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Olympic Philately: Reading the 1896 Athens Olympics from Postage Stamps

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ABSTRACT

A postage stamp is principally used to demonstrate that postage has been paid. However, governments also use postage stamps to convey various messages to the world, and the message the stamp contains reaches many people. Therefore, postage stamps are frequently used to embrace and disseminate an idea or belief, to convey information to a target audience, or to announce or promote an event. Additionally, philately (or stamp collecting) remains a popular hobby. Stamp collectors, who consider stamps as works of art, meticulously collect, classify, and scrutinize the details linked to stamps. Philately also has deep ties to the Olympic games. Olympic postage stamps, which were first introduced to offer financial assistance in organizing the 1896 Athens Olympics, have also served the purpose of promoting the Olympics at the international level. Furthermore, the works of ancient Greek culture and art were admirably depicted on the first Olympic postage stamps. These stamps, which also contribute to the revival of the Olympics, have rich symbolic meanings behind their visuals.

KEYWORDS

Olympic Games;
philately; stamps;
Athens; Greece

In 1837, English reformer Rowland Hill published a comprehensive pamphlet proposing reforms in the postal service. He suggested the use of postage stamps. At that time, postal fees were paid by buyers according to the distance the mail would be sent. These high fees made buyers unwilling to pay. Hill proposed a prepaid model of postage for delivery anywhere in the country. This model was weight-based and accompanied a low uniform rate. Evidence of prepayment would be provided with a stamp affixed to the post.¹ In 1840, as a by-product of Hill's efforts, the use of postage stamps became an official practice in England. The postage stamp, adopted by other countries, has become an essential source of income. With its widespread use, the idea that postage stamps could be used as a social and political power emerged. Countries began to promote their touristic, cultural, economic, historic, and political aims through stamps. Thus, the postage stamp fulfilled the following purposes: to authorize mail delivery, to generate income, and to spread propaganda.²

A postage stamp is a valued piece of paper that has been cut into various shapes, symmetrically or asymmetrically. On the face of the stamp, the stamp value, the name of the issuing country, the year of printing and various texts, and pictures, shapes, or patterns are portrayed. On the opposite side, there is a kind of adhesive that assures the stamp's stickiness. The postage stamp is generally used to inform that the necessary prepayment has occurred for the delivery of mail or postcards. However, when an individual adheres that little piece of paper onto the envelope they are about to mail, it is no longer only about the fee and postal delivery; it is an image the person observes. The graphic design on a postage stamp may relate to a country's scientific achievements, culture, history, politics, art, education, tourism, sport, and economy. It is an important source of information concerning past and present efforts in various fields.³ Stamps circulate from hand to hand and from city to city, reaching the farthest corners and provinces of a country, as well as the most distant countries of the world. The symbol of the nation from where the stamp is sent conveys its message extensively as a living expression of the country's culture, civilization, ideas, and ideals.⁴ Stamps, which have a high propaganda capacity for both international and domestic consumption, effectively convey ideological thoughts and political messages to their targets.⁵ Postage stamps have also been used as a means to construct and disseminate government identities and as mechanisms to legitimize country regimes. The management styles, worldviews, ideals, and purposes of changing powers have been located in the designs and themes of stamps.⁶

Postage stamps can be produced on various themes, including the Olympic Games. The first Olympic stamps issued were for the 1896 Athens Olympics and provided financial resources to Greece, a country with a troubled economy. The stamps supported the organization of the first modern Olympics, which had a multi-faceted historical impact on political, economic, social, and cultural aspects. On the other hand, the images on the stamps served to revive the Greek national consciousness as concrete evidence of the rich Ancient Greek culture.

