1

AN INTRODUCTION TO OLYMPIC VICTOR LISTS

1.1. THREE QUESTIONS

For on the day of judgement the Holy One will judge his world as it says, "For by fire will the Lord execute judgement." And the fire will increase to fifteen cubits above Mt. Tabor, and above the highest of all mountains, the mountain called Olympus. For from that mountain the Greeks made the reckoning of the Olympiads. For each four years they would ascend Mount Olympus, and they would write their victories in the dust of the soft earth which was on the mountain. (*Signs of the Judgement*, Hebrew version, 257r.3–8)[1]

The anonymous Christian author who wrote *Signs of the Judgement* eloquently expresses, albeit in a poetic and slightly confused way, the importance ancient Greeks attached to recording the names of victors in the Olympic Games. Indeed, Olympic victor lists were documents of considerable importance in the ancient world. Nevertheless, they remain largely unknown even among classicists. It may be helpful, therefore, to begin by answering three basic questions I have been repeatedly asked during the time that I have worked on this project: What, exactly, was an Olympic victor list? What sort of textual evidence is available? Why are Olympic victor lists of more than passing interest?

In its original and most basic form, an Olympic victor list was a cumulative catalog of victors at the Olympic Games. These catalogs began with the Olympics held in the year corresponding to 776 BCE

[1] The translation is taken from Stone 1981, which should also be consulted for information on date and authorship.

and continued to the time they were compiled. Hippias of Elis assembled the first Olympic victor list sometime around 400 as part of a larger work on the history of Olympia and the Olympic Games. By the Roman period, Olympic victor lists covered more than 200 Olympiads and contained the names of well over 2,000 athletes. Information about individual Olympic victors appeared in other types of literature such as local histories of Elis and treatises on athletic contests. It is, however, important to avoid conflating works that include scattered information about specific athletes with those that contain cumulative catalogs of Olympic victors. To do so would be to group together a large number of texts that have little in common. Only those works that offer catalogs of victors for multiple Olympiads can properly be described as Olympic victor lists.[2]

Olympic victor lists would have remained little more than a curiosity had it not been for the fact that Olympiads proved to be a convenient means of reckoning time. Starting in the fourth century, numbered Olympiads and the names of victors in the *stadion* (a short footrace) at those Olympiads became the basis of a widely used system for identifying individual years. As a result, the Olympic victor list became a useful, chronologically ordered framework that was utilized by both chronographers and historians. Chronographers took the Olympic victor list and added the names of magistrates and kings that served as the bases of other dating systems. Historians added notes about important events that took place during each Olympiad. Numerous different versions of the Olympic victor list came into being as successive chronographers and historians updated the catalog of victors and made choices about how much and what kind of information to attach. Some sense of the varied nature of Olympic victor lists can be had from the fact that the

[2] Historical works based on numbered Olympiads without named Olympic victors are for obvious reasons not discussed here. The most well-known example of such a work is Polybius' *Historiae*, in which each Olympiad is generally covered in two books and in which numbered Olympiads are used as date markers on numerous occasions. Polybius does not, however, name the corresponding Olympic victors, so the *Historiae* is not an Olympic victor list. On the structure of the *Historiae*, see Marincola 2001, 116–24. Another relevant example can be found in the *Historiae* of Posidonius, who probably organized his historical work in the same fashion as Polybius. See Malitz 1983, 60–74.

shortest version took up less than a single book, whereas the longest versions occupied twenty books or more.[3] Ancient Greeks used the word *Olympionikai* to describe Olympic victor lists of all varieties, and these two terms are used interchangeably here.

The history of Olympic victor lists extends from the work of Hippias of Elis in the late fifth century BCE to that of Panodoros in the beginning of the fifth century CE.[4] The roster of authors who are known to have written *Olympionikai* includes Aristotle, Cassius Longinus, Castor of Rhodes, Ctesicles of Athens, Dexippus of Athens, Diodorus Siculus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Eratosthenes, Eusebius of Caesarea, Hippias, Panodoros, Philochorus of Athens, Phlegon of Tralleis, Scopas, Sextus Julius Africanus, Thallus, and Timaeus of Tauromenium. The large number of *Olympionikai* that were compiled and their wide circulation is evident from the fact that the extensive papyrus finds from Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, an unexceptional city on the edge of the Greek world, include three different Olympic victor lists.

