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The ancient and modern Nemean Games – the evolution of socio-cultural and political functions

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Summary

The aim of this article is both to describe the phenomenon of the ancient and modern Nemean Games and to present differences between sporting events held in the period B.C. and those which currently take place in Nemea. Political, cultural and touristic aspects, including their significance in different eras, are of particular interest to the authors of the paper. As will be stated, in ancient times, the Nemean Games performed mostly religious and political functions. Whereas, currently they play social, cultural and touristic roles, which translates into economic development of the region.

Keywords: Nemean Games, Nemea, sport, cultural heritage

The Nemean Games are one of four great Panhellenic Games (along with the Pythian, Isthmian and Olympic Games) which were held in ancient Greece. They were part of sporting and religious events in which athletes from all Greek cities took part [Miller 1995]. The aforementioned Games, called “the feast of all Greeks”, were not only supervised by Greek gods, but also organized in honor of them. One of the aims of these events was to regularly remind citizens about the cultural and ethnical unity of Greece and to present the polis’ best economic face to visitors. In ancient times, most polis would host their own sporting events, but only those four previously mentioned Games were panhellenic (i.e. national and for all citizens of Greece). The Panathenaic Games aspired to this panhellenic character, yet they were never considered national. Different types of Games, which honoured various gods, were also held in Epidaur, Alexandria, Tespiach, Sardes, Megalopolis and Pergamon [Liponski 2012, p. 93].

The aim of the article is both to describe the phenomenon of the ancient and modern Nemean Games and to present differences between sporting events held in the period BC and those which currently take place in Nemea. Political, cultural and touristic aspects, including their significance in different eras, are of particular interest to the authors of the present paper.

Materials and methods

Since academic performance may also serve social purposes, interdisciplinary academic knowledge was used to select the most crucial information with regards to the ancient and modern Nemean Games. While doing research, methods from the fields of pedagogy and history were used, mostly source analysis, in which content analysis techniques played a dominant role [Grabowski 2003, pp. 71-84]. To obtain the most up-to-date information concerning the research, in September 2015 a trip to Nemea was arranged in order to visit the archaeological museum and participate in a lecture from prof. Stephen G. Miller, who is a specialist in classical archaeology from the University of California, Berkeley. Another trip took place in 2016 so that the research could be completed and further observations could be made. Prof. Miller was asked questions as part of an individual in-depth interview, which is one of the basic techniques of quality research [Nicpon, Marzecki 2010, pp. 247-248]. The interview was conducted during a visit to the ruins and the former sporting stadium in company of Prof. Miller, who had been doing archaeological research in Nemea for many years. Unfortunately, Polish scholars have not brought up issues connected with the history and revival of the Nemean Games,

therefore the sources used to prepare the present paper were mostly foreign-language. The essential part of the article is, hence, based on academic writings from various countries. The seminal work which laid ground for the article is Stephen G. Miller's *Ancient Greek Athletics* [2004] which remains one of his most influential publications to date. A set of significant facts were taken from Panos Valavanis' *Games and Sanctuaries in Ancient Greece* [2004] that includes a chapter devoted to the history of the Nemean Games, particular games and sporting disciplines, as well as competitions and descriptions of Nemean buildings which are ruins now. A variety of brochures and folders were given to the authors during their stay in Nemea. The present paper, completed with key historical facts concerning the Nemean Games, should be seen as an introduction to further research on the issues below.

Nemean Geopolitics

Nemea is a Greek town located in an administrative unit of Peloponnese, Western Greece and Ionian Islands. It is part of the Peloponnese Peninsula in a regional unit of Corinth [Dabney, Halstead, Thomas 2004, p. 197]. Its name comes from a Greek word *nemos*, which refers to the natural environment and means: a pasture, a clearing or a green area within a forest [Valavanis 2004, p. 305]. In fact, today's Nemea fully fits this description. Historically, the region in question had a status of a neutral territory, for it was located on the borders of Argolis, Arcadia, Achaea and Corinthia which were settled by people of different political, religious and ethnic roots [Valavanis 2004, p. 305]. These circumstances likely served as an impulse to create an international religious center which would host games for all Greek citizens, regardless of their beliefs and values [Valavanis 2004, p. 305].