Olympic Philately

In 1864, French stamp collector Georges Herpin invented the term philately by combining the Greek terms *philos*, which means loving, and *ateleia*, which means tax exemption. Herpin defined the word philately as the love of studying anything related to postage stamps.⁷ Philately, also known as stamp collecting, started in the 1860s and became popular and internationally widespread in the 1880s as a structured hobby. Due to the establishment of clubs and the successful activities of the philatelic press, stamp collectors who defined themselves as philatelists formed a large community in the late nineteenth century.⁸ Philately is an instructive hobby, and it enables those who are interested in the activity to improve their observational power and perceptive capacity. It also contributes to a collector's knowledge of various fields, including history, art, language, geography, botany, and mythology.⁹

According to how they are printed, postage stamps are typically divided into two types. Daily-use stamps are called definitive stamps, presented to the public continuously and reprinted when necessary. Although the values vary, they usually have a tiny format, a simple design, and are mostly the same size. Commemorative stamps

are the second type, which are only available for a limited time and are rarely reissued. These stamps are named as such because they are used to commemorate events of national importance. Moreover, they may be larger than definitive stamps. After the Second World War, the number of commemorative stamps increased rapidly with the development of printing techniques that allowed more design diversity and the spread of philately as a hobby. An increase in the number and range of stamps issued created a form of thematic stamp collecting, in which stamps depicting a particular subject are collected. Thematic collectors often use their stamps as a way to delve deeper into a subject.¹⁰ One of the most prominent subjects of thematic stamp collecting is sport. Within the general sport theme, the collection of Olympic stamps became widespread, especially after the 1952 Helsinki Games. Alongside the popularity of the Olympics, the Olympic Games emerged as an engaging theme in philately.¹¹

Olympic philately is a hobby that involves collecting and studying the details concerning postage stamps issued for the Olympic Games. The pastime began in 1896 with the printing of postage stamps designed for the first modern Olympic Games held in Athens. There is a historical, cultural, and economic link between philately and the Olympic movement. The stories behind the visual depictions presented on Olympic stamps are part of Olympic culture and history. Olympic philately is not just about stamp collecting. It also requires an in-depth study of events directly or indirectly linked to the Olympic movement.¹² Additionally, stamps have contributed to the financing, promotion, and dissemination of the Olympics and Olympism. Through Olympic philately, the Olympic motto *Citius, Altius, Fortius* obtains a new dimension and becomes a record of the past, present, and future of the Olympic Games.¹³ The International Olympic Committee (IOC) also supports Olympic philately with a regulation in the Olympic Charter. According to the charter, the IOC encourages the use of the Olympic symbol on postage stamps issued by the competent national authorities in cooperation with the National Olympic Committee of the relevant country (and under the conditions determined by the IOC).¹⁴ Therefore, since 1896, commemorative stamps issued in the name of the Olympic Games have been printed not only in countries that organized the games but also in multiple other participating countries. Accordingly, the quantity of Olympic stamps grows with each passing Olympic Games to form a complete and lively history of the Olympic Movement.¹⁵ Today, Olympic philately has become a valuable visual phenomenon for understanding the development and growth of the Olympic movement.

Mike Huggins explained that the interest in visual elements has increased in the studies conducted in the last two decades. This field, characterized as an exciting new methodology with unique epistemological, ontological and phenomenological features, has led to greater awareness of the potential of sporting images and visual phenomena.¹⁶ As Mike O'Mahony emphasized, this trend, which focuses on developing methods of relating to visual culture, is commonly called 'the visual turn'. The visual turn in the history of sport can serve two primary purposes; first, the images provide information in a simple and unproblematic way as incontrovertible evidence of history, and second, they provide a rich and valuable resource to facilitate explorations into the past of sport with a more critical and analytical approach

to visuals.¹⁷ In 2011, Huggins and O'Mahony brought together the work of 20 researchers on visibility and visual material for the Sport and the Visual special issue of *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. Expressing that sport and visibility is a potentially important field that needs further development, the editors aimed to encourage research and publications in this field, to increase awareness of a wide and important range of visual sources, and to revive the field by making use of different methodological approaches. They also wanted to encourage researchers and students to engage with visual sources other than texts and oral testimonies.¹⁸ Researchers in that special issue used various methodologies to examine sources such as photographs, posters, paintings, prints, postage stamps, caricatures, animation films, sculptures, stadiums and architecture.

