

George Squires, *Ritual participation at the sanctuary of Olympia and the changing nature of individual and state identities (1000-397 BC)*¹

Abstract

Sanctuaries in the Greek world were a nexus of community interaction, and none more so than at the sanctuary of Olympia in Elis. From the traditional starting date of the Olympic games in 776 BC through to their abolishment in 393 AD, communities would come together every 4 years to take part in athletics, feasting, worship and politics.

This paper will investigate the changing nature of individual and state identities from the evidence for participation at Olympia. It will examine material culture to understand how it grew to be a sanctuary of Panhellenic importance, shaping the way people interacted at the sanctuary, at home, and between states. This paper will cover from the end of the Dark Age (1000 BC) through to the end of the Classical period (397 BC), enabling it to get a strong sense of changed that occurred at the sanctuary, and how this impacted emerging Greek identity.

Pottery Style	Dates (BC)
Protogeometric	1050-900
Early Geometric	900-850
Middle Geometric	850-760
Late Geometric	760-700
Orientalising	730-600
Archaic	600-508
Classical	508-397

Table 1: Chronology Table (Adapted from Whitley 2001, 62; Lemos & Fantalki 2013, Fig. 14)

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Introduction

Religion and ritual in Ancient Greece permeated every aspect of daily life. In the classical period, activity at sanctuaries was a focal point for interactions between different social groups.² Analysing the evidence for participation at sanctuaries can provide a clearer understanding of how this interaction impacted developing notions of identity. From the Classical period, we know that the wealthy would often make costly dedications as a way of reinforcing the distinctions between themselves and the lower classes.³ States also played an active role at sanctuaries, often competing with other states via dedications, including monumental architecture at state sanctuaries and treasuries and large dedications at inter-state sanctuaries such as Delphi⁴.

While the Classical period is well documented, we should not project our understandings of activities at classical era sanctuaries onto an earlier period. Ritual and religion were constantly changing across time⁵, as such activity at sanctuaries was not constant. This paper will explore how developing ideas of both individual and state identity manifest through activity at the Greek sanctuary of Olympia across a long period of time (1000-397 BC). A consideration of the evidence from the end of the Dark Age (1000 BC) through to the end of the Classical period (397 BC) will provide a strong sense of perspective for changes that occurred at the sanctuary.

² Dillon 2013

³ Valavanis 2004: 42

⁴ Neer 2004: 64.

⁵ Haysom 2019

It should also be noted that there are issues with dating the material from the early phase at Olympia as we do not have accurate stratigraphy. Normally when this is the case, we rely on pottery chronology, but we cannot confidently establish this until the 8th C. BC.⁶ Scholars have attempted to establish a chronology for the earliest period based on other forms of evidence with varying success (Table 1).⁷

What is ‘identity’?

‘Identity’ is a term employed in many ways, an ambiguity fuelled by anthropological studies which often use it to reference both individual and community identity⁸. This paper will consider both individual and state identity at sanctuaries and will make a clear distinction between the two. Status is another concept which is central to this essay but has been used vaguely in the past⁹. It has been seen as a category or objective entity, instead it should be viewed as a formative tool which can be manipulated by an individual or state through actions¹⁰. This intrinsically links status and identity, as one often informs the other.

Earliest Votives

One of the earliest and most abundant forms of evidence from the sanctuary at Olympia are votive offerings, often comprising of animal representations.¹¹ The style, size, and manufacturing techniques of the earliest votives can tell

⁶ Snodgrass 1972: 276

⁷ Mallwitz 1988: 85-89; Shaw 2003: 210

⁸ Barnard and Spence 1996: 292

⁹ Wurst 1999

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 7

¹¹ Holmberg 1979: 72

us a lot about who was dedicating them and why¹². By analysing the changing trends in votives over the period we can get a clearer picture of the way individuals were using material culture to establish identity for themselves at the sanctuary.