Similarly to other games, their mythological origins are touched upon in numerous legends. They were, for instance, held to commemorate Heracles' victory over the Nemean Lion [Liponski 2012, p. 92]. Initially, the Nemean Games were a funeral event in honor of Archemor, a god of nature. Yet, due to a large number of caves situated in the nearby mountains, a legend of Heracles and his first out of twelve labors, the slaying of the Nemean Lion, was brought up. Since the lion's skin was impervious to attack, Heracles defeated the beast by strangling it to death [Nabilou 2014, p. 878; *Nemea* 2016...]. In view of the significance of this act, the Nemean Games were later initiated. According to the Roman sources, Heracles created the Nemean Games to commemorate his father, Zeus, who helped him kill the lion [Graves 1955, p. 103-107]. There are other myths regarding the genesis of the Games which refer to King Likurgos, his wife Eurydice or Orpheus [Graves 1955, p. 15-21]. The Nemean Games were considered the least prestigious among the four Panhellenic Games [Liponski 2012, p. 92].

One of the anonymous inscriptions on Parian marble informs us that the first Nemean Games took place in

1251 BC, which makes them the oldest games regularly held in Greece [Liponski 2012, p. 2]. Nevertheless, the first reliable sources suggest that the earliest Nemean Games can be dated back to 573 BC when Argos took over the organization of the Games from Cleonae and developed them similar to the Olympic Games [Curtis 1886, p. 36]. Cleonae is a small town near Argos, whose activities supported the bigger center. Clerks who were working in Nemea were officially included into an administration of Argos [Miller 2004, p. 107]. Argos, Corinthia and Argolida were responsible for controlling and coordinating the ancient Nemean Games. Nemea was not associated with being a town at all as its territory was rather small. It was identified as place with a temple, which used to be coordinated by bigger centers [Miller 1975, p. 149].

The local politics were, therefore, based on organizing work in the field. Without schemes launched to improve it, there would be a possibility of wrong management. The spot directly related to hosting the Nemean Games, known as „the Sacred Area“ (due to a significant number of monuments, temples and a citrus grove) was called by Argives *epipola* [Miller 2004, p. 107]. There were also kitchens, canteens, changing rooms, baths and other rooms necessary to host the Games properly [Miller 2004, p. 107]. The central place at epipola was a temple of Zeus. This was not the Zeus who controlled thunder, but rather the Zeus who was a peaceful god identified with a shepherd [Miller 2004, p. 108].

Another story circles around the funeral games in honor of seven Greek leaders, known as Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, who died trying to restore Polynices' power in Thebes. The funerals of the three of them – Andrastus, Amfiaraos and Ofeltes – were to initiate the tradition of the Nemean Games. Unlike the rest of the Panhellenic Games, Nemeiad did not include many artistic events [Liponski 2012, p. 92].

Today's academics do not provide us with much information on what travelling to the Panhellenic Games looked like. This travelling, however, could be thought to be the beginning of sport tourism in Europe [Zauhar 2003]. It has been established, though, that participation in the Nemean Games was not easily affordable. In spite of the fact that sport played a crucial role for Greeks, a trip to a sporting event was very expensive for both athletes and spectators. Few sources regarding ancient Games tourism have survived to this day. What is known is that those sporting tourists struggled with problems including the hot weather, crowds, poor infrastructure (especially sanitary facilities and a lack of running water), heavy rainfalls, noise, bothersome insects, robberies and thefts, death and ecological issues. The trip was not always safe, even though the time of the Games was the time of truce (*Ekecheiria*). It used to be long and problematic due to Nemea being located in a hilly area of the Peloponnese. Travellers were moving mostly on foot (which took several days from Ath-

¹ Polynices was the son of Oedipus and Jocasta.

