
The Wreath of Athletic Victory and Its Moral Symbolism

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| 1 | <i>Introduction</i> |
| 2 | <i>The Origins of the Crowning Ceremony and their Importance</i> |
| 3 | <i>Conclusion</i> |

1 Introduction

The wreath with which the victors in the Olympic Games are crowned today is neither a contemporary custom nor a tradition that simply accompanies a formal ritual. On the contrary, this tradition can be traced back into the distant past, with its roots in very old customs, back when truth and reason were sweetly mixed with imagination and myth. This paper follows the importance of the crowning of the victor in athletic competitions, or games, linking this event with its multiple manifestations in various events of modern-day cultural reality.

2 The Origins of the Crowning Ceremony and their Importance

According to one of the oldest traditions concerning the origins of the Olympic Games, when the father of the gods, Zeus, was born, his mother Rhea entrusted the guarding of her child to the Idaious Daktylous, five brothers from the Cretan mountain Ide¹. The oldest of the siblings was Heracles (Hercules) who, for the sake of entertainment (playing), would put his brothers to competing against each other in a race², and would crown the victor with a branch from a wild olive tree (kotinos)³. The kotinos, or wild olive tree, was brought to Greece by Heracles (Hercules) himself, from the land of the Hypervoreans, people who lived beyond the northern wind⁴, to provide shade to the many visitors flocking to the sacred alsos (park) of Zeus, but also to be used as a wreath of virtues⁵.

Consequently, according to this tradition, to the Idaian Heracles (Hercules) belongs the glory of being the first to establish that first competition, which he called "Olympia"⁶. In fact, he stipulated that the competition should be carried out every fifth year, since he and his brothers numbered five⁷. To Heracles also belongs the establishment of crowning the victor of the Olympic competitions, or Games, with a wreath from the otinos (the establishment of the 'stefaniti' competition, meaning competitions with a wreath as the prize, occurred following a prophecy by Pythia, Apollo's priestess) he had brought as a gift from the shady springs of Istros⁸ from the Hyperboreans' land, a land described as "dream-like".

The Hypervorean people are linked with Greece through other traditions, as well⁹. The Hypervorean Maidens are the ones who bring the sacred offerings from their land on Delos¹⁰, and are closely related to tree worship¹¹. Perhaps, in fact, via the Hypervoreans, there is an esoteric link between the Olympic games and the Delphic games, since they are linked both with Heracles, founder of the Olympic games (according to one tradition), and with Apollo, founder of the Pythian games and the god of purification¹². The "kallistefanos elaiá"¹³ (olive tree) is linked with Apollo's sacred plant, the laurel, in another way, as well, since both assisted his mother, Leto, in giving birth¹⁴. Their assistance in the birth appeals to the perception of the ancients that many trees and plants, having magical properties, effectively contributed to the birthing process¹⁵. The olive tree is linked also with Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, whose symbol is this sacred tree¹⁶. In the Panathenaia, the most renowned celebration of the city-state of Athens, the victors of the athletic competitions receive, as their prize, a panathenian amphora filled with oil from the goddess' sacred olive grove¹⁷.

The tradition that the olive tree is "sacred" is an ancient one, while equally ancient, according to testimony, is also the sacredness attributed to the kotinos also in the crowning ceremony. Ifitos himself, the king of Ilia, who reorganized the Olympic games and the sacred truce (Ekecheiria)¹⁹, is depicted in art at precisely the moment he is being crowned by a woman, the personification of Ekecheiria²⁰. But the spondoforoi too, those who proclaimed the ekecheiria, would also announce its commencement wearing an olive wreath on their heads²¹.

Thus, in antiquity, the wreaths of the Olympic winners comprised one of the religious aspects of the games. The wreaths destined for the winners were made from a wild olive tree that had sprouted outside of Alti²², the branches of which were cut by a child, both of whose parents were still alive. They were then placed on an altar found, among other votive offerings, on Kypselos' larnaca²³. In fact, before the altar was made for this purpose, there was in the temple entrance a bronze-plated tripod on which the victors' wreaths were displayed before their presentation²⁴. The sacredness of the wreaths of victory is also evident in the ritual that followed their placement on the heads of the victors. The Ellanodikes (judges), carrying out the old orders of Heracles, as Pindar notes, placed on the hair of the victors, above their forehead, the aigli (glow) of the glafkochrou elaia (azure olive)²⁵, decorating their hair²⁶. Inter alia, while the Ellanodikes, themselves also crowned with laurel, crowned the victors, the spectators would shower him with flowers and wreaths (phyllovolia)²⁷.

