

Save Ancient Studies Alliance

Summer 2021 Texts-in-Translation Reading Group

## The Ancient Olympic Games



[the entryway leading to the stadium at Olympia; Wikimedia Common]

Want to know what it takes to win at the Olympic Games? Thousands of dreamy-eyed athletes for millennia have sought the answers to this question. With the 2021 Tokyo Games around the corner (or perhaps not!), now is the time to read up on how the ancient Olympic Games worked, their significance in the world of ancient and modern sport, and why we cannot help but look away from scenes of competition. In this reading group, we will discuss the origins of the ancient Olympic Games, learn about the various competitions that took place (some might surprise you), and explore some curious, bizarre, and inspiring stories told by ancient Greek and Roman authors about the brutal, glorious, and downright dangerous games. Together, we will find out just what makes an Olympian.

Thursdays at 4pm EST

Reading Group Facilitator:  
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University of California, Riverside

**Location: (Provided by SASA)**

Zoom Meeting Link

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82235821565>

Zoom Meeting ID

822 3582 1565

Zoom Meeting Password

478309

**Texts:** I will provide links to free online translations of selected passages below in the “Reading Schedule.” There are no English language sourcebooks on the Olympic Games specifically, but there are many general works about Greek athletics. Some titles worth your attention include:

Miller, Stephen G. 2012. *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Sweet, Waldo E. 1987. *Sport and Recreation in Ancient Greece*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Reading Schedule:**

**Week 1 (Myths and Origins of the Ancient Olympics)**

July 1 @ 4pm EST

- Pindar, *Olympian*, 1.65ff (Pelops/Oenomaus/Hippodamia)
  - Compare with *Olympian*, 2.1-4 (Dactylian(?) Heracles)
- Pausanias, *Description of Greece*,
  - [5.4.5-6](#) (Lycurgus/Iphitus)
  - [5.7.6-10](#) (Dactylian Heracles)
  - [5.8.5-6](#) (Iphitus/Coroebus)
  - [8.26.4](#) (Iphitus/Coroebus)

- Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Epitome*, 2.3-9 (Pelops/Oenomaus/Hippodamia)
- Strabo, *Geography*, 8.3.33 (Elis/Iphitus/Pisa/Pheidon)
- Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, 1.1-3 (Lycurgus/Iphitus)
- Plutarch, *Numa*, 1.6; Hippias of *Brill's New Jacoby* 6 F2: "It is difficult to establish these chronological matters [sc. relating to Numa's lifetime [Numa was the legendary 2<sup>nd</sup> king of Rome] with exactitude and in particular if one resorts to the chronology of the Olympic victors, whose list – we are told – had been published late by Hippias of Elis, who was unable to base it on any cogent data."
- Phlegon of Tralles, *Brill's New Jacoby* 257 F1

