

Whence 776? The Origin of the Date for the First Olympiad

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This essay explores the origin of the date of 776 BC for the first Olympiad. That date was established by Hippias of Elis c.400 BC when he compiled the first complete list of Olympic victors. Contrary to what one might expect, Hippias did not arrive at the date of 776 on the basis of written records pertaining to the Olympics or to Olympic victors. Instead, he calculated the date of the first Olympiad by associating that Olympiad with a famous Spartan lawgiver named Lycurgus, who was a member of one of the Spartan royal families and who was believed to have helped organize the Olympic Games. Hippias used a list of Spartan kings to determine the number of generations between his own time and that of Lycurgus. He then assigned a fixed number of years to each generation and ended up with a date for Lycurgus and hence the first Olympiad. The inaccuracies inherent in this approach mean that the date of 776 for the first Olympiad is at best an approximation. The excavators at Olympia have suggested a date closer to 700.

Introduction

776 BC, ostensibly the year in which the Olympic Games were held for the first time, may be the single most well-known date among sport historians of all kinds, regardless of the period and place in which they specialize. [1] Most sport historians, however, even those sport historians specializing in ancient Greece, would be hard pressed to provide a clear explanation of how we know that the first Olympics were held in 776. That date ultimately goes back to a list of Olympic victors that was compiled by Hippias of Elis in the late fifth century BC. But how did Hippias reach the conclusion that athletic contests were first held at Olympia in 776? Despite its obvious significance, there is very little scholarship that directly addresses this question, and virtually all of that scholarship is now at least a century old and thoroughly obsolete.

The purpose of this study is to argue that the date of 776 was not, as one might expect, taken from written records kept at Olympia, but was calculated by Hippias on

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the basis of a list of the kings of Sparta. Hippias used that list to reckon the number of generations between his own time and what he identified as the first Olympiad, which he believed was organized by a member of the Spartan royal family named Lycurgus. He assigned a fixed number of years to each generation and arrived at a date for Lycurgus and hence for the first Olympics. This means that the date of 776 rests on very shaky foundations. Generational reckoning is notoriously inaccurate, the participation of Lycurgus in the founding of the Olympics is uncertain, and widely variant dates for Lycurgus – and for the first Olympiad – circulated in the ancient world. The archaeological evidence from Olympia can be used to support a range of dates for the first athletic contests held there; the excavators at the site have proposed a date of sometime around 700. There is no reason, therefore, to take the date of 776 as anything more than a rough approximation.

The discussion that follows is broken down into six sections. The first section provides background information on Hippias and the Olympic victor list. The second section treats the existence of written records at Olympia. It finds that written records were not kept at Olympia until the sixth century at the earliest and that, as a result, Hippias could not have dated the first Olympics on that basis. This is followed by a discussion of the sources Hippias used in compiling his list of Olympic victors. Broadly speaking, those sources consisted of oral traditions for the Olympiads held before c.600 and written records, primarily in the form of lists of victors in individual Olympiads and victor monuments, for the Olympiads held after c.600. In the fourth section detailed consideration is given to the question of precisely how Hippias calculated the date of 776. The reliability of the date of 776 is the subject of the fifth section. A brief conclusion makes up the sixth and final section of the essay.

This study draws directly on my recent book on Olympic victor lists. [2] That book was written primarily with classicists in mind. My goal here is to make some significant new findings about Olympic victor lists more readily accessible to sport historians whose area of research lies outside the ancient world. I have to that end supplied more background information than I did in the book and omitted a fair amount of esoteric material likely to be of interest only to classicists. For readers who wish to pursue the evidence in greater depth, I have included the requisite citations both to the original sources and to the pertinent scholarship.

Background

The basic structuring principles of ancient and modern systems of reckoning time diverge sharply. Most time-reckoning systems in use in the modern world identify individual years by counting from a fixed date and assigning each year a number. The most obvious example is the system used in this essay, which numbers years from the birth of Jesus. The standard practice in ancient Greece was quite different. Greeks lived scattered around much of the Mediterranean basin and were settled in literally hundreds of politically autonomous communities. Each community had its own calendar and system for reckoning time. For example, Athenian years began and

ended in the middle of the summer, while Spartan years began and ended in the autumn. One trait that was shared by virtually all Greek time-reckoning systems was the habit of identifying individual years by associating each one with the name of an individual, typically a magistrate, who thus served as an eponym. For example, each year in Athens was named after an archon, the chief magistrate of the Athenian state (who held office for one year). We would say that the first phase of the Peloponnesian War began in 431 and ended in 421, but an Athenian would say that it began in the year that Pythodoros was archon and ended in the year that Aristion was archon. [3] In order to calculate the interval between the present and an event in the past, it was necessary to have at hand a complete list of eponyms and to count the number of names between the current eponym and the eponym in the year in which the event in question took place. One can see why systems in which years were numbered eventually became standard.

The date for the first Olympiad was closely tied to the list of Olympic victors, which was compiled for the first time at the end of the fifth century by Hippias of Elis. Hippias was an itinerant scholar and a person of some importance in his home town. His work with the Olympic victor list is most immediately obvious from the following passage written by Plutarch in the second century AD:

It is difficult to make precise statements about chronology, and especially chronology based on the names of Olympic victors. They say that Hippias of Elis produced the list of Olympic victors at a late date, starting with nothing authoritative that would encourage trust in the result. [4]

The fact that Hippias was from Elis is significant. The Olympic Games were held at a religious sanctuary called Olympia, in the north-west corner of the Peloponnese (see Figure 1). Olympia was administered by the Eleans, who also oversaw the Olympic Games and participated in those contests, alongside athletes from all over the Greek world. As a prominent Elean, Hippias frequented Olympia and was familiar with the inner workings of the Olympic Games. [5]

After the publication of Hippias' list Olympiads rapidly became the basis of a time-reckoning system that was widely employed by ancient Greek writers. Hippias used the approach standard among Greeks and identified each Olympiad by the name of a particular person. He used the victor in the *stadion* as the eponym for each Olympiad. The *stadion* was a short foot race and the signature event of the ancient Olympics. Ancient Greeks believed that the first 13 Olympiads consisted solely of the *stadion* race. [6] The eponym for the first Olympiad was a *stadion* victor named Koroibos of Elis. Aristotle, working about 75 years after Hippias, introduced an important innovation by numbering the Olympiads. The Olympiad in which Koroibos won the *stadion* became Olympiad 1 and all subsequent Olympiads were numbered on that basis. [7] After Aristotle, individual Olympiads were identified by both number and the name of the *stadion* victor. For example, the Greek writer Diodorus Siculus starts his account of the events in the year we would call 348 BC by describing it as the year in which 'Theophilos held the archonship in Athens ... and the 108th Olympiad was