The earliest votives display connections with metalworking at Nichoria in Messenia. Tripods, jewels and figurines with strong similarities have been found at both sites.¹³ Three horse figurine fragments found at Nichoria are paralleled at both Olympia and Artemis Orthia in Lakonia, where there is other evidence for high status metal working including gold wire and casting debris. The combination of manufacturing capabilities and parallels in material culture suggests that at least some of the offerings at Olympia originated in Nichoria. It is also possible that metalworkers travelled to Olympia to produce and dedicate objects. A possible suggestion is that the material changed hands through trade and was dedicated by someone different to who manufactured it. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of the archaeological record it is difficult to distinguish between down-the-line trading and craftsmen mobility in this scenario.

From the early period we have evidence for connection with metalworkers in Arkadia¹⁴. Archaeological evidence from Arkadia comes primarily from sanctuaries¹⁵ and Arkadian sites show evidence of stylistic differences from the very beginning of activity. Activity at the sanctuary of Athena Alea at Tegea dates back into the Protogeometric period and the

¹² Morgan 1993: 18.

¹³ McDonald et al. 1975: 95; 1983: 66, 70-90; Morgan 1990: 65

¹⁴ Parker 2006: 11

¹⁵ Ibid.

votives show close similarities with Olympia.¹⁶ Due to the location of Tegea as one of Arkadia's easternmost sites there is a possibility that it may have been a movement of goods, not people. Tegean objects could have been exchanged between Arkadian chiefdoms before ending up as dedications at Olympia. A problem with this theory is that one of the closest Arkadian settlements to Elis, Bassai, has little material apparent at Olympia even from the 8th C. BC onwards, whilst there was a large increase in material from other Arkadian sites.¹⁷ Based on this evidence Morgan argues that it is likely that craftsmen from Tegea were travelling to Olympia and producing the material in situ.¹⁸

Significance of the votives

Whilst the range of votives found at Olympia in the early period is important for displaying early connectivity around the Peloponnese, it is also important to consider the intentions behind the dedications. The earliest votives are figurines, most prominent of which are bulls, horses, and humans driving chariots.¹⁹ During the proto to middle geometric period, it would have taken an above average amount of wealth to be able to travel to a remote sanctuary such as Olympia to make a dedication, no matter what the size. It is likely that the votives from this period had little religious connotations but instead represent a wealthy individual making visible their wealth from land

¹⁶ Morgan 1990: 91; Voyatzis 2004: 191,

¹⁷ Yalouris 1979: 91,

¹⁸ Morgan 1990: 81

¹⁹ Heilmeyer 1972: 38-40

ownership and livestock in a religious setting, distinguishing their identity in relation to the sanctuary community.²⁰

During the late Geometric period the number of offerings at Olympia increased with the appearance of Lakonian and Corinthian material.²¹ A major development is the appearance of tripods: the earliest had short, thick legs and were rivetted to a hammered bronze bowl.²² These developed in the 8th C. BC to have large bronze cauldrons placed on the tripods and are found nearly exclusively in sanctuaries. Morgan has provided a comprehensive argument for why most tripods dedicated at Olympia prior to 700 BC were manufactured elsewhere and brought to the sanctuary for dedication.²³ Both the dedication and manufacturing of tripods were conspicuous activities. By commissioning the production of a costly item in their local area, the individual would be demonstrating their disposable wealth to the populace thus establishing a higher level of social prestige. Dedicating the item outside of their local sphere of influence, at site such as Olympia, reinforced their aristocratic identity and wealth in more than one context²⁴. Bronze was a rare material to come by in the 10th-8th C. BC due to the disruption of trade routes for tin after the 12th C. BC collapse.²⁵ This meant that to commission a bronze cauldron of the scale of some found at Olympia would have required

²⁰ Kindt 2012: 127

²¹ Morgan 1990; Heilmeyer 1979: 21

²² Rolley 1986: 61

²³ Morgan 1990: 37

²⁴ Neer 2007: 229

²⁵ Cline 2013: 173

immense wealth and long-range social contacts to source the materials necessary for production.