Although there has been an increased interest in visual elements in sport, academic studies on sport-themed postage stamps have remained limited. Dewey F. Langston introduced thematic stamp collecting in his 1968 study by examining the sport stamps published by the United States Post Office, one of the first articles on sport-themed postage stamps.¹⁹ In 2004, Gary Osmond and Murray G. Phillips examined how Australian Solomon Islander swimmer Alick Wickham, a famous figure in the history of international sport, was represented on postage stamps.²⁰ Osmond's 2008 study examined a postage stamp issued by the United States in 2002 to commemorate Hawaiian athlete and cultural icon Duke Kahanamoku.²¹ In 2011, Osmond and Phillips demonstrated how selected sport stamps from cricket represent the past through an examination of how museums present sport history through philately exhibitions.²² In 2012, Agbenyega Adedze examined the evolution of football representation on postage stamps issued by eight African countries.²³ Apart from academic publications, *Journal of Sports Philately*, the publication of Sports Philatelists International, *Journal of Olympic History*, the publication of the International Association of Olympic Historians, and *Olympic Review*, the official magazine of the Olympic Movement, include articles on Olympic stamps.

The visual turn in sport demonstrates the increasing interest in visual materials and the growing importance of visibility as a means of expression and representation in sport. The visual turn enables the creation of new knowledge, ideas, and messages through the examination of visual culture materials in sport using various methodologies and approaches. The development of communication technologies that facilitate the creation and dissemination of visual content has diversified these studies. However, there is limited academic interest in Olympic visual materials, particularly postage stamps. Postage stamps convey information, ideas, and messages which provide a deeper understanding of the political, economic, social, and cultural impacts of the Olympic Games.

Philatelic Support for the Athens 1896 Olympic Games

Philately has a long history of documenting and commemorating the games since the 1896 Athens Olympics. The stamps issued to commemorate the 1896 Olympic Games were the first time philately supported the games' organization. Greece, seeking financial resources to build missing structures, acquired this resource through stamps. Thus, the commemorative stamps served as the modern world's introduction

to the Olympics. The emergence and sale of the 1896 Olympic stamps reveals their contribution to the revival of the Olympics.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) believed that sport – which had served Greece marvellously in the golden ages of antiquity, concerning matters such as health, wellness, physical education, and the glorification of the body – could serve similarly in modern times. The International Congress of Athletics held in Paris in June 1894 decided to establish the IOC and awarded the first modern Olympic games to Athens in 1896.²⁴ Greece, a constitutional monarchy, had a troubled economy in 1894. King George I largely supported the idea of the Olympics, while Prime Minister Charilaos Trikoupis opposed the choice of Athens as the host city for economic reasons. On October 5, 1894, IOC President Vikelas wrote a letter to Coubertin citing Trikoupis's position.²⁵ The king agreed to authorize the Olympic Games due to Pierre de Coubertin's words in Athens, and the support of most newspapers.²⁶ Prime Minister Trikoupis resigned in January 1895 mainly because of Crown Prince Constantine's insistent decision to hold the games in Athens, and Theodoros Deligiannis became prime minister.

The Olympic Games were to be held, but the 920,000-drachma support of millionaire philanthropist Georges Averoff was not sufficient to construct the sport facilities. The organizing committee encountered a lack of funding to complete construction of the rifle range at Kallithea, the bike trail at New Phaliron, and the piers and boathouses needed for sea sports. Deligiannis's government decided to issue commemorative stamps to raise money for the organization of the Olympic Games and to promote the Olympics internationally. On July 15, 1895, the Bill of Law on the issue of commemorative stamps was submitted to the Greek Parliament. Member of Parliament, Konstantinos N. Papamichalopoulos, who strongly supported the issuance of commemorative stamps, informed the parliament of the following:

1. Philatelist brothers Dimitrios and Ioannis Sakorrafos, founders of the Athens Philatelist Association, were the first to raise the issue of the need to issue commemorative stamps.
2. Stamp collecting is a growing trend around the world, and it is necessary to create beautiful and artistic designs to ensure the sale of stamps.
3. The circulation period should be limited to ensure success in the sale of stamps.
4. The provision in the Bill of Law that 'Stamps that have become unusable for any reason will be put up for auction by order of the Ministry of Economy' should be cancelled, as buyers will not pay a higher price later.
5. Under Article 3 of the Draft Law, 50 percent of the net income from the sale of commemorative stamps will be paid to the Olympic games Fund, and printing expenses will be deducted. Due to the benefits of stamps, printing costs should not be deducted. When commemorative stamps are in circulation, definitive stamps should not be sold.²⁷

After a few amendments, the Decree with the Force of Law, consisting of five articles, was finalized and entered into force after being published in the *Official Gazette* dated August 22, 1895. The decree-law consisted of the following articles:

Article 1: The printing of commemorative stamps is allowed for the Olympic games, to be held in Athens next year.

Article 2: Commemorative stamps will be in circulation within the period determined by the Ministries of Finance and Interior, and the regulations on this matter will be made within the framework of the existing provisions.

Article 3: Fifty percent of the revenue from the sale of commemorative stamps is allocated to the Olympic games Fund after deducting the expenses incurred and the printing fees for the circulation period of the stamps. These normal fees should be limited to amounts received during 1894 and the first six months of the current year.

Article 4: The amount belonging to the Olympic games Committee under Article 3 will be paid in cash upon the instruction of the Ministry of Economy and must not exceed 200,000 drachmas.

Article 5: If deemed necessary, the Olympic games Organizing Commission can sign a loan agreement with banks that do not exceed seven percent interest. The state guarantee for this loan is allowed to be provided by the Ministry of Finance.²⁸

According to the decree, 200,000 drachmas (i.e. 50 percent of the revenue from the sale of commemorative stamps) were paid in advance to the Olympic games Fund after deducting expenses and printing fees.²⁹ Additionally, under Article 5 of the law, the Olympic Games Organizing Commission took out a loan of 200,000 drachmas at an interest rate of 6.5 percent from the National Bank of Greece. The repayment of this loan was covered by a percentage of the revenue from the sale of Olympic stamps allocated to the Olympic Games Fund. Commemorative stamps contributed approximately 400,000 drachmas to the 1896 Athens Olympics. In order to make a comparative calculation, at that time, a newspaper cost five lepta (one drachma equals 100 lepta), and a stamp cost five lepta for domestic mail and 25 lepta for international mail. Considering that the average monthly salary of an employee was 120 drachmas, a significant amount of support was provided for postage stamps for the first Olympics.³⁰

On April 6, 1896, the opening day of the Olympic Games, new Olympic stamps went on sale in all post offices throughout the country. In addition, circulation of all other stamps was temporarily banned.³¹ Postal tax revenues were 1,583,981 drachmas in 1894, 1,612,117 drachmas in 1895, 2,091,339 drachmas in 1896, and 1,768,700 drachmas in 1897. Accordingly, the income obtained from the sale of stamps in 1896 increased significantly (by 479,222 drachmas) from the previous year.³² The interest in these commemorative stamps was thus high. The stamps helped organizers balance their budgets and build the final four venues for the games. The first Olympic Games of the modern era and the first Olympic-sport stamps entered history together. A partnership was born that turned into a special relationship. Since then, philately and postal services have been regular supporters of the Olympic Games.³³

Ideals and Realities from Antiquity to Modernity

In addition to economic support, the 1896 Olympic stamps also served the political purposes of Greece. The stamps, which featured images of Greece's rich cultural

history and reminded of its Olympic legacy, were used as propaganda tools domestically and internationally. For Greece, the organization of the Olympics provided the opportunity to show its development after Ottoman rule and take its first steps towards modernity. Organizing the first modern Olympic Games and being the centre of international attention opened the door for Greece to realize cultural, economic and political integration with modern Europe. Despite Greece's aims, Pierre de Coubertin's Olympic ideal was to ensure individual and social development through sport, and bringing athletes together at the Olympics was also a way of maintaining international peace. However, there was a gap between Coubertin's ideals and the realities of Greece which had important consequences.