Only a fraction of the *Olympionikai* produced by ancient authors has come down to us, but the sum total of the extant text is nonetheless considerable. The *Olympionikai* of Eusebius, Diodorus Siculus, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus survive in something close to their original form. The only complete Olympic victor list extant is the catalog of winners in the *stadion* at Olympiads 1–249 found in Eusebius' *Chronographia*.[5] Diodorus' *Bibliotheca Historica* originally supplied the

[3] Because most Olympic victor lists survive in a fragmentary state, we are largely dependent on statements by ancient authors for information about their length. Those statements typically do nothing more than specify a number of books. The length of a book in an ancient prose work was generally in the neighborhood of 2,000 lines. There was, however, considerable variation, with the shortest books running to about 1,100 lines, the longest to more than 5,500. Even within individual works books could vary widely in length. Book 6 of Pausanias' *Graeciae Descriptio* contains 2,500 lines, Book 8 4,172. On book lengths, see Birt 1959 (1882), 307–41.

[4] Panodoros worked with his contemporary Annianos, but the precise nature of their association remains unclear. In the interests of simplicity, their joint efforts are here ascribed solely to Panodoros. For further discussion, see Sections 4.1–4.

[5] Eusebius produced a chronographic study in two books called the *Chronika*. The books were almost independent works, so each had its own preface and title. The first book was called the *Chronographia*, the second the *Chronikoi Kanones*. The Olympic victor list appeared only in the *Chronographia*.

names of *stadion* victors in the first 180 Olympiads, but the preserved sections of the work cover only the mythological period (before the beginning of the Olympics) and the 75th to the 119th Olympiads. Dionysius' *Antiquitates Romanae* originally supplied the names of *stadion* victors in the 68th to 129th Olympiads, but the preserved sections of the work end in the 85th Olympiad.[6] We also have lengthy fragments of *Olympionikai* by Castor, Phlegon, and the anonymous authors of *POxy* I 12, II 222, and XVII 2082. Numerous short fragments from about fifteen other *Olympionikai* are extant.

Olympic victor lists are of great interest to the modern scholar for five reasons. First, *Olympionikai* constitute a particular, well-defined type of literary work that has heretofore received little attention. Olympic victor lists came into being at a relatively late date and were never intended for performance, so it would be inappropriate to identify them as constituting a distinct literary genre, as that term is currently understood.[7] At the same time, *Olympionikai* served a specific range of functions and were a recognized and recognizable type of text with an expected constellation of features. There is, however, a tendency to treat each version of the Olympic victor list separately or in relation to one or two other such works, rather than collectively. Careful study of the surviving fragments of *Olympionikai* as a group makes it possible to add a small but important dimension to the current understanding of ancient Greek literary activity.

Second, Olympic victor lists present intriguing interpretive possibilities, many of which have never been properly explored. Among Foucault's intellectual legacies is the now widely accepted belief that the way humans organize and present knowledge reflects and affects their understanding of the world around them and the power structures of the society in which they live. More specifically, texts that systematize knowledge necessarily impose an order on the material they contain, an order that enshrines a particular worldview. *Olympionikai*, especially those *Olympionikai* that included historical

[6] The last *stadion* victor named is Crison, in the 83rd Olympiad. Fragments of the missing sections of both Diodorus' and Dionysius' histories survive, but not enough to complete their victor lists.