(1) *On the Olympics*, by Phlegon, freedman of Hadrian Caesar. It seems to me I ought to report the reason why it so happened that the Olympics were instituted. It is this: after Peisos and Pelops, and even Herakles, who first established the festival and competition of the Olympics, the Peloponnesians abandoning the observance for a period which lasted from the eighth Olympiad, of Iphitos, to the twentieth, of Koroibos the Elean, and when the games were neglected, there was unrest throughout the Peloponnesos. (2) The Spartan Lykourgos, being the son of Prytanis, son of Eurypon, son of Sous, son of Prokles, son of Aristodemos, son of Kleodaios, son of Hyllos, son of Herakles and Deianeira, and Iphitos the son of Haimon (according to some the son of Praxionidos), descended from one of the Heraklids, an Elean, and Kleosthenes the son of Kleonikos, a Pisatan, wishing to restore harmony and peace among the people again, decided to bring back the Olympic festival according to the old rite and to hold an athletic contest. (3) They sent to Delphi to ask the god whether he approved that they should do these two things. And the god said that it would be better if they did these things. He commanded them to declare a truce in the cities wishing to take part in the competition. (4) These things were proclaimed around Hellas and the discus was inscribed for the Hellenodikai, which commanded them to hold the Olympic Games. (5) But when the Peloponnesians obstinately refused to accept the competition, a pestilence arose and they were sorely afflicted by a blight on their crops. So once again they dispatched Lykourgos and his associates to ask for an end to the pestilence, and a cure. (6) The Pythian Odes delivered this oracle: 'Ye who dwell on the Pelopian acropolis, famous throughout the entire earth, and best ambassadors of all mortal kind, take heed of this godly prophecy from me, which I deliver. Zeus has wrath against you regarding the festival, which he has nursed, because you dishonour the Olympics of omnipotent Zeus – which first Peisos founded and placed in honour; and after him Pelops, when he came to the land of Hellas, then established a festival and prizes for the dead Oinomaos; and third after them Herakles the son of Amphitryon performed a festival and competition for his dying uncle, the Tantalid Pelops, but now you entirely neglect this festival. So he is angry in his heart, and has stirred up a baneful famine and a pestilence against you, and to stop it, you must reinstate his old festival again'. (7) Hearing this, they informed the Peloponnesians. But they still did not believe the oracle, and once again sent and, by common decision, inquired in greater detail of the god about the prophecies. And the Pythia spoke as follows: 'Inhabitants of the Peloponnesos, go to the altar, make an offering, and obey whatever the seers say'. (8) The Peloponnesians changed their minds and decided, at these prophecies, to establish the Olympic contest at Elis and to declare an armistice in the cities. (9) And the Eleans, wishing after these things to aid the Spartans, who were besieging Helos, sent to Delphi and consulted the oracle. And the Pythia pronounced these things: 'Inhabitants of Elis, restore the law of your fathers and redeem their homeland, leave off from battle, leading the Hellenes in just and common friendship, so that every fifth year be propitious'. At these prophecies they left off from making war, and took charge of the Olympics. (10) No one was crowned up to the fifth Olympiad, but in the sixth (756) it seemed right to consult the oracle about whether they should bestow wreaths on the victors, and they sent the king Iphitos to the (oracle of) the god. And the god said these things: 'Iphitos, place no fillet of sheep's wool on the victor, but put on the fruit of the wild-olive which now is covered with the delicate web of a spider'. (11) And so, going into Olympia, into the precinct where there were many wild-olive trees, he found one covered in spider-web and enclosed it, and the crown given for the victors is made of it. And the first crowned was Daikles the Messenian, who won the stadion at the seventh Olympiad (752).

- Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 14.37 (Iphitus)
- Eusebius, *Chronica*, 89.11: “776 BC. 1st Olympiad, in which Koroibos of Elis won the stadion. For this was the only contest in which they competed for thirteen Olympiads.”

## Week 2 (Athletic Contests; Heraia Games)

July 8 @ 4pm EST

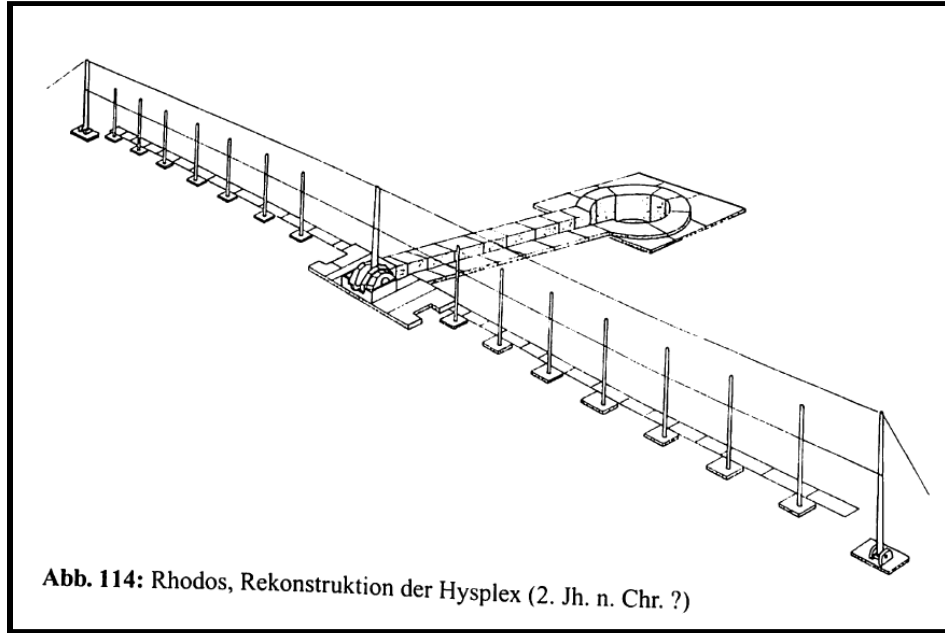
- On the addition of events at Olympia over time: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.8.5-11 (changes represented visually in this chart from Miller (2012) Appendix A)