For Greece, both the position and continuity of the ancient Olympic Games in national history and the symbolic meaning of the revival of the modern Olympic Games for national identity are important.³⁴ The acceptance of the lineage relationship between the ancient and modern Olympic Games remained strong as it served the idea of the uninterrupted continuity of physical exercise and games.³⁵ How this continuity was achieved is a controversial issue. Studies of the continuity of physical exercise in Greek history can be divided into three distinct periods, those written in the nineteenth century, the twentieth century, and the modern period. National historiography throughout the nineteenth century emphasized the continuity of physical exercise from antiquity to the present, expressing the love of athletics and games as integral elements of the Greek character for centuries. Scholars consider competitions held by the *armatoloi* (militia soldiers) and *klephts* (bandits) to improve their skills in their ongoing war against Ottoman rule as sports competitions. While history studies written in the nineteenth century denied the existence of physical exercise before the Ottoman rule during the Byzantine period, the historical studies of the twentieth century argued that the ancient sport survived in the form of competitions and exercises in the Byzantine period and even that contests of knights in the West were Greek-inspired. Thus, a coherent national continuity of physical exercise was created throughout Greek history (Byzantine Empire and Ottoman Empire). The period of modern Greece was the last to be included in the national model of sport history but includes the revival of the Olympic Games.³⁶

Greece aimed to establish a form of historical continuity with the idea of reviving and periodically organizing the modernized and secularized Olympic Games as an 'invention of tradition'.³⁷ The invention of tradition means a set of habits and practices of ceremonial or symbolic nature that imply continuity with the past, attempting to instil specific values and norms of behaviour through repetition. Invented traditions create a bridge between the past and the present as well as a sense of continuity. Traditional practices are modified, ritualized, and institutionalized for national purposes.³⁸ In the Olympic Games, the tradition was invented for political and social purposes, asserting the historical continuity of physical exercise. While the vast majority of the Greek intelligentsia and historians also supported this view, original historical research in Greece, as noted by Koulouri, could not document this.³⁹ The continuity of physical exercise was incorporated into the history of the post-antique Greek nation as a false identity. Therefore, in pre-modern Greek national historiography, the sport was not athletic but only cultural and limited to antiquity.⁴⁰

In classical Greek culture, the physical perfection, vigour and vitality of the male body was a symbol of national identity. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Western Europe entered an ever more visually oriented era in which men were classified according to classical beauty standards. The pursuit of the ideal of beauty that emerged in this era produced the concept of 'modern masculinity'.⁴¹ According to this understanding, while the body itself became the main indicator of masculinity, the masculine ideal became a symbol of society and nation. The masculine ideal of beauty was inspired by Greece, and it became one of the prime examples of ancient Greece's influence on European thought. Archaeologist and art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) sought to rediscover the beauty of Greek sculpture, a neglected art form. Claiming that sculpture was superior to other arts, Winckelmann not only popularized the beauty of Greek sculpture with his works but also defined a generally valid ideal of beauty with the meaning he gave it. The sculptures of young male athletes Winckelmann examined reflected harmony, proportion and self-control with their strong-looking body structures. The male bodies he described were always lithe, without surplus fat, and no feature of the body or face disturbed their noble proportions. Winckelmann defined the male body's ideal of beauty through balance, proportion and moderation. The way to reach this ideal was through sport. As a means of shaping the human body, sport played a vital role in the construction of modern masculinity.⁴² The increase in the popularity of the sport in the nineteenth century played a significant role in the revival of the modern Olympics.