[7] On ancient and modern definitions of genre, see Conte 1994, 105–28. On genre in ancient historiography, see Marincola 1999.

notices, were by their very nature a means of systematizing knowledge. Olympic victor lists were structured in such a way as to create a uniform, endlessly extensible temporal grid based on the Olympic Games, which were a powerful symbol of Hellenic tradition and identity throughout classical antiquity. As a result, *Olympionikai* had a special attraction for authors of the Hellenistic and Roman periods interested in the relationship between past and present, Greek and non-Greek. What might seem to be a simple literary form can thus offer important insights into evolving *mentalités*.[8]

Third, *Olympionikai* were one of the means by which literate Greeks familiarized themselves with recent events in the Mediterranean basin. In the era before the printing press or electronic communications, there was a need for compact summaries of important happenings that could be easily updated.[9] This need was felt with particular urgency among Greeks, who were dispersed over an unusually large geographical area. The Greeks, like other premodern, literate cultures, responded by producing simply organized historical chronicles, and the Olympic victor list proved to be very useful for this purpose.[10] The resulting chronicles were organized on a strictly chronological basis and were internally divided on the basis of Olympiads. It was difficult to produce such a work with a larger narrative structure and clear ending. As Hayden White has noted, "The chronicle . . . often seems to wish to tell a story, aspires to narrativity, but typically fails to achieve it. More specifically, the chronicle usually is marked by a failure to achieve narrative closure. It does not so much conclude as simply terminate . . . *in medias res*, in the chronicler's own present. . . ."[11] The absence of a clear narrative structure was advantageous in that new chronicles organized around Olympiads could be quickly produced by copying some or all of the contents of earlier accounts and adding more recent

[8] For a discussion of the relevant parts of Foucault's work, see Smart 1985, 18–70. For the intellectual background to Foucault's work, see Burke 2000, 1–17. For a discussion of the potential interpretive importance of systematizing texts from classical antiquity, see König 2005, 1–44.

[9] On the dissemination of information in the classical world, see Lewis 1992 and Riepl 1913.

[10] For one significant comparandum, see Spiegel 1978 on chronicle writing in medieval France.

[11] White 1987, 5.

information to the end. We have fragments from twelve historical chronicles of this sort, and it is clear that they were quite popular in the ancient world. As a result, an exploration of Olympic victor lists can provide a glimpse of one of the ways Greeks learned about their world.

Fourth, Olympic victor lists were the basis of a widely used time-reckoning system and thus are critical to our understanding of the chronological underpinnings of Greek history. The reliability of the early parts of the Olympic victor list was the subject of vigorous, but ultimately inconclusive, debate in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scholarship that has appeared since that time makes it possible to revisit this debate and to resolve many previously contentious issues such as the source of the date of 776 for the first Olympics. These issues are of potentially great significance because minor changes in our understanding of chronology can have major interpretive ramifications that impinge on such disparate issues as the conquest of Messenia by the Spartans and the introduction of athletic nudity. Finally, Olympic victor lists are a key source of information about the history of Greek athletics, a subject of enduring interest to both scholars and the general public.

Given the importance of *Olympionikai* and the large amount of textual evidence that is available, one might think that Olympic victor lists would have been the subject of monographic treatment in the past. In fact, no such treatment has ever been produced, nor have all the extant fragments of *Olympionikai* ever been collected in a single publication.[12] The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but they would at minimum include the fact that a thorough study of the Olympic victor lists requires a firm grounding in both Greek chronology and the history of Greek athletics. Felix Jacoby, for instance, demurred writing a detailed study of Hippias' *Olympionikai* on the grounds that such a study would require a full consideration of the *Grundlagen* of Greek chronology.[13] The quantity and quality of the scholarly literature

[12] Luigi Moretti assembled a list of the names of all known Olympic victors but did not print the source texts on which his list is based (Moretti 1957).

[13] Jacoby 1923–58, 3b1: 223. The emphasis that Jacoby and others placed on the work of the fifth-century "founders" of Greek historiography has probably also contributed to the neglect of *Olympionikai*. For the importance of Jacoby and his predecessor Eduard

on chronology and on athletics have improved considerably in the past half century, removing what may have been perceived as an insuperable obstacle.

