

AN ECHO OF DELPHI: THE PYTHIAN GAMES ANCIENT AND MODERN

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Perhaps less well known than today's Olympics, the Pythian Games at Delphi, named after the slain Python of Delphi and the Prophetesses, were a manifestation of the "the beautiful and the good," a hallmark of the Hellenistic spirituality which comes from the Mystery Schools.

The Olympic Games, now held every two years in alternating summer and winter versions, were the first and the best known of the ancient Greek religious and cultural festivals known as the Pan-Hellenic Games. In all, there were four major celebrations, which followed one another in succession. That is the reason for the four year cycle of the Olympics, observed since the restoration of the Olympics in 1859.



Silver tetradrachm issued by the city of Myrina, ca. 160-150 BCE. Apollo wearing a diadem and a laurel wreath. Photo ©Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons, used with permission.

The Beautiful and the Good

The concept of athletic and cultural competitions in connection with a religious observance is not exclusive to the Greek world, however, the Hellenic spirit raised this conjunction to a fine art. This is not surprising, since one of the Hellenistic ideals which eventually spread from Spain

to Northern India, and from Rus' to Egypt, was that of *kaloï k'agathoi*, the Beautiful and the Good, certainly part of the tradition of Apollo.

Essentially, since the Gods loved that which was Good—and for the Athenians in particular, what was good was beautiful—this maxim summed up Hellenic piety. It was no great leap then to wish to present to the Gods every four years the best of what human beings could offer—in the arts, and in athletics. When these were coupled together with their religious rites, the three lifted up the human body, soul, and spirit, and through the microcosm of humanity, the whole cosmos, to be Divinized. The teachings of the Mystery Schools were played out on the fields and in the theaters of the games.

The Pan-Hellenic Games

Collectively, these Pan-Hellenic Games began with the Olympic Games, whose historical beginning can be traced to 776 BCE, and whose legendary continuation involves Delphi. One story has it that King Iphitos of Elis consulted the Oracle at Delphi for help in restoring order to Greece after the Dorian Invasions or Migrations sometime in the legendary eighth century BCE. He was told to restart the Olympic Games, and this proved so successful that they continued until either Roman Emperor Theodosius I in 394 CE or his grandson Theodosius II in 435 CE suppressed them.

Following the Olympic Games, held at Olympia near Elis and Pisa in honor of Zeus, in importance were:

- The Pythian Games, held every four years near Delphi in honor of Apollo

- The Nemean Games, held bi-annually near Nemea, in honor of Zeus
- The Isthmian Games, held bi-annually near Corinth, in honor of Poseidon

Collectively, although there were many smaller competitions elsewhere, these four were the Pan-Hellenic Games. During each four-year Olympiad, the Olympic Games would be conducted in year one, while the Nemean and Isthmian Games would be conducted at different times during year two. In year three, the Pythian Games would be held, and then in year four, the Nemean and Isthmian Games would once again be held. This was very much like modern international athletic and cultural competitions, scheduled so that leading athletes and stars could attend all of them.

The Pythian Games at Delphi

The Pythian Games distinguished themselves from the others, not only in that they were second in importance only to the Olympic Games, but also because they included the full artistic and cultural components, which actually preceded the athletic competitions there.

According to legend, the God Apollo proclaimed the beginning of the Games at Delphi after having slain the old guardian of the sanctuary of Gaia, Python, the great serpent.

Since the serpent itself often represents the basic energy of creation, and Apollo is the god of the arts, particularly poetry and music, it is no surprise that the first two competitions were for these disciplines, and later, the field was expanded to include athletic competitions as in the other Pan-Hellenic Games.¹

In historic times, the Pythian Games at Delphi can be traced to 582 BCE. At that time, the running of the games was entrusted to a twelve-person Delphic Council, known as the *Amphiktyonia*, which represented the Greek tribes or peoples. The games' celebrations were fixed at every



Virgil Solis, *Apollo Slays Python*, 1563. Illustration for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from *Ovid Illustrated*.

four years, two years after each Olympics, and between the years for the Nemean and Isthmian Games.

