered the reestablishment of the Games in

[1] James McBride, Manno Melissa, and Noah Berman, "The Economics of Hosting the Olympic Games," *Council on Foreign Relations,* July 20, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/economics-hosting-olympic-games.

[2] The texts I analyze act as primary or secondary sources, depending on context. For example, *Pausanias'* belief in the mythical origins of the Olympics demonstrates later beliefs of the Olympics' prestige, acting as a primary source. Elsewhere, these texts act as secondary sources to fill in archaeological gaps.

[3] Judith M. Barringer, *Olympia: A Cultural History,* (Princeton University Press, 2021); Graeme Bourke, *Elis: Internal Politics and External Policy in Ancient Greece*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2017).

[4] Barringer, *Olympia,* 13.

[5] Barringer, *Olympia,* 29; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, trans. Jones W H S. and Henry Arderne Ormerod (Harvard University Press, 1918). 5.7.6-5.7.10; 5.4.5-6.

776 BCE.[6] Modern scholars disagree on a specific start date for the games, with most arguing a date sometime after 776 BCE.[7] Regardless of when they started, Pausanias stories detail a glorious mythological origin for the games at the religious site.[8] These invented traditions create the basis for the Olympics as a religious and athletic festival. The mythology surrounding the festival's origins, with events added over the years, is fundamental to attracting visitors across the Mediterranean.

Tourism and Fame

Tourism to the Olympics is critical to understanding the economic impacts of the Games on Elis. The thousands of tourists who travelled to the religious festival would require immense amounts of food and wine - provisions that would be costly to travel with. Firstly, visitors would have to go through the city-state on their journey to Olympia. Due to it being inland, visitors would likely go through local ports, such as Pheia, Kyllene, or the mouth of the Alpheios River, which Elis controlled.[9] Olympia itself had little infrastructure in the form of shops and residences.[10] This lack of infrastructure would force visitors to purchase goods locally – inciting spending at Elis. While these vendors may not be strictly from the Elean economy, Eleans would be in the most advantageous position to establish themselves as vendors during the festival.

Athletes' fame gained in the Olympics would increase tourism to the festival. While no official prizes past an olive-wreath crown were granted to Olympic victors, they were permitted to put up a statue at the sanctuary and would experience fame and fortune at home.[11] These sanctuary-endorsed statues would become a form of conspicuous consumption. This conspicuity would act to boast of the athlete's prowess in the Olympics, attracting further attention to the festival. We see mentions of athletes' fame throughout writings such as Pausanias, Thucydides, and Herodotus, who all celebrate champions.[12] It is noteworthy that the Olympics showcased other events, such as Herodotus himself reciting his *Histories,* as well as other orators and artists.[13] These events would attract more people to Olympia –bolstering the economy. Furthermore, Olympic victors often constructed statues commemorating their victories in their

[6] Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 5.4.5-6.

[7] Barringer, *Olympia,* 29.

[8] Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 5.7.10; 5.4.5-6.

[9] Bourke, *Elis*, 80.

[10] Barringer, *Olympia,* 45-58.

[11] Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. Simon Hornblower and Pelling C. B. R. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 6.11.5-9; 8.26.

[12] Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 6.1.1-6.18.7; Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Pelling C B R. (Cambridge University Press, 2022). 1.126.2-6; 6.16.2; Herodotus, *Histories*, 5.47.1.

[13] Stephen G. Miller, *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources*. (University of California Press, 2012), num. 143-144.

home *poleis*.[14] This construction would further the victor's fame and spread the Olympics' reputation to attract greater attention towards the event as "the greatest games in the world."[15]

Athletes and their entourage fueled the Elean economy. These athletes were required to train at the gymnasium at Elis for thirty days before the competition.[16] This period would require food and provisions for the athletes, trainers, and slaves accompanying them, further fueling local industries through an increased demand on foodstuffs and related industries.[17] While one could argue they would be cared for by Elis, no record exists of these athletes being freely fed by the Elean state. Furthermore, the *Hellenodikai'*s performance takes place on the road from Olympia to Elis.[18] This event occurring between the two towns suggests that many pilgrims passed through Elis proper, purchasing goods and injecting the local economy with bullion.

Archaeological Evidence for Increasing Commerce

Olympia's agora activity highlights the event's commercialization. At Olympia's agora, more than four hundred official weights and measures from the fifth to fourth centuries BCE have been discovered – more than any other site.[19] Additionally, some artifacts include wines from across the Mediterranean, such as wine from Kos and Chios.[20] These objects from across the Mediterranean showcase how merchants brought commercial goods to Olympia. This commercialization demonstrates how tourists interacted with the wider commercial networks that opened at Olympia. Wine from Kos and Chios, along with weights, measures, and food vessels, showcases how merchants exploited this event for profit due to Olympia's limited infrastructure. There is no evidence that these merchants were Eleans, but they would be in prime position to sell goods at Elis due to minimal transportation costs and geographic proximity to the sanctuary.