Most of the important scholarly literature on Olympic victor lists consists of short studies dating to the period before World War II. The standard treatments remain the ten pages that Julius Jüthner devoted to *Olympionikai* in his 1909 commentary on Philostratus' *De Gymnastica* and the surprisingly brief discussion found in Jacoby's *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*.[14] The one aspect of Olympic victor lists that has attracted continuing attention from scholars, the first of whom was none other than Isaac Newton, has been the reliability of the names and dates in the early parts of the list. Articles continue to appear on this subject, but the parameters of the debate have not changed significantly in close to a century, and recent work has done little more than stir up old embers.

The time is ripe, therefore, for a systematic study of Olympic victor lists. *Olympionikai* have remained largely unknown in no small part due to the scattering of the relevant texts and scholarship in publications that have appeared over the course of more than two centuries. My goal in writing this book has been to bring together all of this material and to present it in a fashion that enables readers to work through it with relative ease. This is an overtly preliminary study that makes no claim to exhausting the interpretive possibilities of Olympic victor lists. Rather, my hope is that this book will facilitate future research on *Olympionikai*.

Before proceeding further, a few words on organization are in order. The remainder of this chapter supplies brief introductions to Greek chronography (Section 1.2) and to Panhellenic athletic festivals (1.3), a basic understanding of which is a prerequisite for any serious discussion

Schwartz in enshrining a relatively negative view of Hellenistic historiography, see Strasburger 1977. Another possible factor is the tendency to value narrative history over chronicles, on which see White 1987, 1–25.

[14] Jüthner 1909, 60–70 and Jacoby 1923–58, 3b1: 221–8. Gustav Gilbert's treatise on Olympic victor lists is at points strikingly insightful (Gilbert 1875). It is, however, only ten pages long and is thoroughly out of date because it was written before the excavations at Olympia and the publication of the papyrus finds from Oxyrhynchus. Bengtson's brief but widely cited comments on Olympic victor lists derive directly from Jüthner (Bengtson 1983, 21–5).

of Olympic victor lists. Those knowledgeable in these areas may find it expedient to move directly to Section 1.4, which contains a capsule history of Olympic victor lists and samples of different types of *Olympionikai*. Chapter 2 offers a detailed study of Hippias' *Olympionikai*, including the sources on which Hippias drew in compiling his victor catalog and hence the reliability of the early parts of the Olympic victor list. Chapter 3 treats *Olympionikai* that included both a victor catalog and extensive material on Olympia and the Olympic Games. Chapter 4 examines Olympic victor lists compiled by chronographers; Chapter 5 focuses on Olympic victor lists compiled by historians. Chapter 6 returns to the question of why *Olympionikai* repay careful attention. The reasons for arranging the material in this manner are discussed in Section 1.4.

A collection of all the known fragments of Olympic victor lists and the relevant testimonia can be found in Appendices 1 through 5. In order to avoid repetition, the fragments of *Olympionikai* treated in the main text are for the most part given in English translation only. References to the appropriate appendices are supplied to guide the reader to the Greek text. Appendices 6 through 15 contain treatments of various technical issues. I have placed this material in appendices because it supports and supplements the discussion in the main text while being sufficiently removed from the primary narrative as to be potentially distracting. Here again appropriate references are supplied to guide the reader.

1.2. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO GREEK CHRONOGRAPHY

Prior to the fifth century, Greeks did not have any system of absolute chronology that was used beyond the boundaries of a single *polis*.[15] Moreover, even systems used only within individual *poleis* were

[15] A system of absolute chronology consists of an uninterrupted series of time units, each occupying a known, fixed span, and thus provides a uniform chronological scale. See Bickerman 1980, 62–79. The overview of the development of time-reckoning systems in ancient Greece given here is based on Ginzel 1906–14, 2: 350–60; Holford-Strevens 2005, 108–30; Mosshammer 1979, 84–127; and Samuel 1972, 189–248.