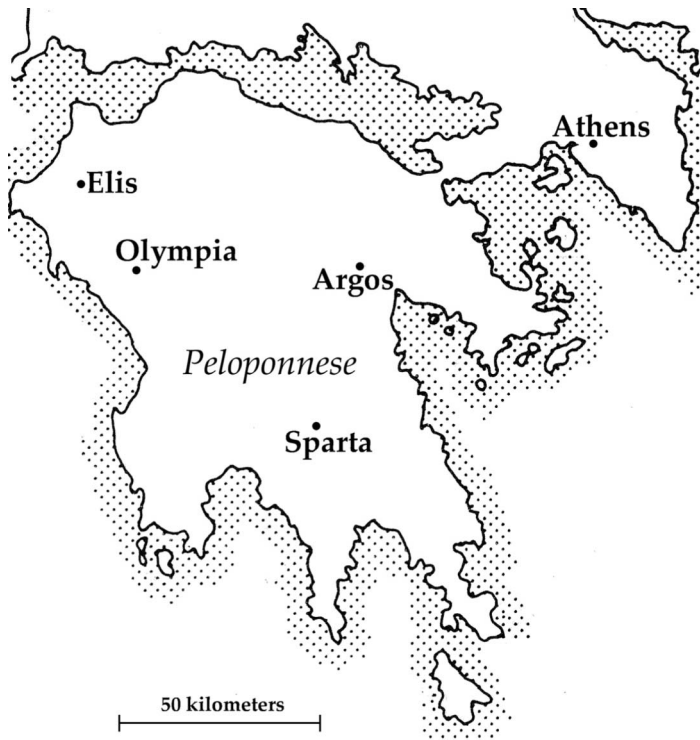


Figure 1 Map of Greece.
 Source: Author.

held, in which Polykles of Cyrene won the *stadion*'. [8] The simplicity of identifying years by numbered Olympiads and the familiarity of virtually all Greeks with the Olympics made this system of reckoning time very popular.

A complete list of Olympic *stadion* victors by definition supplied a precise date for the first Olympiad for the simple reason that the Olympiad was held every four years. For instance, someone who was present at the 51st Olympics could easily figure out that the first Olympic Games took place 200 years earlier. We can state with some certainty that Hippias' list placed the first Olympiad in the year we would identify as 776. Hippias' Olympic victor list in its original form does not survive, but it was regularly copied and updated throughout antiquity. A complete list of *stadion* victors in Olympiads 1–249 is preserved in the work of Eusebius, a Catholic bishop who composed a massive chronological study in the first quarter of the fourth century AD. We can synchronize some Olympiads with our own calendar because many ancient authors associate independently datable events with specific Olympiads. Eusebius, for example, synchronizes the 15th year of the reign of the Roman emperor Tiberius with the fourth year of the 201st Olympiad (*PE* 10.9.2–3), and Diodorus Siculus records a solar eclipse in the third year of the 117th Olympiad (20.5.5). [9]

These and similar passages indicate that Olympiad 1 was linked to the year corresponding to 776.

Written Records of Olympic Victors

The cumulative result of the somewhat complex collection of evidence reviewed above is deceptively straightforward. It invites the conclusion that the date for the first Olympiad, which was taken directly from the list of the names of Olympic victors compiled by Hippias, must be accurate.

However, this conclusion is potentially quite problematic because the reliability of Hippias' list of Olympic victors is open to question. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries scholars debated this issue vigorously, and over the course of time two distinct points of view emerged. One view was that Hippias drew on archival records that provided him with a complete and accurate listing of Olympic victors and that the date of 776 was established by counting the total number of *stadion* victors and hence the number of years that had elapsed since the first Olympiad. This would mean that Hippias' date for the first Olympics is unimpeachable. The other view was that Hippias had no such records at his disposal, and instead drew upon a diverse and inescapably incomplete and imperfect array of sources such as lists of victors in individual Olympiads, inscriptions on victor statues, and oral traditions. This would mean that Hippias' date for the first Olympiad could easily be incorrect. No consensus was ever reached, but the staunch defence of the accuracy of the Olympic victor list written by August Brinkmann in 1915 found fairly wide acceptance. [10] Scholarly debate on the accuracy of the Olympic victor list died down markedly after the early twentieth century, and there is a tendency in more recent scholarship to assume that the Olympic victor list is a reliable source of chronological information.

This assumption is less secure than it might appear because the seemingly firm foundations of the arguments brought forward by Brinkmann and other scholars have gradually eroded over the course of time. In the near century since the publication of Brinkmann's article on the Olympic victor list, significant progress has been made in our understanding of ancient Greek historiography. In part that progress has come as the result of ongoing scholarly inquiry into Greek historical practice, and in part it has come as the result of excavations at sites such as Olympia that have produced masses of important objects and inscriptions. One of the more significant advances relevant to the questions under consideration here has been the realization that Greeks happily and regularly fabricated 'historical documents' of various kinds. Those 'documents' were formerly taken by many earlier scholars as genuine records. The significantly greater collection of material, especially inscriptions, that is now available and the recognition that people in a vast range of times and places have blithely invented pasts for themselves have made it much easier to recognize fabricated documents. [11]

Nonetheless, until very recently no fundamental reassessment of Hippias' work on Olympic victors was undertaken. The precise reasons for this oversight are not entirely clear. One factor of some importance was the scattering of the early scholarship on Hippias' Olympic victor list in a large number of now obscure German publications. Another was the very gradual evolution in our understanding of Greek historical sources, which made the emergent problems with earlier scholarship on Olympic victor lists less immediately evident.