Why dedicate at Olympia?

The reason for dedicating at local sanctuaries such as Perachora at Corinth are clear as the actions are placed in a local context, establishing local group identity and status. The reasons for dedicating at a remote sanctuary such as Olympia are more complex. As mentioned above the earliest votives are a representation of the aristocratic man's land-based wealth, but there are a multitude of other reasons for dedicating at Olympia.

The earliest votives came from Messenian and Arkadian contexts, in the early Iron Age this would have been 'non-local'. Antonaccio suggests that Olympia was acting as a meeting place for the petty chiefs of the western Peloponnese.²⁶ They were in non-violent competition with each other through the quality and range of dedications to establish social prestige both in relation to each other and to the populace, increasing their elite identity in the community. Olympia could simultaneously act as a neutral space where the chiefs could carry out common religious rituals, discuss matters of trade, and exchange ideas.²⁷ With the introduction of Lakonian and Corinthian offerings, we can assume that chiefs and aristocrats from these areas were also partaking in meetings at Olympia, meaning communities across the whole Peloponnese were represented.

²⁶ Antonaccio 2006: 282

²⁷ Terrento 2011.

Since the 9th C. BC Italian metalwork was present at Olympia but by the 7th C. BC it had increased drastically²⁸ with a range of arms and armour including broken spearheads, helmets, and greaves.²⁹ Some scholars suggest that this is related to the increased Greek mobility in this period and battles being fought between Greeks and Etruscans in southern Italy, with weapons taken as prizes being dedicated at the sanctuary.³⁰ More recently it is understood that this process may not be quite so clear cut, and the Italic weapons at Olympia may have been dedications by Italic participants.³¹ By dedicating at Olympia, the Italic elites are displaying their wealth to a new audience, the Greeks.³² Etruscan horse bits of the Vetulonian type have been found, these often appear in high status Italic contexts and would have been recognised as a dedication of high prestige by the Greek participants at the sanctuary as horses were often equated with wealth.³³

During the 8th C. BC there is a movement of arms and armour from graves to sanctuaries across Greece.³⁴ This is evidence of a shift from family and communal prestige as displayed through burial, to a display of individual identity being made in life as opposed to in death. The lack of ceramics until the 8th C. BC also suggests an emphasis on individual rather than communal activity.³⁵ The first ceramics to appear are Elean style and produced locally, they are essential sanctuary equipment and show parallels with the Samian

²⁸ Herrmann 1984: 282

²⁹ Antonnaccio 2006: 278

³⁰ Graham 1971: 38

³¹ Frielinghaus 2013: 219

³² Antonnaccio 2006: 278.

³³ Naso 2000: 200

³⁴ Whitley 1991: 41; Snodgrass 1972: 279

³⁵ Barrow et al. 2000

Heraion and Isthmia.³⁶ Elean craftsmen could have been using Olympia as a commercial site, providing sets required by visitors to the sanctuary for a cost. This would have been convenient for travellers who could not bring/afford a personal set, whilst generating income for local Elean craftsmen.

Mary Helms argued that in pre-industrial societies, status is connected to a knowledge of culture outside of one's own local area, with an emphasis placed on cosmology.³⁷ This may be a key factor behind individual dedications at Olympia. At the start of the period, 'non-local' can be considered anything outside of the Elis region such as Arkadia, Messenia and the Argolid. Elites are displaying their wealth not just through the dedications but also through making the journey to Olympia, which would differentiate them from the rest of the community who may not have this luxury.