Experiencing a dual identity as an inheritor of the classical tradition and a modern European state, Greece saw the Olympic Games as a way to reach modernity.⁴³ The modern Olympic Games were primarily planned as a mechanism to create the material and intellectual infrastructure to enable the underdeveloped Greek state's integration into the cultural activities of developed Europe. The Olympic Games, first, put Greece at the centre of international attention. The international community saw the moral, spiritual, artistic and material progress made, and opinions about Greece changed positively.⁴⁴ Self-confidence derived from the prestige of antiquity provided a 'passport' for the acceptance of modern Greece by the 'civilized' nations.⁴⁵

The 1896 Olympics also served the political purposes of modern Greece. At that time, the country was ruled by a dynasty under internal pressure. The Greek royal family was originally a Danish princely house enthroned by the European powers after Greece gained independence from the Ottoman Empire. The royal family used the Olympics as a tool to achieve national unity. The Olympic Games provided an opportunity to connect the Danish dynasty to the glories of ancient Greece, while the organization became an arena for political demonstrations by the royal family. Since the hosts at the first Olympics oversaw rulemaking and judging, the dukes included themselves as referees, and the princesses handed out the prizes.⁴⁶ King George was so excited by the success of the games that he declared that Greece could host them every four years. Timoleon Philemon, secretary general of the organizing committee, enthusiastically welcomed the idea and sought to replace the IOC with an all-Greek committee. Prime Minister Deligiannis and the royal family also supported Philemon's effort to usurp the games.⁴⁷

The Greeks also were not sincere about Coubertin's lead in reviving the Olympics. Coubertin's name was absent from official Olympic bulletins, royal edicts, organizing committee instructions, tentative programmes and the Greek press. When he claimed his role in the Olympics, an Athens newspaper accused Coubertin of being 'A thief trying to steal Greece's heritage'.⁴⁸ While Coubertin's role may not have been accepted at the time, he still controlled the IOC. Suggested hosts for the next Olympics mentioned at the IOC's meeting included New York, Berlin and Stockholm, but Coubertin preferred Paris. The IOC agreed that the Greeks should not be allowed to monopolize the modern Olympics. Instead of Greece's request to hold all the Olympics, a proposal agreed to hold intermediate games in Athens in the middle of each Olympiad. The 1906 games were the only ones celebrated this way, after which the intermediate games were abandoned. Coubertin did not mention rudeness or ingratitude against him at the first modern Olympic Games in an article published six months after the Olympics, and instead he praised the Greek royal family.⁴⁹

Coubertin wrote that he wondered about the impact physical exercise practices could have on the future of a country and the force of a whole race and whether Greece was likely to usher in a new era from 1896. Referring to the past problem between Greece and Turkey, Coubertin asked, 'Who can tell whether, by bringing a notable increase of vigour to the inhabitants of the country, it may not hasten the solution of this thorny problem?' In the same article, Coubertin stated that wars are caused by nations misunderstanding each other and that the Olympics can be a powerful factor, albeit indirectly, in ensuring universal peace.⁵⁰ At the time he wrote the article, Coubertin did not understand the weight of his own words. Three months after an American magazine published Coubertin's article and eleven months after the games, Greece was at war with the Ottoman Empire. Coubertin was referring to physical courage and patriotism with phrases like 'the future of a country' and 'the force of a whole race'. He distinguished between nationalism and patriotism. Nationalism expressed hatred towards other countries, while patriotism was a person's love for their country and a desire to serve it. The events following the Athens Olympics are decisively the focus of the problematic relationship between nationalism and patriotism in the world of modern nation-states. What Coubertin wanted to encourage here was Greek patriotism. He could not understand that patriotism for the large Greek population meant nationalist hatred towards the Turks. The games indeed became one of the factors in the Turkish-Greek problem, but far from providing a solution to this difficult problem, they exacerbated it.⁵¹

At that time, even the IOC's publication included articles expressing Turkish hate, fuelling this hatred. In *Supplement du Messenger d'Athènes*, the supplement of the fifteenth issue of *Les Jeux Olympique* (published with the permission of the IOC), articles drew the world's attention to the Turkish domination in the region. The issue published on April 6, 1896, the opening day of the Athens Games, called for help to expel the Turks from the region and even from the entire Balkans. The peace mission and de-politicization philosophy Coubertin had imposed on the games was violated in the very first Olympics. In fact, Greece deliberately used the Games for the opposite purpose. The Greek Kingdom did not hesitate to start a war against the Ottoman Empire with the excitement that the games created for the people. After the games, a war against the Turks was started in 1897 and it quickly ended

in defeat for Greece.⁵² The 1896 Athens Olympics were organized under the clash of Coubertin's ideals and the realities of Greece. Before, during and after the organization, its significant economic, political and social effects emerged.