The Olympics' mythical origins and prestigious athletics would fuel larger crowds with successive festivals, stimulating commercial markets. While the festival's inception is murky, its growth from the eighth to the fourth centuries BCE displays how the event grew through word of mouth and beliefs that the Olympics demonstrated the pinnacle of athletics and piety. Evidentially, Peloponnesian athletes' dominance is visible for the first two hundred years of the event.[21] This dominance insinuates that the Olympics were only regionally important during their early years. Likewise, with Peloponnesian supremacy waning and the construction of a 40,000-

[14] Miller, *Arete*, no. 27; Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 8.40.1

[15] Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo,* trans. by Duane W. Roller, (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 8.3.30.

[16] Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 5.24.9; Philostratus, the Athenian, *The Life of Apollonius Tyana,* vol. 16-17;16-17, trans. by C. P. Jones (Harvard University Press, 2005), 5.43.

[17] Philostratus, *The Life Apollonius Tyana,* 5.43.

[18] Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 5.16.8.

[19] Barringer, *Olympia,* fig. 1.6.

[20] Barringer, *Olympia,* 49.

[21] Nigel Jonathen Spivey, *The Ancient Olympics,* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 172.

seat Stadion after the first two centuries in 450 BCE, the festival's geographic popularity must have expanded.[22] This expansion must have a reason. While growing prosperity and wealth are necessary, these alone do not explain this immense growth. This growth must have occurred due to the festival's rising notoriety, caused by victors exporting this fame to their home *poleis*. Fame would rely on the Olympics' mythical origins and prestige.[23] Importantly, certain Olympic victors would become heroized.[24] This heroization would attract further tourists, leading merchants to flock to the site due to more market opportunities.

Local Eleans likely supplied the goods and services for tourists. Archaeological remains of cooking ware, food vessels, iron spits, and various cooking implements from after the seventh century BCE fill the site.[25] While we are unsure of object ownership, most pottery found at Olympia was locally produced, as local kilns and kitchens point to on-site production.[26] Additionally, bronzeworking and stonework shops have been found at the sanctuary.[27] Importantly, the little permanent housing at Olympia alludes to Eleans operating and peddling at these businesses. Moreover, the aforementioned weights and measures support the prominence of vendors at the Olympics.[28] Production sites, shops, and locally made pottery suggest locals operated these businesses. Their locality would be crucial, as they are in the most advantageous position to set themselves up as vendors. Consequently, these locals would utilize their sales from the festival and repurpose them into goods and services to be purchased within the Elean *polis*. This increased capital within Elis would assist in intra-polis wealth, boosting local industries and infusing the economy of the Elean state.

Prestige and Wealth

Pausanias' description of the sanctuary demonstrates the conspicuous consumption occurring at Olympia. While writing in the second century CE, his *Description of Greece* gives a glimpse into the site. He describes an ivory and gold statue of Zeus, dozens of statues of Olympic victors and their exploits, extravagant votive offerings, and various treasuries.[29] These dedications demonstrate piety, wealth, and power as a form of conspicuous consumption. Pausanias notes dozens of statues commemorating Olympia victors, revealing how the event induced this consumption. This consumption was often for other purposes than simply worshipping the gods. We see this with a statue of a Samian boxer, which only tells of the

[22] Barringer, *Olympia,* 44.

[23] Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 5.4.5-6, 5.7.10.

[24] Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 6.11.5-9.

[25] Barringer, *Olympia,* 52.

[26] Barringer, *Olympia,* 52, 58; fig. 1.12; fig. 1.9.

[27] Barringer, *Olympia,* 52, 59; fig 1.9; Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 5.15.1.

[28] Barringer, *Olympia,* fig. 1.6.

[29] Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 5.17.1-6.19.15.

triumph of the city-state.[30] Likewise, many dedications come from private individuals, including Roman emperors.[31] These private dedications and the Samian boxer statue showcase how these dedications were not just religious but competitive and political. This competition would benefit Elis by enticing wealthy travellers and pilgrims to this site of ever-increasing prestige. While not directly influencing the Elean economy, the sanctuary of Olympia's accrual of wealth would tempt individuals to the Olympics. These individuals would purchase local goods, fueling the economy.