I. THE EVENTS OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES AND THE DATE WHEN EACH WAS ADDED TO THE OLYMPIC PROGRAM	
<i>stadion</i>	776 B.C.
<i>diaulos</i>	724 B.C.
<i>dolichos</i>	720 B.C.
<i>pentathlon</i>	708 B.C.
<i>pale</i>	708 B.C.
<i>pyx</i>	688 B.C.
<i>tethrippon</i>	680 B.C.
<i>pankration</i>	648 B.C.
<i>keles</i>	648 B.C.
<i>stadion for paides</i>	632 B.C.
<i>pale for paides</i>	632 B.C.
<i>pentathlon for paides</i>	628 B.C.
(dropped immediately)	
<i>pyx for paides</i>	616 B.C.
<i>hoplitodromos</i>	520 B.C.
<i>apene</i>	500 B.C.
(dropped in 444 B.C.)	
<i>kalpe</i>	496 B.C.
(dropped in 444 B.C.)	
<i>synoris</i>	408 B.C.
<i>salpinktes</i>	396 B.C.
<i>keryx</i>	396 B.C.
<i>tethrippon for poloi</i>	384 B.C.
<i>synoris for poloi</i>	264 B.C.
<i>keles for poloi</i>	256 B.C.
<i>pankration for paides</i>	200 B.C.

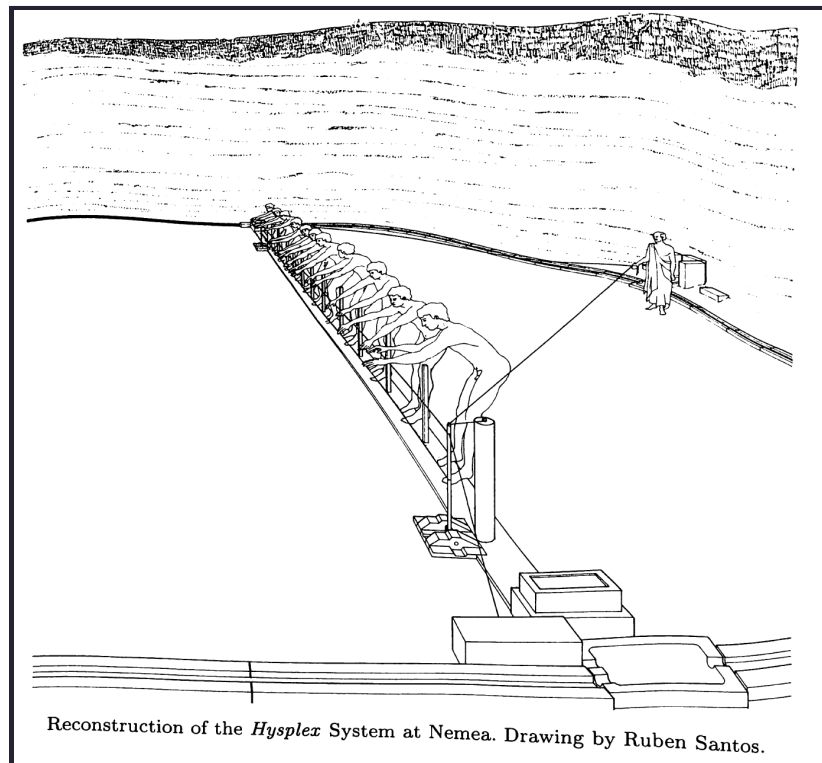
- Running Events (***stadion*** (1 stade length; ~200m), ***diaulos*** (lit. “double pipe,” 2 stade lengths; ~400m), ***dolichos*** (long distance race; ~4-5km), ***hoplitodromos*** (1 stade length in armor))
  - Miller #20: Philostratus the Elder, *On Gymnastics*, 32-33
  - Miller #21: Lucian, *On Slander*, 12