The re-evaluation of older ideas about the Olympic victor list in light of new knowledge reveals major difficulties. It now appears nearly certain that Hippias did not have access to a complete set of written records that ran back to 776. He indeed had access to reasonably good written sources, but those sources began in the sixth century. He derived the names of earlier victors primarily from oral traditions, which were notoriously incomplete and inaccurate. Moreover, Hippias seems to have been aware of the problems with his sources and to have chosen not to establish the date for the first Olympiad by counting up the number of *stadion* victors (and hence the number of Olympiads) and allotting four years to each Olympiad. Instead, he dated the first Olympiad by associating it with Lycurgus and using generational reckoning. This made it possible for him to figure out how many *stadion* victors' names he needed to locate and to supplement his incomplete collection of names accordingly. That in turn leads to the conclusion that the date of 776 for the first Olympics is unlikely to be precisely accurate.

The rest of this section of the study is broken down into two parts. It begins with a concise review of the four basic points that have in the past been brought forward to support the idea that Hippias had access to written records that contained a complete listing of Olympic victors. That review will conclusively show that none of those four points any longer stand up to scrutiny. This is followed by a brief discussion of the chronologies found in ancient Greek authors for periods in the eighth and seventh centuries when Elis lost control of Olympia to its neighbour Pisa. It will become apparent that ancient Greeks could not agree precisely when the Pisatans rather than the Eleans controlled Olympia. This is significant because the fact that the Greeks were unable to date major events at Olympia strongly indicates that there was no substantial collection of written records pertaining to the Olympics from the eighth and seventh centuries.

The belief that there were at Olympia records listing the names of all Olympic victors was founded on four bases: the assumption that Greek communities maintained historical chronicles from an early date; the transmission in ancient Greek literary sources of lists of eponyms that began well before the eighth century; a discus mentioned by Aristotle on which the Olympic truce was inscribed; and a series of passages in the second-century AD author Pausanias that seemed to show that a catalogue of Olympic victors existed before Hippias. Let us briefly examine each of these points. [12]

Up through the early twentieth century AD ancient historians generally believed that magistrates and members of powerful families in Greek communities began

maintaining chronicles of local events starting in the eighth century BC. It was, therefore, reasonable to assume that Elean officials kept a running account of the happenings in Elis as early as 776, an account which included the names of Olympic victors. However, the magisterial studies carried out by Felix Jacoby and others have conclusively shown that Greeks did not begin writing local histories until the second half of the fifth century. [13] We can, therefore, be quite certain that Elean officials were not writing a chronicle of any sort in the eighth century.

The second basis for the belief in the production of written records at eighth-century Olympia was the mention in Greek sources of lists of eponyms that began well before the eighth century. For example, we know from Eusebius that the list of Athenian archons ran back to the year we would identify as 1068 BC. [14] An eponym list beginning in 1068 BC made a list of Olympic victors maintained starting in 776 seem entirely plausible. It is now clear, however, that the earlier parts of such eponym lists were fabricated from the fifth century onwards, based in large measure on pre-existing mythological stories. It can come as a bit of a shock to the sensibility of a modern historian that a community could use a list of names of that sort as the basis of their local time-reckoning system. One must keep in mind, however, that in an unnumbered eponym list, the eponym is as much a symbol for a year as a factual datum. Modern scholars are primarily interested in eponyms for prosopographical and historical purposes, but to ancient Greeks the value in an eponym list lay primarily in its use as a time-reckoning instrument. As a result, ancient Greeks were less interested than modern scholars in the question of whether a particular person actually held office or won a victory in the year indicated in an eponym list. Eponyms could be and frequently were nothing more than a way of designating a year or an Olympiad.

There continues to be considerable debate among modern-day historians as to when Greeks began keeping running records of eponyms. The consensus is that the practice did not begin until the seventh century at the earliest. Some scholars are of the opinion that such records were not kept until the fifth century. Moreover, it is clear that communities that kept records of eponyms did so because those names were the basis of the local system of telling time. However, the Eleans did not use the names of Olympic victors as the basis of their calendar, so there was no obvious reason why they would have bothered to keep scrupulous records of the names of those victors. [15]

One might also add that Greeks did not show a particularly early interest in having at their disposal complete listings of victors at their important athletic competitions. There were four famous sets of contests in ancient Greece: the Olympic, Pythian, Isthmian and Nemean Games. (The Greeks called this group of four games the *periodos* or circuit; a noteworthy feat was to win the same event at all four games, the ancient equivalent of the Grand Slam in tennis.) We have already seen that the first complete listing of Olympic victors was compiled by Hippias around 400. Aristotle and Callisthenes produced the equivalent list of victors at the Pythian Games around

330. Complete lists of victors in the Isthmian and Nemean Games were never assembled at all. [16]

A final consideration that requires discussion is that if records of Olympic victors from the eighth century existed for Hippias to consult almost four centuries later, those records would have to have been inscribed on a durable material such as stone or bronze, not written on a perishable material such as papyrus. However, early Greek inscriptions focus on private concerns, such as ownership or artistic creation, not on public events such as the Olympics. The earliest extant public documents (decrees and treaties) date to sometime around 650. [17] Moreover, the Eleans show no signs of having been pioneers in regard to the practice of inscribing public records. The earliest known Elean inscriptions date to sometime around 550, considerably later than many other places in Greece. [18] There is, therefore, no reason to think that Elean magistrates were carving the names of Olympic victors onto stone or bronze tablets in the eighth century. More broadly speaking, the eponym lists from certain Greek communities that began well before the eighth century were in large part fabrications and provide no firm basis for the idea that running records of Olympic victors were kept from 776 onwards.

The preceding discussion helps us with the third reason why scholars formerly believed that Hippias had access to a complete set of written records of Olympic victors: the existence at Olympia of a discus with the Olympic truce inscribed on it. Aristotle evidently saw this discus when he visited Olympia in the second half of the fourth century, and Pausanias, a traveller who visited Olympia in the second century AD, saw the same discus or at least a copy of it. [19] The inscription on the discus seems to have included the name of Lycurgus. That is significant because Aristotle probably believed that Lycurgus was one of the persons who organized the first Olympic Games in 776. Scholars have in the past interpreted this discus, which is no longer in existence, as a genuine artefact from the eighth century and proof that Elean officials were at that point in time keeping written records. The problem, of course, is that the Eleans did not begin cutting inscriptions of that sort until around 550, so it is extremely improbable that the discus that Aristotle saw was inscribed in 776. [20]

The final basis for the belief in the existence of written records of Olympic victors was a reference in Pausanias' description of Olympia to an inscribed list of Olympic victors. [21] Pausanias saw this inscription on the walls of the gymnasium at Olympia. Before Olympia was excavated (which happened at the very end of the nineteenth century AD), it was reasonable to believe that the inscription could have been begun in the eighth century. As it turns out, the gymnasium at Olympia was constructed in two phases – the first phase was in the second half of the fourth century. [22]