Helms' theory provides an explanation for Etruscan dedications at Olympia in the early period. By showing connections with a sanctuary on the Greek mainland, this would have acted to set apart the elites from the community. It would have connected the elites with the ritual tradition of Greece, whilst also demonstrating they have the wealth and power to make dedications far removed from their local context. Another possibility for Etruscan material at Olympia is that there were no south Italic sanctuaries in this period³⁸. This means that those who wished to partake in centralised cosmological activities had to go elsewhere to do so – a privilege afforded only to the wealthy.

³⁶ Kron 1984: 294; Morgan 1993: 19; Osborne 1998: 43.

³⁷ Helms 1988: 205; 1998

³⁸ Antonaccio 2013: 245

The Olympic Games

It is impossible to study Olympia without acknowledging the role of the games. The traditional starting date for the Olympics is 776 BC based on the list compiled by Hippias of Elis,³⁹ although this date is disputable based on archaeological evidence.⁴⁰

The games may have been instituted as a way of creating both competition and unity simultaneously. A competitive sporting contest would have allowed elites at Olympia to display their superiority in a non-violent manner, whilst showing traits thought to be characteristic of the ideal Greek man.⁴¹ The only event recorded at the first 13 games was the *stade* (192m foot race). Xenophanes wrote that ‘Victory by speed of foot is honoured above all’.⁴² This shows the extent to which winning at the Olympics would contribute to personal prestige and social power, enhancing or establishing an elite identity. Victors would gain the opportunity to construct a statue of themselves at Olympia, have victory odes wrote about them, and have their name added to a list of past victors.⁴³ This would contribute to the individual social prestige of the victor throughout Greece.⁴⁴ Those who cheated in the games also erected statues (*Zanes*), as a punishment for their indiscretion. This would have publicly humiliated the individual and acted as a deterrent to others.

³⁹ Christesen 2005: 319

⁴⁰ Instone 2007; Mb’ller 2004: 169

⁴¹ Burger 2008: 323

⁴² Diels 1922: 129

⁴³ Smith 2007: 83

⁴⁴ Gribble 2012: 45; Isoc. 16.34; Thuc. 6.16.3.

A display of unity between states was the implementation of an Olympic truce. This was a truce between all Greek states that stated during the period of the festival of Olympia that all hostilities ceased and pilgrims to the sanctuary were allowed safe passage.⁴⁵

Some scholars propose that the games would have created more division than unity.⁴⁶ They suggest that the games at both Olympia and Delphi created violent competition, and that erecting monuments commemorating the victory of one city over another was a public humiliation for the defeated state.⁴⁷

Shift towards States

State activity is hard to witness at Olympia in the early period as a state is unlikely to leave offerings in the form of votive figurines etc. preferring instead to construct monumental architecture as a display of power and wealth.⁴⁸ Some of the earliest evidenced state constructions are the treasuries from the 6th C. BC onwards. A number of these were dedicated by western colonies.⁴⁹ Colonies may be some of the earliest state dedicators at Olympia as they may have to reinforce their socio-political identity as separate from their mother city.⁵⁰ A dedication at a sanctuary such as Olympia on the Greek mainland would emphasise a colony's socio-political independence.

⁴⁵ Mestre 2009: 27

⁴⁶ Scott 2010: 257

⁴⁷ Kindt 2012: 124

⁴⁸ Morgan 2002: 14

⁴⁹ Holne 1972

⁵⁰ Antonaccio 2006: 272.

State dedications appear at Olympia later than in state sanctuaries. During the early Archaic period state identities were fragile, with much internal strife between aristocratic families.⁵¹ A priority for dedications was to establish the 'spatial, social and political definition of the state'.⁵²

From the middle Archaic period onwards, the number of state dedications at Olympia increased greatly, but they did not fully replace individual dedications. The states may have intervened in the sanctuary as a way of containing and marginalising areas of traditional individual prestige, this would have allowed them to contain areas of elite action which may have been potentially threatening to the newly formalised states.