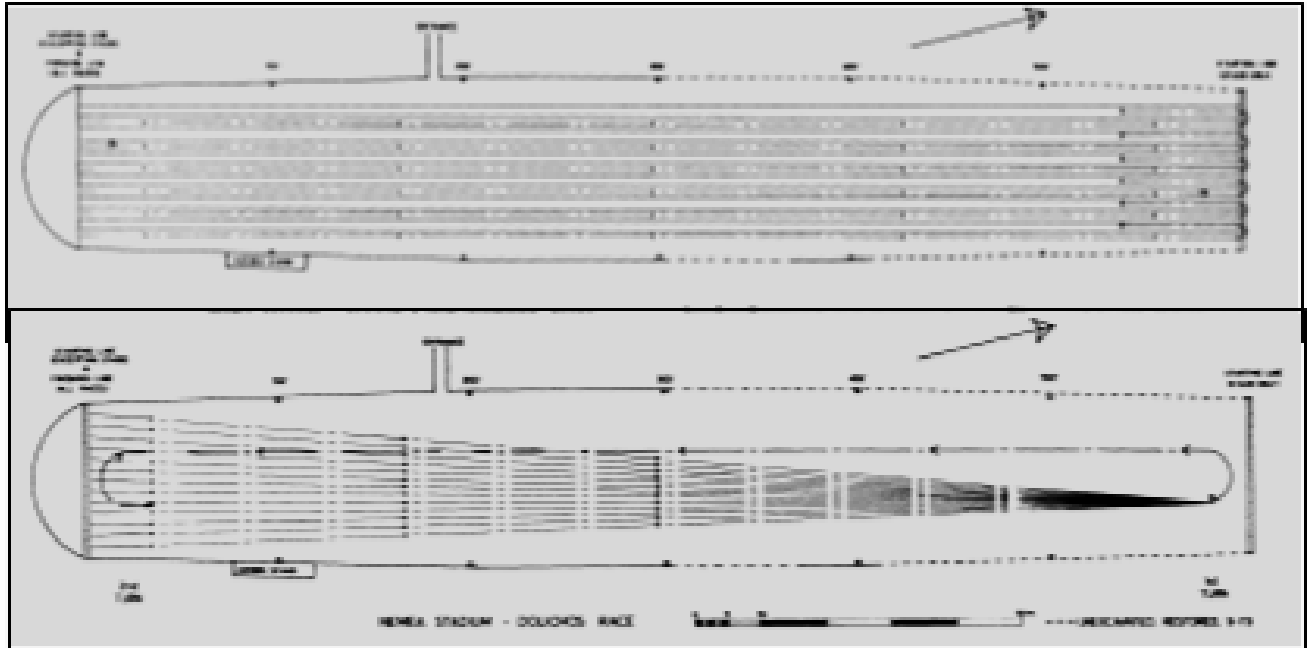


- Miller #23: Lucian, *Timon*, 20
- Miller #24: Greek Anthology, 11.86
- Miller #25: Plutarch, *Moralia*, 224F
- Miller #26: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.10.4
- Miller #27: *IG IV<sup>2</sup>*.1.618