All the underpinnings of the belief that there were at Olympia complete, written records of the names of Olympic victors have thus evaporated. There is, moreover, strong positive evidence that no early records were kept at Olympia, in the form of inconsistencies in the dating of the struggle between Elis and Pisa to control Olympia. Olympia was located in an area called Pisa that was about 25 miles from the city of Elis. The Eleans seized control of Olympia in a final and definitive way some time in

the first half of the sixth century. Prior to that time, the Pisatans and Eleans seem to have fought repeatedly over which group would run Olympia. There are four extant ancient accounts of the conflicts between the Eleans and Pisatans. These accounts present three divergent and irreconcilable chronologies. Each of these chronologies is based on a synchronization between the outbreak of what modern-day scholars call the First and Second Messenian Wars (which involved the Eleans and their neighbours the Messenians, Spartans and Argives) on one hand and temporary seizures of Olympia by Argos or the Pisatans on the other. The existence of three variant chronologies based on the Messenian Wars shows that the Eleans did not have accurate records about the early history of Olympia. Those records would perforce have supported a single, clear chronology for when the Pisatans and Argives ran the Olympic Games and would have made it unnecessary to date events at Olympia by reference to the Messenian Wars. This in turn indicates that the Eleans did not keep a running victor list from the eighth century onwards. [23]

We are now in a position to state with a high degree of certainty that records of Olympic victors were not kept starting in 776. This conclusion has important ramifications because it means that Hippias did not simply collect and publish a pre-existing collection of names. He had to compile the list of Olympic victors virtually from scratch. That immediately raises two, related questions: what sources did Hippias use to generate his list of Olympic victors and how did he date the first Olympiad to 776?

Hippias' Sources

Hippias did not simply fabricate an Olympic victor list. He had sources, both written and oral. The written sources consisted of lists of victors at specific Olympiads, inscriptions on dedications by or monuments in honour of Olympic victors, and poems written to celebrate athletic victories. However, as we will see, those written sources were first produced in the sixth century, some 200 years after the notional date of the first Olympics. He relied on problematic oral sources for earlier periods. [24]

It was a common practice for the officials who ran a particular set of games in a particular year to produce an inscribed record of their activity, a record that frequently included the names of victors. The most important extant inscription of this type is *IvO* 17, one of the two known victor lists from Olympia itself. [25] It was cut onto a thin bronze plaque sometime around 400. It originally listed all the victors in a particular Olympiad; it has unfortunately come down to us in very fragmentary condition.

The legible part of the inscription reads as follows:

Ἐνίκασαν ἐπὶ [τῶν περι ----]-
 -να δαμιοργον[τῶν ----]
 μᾶδὲν πότεχε[ν? ----το----]-
 -κοστ(ο) Ὀλυμπία[σιν ἀγῶνος?]
 Λαμπυριῶν Ἄθ[αναίως?]
 ...ξς Α[----] [26]



Figure 2 *IvO 17*. Olympia Museum.

Source: (photo by author).

This translates as

The (following) won when [names missing] were *damiorgoi* (magistrates of Elis) with [name missing] as chief magistrate ... in no way give heed (?) ... during the [number missing] Olympiad: Lampyrion of Athens [the rest of the list is missing].

It is impossible to say when magistrates at Olympia started inscribing lists of victors at individual Olympiads, but the earliest known such lists anywhere in Greece do not predate 500. Moreover, the lists at Olympia were inscribed one at a time and displayed outdoors, [27] so Hippias probably had a distinctly incomplete set of victor lists with which to work.

Hippias very likely also made use of objects dedicated by successful athletes as well as monuments and poems that honoured Olympic victors. Olympia was a religious sanctuary sacred to Zeus, and winning athletes frequently made thank-offerings on which they inscribed their names and information about their victories. In addition, victors or their home towns dedicated monuments of various kinds, most typically in the form of statues, to celebrate their successes. Those monuments usually included an inscription that listed the athlete's achievements. Another form of victor monument, poems written to celebrate athletic victories (*epinikia*), would have been useful. Hippias probably drew on all these sources, but here again it is important to emphasize the temporal element: the earliest known athletic victor inscriptions date to the first half of the sixth century, the earliest *epinikia* to the middle of the sixth century. [28]

As is now clear, even if Hippias had made Herculean efforts to collect all the extant, relevant written sources, he still would have had virtually no names of Olympic victors from the period before the sixth century. Yet he produced a victor list that began in 776. In generating the early parts of his list, Hippias must have relied heavily on oral traditions.

Olympic victories were significant achievements, and memories of such victories were maintained in the oral traditions of successful competitors' families. Hippias travelled extensively and had every opportunity to encounter members of the sort of prominent, long-established families that would have produced Olympic victors and preserved memories of their ancestors' triumphs.

Hippias no doubt gathered a significant amount of valuable information about Olympic victors from oral traditions, but he must also have encountered at least three significant difficulties in this part of his researches. First, families could in some instances place their ancestors roughly in time by counting generations, but oral traditions were notably lacking in chronological precision. Second, families had a tendency to exaggerate the prowess of their forebears. A particularly well-documented case is known from the Pythian Games at Delphi in which a victor's family claimed their ancestor had won five times, whereas written records showed only three victories. [29] Third, oral traditions were by definition lacunose and subject to error. Modern studies have shown that oral traditions rarely preserve accurate memories of past events for more than three generations. Close to 400 years, something in the order of 13 or 14 generations, separated Hippias from the earliest figures that appeared in his victor list. The passage of time inevitably effaced memories of some Olympic victors, particularly those from earlier periods. In addition, Hippias could not have spoken with every family in every Greek community that remembered an ancestor who had won at Olympia. [30]

In sum, the information that Hippias derived from oral traditions could not be easily assembled into a neat, chronologically ordered listing of victors. He had to work around major gaps and deal with potential distortions. Even in cases where he acquired accurate information, he still had to find a way to start with a statement such as 'my great, great-grandfather Aristonikos won an Olympic victory in boxing' and then attach Aristonikos to a specific Olympiad. Hippias' reliance on oral traditions for Olympic victors before the sixth century and the inherent problems with those traditions mean that the reliability of the early parts of the Olympic victor list is highly questionable.