But also after the phylloforos competition, as Pindar called the Olympic Games²⁸, the victor's wreath was placed by the victor once again in the temple, in thanks and devotion to the god who had given it to him²⁹. And the god of the Olympic games, Zeus, is depicted in his renowned gold and ivory statue sitting on his throne wearing a golden wreath, representing an olive branch, on his head³⁰. In his right hand he holds an ivory Nike, who also has a wreath on her head³¹. Finally, the olive branches were also placed by the Ilions on the altar, in monthly sacrifices³².

The placement of the wreath on the head of the victors of the games consequently indicates the existence of deeper beliefs, which over a long period of time developed into perceptions while, afterwards, with the intervention of reason over the element of imagination, it evolved or was repelled to the subconscious of human consciousness. For the non-civilized person, the entire world in general has a soul, and precisely this is the basic idea on which various beliefs are founded, such as the worship of plants and trees, which were developing. Tree worship, which according to Burkert (1985) possibly held an outstanding place also in the Minoan and Mycenaean religions³⁴, appears to have been expressed, inter alia, with the "sacred branch". The sacred branch, which is found in the agricultural celebrations of ancient Greece, was believed to bring life and fertility, thus comprising the survival of this worship. The sacred branch was later appropriated by the heros and the gods. The branch of the wild olive tree was appropriated by Heracles and, later, by Zeus, the branch of the prophetic sacred oak tree by Zeus at Dodoni, the branch of the prophetic laurel by Apollo at Delphi, while the other trees, plants or their products, such as the pittys (pine tree), celery, the palm tree branch, or apples, comprised the awards for the winners of the Isthmian and Nemean games³⁹. The sacred branch or wreath from the sacred branches became the indivisible symbol of all the rituals and celebrations.

The sacred branch that brings life and fertility still plays an important role in the agricultural traditions of modern Europe, but it played an equally important role also in ancient Greece, where it was called "Eiresioni" or "korythali"⁴¹. It is found in agricultural celebrations such as the "Thargylia" and the "Pyanopsia", the big celebrations of harvest, or the "Oschoforia", the celebration of the grape harvest⁴². They would tie to an olive branch all different kinds of fruit as well as small bottles of wine or oil, and after parading them around, they would set it up outside their home, where it remained, as an amulet against sickness and evil, for a year until it was replaced by a new one, as is done today with the May Day wreath. But also, whoever sought the protection of the gods would hold an "iketiria", a branch on which ribbons were

tied. The sacred branch was appropriated by the god Apollo also, who incorporated it, as referred below, in his rituals, chiefly at Delphi, where the 'amfithalis paes' brought the eiresioni and the cleansing rituals of Tempi. The deeper symbolism of the eiresioni and iketiria was that of purification, averting bad influences, and invoking good luck.

The wreath that decorated the heads of those who took part in sacrifices, celebrations and competitions owes its origins to the belief that the blooming branch is beneficial. In the archaic religious experience, certain trees represent some force, which is not due only to the "tree" but chiefly to its cosmological extensions. In other words, there is no worship of the tree itself, but of the underlying spiritual entity. The tree becomes a religious object, notes Eliade (1964), by its simple presence (the 'force') and by the law of its evolution (the 'rebirth'), repeating that which, for the primitive, is the entire World. For an archaic conscience, the tree is a symbol of the inexhaustible Life, it is the Universe, a form which is met in the advanced civilizations.

The power found in the sacred branch was transferred simply by its presence alone, or by contact with it. The fundamental idea of these perceptions, observes Nilsson (1949) in *A History of Greek Religion*, was purely magical. They believed that, with the sacred branch or wreath, the person came into contact with the beneficial force that lived inside the sacred branch and could be transferred to everything that came into physical contact with it. They believed that man, via the branch, came into contact with a supernatural force. This belief, of union with the god, is based, according to Nilsson (1949), on the same perception as holy communion. Thus, those athletes that were crowned received some of the divine power of the sacred tree, from the branches from which the victory wreath was made, and were transubstantiated among the "blessed of the earth". For this reason, the simple olive wreath is so appreciated that some of the Olympic victors died of emotion during their crowning.

In the historic and classical eras, we find many remnants of the primitive tree worshipping⁵⁶. In the religious light of the historic years and during the stage of completion of the Olympian pantheon, this belief crept into all the rituals of the Greeks, and consequently also the sports-related ones. The games acquired a patron god, in the name of whom they took place. The wreath contained the initial idea, but now the spirit it emanated is a godly one and no longer a magical one. The branch with which the victors of competitions are crowned is embellished with more religious values and becomes "sacred", just like the games. The victor is considered as blessed by the god, - the mortal whom the god enables to achieve happiness⁵⁷. The wreath acquires the religious and ethical value of purification, of cleansing, as well as the value of virtue⁵⁸. The athlete who wears it is purged, has managed to appease the god, while his purification is a prerequisite for his communication with the god.