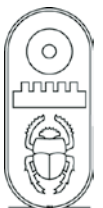
The Arts First at Delphi

In the beginning, the first competitions were for music, and then later singing with the Kithara. This instrument—similar to a Lyre and a favorite of Apollo—is the ancestor of the modern guitar. It was also regularly associated with the Greek poet Sappho. Even as late as the Italian Renaissance, woodcuts by Boccaccio show her playing the instrument.²

Singing accompanied by the flute, and then solo flute performances, joined the roster of Pythian competitions. As Roger Lipsey mentions, “. . . eventually theatrical troupes, painters, and perhaps artists in other media had their competitions.”³ One of the ways in which Rosicrucians manifest this Delphic arts tradition today is the continuation of the late nineteenth century [Salons de la Rose+Croix](#),⁴ which are now held in the Rosicrucian [Espace Saint-Martin](#) in Paris,⁵ as well as the series of Salons which have been held at [Rosicrucian Park](#) in San Jose, California.⁶

Finally, athletic games were added, including the same contests as in the Olympics, such as chariot racing, wrestling, boxing, *pankration*, *stadion*, other foot races, and the pentathlon.

Lipsey also points out that the Greek name for these types of Games was *Agones*, struggles, whence our word *agon*. Although not meant in its tragic sense, *agon* is also a key term in spirituality as the spirit within



struggles for perfection and reintegration with its source. He recalls that Antiphon (fifth century BCE) remarked, “Olympic and Pythian victories and all pleasures are apt to be won by great pains.”⁷

The Holy Peace of Delphi

Significantly, this struggle of competition at the games was accompanied by a truce, and a cessation of conflict during this sacred occasion. “During the Delphic Games, which lasted three months, the Holy Delphic Peace was announced. The ceasefire guaranteed the people—participants and spectators—to travel without risk to the games and back to their homeland.”⁸ Sadly, neither in ancient nor modern times, has humanity yet learned the Divine lesson that the energy put into warfare could be permanently transmuted into higher and more productive pursuits.

Aristotle describes some of the activities of the games, combining the arts and athletic aspects of the competitions. The entire period of the Delphic Games lasted about three months, as competitors and spectators safely journeyed to and from the games. The core of this celebration was approximately eight days. It started with a ritual drama, a “Holy Game,” reenacting the slaying of Python by Apollo, which culminated in a festive procession to the Temple of Apollo, where a sacrifice was offered. Then four days of feasting followed.

After the fourth day, the musical, theatrical, dance, and other artistic competitions took place in the Delphic Theater, while the athletics were held in the Stadium. Due to the mountainous topography of Delphi, the chariot races took place nearby on the plain of Krisa.¹⁹

All for Honor

Unlike at the other Games, the winners of the competitions at Delphi received honor only. A statue was erected in their honor, as the well known Bronze Charioteer of

Delphi attests. Winners were also crowned with a laurel wreath created especially from leaves brought from the Vale of Tempe in Thessaly in Northern Greece, bordering on the Aegean Sea. In Homeric times, Thessaly was known as Aeolia, and the Vale of Tempe was a favorite haunt of Apollo and the Muses. It was here that Apollo came to purify himself after slaying Python.¹⁰ This river gorge was formed by the Pineios River, where Aristaeus pursued Eurydice, the wife of Orpheus, to her death. In the thirteenth century, a church built in this area was dedicated to St. Paraskevi, a holy woman whom Greeks and other Orthodox still venerate as a miraculous healer.

According to an ancient Greek myth, as retold by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, when Apollo was purifying himself in the Vale of Tempe, he spied Daphne, the daughter of the River God Pineios. She was instantly his first love, and he pursued her, despite her refusals. Finally, as the God was on the verge of catching her, she cried out to her father, and he transformed her into the laurel tree. Apollo then honored her by making her leaves the token of victory in all contests, even to our own day.¹¹

It is no wonder, then, that the laurel from this vale, sacred to Apollo, Orpheus, and later Christians, would have been highly appropriate for the Delphic victors’ crowns, as it is the origin of the laurel itself!

A modern Delphic arts connection to the Vale of Tempe may be found in the world famous concert hall, [Grady](#)



Daphne becomes the Laurel, from Micyllus's edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, 1582. Leipzig.