The Date of 776 for the First Olympics

The dubious reliability of the early parts of the Olympic victor list raises a further question, that is, whether Hippias' date of 776 for the first Olympiad is accurate. If Hippias could not locate the names of many Olympic victors from earlier periods or find firm dates for those victors about which he did know, it would have been very difficult for him to establish the precise number of Olympiads that had been held before the sixth century. That, in turn, would have made it nearly impossible to

determine when the first Olympiad had been held by counting the number of stadion victors.

Hippias must have been aware of this problem, and he seems to have adopted a solution that was not uncommon among ancient Greek scholars who were interested in dating specific events for which written records were not available: he associated the event in question (in this case the first Olympiad) with a specific individual (in this case Lycurgus of Sparta) and then calculated a date by counting the number of generations between that individual and his own time and assigning a fixed number of years to each generation. [31]

There is little doubt that Hippias portrayed Lycurgus as playing a central role in organizing the first Olympiad in his Olympic victor list. A key piece of evidence that supports this conclusion is the discus at Olympia with the Olympic truce inscribed on it. Plutarch begins his biography of Lycurgus with the following statement:

Concerning Lycurgus the lawgiver, it is generally speaking possible to say nothing that is not subject to dispute. The accounts at any rate diverge in regard to his family and travels and death and especially in regard to his work with the laws and the constitution. Least of all do the accounts agree as to when he lived. For, on one hand, some say that he flourished in the time of Iphitos and that they founded the Olympic truce together. Aristotle the philosopher is one such, offering as proof the discus at Olympia on which the inscribed name of Lycurgus is preserved. [32]

There has been considerable scholarly discussion as to whether Aristotle was the first to use this discus as a source for the history of the Olympics or whether Hippias had done so before him. The latter is by far the more likely possibility. This discus cannot have been inscribed for the first time in the fourth century since Aristotle was too perspicacious to be taken in by a recent forgery. It must, therefore, have existed in Hippias' time. Hippias can hardly have been unaware of the existence of a discus at Olympia that had the terms of the Olympic truce and the names of Iphitos and Lycurgus inscribed upon it. Both individuals were quite famous in the ancient world. The Eleans believed Iphitos to have been an important early king of Elis, and the Spartans revered Lycurgus as the founding father of their state. (We will see below that both Iphitos and Lycurgus were semi-mythical figures whose actual biographies and activities are impossible to establish.)

Hippias, moreover, had two good reasons to highlight the connection between Lycurgus and the first Olympiad. The first reason was political in nature. Hippias produced his victor catalogue sometime around 400. At the end of the fifth century a long-running, low-level conflict between Elis and Sparta had developed into full-blown hostilities. The historian Xenophon, who was well connected in Sparta and lived through the events in question, makes it clear that the Spartans gave serious thought to stripping control of Olympia from the Eleans and handing it to the Pisatans. [33] This would have been a devastating blow to Elean prestige, and Hippias, who frequently served as the Elean diplomatic representative to Sparta, was no doubt aware of the situation. The claim that Iphitos and Lycurgus had jointly

founded the Olympics would have made it more difficult for the Spartans to terminate Elean control of the Games, and so Hippias very probably began his victor catalogue with the Iphitos-Lycurgus Olympics. [34]

The second reason why it was advantageous for Hippias to focus on Lycurgus' role in founding the Olympics was that Lycurgus' genealogy was widely known; Hippias in fact memorized it. It is, of course, impossible to reckon time on the basis of generations unless one has a full list of figures in generational sequence that runs from one's own time back to the event one wishes to date. By far the best known such generational sequence in ancient Greece was that of the kings in the two Spartan royal families. (The Spartans were very unusual in always having two kings, from two different families, the Agiads and the Eurypontids, ruling at the same time.) A list of Spartan kings had been compiled and put into circulation before Hippias' time. Lycurgus was related to one of the royal families of Sparta and so could be associated with a specific Spartan king. [35] We know that Hippias memorized the Spartan king list because he was famous for his amazing powers of recall and appears in one of Plato's dialogues in which he claims to have memorized 'genealogies of heroes and men' [36] in order to entertain people during his visits to Sparta. There can be no doubt that among the genealogies he committed to memory was the Spartan king list.

Hippias, then, seems to have associated the first Olympiad in his victor list with Iphitos and Lycurgus. One might object that, according to Plutarch, the discus on which Lycurgus' name was inscribed was linked to the Olympic truce, not the foundation of the Games. However, one has to keep in mind that most Greeks believed that the Olympiad in which Koroibos won the *stadion* (the first Olympiad in Hippias' victor list) was not the first time games were held at Olympia. There seems to have been general agreement in the ancient world that contests were held intermittently at Olympia from the 'heroic' period onwards (with Herakles or even earlier), so that the Koroibos Olympiad was not in fact the first Olympics. There was also a consensus that the continuous series of Olympiads that did not end until the fifth century AD began when the Games were refounded by Iphitos and Lycurgus, and there was a concomitant tendency to identify the Lycurgus-Iphitos Olympics as the first Olympiad.

Iphitos and Lycurgus could, therefore, by definition not 'found' the Olympics. However, ancient accounts make it clear that at least some Greeks believed that Lycurgus and Iphitos *refounded* the Olympics, at which time they also established the Olympic truce. This is most clear from the account given by the historian Phlegon of Tralles, in the introduction to the Olympic victor list he produced in the second century AD:

It seems to me to be proper to discuss the reason on account of which the Olympic Games came to be founded. The reason is as follows. After Peisos and Pelops, and then Herakles, who first instituted the festival and the contests at Olympia, the Peloponnesians neglected the observance of them for a certain period, until the period beginning with Iphitos ... Because they neglected the contest, unrest threatened the Peloponnese. Lycurgus of Lacedaemonia (son of Prytanis, son of Eurypon, son of Soos, son of Prokles, son of Aristodemos, son of Aristomachos,

son of Kleodaios, son of Hyllos, son of Herakles and Deianeira) and Iphitos of Elis (son of Haemon, but according to some son of Praxonidos, one of the Herakleidai), and Kleosthenes, son of Kleonikos, of Pisatis, wishing to restore the people to harmony and peace, took it in mind both to revive the Olympic festival in accordance with the ancient customs and to hold the athletic contests. They indeed sent to Delphi, in order to inquire of the god as to whether it would be better for them to do these things. The god said it would be better for them to do these things. He ordered them to announce a truce for those cities wishing to take part in the contest. After these things were announced by messengers throughout Greece, a discus was inscribed for the *Hellanodikai*, [37] in accordance with which they were bound to conduct the Olympics. [38]

It is very likely that Hippias, like Phlegon, saw Lycurgus and Iphitos as refounders of the Olympics and that Hippias' victor catalogue began with the Lycurgus-Iphitos Olympics.