The idea of cleansing does not belong to the realm of magic, but to that of religion, notes J. G. Frazer. The much-desired wild olive tree branch of the Olympic victors, just like the laurel wreath of the Delphic games winners, just like all the other plants of the sacred games, comprise the godly sign received by the lucky winner of the games, which mutates his previous nature, turning him from a simple mortal into a glorified, cleansed and sacred individual. The belief that the feasting is owed to the god is also indicated in the 'stefanoforia'⁶¹, the march held in honor of the crowned athlete, and in the return of the wreath to the god through depositing the sacred wreath on the wall of the temple of the god from whom it originated. This custom dates to the older years, when bronze tripods were presented to the victors as a prize, which the athletes were not allowed to take away from the altar but would devote them to the god. An athlete from Halikarnassos, in fact, who defied this law, was punished with his ostracism from the city and the altar, according to Herodotos⁶³.

The above beliefs become evident also in the laurel wreath of the Delphic games⁶⁴, which played an important role in the Oracle's prophecies. The laurel is linked with Apollo in many traditions⁶⁶, comprising the god's emblem⁶⁷, and his prophetic symbol⁶⁸. The winners of the god's games were crowned with a laurel wreath, but also the Pythia, Apollo's prophetess,

chewing a leaf of laurel, would be inspired with the prophecies of the Oracle, which for twelve whole centuries determined the Greek reality. Apollo himself established the laurel as the emblem of cleansing⁷⁰: he returned from Tempi in Thessaly, the place of his cleansing from the miasma of the killing of Python, crowned with the Tempi laurel while, holding in his right hand a branch of laurel, he founded the Oracle of Delphi and established the Pythian games⁷¹. Obviously, the god of purification appropriated the relevant rituals of the Tempi region in order to use them in the Delphi worship and give them a new and greater glow⁷². By putting himself to this process of catharsis and returning purified, with the sacred laurel, he indicated, with his own example, the obligation for purification. The victors of the Pythian games were crowned with laurel from the sacred tree from which the god himself was crowned when he was purified⁷³. Each time the laurel is brought from Tempi by the amphithalis koros, who for reasons of purity and purification, had to have both parents still living⁷⁴ and who, personifying Apollo, ran away to Tempi, from where he returned purified⁷⁵.

This laurel was considered "sacred"⁷⁶ and "purging"⁷⁷, comprising the personification of purification. At the same time, the laurel had incorporated in it the power to purify, transferring its sacred quality to everything that came into contact with it. Consequently, it transferred it to the winners of the games who, crowned with the godly laurel, acquired the privilege of becoming the chosen of the god. The power of the sacred tree cleansed them of all guilt, but mainly placed them under the protection of the god. The laurel branches, consequently, were brought from the purification rituals at Delphi to adorn the victors of the local games and to transfer to them the laurel's purifying power.

The branch of this sacred plant or tree, in these instances, comprises in a way the representation of the god himself, in other words it is an ierofania, or epiphany⁷⁸, having the same properties as the sacred votive offerings. It comprised the necessary excerpt of an important purifying ritual, whose roots traced back to primitive ideas, to the taboos. The belief of the primitive hunters of the Mesolithic and perhaps even the Paleolithic period in purification rituals before going hunting, for the purpose of cleansing themselves from the miasma of the animal's blood, is well known⁸⁰. These beliefs are the remnants of the first sacred votive offerings for the fertility of the earth, and the agricultural rituals during the period of humanity's agricultural economy. The magic rituals thus penetrated the worship of the gods and became sacred rituals, and in that sense they are "pro-theistic". The protheistic, magical customs are particularly linked in ancient Greece with agriculture, which during the pre-historic years must have comprised the most important or at least one of the most necessary sources of life resources, notes Nilsson. In addition, the olive branch continued to symbolize, in addition to cleanliness, the tranquility that emanates from purity, and by extension, internal peace. An olive branch revealed to Noah the end of the storm, salvation. The olive grove is reminiscent of a place of worship and tranquility, a place of deep communication with the higher forces, a place of worship, such as Mount Olive. In general throughout the world, the branches of the olive tree symbolize the supreme modern-day necessity: political and social peace. Through all this one observes, through the course of thought, a subsequent passage from the magical beliefs to religious beliefs, and from the metaphysical to higher theories, with a simultaneous incorporation and rationalization of the idea from the world of magic to the world of religion.