Gammage Auditorium. This was the last public commission of renowned American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, on the campus of Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona, a city named for the ancient Greek Vale.¹² Thus the spirit of the Muses of Delphi continues to manifest in another Tempe across the ocean, which has, over the years, become a progressive arts and cultural center for central Arizona.

The role of the arts at the Pythian Games (and at Delphi in general) is perhaps most clearly shown in the person of Pindar (ca. 522-443 BCE), who was a “poet in residence” at the shrine. “They say that an iron throne was kept for him near the eternal hearth in Apollo’s Temple. When he came to Delphi—we glimpse here the archetype of the traveling bard, welcome everywhere—he occupied the throne to sing in Apollo’s honor.”¹³

Sadly, as with so many other institutions of the old ways, the Delphic Games came to an end in 394 CE by the decree of the Roman Emperor Theodosius I, who was solidifying the status of official Christianity in the empire. Nevertheless, the spirit of Delphi, of its Pythias, and of the games did not entirely fade into oblivion.

The First Revival

In 1927, Angelos Sikelianos, the well known Greek poet and playwright, a Nobel Prize nominee, together with his wife, American Eva Palmer, sponsored the first revival of the Delphic Games. It included “Olympic contests, a concert of Byzantine music, an exhibition of folk art, as well as a performance of *Prometheus Bound*. It became very successful and despite lack of state assistance, it was repeated the following year. The revival was then permanently abandoned due to the excessive costs of organizing it. In honor of the memory of Angelos and Eva Sikelianos, the European Cultural Centre of Delphi bought and restored their house in Delphi, which is today the Museum of Delphic Festivals.”¹⁶

Although Sikelianos’s two consecutive festivals did not continue, it would not be long until the Delphic spirit found manifestation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

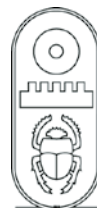
The *Amphiktyonia* Is Restored

In 1994, exactly 1,600 years after Emperor Theodosius suppressed the Delphic Games, and one hundred years after the restoration of the Olympic movement, J. Christian B. Kirsch invited people from all over the world to Berlin to the founding Congress of the International Delphic Council.¹⁵ Representatives from eighteen nations from five continents¹⁶ attended the Congress, and proclaimed their mission to the world, inspired by the Delphic spirit across the millennia:

“In today’s times of globalization, dialogue between people, nations, and cultures has become more important than ever before. We must not fail to support and promote the creative potential and new forms of expression of young artists if we wish to sustain social development. Therefore, culture, as an engine of social development, must be moved into focus.”¹⁷



Modern photograph of the Delphic stadium. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.



The governing Delphic Games board has adopted the ancient name of *Amphiktyonia*, to demonstrate its continuity with the ancient ideals. The two manifestations of this movement have been a series of modern Junior Delphic Games and Delphic Games, now alternating in two year cycles, reminiscent of the ancient games. In 1997, the first Junior Delphic Games were held in Tbilisi, Georgia, and patrons included former Georgian President Edward Shevardnadze; the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Daniel Tarschys; and the Director General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor.

The first modern Delphic Games under this administration took place in 2000 in Moscow, under the patronage of President Putin and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexei II. In 2003 the second Junior Delphic Games were held in Düsseldorf, Germany, where the primary patron was Dr. Walter Schwimmer, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe. The year 2005 saw the second Delphic Games in Kuching, Malaysia. Baguio City in the Philippines hosted the 2007 Junior Games, and the third modern Delphic Games are scheduled for September 5-9, 2009, in Jeju, South Korea.¹⁸

Pan-Hellenic Delphic Games Return to the Source

In addition to this global manifestation of the Delphic spirit, there have been independent Delphic arts festivals held at Delphi itself. Perhaps the best known of these was the Pan-Hellenic Delphic Games, June 4-11, 2005, led by the remarkable and historic Isadora Duncan International Institute, and co-sponsored by the Society for the Study of Myth and Tradition (publishers of *Parabola Magazine*), and the City of Delphi itself.¹⁹ The IDII is a “global organization committed to the enhancement of education through movement and the arts, drawing from the ideals and principles

of Isadora Duncan”²⁰ (the San Francisco born dancer who is credited by many as “the Mother of Modern Dance”).²¹



Dancers from the Isadora Duncan Institute at the 2005 revival of the Pythian Games at Delphi. Photo by Stuart Orenstein, ©2005 [Isadora Duncan International Institute](#).