One feature of Phlegon's account merits further attention, which is the fact that he goes out of his way to give Lycurgus a genealogy going back to Herakles, while no genealogy is provided for Lycurgus' cohorts, Iphitos and Kleosthenes. This indicates that there was something particularly important about Lycurgus' genealogy in regard to the founding of the Olympics, which in turn supplies an important piece of evidence for how Hippias went about calculating a date for the first Olympiad. The obvious reason why Lycurgus' genealogy would have been of interest is that it was directly relevant to the date for the first Olympics. There is, of course, a very considerable distance, roughly five centuries, between Hippias' Olympic victor list and that of Phlegon. As nothing survives of Hippias' Olympic victor list, it is impossible to say with any certainty that Hippias' version included a statement about Lycurgus' genealogy. However, there was surprising continuity and consistency in the contents of Olympic victor lists over long periods of time. This was because each author who updated the Olympic victor list started with an earlier version and copied some or all of its contents. [39] There is, therefore, some reason to think that Lycurgus' genealogy also appeared in Hippias' Olympic victor list.

If Hippias did use Lycurgus' genealogy and the Spartan king list to calculate a date for the first Olympics, he was in good company; the two most influential chronographers in the ancient Greek world, Eratosthenes (c.285–c.195) and Apollodoros (c.180–c.110), later used that exact approach to date a number of early events. They adopted this approach out of necessity. Chronography did not become a matter of much scholarly significance in Greece until the end of the fifth century. The situation with the Olympics was the same for most aspects of Greek life in that there was a general dearth of written records from before the sixth century. Nonetheless, Greek scholars wanted to establish the dates for famous people and events from earlier periods. Without written records with which to work, they did the best they could, which frequently entailed the use of generational reckoning and the Spartan king list. Herodotus, who finished his famous *Histories* about 30 years before Hippias compiled the Olympic victor list, made heavy use of the Spartan king list to reckon time. [40] Moreover, we know that both Eratosthenes and Apollodoros, who

produced immensely influential handbooks with dates for a wide array of people and events, both relied on the Spartan king list in generating a date for Lycurgus. This is evident from Plutarch's biography of Lycurgus:

Those who reckon time by means of the succession of kings at Sparta, such as Eratosthenes and Apollodoros, show that he (Lycurgus) was more than a few years older than the first Olympiad. [41]

It is quite likely that Hippias generated a date for Lycurgus by the same means. [42]

There was an undeniable logic in dating the first Olympiad via Lycurgus and the Spartan king list. Hippias must have known that his sources for the early Olympiads were hopelessly incomplete. Provided that he had some confidence in his means of calculating a date for Lycurgus (and there is no reason to think that he did not), he would have believed that the Spartan king list would generate a more accurate date than any of the alternatives at his disposal. (The most obvious alternative, adding up the number of *stadion* victors and hence the number of Olympiads and adding four years for each Olympiad, was problematic because Hippias could not generate an accurate count of the number of *stadion* victors.) Moreover, the creation of a defined number of Olympiads to which victors needed to be attached simplified Hippias' work. He could determine in advance how many *stadion* victors he needed and then do what he could to assemble the appropriate number. [43]

It is worth noting that it remains possible that Hippias calculated the date of 776 by some other means. The various other possibilities are too esoteric to merit discussion here. The key point to keep in mind is that once one eliminates the possibility that Hippias used a complete set of documentary records, the precise means by which he arrived at the date of 776 is not of overriding importance. In any of the possible scenarios, the date of 776 is nothing more than an educated guess. The same can be said of the dates assigned to the Olympic victories of particular individuals from the period before the sixth century.

Assessing 776

We are now in a position to assess the reliability of the date of 776 for the first Olympiad, and the outcome of that assessment is clearly one that calls for caution in accepting that date as reliable. Generational reckoning is notoriously inaccurate, Lycurgus was even in ancient Greece a shadowy figure, and variant dates for Lycurgus and for the first Olympiad circulated in the ancient world. The archaeological evidence from Olympia itself suggests a date closer to 700.

The inherent flaws in generational reckoning require little discussion. The assignment of a fixed number of years to each generation is inevitably inaccurate due to the inconvenient untidiness of biology. In addition, ancient Greek scholars argued with some vigour about how many years should be assigned to each generation, with answers ranging from 25 to 40, with predictably varying results. [44]

Uncertainties surrounding Lycurgus compounded the problems with generational reckoning. Lycurgus was an enigma even to the ancient Greeks. He was as much or more a figure of legend than an actual historical person. As we have already seen, Plutarch opened his biography of Lycurgus with the following statement:

Concerning Lycurgus the lawgiver, it is generally speaking possible to say nothing that is not subject to dispute. The accounts at any rate diverge in regard to his family and travels and death and especially in regard to his work with the laws and the constitution. Least of all do the accounts agree as to when he lived. [45]

Modern historians have found it nearly impossible to say anything certain about Lycurgus, and he cannot be linked in a definitive way to any event or enactment. His participation in the founding of the Olympics is, therefore, far from an established historical fact. [46]

The general difficulties that surround any inquiry into Lycurgus are compounded in this case by specific problems relating to his genealogy. There were multiple variants of Lycurgus' genealogy and hence his position in relation to the Spartan royal lines. Herodotus records a tradition that he was related to the Agiad royal family and that he was the guardian of King Leobotes. [47] All other ancient sources make him a member of the Eurypontid royal family and typically describe him as the guardian of King Charilaos. Simonides made Lycurgus the son of Prytanis, while most other ancient authorities made him the son of Eunomos. In addition, there was considerable disagreement about the sequence of early kings in the Eurypontid line. As one might expect, Greeks could not agree even in rough terms about when Lycurgus lived, and his activity was placed in the eleventh, ninth, eighth, and seventh centuries by different authors. [48]