The Olympics prestige cemented the festival as being authoritatively the 'pinnacle of Greek athleticism,' giving weight to the Olympic truce. Herodotus and other authors of antiquity proclaim the excellence of the Olympics.[32] These praises demonstrate the common view of the Olympics as the greatest of the Greek athletic games. Scholars stress that this truce was not a Mediterranean-wide Greek truce and was only for safe passage to, and not interfering with, the Olympics.[33] Still, fines for disturbing pilgrims travelling to the event were often paid – further providing funds to Elis.[34] Additionally, some scholars point out how warfare once occurred within the sanctuary.[35] But this forgoes how this conflict occurred outside the truce period when enemies attempted to conquer the site. These intentions demonstrate not only the prestige of Olympia but also its economic significance due to attempts to control the sanctuary.

The truce allowed pilgrims to access the site and stifled local conflict, fueling economic growth. While accessing the Olympics would be costly, with many travellers unable to make it, this truce removed one barrier for their expedition. Often, the truce gets depicted in literary sources as a religious or Greek peace, allowing individuals to travel to Olympia.[36] This depiction may function as a basis for this rationale, but there are no doubt economic motivators for Elis. During antiquity, authors remarked on how inviolate Elis was. Polybius writes in the mid-second century BCE about how "inexperienced in all danger and any kind of military incursion" the Eleans were.[37] This remark demonstrates how this truce benefited Elis economically through its shielding from conflict. A truce that relied upon the prestige of the religious festival. With little conflict occurring in the Elean lands, the accumulation of capital would be easily achieved.

Counterarguments

[30] Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 6.2.9.

[31] Barringer, *Olympia,* 83, 205.

[32] Herodotus, *Histories,* 8.26; Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, 8.3.30.

[33] Donald G Kyle and Robert Edelmen, "Ancient Greek and Roman Sport," essay, in *The Oxford Handbook of Sports History: The Oxford Handbook of Sports History,* ed, Robert Edelman and Wayne Wilson (Oxford Academic, 2017), 85; Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 5.20.1; Miller, *Arete*, no. 89.

[34] Miller, *Arete*, num 69; 68; Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian Wars,* 5.49.

[35] Louis Dyer, "The Olympian Theatron and the Battle of Olympia," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 1908, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/624609, 250.

[36] Miller, *Arete*, no. 85; Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 5.4.5-6.

[37] Polybius, *The Histories*, trans. W. R. Paton (Harvard University Press; William Heinemann, 1922-1927). 4.73.6-10.

If the Olympics were profitable, why would it be a quadrennial festival and not a yearly one? Hippias of Elis first used "Olympiad" as a timekeeping tool around 400 BCE.[38] Before this, and for most of antiquity, Elis and all Greek *poleis* used yearly calendars.[39] This suggests that the origins of this four-year cycle are murky. It may be true that the Olympics were initially expensive for the city-state to run, explaining the quadrennial cycle, especially when it was competing for control of Olympia. Once Elis firmly secured control and the festival's prestige and popularity grew, the Games' quadrennial nature would have been cemented. This cementation would be challenging to alter without disturbing the event's traditions, meaning that the Olympics' four-year cycle had already hardened itself once it became profitable through this increased popularity in the fifth century. The Games' rarity would further its prestige by amplifying the magnitude of the athletics at hand, as it would not come for another four years. Lastly, it would be easier for Greeks to travel to the festival as it would be less costly than travelling yearly – enabling more to travel overall. Costs possibly established the four-year cycle, but they do not prove that the expenses outweighed the profits once the Olympics' popularity expanded, with tradition cementing its quadrennial nature.

What about the Olympics' operating costs? There were severe fees for running a Panhellenic athletic festival. An inscription from Delphi outlines its expenses for the Pythian Games, with contractors hired and their costs listed.[40] These costs are the only examples of such expenses we have, with no exact costs from Olympia or Elis surviving. The Olympics, as the largest of the Greek Panhellenic festivals, would likely have the highest running costs. Other sanctuary fees, such as monument upkeep or dedications from Elis would increase expenses.[41] However, little infrastructure was constructed for visitors.[42] These fees at the festival's inception may be steep, with lower guest turnout and thus less capital being brought into Elis by the event. However, with the festival's growth, maintenance costs would become compensated through increased tourism, benefiting the Elean economy, and assisting in wealth accumulation.

Growth of the Games

The prosperity of Elis throughout antiquity demonstrates its wealth accrual over time. Throughout the Classical period, Elis grew economically and geographically.[43] The historian Thucydides remarks on how the Corinthians asked the Eleans for money and ships in 434 BCE,

[38] Paul Christesen, "Whence 776? The Origin of the Date for the First Olympiad," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 26, no. 2 (2009): 161.

[39] Christesen, "Whence 776?," 162-163.

[40] Miller, *Arete*, no. 63.

[41] Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 5.24.4, 5.24.6, 5.26.6.

[42] Barringer, *Olympia,* 45-58.