Depictions of the First Olympic Commemorative Stamps

The Royal Decree published on November 9, 1895, in the *Government Gazette* No. 136, determined the 12 classifications, colours, shapes, sizes, descriptions, and values of the Olympic stamps.⁵³ A committee headed by Greek archaeologist and numismatist Ioannis Svoronos selected the designs for the 1896 Olympic stamps: images of the ancient origins of the games.⁵⁴ The series of 12 stamps contained eight different depictions. French artist Émile Gilliéron (1850-1924) designed the stamps, and French engraver Louis-Eugène Mouchon (1843-1914), whose name appears at the bottom of each stamp, created the stamp patterns.⁵⁵ Apart from the visuals on the stamps, the Greek writings were designed similarly for each stamp. The inscription *ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑΚΟΙ ΑΓΩΝΕΣ* (Olympic Games) is written in short or complete form at the top of the stamps. The inscription of 1896 is divided or undivided. Additionally, the inscriptions *ΕΛΛΑΣ* (Hellas-Greece), *ΑΘΗΝΑΙ* (Athens), and currencies such as *ΛΕΙΤΟΝ* (lepton), *ΛΕΙΤΑ* (lepta), and *ΔΡΑΧΜΑΙ* (drachma) are included.

Two wrestlers are portrayed on the one lepton and two lepta stamps (Figure 1). The Greeks revered competitive sport, which were seen to demonstrate the gods' favour concerning certain athletes. Individual competitions were preferred over team sport in the Olympic Games. The most popular events in public competitions included short, long, and armoured running races; field events, such as the discus throw, javelin throw, and long jump; and fighting competitions, such as wrestling, pankration, boxing, and chariot races.⁵⁶ Wrestling emerged as an Olympic sport in 708 BC and also became one of the most popular events.⁵⁷ Wrestling was an essential element of the education of Greek boys, who spent most of their time in wrestling schools called *palaestrae*, which is derived from the Greek verb *palaio* (wrestling).⁵⁸ *Palaestrae* were primarily for martial arts practice and training, although other



Figure 1. Two wrestlers: One lepton and two lepta stamps. © British Library Board (F60111-48 & F60111-49).

activities occurred there. The palaestrae had several small rooms where athletes prepared for their exercises. Since the eighth century, Greek athletes performed in the nude; they first undressed in the apodyterium (literally, the locker room). Athletes made general physical preparations, such as oiling, in the locker rooms and could rest in wide rows and converse with other athletes.⁵⁹ The correct way of wrestling was taught in the palaestrae, and both ordinary people and professionals demonstrated interest in this ancient sport. The best wrestlers competed in the Olympics and other crown games.⁶⁰ In the ancient Olympics, wrestling was one of the five sports that made up the pentathlon. The aim in ancient wrestling (similar to the present day) was to knock down the opponent.⁶¹ To win an official competition, a wrestler had to knock his opponent down three times. The philosopher Seneca used the phrase that the three-time downed wrestler lost the victory palm branch. The third fall was widely accepted as a Greek metaphor for a decisive defeat.⁶² The victory palm mentioned by Seneca is featured on the stamps (depicted in Figure 1) under the shields inscribed 18 and 96. A palm branch was symbolically presented to athletes immediately after their victory. Olympic champion athletes entered their coronation ceremonies carrying the palm branch.⁶³ The athletic competitions of antiquity thrived under different conditions than the athletic competitions that were revived in the nineteenth century. Ancient competitions differed significantly from the modern sport in terms of standards, rules, values, and limitations. In ancient times, the traditional rules of combat sport, such as boxing and wrestling, admitted a much higher degree of physical violence than today, and the control of violence was highly lacking when compared to today.⁶⁴