ens) using mules or donkeys. Horses were seldom used because they were expensive and people did not have saddles, the appropriate footwear and because the road caused difficulties for the animals. Wealthy citizens travelled by carriages or ships and yachts. Travelling by sea was not easy, though, for the chances of storms or pirate attacks were high. Trips could take weeks and ships did not operate according to any schedules. In the centers hosting the Games, the beginnings of infrastructure could be observed. Fans would spend a night in tents made from wood and leather, which formed a "tent city". There were not enough stands and seats. Hosting the Games contributed, however, to renovations of roads and bridges. Greek poleis were supposed to show their best side to create a positive image of the place in the eyes of the guests and to present the region as strong in terms of its economic standing and politics [information taken from the lectures given by prof. Nigel Crowther and prof. Ingomar Weiler during the 22nd and 23rd *International Seminar for Postgraduate Students*, which took place in September 2015 and 2016 in the International Olympic Academy in Olympia]. Moreover, the outskirts of the centers hosting the Games were scattered with tents, and some of the spectators would sleep outdoors. The concept of a hotel remained unknown at the time [Schnayder 1959].

Basic games in ancient Nemea

The Games hosted in Pythia, Isthmia, Olympia and Nemea were interrelated in terms of their schedules so that they did not all take place at the same time [Miller 2004, p. 111]. The best athletes of the ancient times were called *periodonikai* if, at least once in their lifetimes, they won each of the Greek Games [Miller 2004, p. 112]. The Nemean Games were held twice in a four-year Olympiad – in the second and forth year, in July or August. Almost all sports present at the Olympic Games were offered in Nemea – gymnastics competition, boxing, and racing in full armor for example [Miller 2004, p. 112]. According to F.A. Wright, the schedule of athletics at the Nemean Games outran the most optimal schedule of the Olympic Games [Wright 1925, p. 21]. In the Nemean program, there was a race which did not find its place in other Panhellenic Games called *hippi-os* (a horse race) [Miller: 2004, p. 32]. The challenge was to circle the Nemean stadium four times (about 800 meters). No further details or artistic reflections of this discipline in paintings and sculptures have been found [Miller 2004, p. 32]. The race of hoplites is also not sufficiently described in the sources, which is thought to have only been a part of the Nemean Games [Gardiner 1910, p. 225]. Reportedly, pentathlon was never included into the program [Miller 2004, p. 75].

One of the basic aspects which differentiated the Nemean Games from the others was the presence of an age division. Athletes were divided into three groups: children (from 12 to 16 years old), teenagers (from 16 to

20 years old) and adult men (over 20) [Valavanis 2004, p. 310]. For a long time, only men were allowed to compete, but over the course of time, female competitions were introduced into the agenda [Valavanis 2004, p. 310].

As with other Panhellenic Games, the Nemean Games served as an opportunity to declare a truce and put conflicts on hold so that every athlete and spectator traveling from afar could arrive at the destination safely [Tomlison 1972, p. 160]. Due to the fact that Nemea is situated in a hilly region that is difficult to reach, spectators were likely offered other attractions. A limited variety of sporting events could reduce the number of fans and athletes, so the program was enriched to meet the needs of Peloponnesians [Hart 1977, p. 31].

Excavation works in the 20th century

Initiated in Nemea in the 20th century, the excavation work provided a comprehensive image of a whole range of events which happened over two thousand years ago [Hart 1977, p. 31]. It was possible since the American School of Classical Studies obtained rights to carry out archaeological works in the 1920s. These proved to be extremely successful, especially due to B. H. Hill and C. W. Blegan's findings from 1924 and 1926 [Hart 1977, p. 31]. A considerable part of the temple of Zeus was found, a small part of the Nemean stadium was excavated and traces of the palaestra and gymnasium were identified [Miller 1975, p. 145]. Ruins, which proved the existence of these places, were found fifty meters from the temple of Zeus. Although few remaining documents describe this fact, there were, in some parts of the palaestra, rooms with eight baths found, which were likely used by the athletes after their trainings [Miller 1975, p. 192]. The very stadium is situated approximately 450 meters southeast from the Temple of Zeus and it is hard to identify, as it was built in a hilly area which visually impedes locating it [Blegan 1927, p. 435].