The event was held over eight days, and included presenters such as the storyteller and scholar of mythology, Michael Meade, and the dance performer and lecturer Jeanne Bresciani, Ph.D. A keynote address was given by Richard G. Geldard, Ph.D., whose reflections on the Bronze Charioteer at Delphi can be found elsewhere in this *Rosicrucian Digest* issue. He also conducted sessions on the power of healing in Greek Drama. Inspiring films were shown from the Parabola collection, and the Isadora Duncan Dancers graced the event with performances keyed to the ancient setting.²² In all of these ways, the echoes of Delphi and the Pythian Games sound louder today than they have for 1600 years. The spirit of the Prophetesses of the historic Oracles, and the power of the legendary Sibyls both call modern women and men to enter into communion with the Divine through beauty and the good, and in this way, come to know themselves as truly divine sparks enjoying the wonders of a human experience of body, soul, and spirit.²³

Endnotes

- ¹ For a detailed study of the Pythian (Delphic Games), see Joseph Fontenrose, "The Cult of Apollo and the Games at Delphi" in Wendy J. Raschke, ed. *The Archaeology of the Olympics: The Olympics and Other Festivals in Antiquity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 121-140.
- ² "Women's History" at <http://www.about.com>. Image of Sappho with Kithara, woodcut, 1473, from Boccaccio's *De Cleris Mulieribus*: <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/sappho/ig/Sappho/Sappho-Boccaccio.htm>.
- ³ Roger Lipsey, *Have You Been to Delphi?* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 16.
- ⁴ For the history of the nineteenth-century Parisian Salons de Rose-Croix organized by Sar Péladan, see Christian Rebisse, *Rosicrucian History and Mysteries* (San Jose: English Grand Lodge of AMORC, 2005), 137-143; and also "Joséphine Péladan et les Salons de Rose-Croix" at http://www.rosecroix.org/histoire/salon_rose-croix_1.html.
- ⁵ http://www.rosecroix.org/activites/expo_salon_paris.html.
- ⁶ For more information about the Book Salons at Rosicrucian Park, see <http://www.rosicrucian.org/park/library>.
- ⁷ Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 150, cited, with the general discussion of *agon*, in Lipsey, 16.
- ⁸ "Pythian Games," *Wikipedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pythian_games.
- ⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pythian_Games.
- ¹⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.568-587.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.438-567.
- ¹² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gammage_Auditorium and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tempe,_Arizona.
- ¹³ Lipsey, 16, based on Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, 10.24.4.
- ¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angelos_Sikelianos.
- ¹⁵ <http://www.delphic.org>.
- ¹⁶ The Founding members in 1994 were China, Germany, Ecuador, France, Ireland, Greece, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Libya, Mexico, Nigeria, Austria, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, United States of America, and Cyprus. Since then other countries have joined: Albania (1998), Armenia (1998), Azerbaijan (1998), Belarus (1996), Bulgaria (2003), India (2002), Georgia (1996), Japan (1997), Korea (2005), Malaysia (2004), Moldova (2000), South Africa (2001), Ukraine (2003), Venezuela (2003). See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Delphic_Council.
- ¹⁷ http://www.delphic.org/index.php?id=4&no_cache=1&L=1.
- ¹⁸ http://www.delphic.org/index.php?id=80no_cache=1&L=1.
- ¹⁹ See deTraci Regula, "Pan-Hellenic Delphic Games Return to Delphi" <http://gogreece.about.com/od/citiestowns/a/delphicgames.htm> and www.idii.org/delphicgames.html.
- ²⁰ <http://www.idii.org/history.html>.
- ²¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isadora_Duncan.
- ²² <http://www.idii.org/delphicgames.html>.
- ²³ Resources for this article were found at the following sources, in addition to those specifically mentioned in the Notes: "International Delphic Council," "Kithara," "Olympic Games," "Pan-Hellenic Games," "Pythian Games," at <http://en.wikipedia.org>; Myron Stagman, *100 Prophecies of the Delphic Oracle* (San Francisco: City-State Press, 1999).