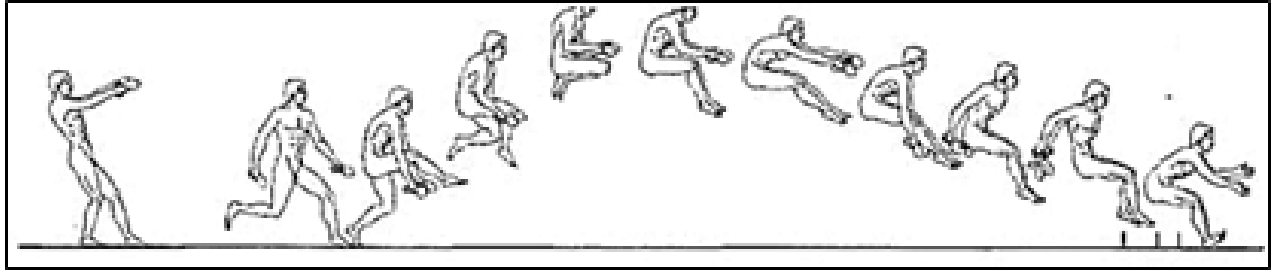
The *hysplex* was the starting gate for running events on the *stadion*.





Lanes and turning posts for the *diaulos* and *dolichos* races.

- Wrestling (*pale*)
  - [Miller #32](#): Philostratus the Elder, *On Gymnastics*, 35
  - [Miller #34](#): Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.4.3
- Boxing (*pyx*)
  - [Miller #173](#): Aelian, *Varia Historia*, 10.19
- **Pankration** (a mix of boxing and wrestling; modern MMA (mixed martial arts) is a good parallel)
  - [Miller #45](#): Philostratus the Younger, *Pictures in a Gallery*, 2.6
  - [Miller #46](#): Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.4.2
- **Pentathlon** (5 events: *akon* (javelin), *diskos* (discus), *halma* (long jump holding weights called a *halteres*), *dromos* (footrace; probably 1 stade length), and *pale* (wrestling))
  - [Miller #47](#): Philostratus the Elder, *On Gymnastics*, 31 and 35
  - [Miller #50](#): Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 3.11.6
  - [Miller #59](#): Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.7.10



The *halma* (long jump) using the *halteres* weight.

- Equestrian events (*keles* (single horseback race; 2 laps, ~2,600m), *tethrippon* (four-horse chariot race; 12 laps, ~14,000m), *kalpe* (race for mares), *apene* (race for mule cart race), *synoris* (two horse chariot race; 8 laps, ~9,500m))
  - Miller #67: Isocrates, *Team of Horses*, 32-35
  - Miller #69: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.20.10-19
  - Miller #70: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.10.7
  - Miller #71: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.13.9
  - Miller #72: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.9.2
- Herald (*keyx*)/trumpet contests (*salpinx*)
  - Miller #73: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.22.1
  - Miller #74: Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 10.414F-415A
- Women in the Olympics
  - Miller #149: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.6.7-8
  - Miller #150: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.20.8-9
  - Kyniska of Sparta
    - Miller #151a: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 3.8.1
    - Miller #151b: *IvO* 160
    - Miller #151c: Plutarch, *Life of Agesilaus*, 20.1
  - Belistiche of Macedonia
    - Miller #160: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.8.11
- Heraia Games ([Scanlon \(2014\)](#) provides a useful overview)
  - Miller #158: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.16.2-7

### Week 3 (Controversies and Judges)

July 15 @ 4pm EST

- Role of the *Hellanodikai* (lit. “Greek judges”)
  - Miller #83: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.23-24
  - Miller #84: Philostratus the Elder, *Life of Apollonius*, 5.43