Current excavation work was started in 1973 via co-operation with the University of California, Berkeley. Prof. Stephen G. Miller, a professor emeritus of classical archaeology at the University of California, Berkeley, led the excavation that unearthed the temple and stadium of Nemea: one of the four major sites where Ancient Greek games were held along with Olympia, Delphi and Isthmia.

Contemporary Nemea

Visiting pristine sports facilities is one of the best methods of learning sport history to and exploring culture, architecture and arts. Archaeological facilities especially play such a role. Nemea is, hence, and important spot on the European map: an ancient cultural center in which excavation and reconstruction works are done by Greek and American researchers. Comprehensive educational activities are undertaken and the archaeological site is

well taken care of. Thanks in large part to prof. Miller, the Nemean Games were recently revived, and which have become a global phenomenon.

Everyone can participate in the modern Nemean Games, including children. There are no age, sex, religious or nationality limits. Anyone can take part – regardless of their sport level or health condition. The event is becoming more and more popular among athletes, fans and tourists [www.nemeangames.org].

According to Prof. Miller, the idea of the modern Nemean Games supports the economic growth of the region. The event now serves as a local tourist attraction and contributes to the recovery of the cultural heritage, tradition and integration of the local community. The modern Nemean Games are mostly a social and cultural event which, among other duties, encourage international dialogue through sport. (Visitors come to Nemea from different parts of the world, unlike in ancient times when visitors only came from Greek poleis). The twenty first century Nemean Games are mainly a socio-cultural phenomenon: an event which enables communication between athletes, fans and hosts. They provide a tremendous opportunity in the multicultural world to raise new generations in the spirit of friendship, peace, harmony, tolerance, and fair-play. In the twenty first century, the relationship of sport and tourism has become strong, and sporting events (including historical reconstructions) have played an essential role in the development of many tourist regions and their images. Such an interplay can be referred to as „sportification of tourism” or „touristification of sport”. A sporting event may revitalize a region in terms of its economic condition as, tourists have to sleep, eat and commute. Although the Nemean event does not take place every year, cultural tourists interested in sport and history visit this place year round. The modern Nemean Games have a chance to become the trademark of the region in terms of cultural tourism, but mostly, in terms of sport tourism, which is based on travelling from one's residence in order to undertake recreational or competitive sport activity, to watch popular or exclusive sport-ing events, and to sightsee at sport attractions like sport halls, halls of fame, and water park [Gibson 1998]. Visiting Nemea fits in all the three forms of sport tourism presented in Gibson's definition: tourists participate actively in sporting competitions, some of them watch the games and cheer on athletes (both professionals and amateurs) and visit historical sites. The latter way of travelling is called „heritage sport tourism” and „nostalgia sport tourism” [Fairley, Gammon 2005; Ramshaw, Gammon 2005].

Currently, Greek politicians as for example Greek Alternate Tourism Minister Elena Kountoura discuss ways to boost the international promotion of the Modern Nemean Games, a revival of ancient Greek games that have been taking place in Nemea, southern Greece, since 1996. The sixth edition of the Modern Nemean Games took place this year June 10-12, were organized by the *Society for the Revival of the Nemean Games*, and supported by the Tourism Ministry and the Greek National



Fig. 1. Tourists visiting the archaeological museum in Nemea

Source: private photo (September 2015)



Fig. 2. An exhibition at the archaeological museum in Nemea

Source: private photo (September 2015)

Tourism organization (G.N.T.O). While in Nemea and in a meeting with the Society's president, Kyriakos Spyros, and board members, the minister discussed the important role the Games could play in the promotion of the country's cultural and sports tourism. When speaking at the event, Ms Kountoura referred to Greek tourism's excellent performance and highlighted the ministry's policy which seeks to promote new Greek destinations, extend the season and develop thematic forms of



Fig. 3. The Nemean stadium in Greece
Source: private photo (September 2016)