rare or perhaps nonexistent through the entirety of the Archaic period.[16] Indeed, Alden Mosshammer has argued that "there was not . . . a sense of historical time at all" before the fifth century.[17] Starting at the end of the sixth century, Greeks began showing an interest in developing systems capable of clearly quantifying temporal distance. Sometime around 500 Hecataeus of Miletus published his *Genealogiai*, which presented a rationalized account of the progression of generations in Greek myth. By establishing generational relationships among various mythological and historical figures, Hecataeus placed those figures into a chronological relationship. Although generational reckoning was a blunt instrument, the imposition of a fixed sequence of generations represented a major advance in imposing a uniform temporal grid on past and present.[18]

The next significant step was taken in the last third of the fifth century, when Greek communities began to identify individual years by reference to the name of an eponymous magistrate. The calculation of temporal distance between two events required a continuous list of magistrates so that the number of intervening eponyms could be counted. Most *poleis* eventually marked years on the basis of eponyms. This produced a bewildering array of time-reckoning arrangements, because each *polis* used its own magistrates as a reference point.

The multiplicity of eponym systems presented a serious problem for Greek authors interested in specifying dates in a fashion

[16] Ancient Greek history is frequently divided by modern scholars into the following periods: Geometric (900–700 BCE), Archaic (700–480), Classical (480–323), and Hellenistic (323–31).

[17] Mosshammer 1979, 85. The development in ancient Greece of what Mosshammer calls a sense of historical time has been the subject of much discussion. See Möller and Luraghi 1995 and Momigliano 1977, 179–204.

[18] On the mechanics of generational reckoning in ancient Greece, see Ball 1979; den Boer 1954, 5–54; and Prakken 1943, 1–48. Generational reckoning remained important even after the development of more precise means of measuring time because of the need to assign dates on a *post eventum* basis. On this subject, see Burn 1935. The chronographic significance of Hecataeus' work is a subject of some debate. Meyer believed that Hecataeus used generational relationships to date events (Meyer 1892, 1: 169–88). A number of scholars, including most recently Bertelli, have argued that Hecataeus did not exploit the chronographic potential of his genealogies. On Hecataeus, see Bertelli 2001; Hornblower 1994, 7–16; Jacoby 1912; and the bibliography cited therein.

comprehensible to large numbers of readers. One solution was to utilize the names of officials from three particularly influential communities, Sparta, Athens, and Argos, all of which seem to have developed eponym-based time-reckoning systems at an early date. Spartans began identifying years using the names of their ephors shortly after 440, and a list of Spartan kings and ephors was compiled, possibly by Charon of Lampsacus, at about this time. The Athenians employed the names of their archons for this purpose, and the Athenian archon list was inscribed on marble *stelai* and put on display in the agora sometime in the last quarter of the fifth century. In the second half of the fifth century, Hellanicus of Lesbos assembled a continuous list of the priestesses of Hera at Argos and specified the number of years that each priestess held the office. For each year thus defined, he listed events that took place in various parts of Greece.[19]

It is against this background that the initial compilation of the Olympic victor list must be understood. Hippias compiled the first complete list of Olympic victors sometime around 400. Hippias' catalog of Olympic victors was probably framed around an unnumbered series of *stadion* victors who functioned as eponyms, the same format used for the lists of Spartan ephors, Athenian archons, and priestesses of Hera. A fragment of the historian Philistus of Syracuse shows that Olympic *stadion* victors were being used as chronological referents in the first half of the fourth century. This indicates that the chronographic potential of Hippias' list of *stadion* victors was rapidly exploited.[20]

Once various systems of absolute dating had been established, it became necessary to clarify the relationship among those systems so that dates expressed in one fashion could be compared with those expressed in another. This was accomplished in the late fourth or early third century by Timaeus of Tauromenium who, according to Polybius, "matches the ephors with the kings of Sparta starting from the earliest times and sets the lists of Athenian archons and priestesses of Argos alongside the list of Olympic victors . . ." (12.11.1; see Appendix 4.2 for the Greek text).

[19] See Section 2.5 for further discussion of eponym lists and relevant bibliography.
[20] See Sections 2.1 and 2.5 for further discussion of the Philistus fragment.