The crowning ceremony for the games victor has another symbolism, as it is reminiscent of the crowning ceremony of the Ancient king. At some stage of the archaic society, the king had a sacred character, as he was considered gifted with supernatural powers or comprised the incarnation of the deity.

The crowning of the victor and the ode on his return to the homeland have the ritual characteristics of the Roman "triumph", that is reminiscent of the glorified crowning of the archaic epochal king. The "epochal king" embodied the spirit of time, the demon "eniafton" in his local form, the "Agathos" daemon who embodied the spirit of time at the agricultural

stage, influencing vegetation and the crop⁸⁴. His kingdom ended, and he had to either be put to death or the godly blessing be renewed, every nine years (ennaetiris)⁸⁵. The crowning wreath of the kings purified them from all guilt and protected them from all evil, cleansing, through them, the community as well from sins, since the kings represented the society. The Games of this type probably in their most ancient function, originate from ancient competitions of the initiation rituals of 'coming of age'. In other words, the ancient puberty initiation rituals, in which the adolescents' entry among the ranks of the adults is accepted. This sacredness is transferred to the ancient epochal king (by epochal meaning for a term lasting a specific length of time) and is reflected up to the classical years to the victor of the Sacred Games, who reaches the limits of a god⁸⁷. The crowning ceremony alters the nature of the victor, upgrading his earlier quality, as he evolves from an athlete into a hero of vegetation, and into a 'god of May', as he is called by Lèvêque (1982)⁸⁸.

The latter maintains that the ritual of the Games in its entirety celebrates the aenaos return, the perpetual renewal of nature, which is the source of life. These functions of renewal and reproduction of nature are mainly explained in the framework of a fertility religion, whose origins trace back to the East of the Neolithic Period, and which was definitively brought to Greece by the Achaians. It is clear that, since that period and up to the calendarial starting point of the Olympic Games (776 B.C.), numerous cultural developments and changes occurred, just as it is clear that the intellectual element of the Games is found deep within a long-term collective intellectual pondering. In other words, Olympia is at the centre of multiple cultural influences, but also manifests the compository capability of the new and dynamic people to take cultural and ethnological elements of the early era and to preserve in the historic period everything that suited their own way of life, giving them a national and specific character. Thus, Olympia became a melting pot of civilizations where, taking on foreign elements, it 'hellenised' them in a way that is perhaps unique in history. Tree worship has played a very important role in the religious history of the wild tribes of Europe, maintains Frazer (1911-1915). The sacred branch that brings life and fertility still plays an important role in the agricultural traditions of modern-day Europe, but also of the other continents. The same holds true for the renovative force of the tree. Thus the ballplayers of the Cherokee Indian tribe wash their bodies with water from the roots of the cat wood plant in order to have strong muscles. Similar ritual elements survive today in Greece, too. The beneficial power that lives inside the sacred branch is in effect in many of the most important moments in life, such as the wreath of the wedding ceremony. Similar perceptions are traced in various customs, such as the May Day branch or wreath, the religious and therapeutic properties of laurel, the palm leaves and the olive branch, Christ being welcomed with palm branches on Palm Sunday, perhaps the Christmas tree, as well as other customs which, via Christianity, have pervaded Greek society today. All these disclose a silent esoteric sequence in human manifestations, and a deep, underlying passage of the world's course, from magic to religion, and from fantasy to reason. No matter how much one speaks of a gradual maturation of civilization, there is, however, among the so different stages of humanity, a common denominator that unites the various approaches: Man has always sought the same thing with passion: the quest for truth, which is identified with the quest for knowledge, which, as Frazer (1911-1915) notes (*The Golden Bough*, vol. A), is the most noble and powerful means for improvement of human destiny.

3 Conclusion

The wreath of the competition winners has, as such, different moral symbolisms, some of which have been lost with the passage of time while others survived and have been passed on to the present. These symbolisms trace back to the age of mythology, back to when every natural phenomenon took on metaphysical dimensions.

These magical interpretations are the remnants of tree worship, then when the non-civilized man believed in the theory of "animism"¹⁰¹. Later, these theories of the beneficial effects of the sacred branch or protection from bad influences were concealed under an agricultural nature of the economy and corresponding beliefs were incorporated. Later, animism evolved into poly-theism, giving religious content to these perceptions, such as that of forgiveness, an idea that does not belong to the field of magic, but religion. Other important values are those of chastity, of catharsis, and the symbol of world peace, that survive to our days, despite their tough competition from the financial value that athletic victories mean today. In general, however, the symbolisms and above interpretations of the competition victor's crowning wreath confirm the theory that athletics is a "microcosm" and a mirror of social development that reflects the course of society.

Due to space reasons the notes cannot be printed and, if necessary, can be asked for from the author.

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