Fig. 4. Tourists visiting the remainings of the temple in Nemea
Source: private photo (September 2016)

tourism — such as sports and cultural tourism — that generate additional and new sources of income for local economies and societies. Moreover, the minister said the ministry and the GNTTO support the Modern Nemean Games and all events, actions and initiatives that significantly boost the international promotion of Greek tourism, Greek culture and the sporting ideal. The Modern Nemean Games were revived by American archaeologist Stephen G. Miller as an attempt to bring back to life the ancient festivals that were based, like the Olympics, on athletic competitions. Today, Prof. Miller is also the former president of the *Society for the Revival of the Nemean Games* and honorary professor and head of excavations at the archaeological site of Nemea. During the actual Nemean Games, Ms Kountoura thanked Prof. Miller for



Fig. 5. Tourists watching a movie on the modern Nemean Games

Source: private photo (September 2015)

his invaluable contribution to the promotion of the region's cultural wealth and the establishment of the institution. She also met with the Mayor of the Municipality of Nemea, Kostas Kalantzis, and discussed ways to further cooperate for the tourism development of Nemea and the wider region [www.newsingreece.com/greek-travelpages/kountoura-applauds-6th-modern-nemean-games-underlines-importance-of-sports-tourism/].

The Society for the Revival of the Nemean Games (which now has more than 1900 members from around the world) was founded in the belief that there is today scope and perhaps even the need for the average person — regardless of ethnicity, language, religion, gender, age, or athletic ability — to participate in an international athletic festival. And, so the Games were held in 1996 and 2000 and 2004 and 2008 and 2012 and 2016. More than 3500 people from 120 different coun-

tries, ranging in age from 6 to 96, have added their footprints to those of ages long gone. No records were kept and no medals were awarded. Families having picnics on the slopes of the stadium were as much a part of the festival as the runners. Races were organized by gender and age, and were interspersed with music and dances. All the participants ran barefoot and in ancient tunics, which they put on in the ancient locker room. And, they entered the stadium through the same tunnel through which athletes passed in the 4th century B.C. They started from the same stone line and with the same starting mechanism, and the winners received the same initial tokens of victory: a ribbon tied around the head and a palm branch. At the end of the day, the victors received the same crown of wild celery that was the short-lived symbol of the victory at the ancient Nemean Games. But, all the participants were rewarded with feet sore from contact with the same earth where ancient feet ran more than 2,300 years ago – and by the knowledge that they had been in direct physical contact with an ancient idea, an ancient spirit, that still lives at the earth of Nemea [www.nemeangames.org; *News of the Nemean Games 2012*; *Nemea – the hidden entrance...*].

In 2012 the percentage of non-Greek runners reached 32% and the winners included 21 different nationalities. About 240 volunteers, mostly from Nemea but also from the rest of Greece and the world, offered their valuable services both in the preparations – cleaning the vegetation from the ancient stadium, sweeping the track and laying out the lanes, painting the bench-

es on the slopes, setting up the tent of the locker room and the hysplex starting mechanism, gathering palm branches and wild celery, and constructing the crowns for the victors – and also during the games as the personnel (e.g., Judges, Heralds, Starters, Trumpeters, Slaves in the locker room and on the track, Peace-keepers, and the Secretariat). To these should be added: those responsible for and the members of the amateur groups, individuals who graced the Nemead with cultural events, the volunteer First Aid, all who worked voluntarily to welcome, host, and help runners and viewers, and those who labored with the clean-up, photography etc. [*News of the Nemean Games 2012*].

Conclusion

The Nemean Games have a long history, which is similar to the history of other Panhellenic Games. Even though one may get the impression they were not as famous as the others due to the location of Nemea, they were undoubtedly popular among ancient Greeks. Whereas in the ancient times the Nemean Games played a mostly religious and political role, today social cultural and touristic functions prevail. They also provide a financial benefit. The ancient Nemean Games were supposed to integrate Greeks, and they currently bring people together – both local communities and visitors representing different cultures. The religious and political functions vanished, yet cultural, econom-



Fig. 6. The modern Nemean Games (2016)

Source: www.newsingreece.com/greektravelpages/kountoura-applauds-6th-modern-nemean-games-underlines-importance-of-sports-tourism/ (date of access September 10, 2016).