

NEMEAN PANHELLENIC GAMES

The Nemean Games, one of the four Panhellenic Games of Ancient Greece, were held at Nemea every two or three years in honor of Zeus. The winners received a wreath of wild celery leaves from the city of Argos.

Legends and History

A legend describes Hercules as the founder of the games. All other legends however, as well as Scholiasts (Pindar, Pausanias, Apollodorus), agree in stating that the Nemea were originally instituted by the "Seven against Thebes" in commemoration of the death of the child Opheltes, afterwards called Archemorus (the forerunner of death). When the Seven arrived at Nemea, and were very thirsty, they met Hypsipile who was carrying Opheltes, the child of the priest of Zeus and Eurydice. While she showed to the heroes the way to the nearest well, she left the child behind lying in a meadow and during her absence was killed by a dragon. When the Seven on their return saw the accident, they slew the dragon and instituted funeral games to be held in Opheltes honor, every third year.

The games were at first of a warlike character and only warriors and their sons were allowed to take part in them; subsequently, however, they were thrown open to all the Greeks. The games took place in a grove, and included horse-racing, running in armor in the stadium, wrestling, chariot racing, discus throwing, boxing spear-throwing, archery as well as musical contests.

It seems that for a time the celebration of the Nemea was neglected, and that they were revived in the Olympiad of 573 BC, from which time the Roman Historian Eusebius dates the first Nemead. Henceforth they were for a long time celebrated regularly twice in every Olympiad. At the start of every second Olympic year in the winter, and soon after the start of every fourth Olympic year in the summer. About the time of the Battle of Marathon, it became customary in Argolis to reckon according to Nemeads.

The games went ahead during the Hellenistic time. Later on, the Roman emperor Hadrian restored the horse-racing of boys at the Nemea, which had fallen into disuse. But after his time they do not seem to have been much longer celebrated, as they are no longer mentioned by any of the writers of the subsequent period.

The Modern Nemean Games

The Society for the Revival of the Nemean Games was founded in 1994, after more than 20 years of archaeological excavation at Nemea. The contemporary games, held every four years since 1996, are a form of popular education in history, as well as a counter to the commercialism of the modern Olympics. Races are organized according to age and gender and are open to international participation. No medals are awarded, only crowns of palm branches and wild celery.

In 2008, some 600 people clad in tunics raced barefoot in the ruins of the ancient stadium on June 21. Two races were staged for the runners aged from 10 to 80, one of

100 meters (110 yards) and the other of 7.5 kilometers. The most striking feature of this attempt was the revival of the “Hoplitodromos” race.