The construction of the Temple of Zeus (470-457 BC) is testament to the competition between states at Olympia. It was built by the state of Elis with spoils gained after the conquest of long-term rivals Pisa (Paus. 5.10.2), this would have been an important event for establishing the Elean's management of the sanctuary. It would have been a monumental display to their victory and seen by all visitors to the sanctuary based on its prominent location⁵³. The temple was not just used by the Elean's to display dominance, the Spartans placed a shield in the centre of the temple's apex to commemorate their victory over the Athenians at Tanagra in 457 BC (Paus 5.10.4). This was a conspicuous display of power by Sparta over one of their most significant rivals, in a period of high tensions, at one of the most significant sanctuaries in the Greek world. It was a bold political statement. The temple of Zeus

⁵¹ Mitchell & Rhodes 2003: 18

⁵² Morgan 1990: 16

serves to support the thesis that the sanctuary of Olympia created disunity and propagated competition at an almost violent level.⁵⁴

The role of individuals did not diminish with increased state activity. If a competitor won at the Olympic Games, they would be rewarded by their home state. The rewards would vary state to state, Spartan victors would get to fight alongside their king whilst Athenians would be given 500 drachmas and free meals provided by the state for life.⁵⁵ This shows the states were seeking to encourage and reward their competitors as victory at the games would bring glory to the state. This demonstrates that there was always an emphasis on the individual at Olympia, even when the states were involved.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the changing nature of individual and state identities from the evidence for participation at Olympia. It initially served a functional purpose as a place for chiefs and kinship groups of the Peloponnese discussing alliances, trade and marriage⁵⁶ with the earliest votive offerings related to the land-based wealth of the participants at the site.⁵⁷ As time progressed participants came from a wider geographical area, with the inclusion of Lakonian, Corinthian and Etruscan material through the 9th and 8th C. BC.⁵⁸ Through the creation and dedication of elaborate objects, the elites were displaying wealth both at home and at the sanctuary, establishing

⁵⁴ Scott 2010: 257; Kindt 2012: 124

⁵⁵ Crowther 1996: 34

⁵⁶ Antonaccio 2006: 282

⁵⁷ Kindt 2012: 127

⁵⁸ Morgan 1990: 66, 67

greater social status. Parallels with other sanctuaries and Etruscan tombs⁵⁹ implies that similar ideas were held in multiple locations about what constitutes a high-status dedication within communities.

The beginning of state involvement at Olympia brought about a change in the nature of participation at the sanctuary. The emphasis shifted towards the athletic competition, with both individuals and states investing heavily. Victory at the games offered the individual the ability to increase their social prestige both in their local state and around the Greek world,⁶⁰ this is similar to the status increase gained through dedications in the earlier period. The games gave state rulers the ability to influence the actions of other aristocratic families by encouraging participation. This could potentially deflect any challenges to the rulers as there was a space for non-violent competition in which to gain and demonstrate power and prestige. The Olympic Games most likely fostered a sense of communal state identity amongst the participating elite that did not exist beforehand, serving to reinforce the geographical boundaries of early states through uniting land-owning aristocrats.

Potential future work could focus on how the material at Olympia parallels with material from other sanctuaries in the Greek world such as the Samian Heraion. Morgan and Scott have compared and contrasted Olympia with Delphi, another significant Pan-Hellenic sanctuary,⁶¹ but through comparing with more sites we can establish a more holistic view of developing identity

⁵⁹ *Ibid*; Naso 2000: 200

⁶⁰ Burger 2008: 323

⁶¹ Morgan 1990; Scott 2010

across the Greek world within the context of religious spaces. More work needs to be done to establish how individuals and states viewed themselves in relation to the cosmos, and how this influenced dedicatory practices and notions of identity.

A final aspect for future work is to identify the activities of non-elites at Olympia⁶². The lower classes most likely played a role in the manufacturing of votives, and took part in the religious festival, as well as being spectators for the games. It is important to consider all actors in Greek society if we are to establish as comprehensive an understanding as possible.

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