[43] Bourke, *Elis*, 1.

demonstrating the wealth Elis possessed.[44] He further comments on accruing a loan from Olympia to combat Athenian naval supremacy.[45] While one could argue that its high-quality linen or ship-building business (as implied by its grant to the Corinthians) impacted this economic growth, the Olympics cannot be a disregarded factor.[46] The ability to grant loans demonstrates the wealth Elis accrued. Later, Pausanias describes Elis and Olympia during the second century CE, pointing constructions that had occurred since the Classical period – implying economic growth.[47] Archaeological findings further evidence this architectural development.[48] To distinguish between the economic growth of Elis caused by domestic linen production versus Olympic tourism is impossible, as pilgrims would likely purchase these very products.

Some scholars argue that the festival declined during the fourth century BCE.[49] This claim forgoes much of the archaeological and literary evidence. Firstly, while religious structures may have diminished, various athletic buildings, bathhouses, halls, and sculptures were constructed throughout this period.[50] Barringer notes that buildings constructed from the fourth century BCE onwards focused more on dining, housing accommodations, and commercial activities.[51] This shift in construction suggests that Elis began purposefully commercializing Olympia, as these buildings focus on supporting larger crowds through feeding, housing, or commercial activities. Secondly, when Pausanias talks about Olympia, he mentions buildings constructed or dedicated during Rome's dominance.[52] This showcases how the allure of the games continued into the Roman era, further bringing wealth into the sanctuary. Additionally, Epictetus writes of the glory of the Olympics and its overwhelming crowds, indicating a sustained popularity.[53] Archaeological evidence demonstrates that the Olympics did not dissipate during the Hellenistic period, and literary sources showcase how the Games continued their importance into the Roman Empire.

The quadrennial cycle of the Olympics furthers the prestige and profit of subsequent games, propelling the Elean economy throughout antiquity. Even through political changes, such as the Roman conquest of Elis, the Eleans still held jurisdiction over the Olympics.[54] Mythology, prestige, conspicuous consumption, and further efforts of commercialization fueled the

[44] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian Wars,* 1.27.2.

[45] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian Wars,* 1.121.3.

[46] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian Wars*. 1.27.2; Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 5.5.2.

[47] Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.16.9-6.19.10*,* 6.24.10.

[48] Bourke, *Elis*, 228.

[49] Barringer, *Olympia,* 5.

[50] Barringer, *Olympia,* 157-158.

[51] Barringer, *Olympia,* 158-159.

[52] Pausanias, *Description of Greece,* 5.24.4; 5.10.5; 24.4, 8.

[53] Epictetus, *Discourses,* 1.6-8, 3.15.2-5.

[54] Barringer, *Olympia,* 13.

Olympics' growth. These central factors intersect with one another, leading to the Games' expansion through antiquity, with Rome opening the games to anyone of the Empire, as indicated by large numbers of visitors outside of the province of Achaia (Roman Greece).[55] Eventually, the rise of Christianity in the Empire led to the Game's prohibition in the fourth century CE.[56] This prohibition was based on the Game's pagan worship – not on any economic detriment.

Limitations and Conclusion

Explorations of past economies and histories have limits, with discovered sources demarcating them. This demarcation illustrates the limits of this paper – we have no precise surviving economic data about the festival, whether operating costs or profit brought into the sanctuary. We may never discover this data for the Olympics, leading to incomplete conclusions that necessitate speculation. This lack of data for the Olympics further confines conclusions regarding other Panhellenic games, as we have even less data for these events. Future analysis could explore the economics of the other Panhellenic festivals, such as the Pythian Games, but similar issues concerning less-than-perfect data will arise. However, researching other festivals could illuminate the situation at Olympia further. Regarding the Olympics, Elis itself could be more heavily researched, as while we have tangential information regarding the population's economic prosperity, how this wealth materialized and who benefited is unknown. Lastly, gaps detailing trade routes, such as the wine imported from Kos and Chois, could provide further insight into which goods were brought to the festival and why, possibly detailing the variety of goods entering Olympia and their Mediterranean paths.[57]

We do not have a ledger detailing the expenditures and profits of the ancient Olympic Games. But there were no doubt economic benefits to hosting the festival. While possibly unintended at the festival's inception, the invented tradition and mythology of the festival act to entice visitors to the event. These visitors would purchase goods and services, injecting the local economy with bullion and later spreading the festival's fame at home. The cyclical nature of the event furthered this popularity, as the quadrennial tradition increased the athletic stakes and permitted more visitors to each Olympics. It was not until Theodosius' ban that the Games ended. An end occurring not due to any economic burden but due to changing morality.

[55] Epictetus, *Discourses,* 1.6-8, 3.15.2-5, which was written around the beginning of the 2nd century CE, well into Roman occupation.

[56] Barringer, *Olympia,* 5.

[57] Barringer, *Olympia,* 49.

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