- Miller #86: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.16.8
- Miller #90: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.24.9-10
- Miller #92: Herodotus, *Histories*, 5.22
- Miller #105: Herodotus, *Histories*, 2.160
- Miller #106: Lucian, *Hermotimos*, 39
- Miller #107: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.1.4-5
- Miller #109: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.9.4-6
- Miller #117: Lucian, *Portraiture Defended*, 11
- Fines and Penalties
  - Miller #101: *SEG* 48.541
  - Miller #103: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.21.2-4
  - Miller #108: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.3.7
  - Miller #166a: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.6.4-6
  - Miller #214: Philostratus the Elder, *On Gymnastics*, 45
  - Miller #236: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.21.5
- Deaths in the Games
  - Miller #38: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 8.40.4-5 (victory awarded to the dead Kreugas in boxing [NB: refers to the Nemean Games])
  - Miller #44: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 8.40.1 (victory awarded to Arrhacion in the *pankration*)
  - Miller #65: Plutarch, *Pericles*, 36.3 (Epitimos of Pharsalus killed by a javelin in the *pentathlon*)
  - Miller #164: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.9.6-7 (Cleomedes of Astypalaea)

#### **Week 4 (Political Encounters and Panhellenism at Olympia)**

July 22 @ 4pm EST

- The Spartan attack of 420 BC
  - Miller #238a: Thucydides, *Histories*, 5.49-50
  - Miller #238b: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.2.2
- “Non-Olympiads”: The Arcadian and Elean rivalry in 364 BC
  - Miller #241: Xenophon, *Hellenica*, 7.4.28
  - Miller #46: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.4.2
  - Miller #51: Xenophon, *Hellenica*, 7.4.29
  - Miller #239: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.20.4-5
- Olympic Truce?
  - Miller #85: Polybius, *Histories*, 4.73.6-10



- Miller #87: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.4.5-6
- Miller #89: Demosthenes, *On the Embassy*, 335
- Miller #232: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.2.1-2
- Greek Statesmen and Hellenistic Kings
  - Miller #142: Plutarch, *Themistocles*, 17.4 (Themistocles after Salamis)
  - Dionysius of Syracuse
    - Miller #225: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.2.6
    - Miller #245: Diodorus Siculus, *Library*, 14.109
  - Miller #246: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.20.9-10 (Philippeion at Olympia)
  - Miller #247: *IG IV<sup>2</sup> 1*, 69.70-73 (Philip II's Hellenic League meetings)
  - Miller #139: Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 4.9-11 (Alexander at the Olympics)
  - Miller #242: Plutarch, *Life of Aratus*, 28.3-4 [NB: concerns the Nemean Games]
  - Miller #140: Polybius, *Histories*, 27.9.3-13 (Ptolemy's Aristonikos vs. Kleitomachos))
- Augustus at Olympia:
  - Restored the Temple of Olympian Zeus:
    - [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C\\_R-6178](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_R-6178)
  - Massive Statue:
    - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/31068574@N05/31155938095/in/photostream/>
- Tiberius and members of his family win chariot race(s) at Olympia
  - I haven't been able to track down the citations for this
- The Emperor Nero
  - Miller #203: Suetonius, *Nero*, 22-25

### **Possible Topics for the Group to Choose:**

- Myths and Origins of the Ancient Olympics
- Athletic Contests (running, wrestling, boxing, *pankration*, *pentathlon*, equestrian events, herald/trumpet contests)
- Political and Military Encounters at the Olympics
- Rules, Judges, and Controversies
- Monuments and Archaeology of Olympia
- Pausanias' Description of Olympia
- Athletes, Coaches, and the Amateur/Professional Debate
- The Womens' Games for Hera at Olympia
- Panhellenism(?) and Olympia
- Victors, Awards, and Punishments

## A Very Select Bibliography:

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- Finley, M. I., and H. W. Pleket. 1976. *The Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Golden, Mark. 1998. *Sports and Society in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge.
- Kyle, Donald G. 2007. *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing. (esp. chapters 5 and 6)
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- Morgan, Catherine. *Athletes and Oracles. The transformation of Olympia and Delphi in the eighth century B.C.*, Cambridge 1990.
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### **Judges and Rules**

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