One result that is not sufficiently appreciated even among classicists is that there was in the ancient world considerable uncertainty about when the first Olympiad took place; it was dated by Hippias to 776 but by Eratosthenes to 884. As indicated above, ancient Greeks generally agreed that contests had been held intermittently at Olympia from a very early period and that Lycurgus and Iphitos refounded the Olympics after which the Games were held continuously. Hippias dated the Olympiad organized by Lycurgus and Iphitos to 776 and listed Koroibos of Elis as the *stadion* victor in that Olympiad. The chronographer Eratosthenes, working about 150 years after Hippias, agreed that Lycurgus and Iphitos organized the first in the continuous series of Olympiads. However, his calculations placed Lycurgus in the early ninth century, and he dated the Lycurgus-Iphitos Olympiad to 884, not 776. [49]

This redating of the Lycurgus-Iphitos Olympiad created a major problem because the date of the Olympiad in which Koroibos won the *stadion* could not be pushed back to 884 without completely revamping the list of *stadion* victors. It would in fact have been necessary to add 27 new *stadion* victors to a list that had been widely accepted and used for a considerable period of time. That solution was completely unworkable. Eratosthenes solved the problem by describing the Olympiads between 884 and 776 as 'unregistered' because the names of the victors in them were not

recorded. This separated the Lycurgus-Iphitos Olympiad (the first in the continuous series of Olympiads, which Eratosthenes dated to 884) from the Olympiad in which Koroibos won the *stadion* (which Eratosthenes, following Hippias, dated to 776.) (In Hippias' version of events, Koroibos won the *stadion* at the Olympiad organized by Lycurgus and Iphitos in 776.) The rather amusing result was persistent confusion among ancient chronographers as to precisely what one meant by the first Olympiad. That term could designate either the Olympiad held in 884, believed by many to have been the first in the series of continuous Olympiads, or the Olympiad held in 776, the first Olympiad in Hippias' Olympic victor list.

The archaeological data from Olympia offers some degree of clarity among all this confusion. Olympia became a sanctuary of Zeus by 1000 and significant dedications in the form of monumental bronze tripods began by 875. [50] Tripods frequently functioned as prizes in athletic contests, and the tripods at Olympia have been seen as evidence for the existence of games prior to the eighth century. Tripods were, however, dedicated for a range of reasons, not all of which had to do with athletic contests. The votives found at Olympia indicate that it was originally patronized primarily by residents of the immediately surrounding regions and that visitors from a gradually widening area began to visit the site in the last quarter of the eighth century. Major work was carried out in the sanctuary at the end of the eighth century, including the diversion of the river Kladeos and the digging of wells to accommodate the needs of spectators. This has led the excavators at the site to suggest a date of around 700 for the inception of the Olympics. [51] It remains possible, nonetheless, that games of purely local significance were held at Olympia prior to that time.

Conclusion

We have seen that Hippias of Elis produced the first complete list of Olympic victors sometime around 400 and that Hippias' list necessarily supplied a date for the first Olympiad. That is the origin of the date of 776 for the inception of the Olympics. In the past century most scholars have taken the position that Hippias' date for the first Olympiad was based on documentary sources that began in the eighth century and was therefore accurate. However, the accretion of new evidence in the form of archaeological finds and inscriptions and advances in our understanding of ancient Greek historiography have helped make possible a very different conclusion. It now appears virtually certain that Hippias did not have a complete set of documentary records at his disposal and that he relied instead on problematic oral sources in compiling the names of Olympic victors from the eighth and seventh centuries. The gaps in those oral sources led Hippias to calculate a date for the first Olympiad on the basis of its association with the Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus. This approach could by its very nature produce nothing more than a conjecture about the date for the first Olympiad. The archaeological evidence from Olympia suggests a date about 75 years later than that supplied by Hippias. Given the inherent limitations in the material at Hippias' disposal, the disjunction between the physical remains at Olympia on one

hand and the date of 776 derived from the Olympic victor list on the other should not be particularly troubling. 776 is nothing more than Hippias' best guess. If the excavators at Olympia are indeed correct in suggesting a date of sometime around 700 for the first Olympics, Hippias deserves credit for getting as close to the correct date as he did.

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Notes

- [1] All pre-modern dates are BC unless otherwise indicated. All translations of ancient Greek sources are those of this author. Abbreviations used for ancient Greek authors and their works follow the conventions of Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*. Abbreviations used for modern works follow the conventions of *L'année philologique*. The following abbreviations are used: *FGrH* (Felix Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, 3 vols., Berlin: Weidemann, 1923–58); and *IvO* (Wilhelm Dittenberger and Karl Purgold, *Inscriptionen von Olympia (Olympia Die Ergebnisse der von dem deutschen Reich veranstalteten Ausgrabung, Olympia Textband V)*, Berlin: A. Asher & Co., 1896).
- [2] Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists and Ancient Greek History* (hereafter cited as Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*).
- [3] For an introduction to Greek time-reckoning systems, see Bickerman, *Chronology of the Ancient World*, 62–79; Mosshammer, *The Chronicle of Eusebius and Greek Chronographic Tradition*, 84–127; and Samuel, *Greek and Roman Chronology*, 189–248.
- [4] *Numa*, 1. 4, *FGrH* 6 F2.
- [5] For basic information on Hippias, see Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*, 46–50 as well as Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 3: 280–5.
- [6] On the expansion of the programme of events at Olympia and the veracity of the ancient tradition on the Olympic programme, see Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*, 15–17, 476–7.
- [7] This was a significant advance because numeration made it possible to calculate the temporal distance between events without consulting a full list of eponyms and engaging in laborious counting.
- [8] 16. 53. 1. On Hippias' Olympic victor list, see Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*, 46–73 and the bibliography cited therein. On Aristotle's work with the Olympic victor list, see Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*, 170–3 and 179–202 and the bibliography cited therein. Individual years within an Olympiad were numbered from first to fourth. For instance, 775 would have been identified as the second year of the first Olympiad.
- [9] On the evidence that connects the first Olympiad to the year corresponding to 776, see Clinton, *Fasti Hellenici*, 1: 150–2; and Samuel, *Greek and Roman Chronology*, 189–90.
- [10] Brinkmann, 'Die olympische Chronik'. For detailed listings of the relevant scholarly literature, see Bilik, 'Die Zuverlässigkeit der frühen Olympionikenliste'; and Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*, 73–6.
- [11] The examples discussed in Habicht, 'Falsche Urkunden zur Geschichte Athens' provide a good sense for Greeks' willingness to fabricate documents. On similar practices in other times and places, see Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*.

- [12] The relevant scholarship and evidence for all four points are examined in detail in Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*, 73–112.
- [13] See Jacoby, *Atthis, The Local Chronicles of Ancient Athens*, 1–70, 176–88, 201. For more recent works on the earliest local histories in Greece, which offer important nuances to Jacoby’s argument, see Fowler, ‘Herodotus and His Contemporaries’; and Marincola, ‘Genre, Convention and Innovation in Greco-Roman Historiography’.
- [14] *Chronographia* 85. 29–89. 2 Karst.
- [15] The Eleans based their calendar on the names of local magistrates, not Olympic victors.
- [16] On victor lists in the *periodos* games other than the Olympics, see Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*, 108–12 and 179–202.
- [17] See Jeffery and Johnston, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece*, 58–63.
- [18] See Siewert, ‘The Olympic Rules’; and Siewert, ‘Due iscrizioni giuridiche della città di Elide’. The earliest inscriptions from Olympia date to c.600, but the dialect and letter forms make it clear that they were brought to the site by visitors from other areas.
- [19] Aristotle used the discus to help date Lycurgus (Plu. *Lyc.* 1. 1). See Pausanias 5. 20. 1 for his comments on the discus.
- [20] It is much more likely that the discus was a later creation and can be plausibly dated to the sixth century. See Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*, 85–8.
- [21] See Pausanias, 6. 6. 3, 6. 8. 1.
- [22] See Wacker, *Das Gymnasion in Olympia*, 15–78.
- [23] See Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*, 112–22, which draws heavily on Koiv, ‘The Dating of Pheidon in Antiquity’.
- [24] The points covered in this section of the study are discussed in detail in Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*, 122–46.
- [25] The other victor list is Olympia 1148, which dates to the fourth century AD and lists victors belonging to an athletic guild. On that inscription, see Ebert, ‘Zur neuen Bronzeplatte mit Siegerinschriften aus Olympia’.
- [26] The text of *IvO* 17 given here is that found in Jeffery and Johnston, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece*, 59.
- [27] One of the fragments of *IvO* 17, not shown in Figure 2, includes a nail hole. The inscription must have been attached to a building or a tree at Olympia.
- [28] For a brief introduction to *epinikia*, see Golden, *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece*, 74–88.
- [29] See Miller, ‘The Date of the First Pythiad’.
- [30] On the inherent limitations of oral traditions as historical sources, see Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History*, 11–33; Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition*, 1–70; Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens*; and Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*.
- [31] The scenario discussed here is the most probable of a number of different possibilities, all of which are discussed in detail in Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*, 146–57, 491–504.
- [32] Plu. *Lyc.* 1. 1.
- [33] See *HG*, 3. 2. 31.
- [34] On the conflict between Sparta and Elis, see Schepens, ‘La Guerra di Sparta contro Elide’ and the bibliography cited therein.
- [35] As we will see, there was some debate as to which royal family Lycurgus belonged and with which king he was associated.
- [36] *Hp. Ma.* 285d.
- [37] The *Hellanodikai* were judges who oversaw the contests at Olympia.
- [38] *FGrH* 257 F1.
- [39] On continuity in Olympic victor lists of widely variant dates, see Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*, 519–31.

- [40] On Herodotus' use of the Spartan king list, see Cobet, 'The Organization of Time in the *Histories*'. Thucydides, who wrote his account of the Peloponnesian War in the last decades of the fifth century, seems also to have used the Spartan king lists for chronological purposes (see Mazzarino, *Il pensiero storico classico*, 3: 432–3).
- [41] Plu. *Lyc.* 1. 2.
- [42] There is no immediately obvious way to arrange the extant source material such as to place Lycurgus in the year 776; the ambiguities inherent in the source material make any number of reconstructions possible but none notably probable. It is possible but unlikely that Hippias used a version of the Spartan king list that included regnal years, and hence calculated a date for Lycurgus on that basis rather by means of generational reckoning. (It is not clear when the first Spartan king list with regnal years was produced.) Even if Hippias did use such a list, it would not have been much of a help in calculating an accurate date for Lycurgus because there was vigorous disagreement in the ancient world about the lengths of the reigns of many Spartan kings. That disagreement sprang from the fact that regnal years were assigned in the fifth century at the earliest, by which point in time there was very limited information about the reigns of earlier kings.
- [43] It is likely that Hippias had to fill in some gaps in the collection of Olympic victors by what a modern-day historian would consider dubious means. There are, for example, a surprisingly large number of Spartans in the early parts of the victor list; one might well suspect that Hippias was not averse to appeasing the Spartans by adding the names of ancestors from powerful Spartan families to his victor list in the absence of any evidence that the men in question had in fact won an Olympic victory. Here again one should recall that Greeks were significantly less concerned than modern-day historians about historical accuracy when constructing eponym lists.
- [44] On the mechanics of generational reckoning in ancient Greece, see Ball, 'Generation Dating in Herodotus'; den Boer, *Laconian Studies*, 5–54; and Prakken, *Studies in Greek Genealogical Chronology*, 1–47.
- [45] See Plu. *Lyc.* 1. 1.
- [46] The ancient tradition on Iphitos was equally confused. See Kroll, 'Iphitos'.
- [47] Herodotus, 1. 65.
- [48] For good overviews of the issues surrounding Lycurgus' biography and chronology, see Mosshammer, *The Chronicle of Eusebius and Greek Chronographic Tradition*, 173–92; Shaw, *Discrepancies in Olympiad Dating and Chronological Problems of Archaic Peloponnesian History*, 47–73; and Tigerstedt, *The Legend of Sparta in Classical Antiquity*, 1: 70–3.
- [49] See the discussion in Christesen, *Olympic Victor Lists*, 151–7. The key ancient sources for Eratosthenes' date for the Lycurgus-Iphitos Olympics are Clem. Al. *Strom.* 1.138. 1–3 and II. 37–44 in the edition of Eusebius' Olympic victor list found in Christesen and Martirosova-Torlone, 'The Olympic Victor List of Eusebius: Background, Text, and Translation'.
- [50] The archaeological data is summarized in Morgan, *Athletes and Oracles*, 26–105, though see now also Eder, 'Continuity of Bronze Age Cult at Olympia?'; and Kyrieleis, 'Zu den Anfängen des Heiligtums von Olympia'.
- [51] See Mallwitz, 'Cult and Competition Locations at Olympia'.

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