Myron's discus thrower statue, *Discobolus*, is depicted between two palm branches on stamps valued at five and 10 lepta (Figure 2). One of the five events of the pentathlon in the ancient Olympics, the discus throw is also included in the modern Olympics. The discus throw was the most exciting sport on the first day of the 1896 Olympics. Eleven athletes, including well-known Greek athletes Versis and Paraskevopoulos, from seven countries competed in the discus event. The majority of these athletes appeared unfamiliar with this form of sport; several of the foreign



Figure 2. *Discobolus*: Five lepta and 10 lepta stamps. © British Library Board (F60111-46 & F60111-47).

athletes threw the discus in unusual ways. Nonetheless, both foreigners and Athenians appreciated the graceful movements and skill of the Greek discus throwers. Versis in particular displayed a level of harmony and nobility in his conduct, which resembled the movements of a skilled ancient discus thrower. Only Versis, Paraskevopoulos, and Garrett (an American) remained in the tournament after the majority of competitors withdrew. The competition became a showdown between Garrett and Paraskevopoulos. The Greek champion threw his discus 28.95 m, eliciting loud applause from all sides, as no one could believe that such a distance could be passed. However, Garrett threw his discus 29.15 m to win.⁶⁵ Greek throws are often likened to an ancient statue, and *Discobolus* is the reason for this. A statue without motion taught Greek athletes how to throw the discus. After researching the ancient Olympics, American athlete Garrett arranged for the fabrication of a classical discus and practised with it before the 1896 Olympics. The discus used by Garrett was much heavier than the wooden discus used in the 1896 Olympics.⁶⁶ It seems it was a mistake for the Greeks to base their technique on *Discobolus*. The American athlete practised with a much heavier discus and achieved victory via a more dynamic throwing method.⁶⁷

In Greek society, a man with a weak or disfigured body was unlikely to attain or maintain a high social or political position. Physical strength, physical beauty, poise, and endurance played a much higher role than today as determinants of a man's social status.⁶⁸ The abstract ideal of human beauty was embodied in Greek sculptures, as in *Discobolus*.⁶⁹ In Greek art, *Discobolus* also represents the medicinal aspect of the human body, revealing the importance of the philosophy of medicine in Greek culture. Historically, health has been viewed as a matter of equilibrium and order. Just as nature must be in balance to preserve wellbeing in the world, the body must be in balance to maintain health. Myron's piece combines realistic athletic motion with idealized vitality.⁷⁰ Notwithstanding, *Discobolus* is the subject of debate and criticism. Although a few Roman copies remain, Myron's original *Discobolus* has not survived.⁷¹ The original statue was in bronze, and the discus thrower's head was turned to the right and observing the disc. The majority of today's marble copy sculptures were improperly restored with their heads facing in the direction of the throw, like on the postage stamps. The National Museum of Rome's Palazzo Massimo alle Terme exhibits one of the reproductions with the head correctly positioned: turned backwards to the right. The head's rotation really aids the body's swing, whereas the shoulder's rotation cannot be managed if the head is static. Another element to consider is the posture of the left foot's toes. The toes appear to be dragging in an unnatural posture. Some later critics have stated that this stance is unnatural and would make throwing impossible, thus making the current copies inaccurate. Some people have even attempted to rebuild the statue with a flatter foot, referencing several late reliefs and gems that present the foot in its natural posture to support this claim. However, it must be considered that the Greek athlete, who is normally barefoot, does not use his toes like present-day people; thus, his toes are likely stronger. In addition, in this situation, the weight is totally supported by the right foot with little or no strain on the left.⁷²

On stamps valued at 20 and 40 lepta, the image of a Panathenaic amphora is presented (Figure 3). These olive oil-filled vases were presented as prizes to the



Figure 3. Panathenaic amphora: 20 lepta and 40 lepta stamps. © British Library Board (F60111-43 & F60111-44).

winners of the Panathenaic Games. The Panathenaia was an ancient festival honouring Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. The festival featured a variety of activities, including artistic and athletic competitions. At the Panathenaic Games, winners of competitions received valuable prizes, and this was the only event in ancient Greece where runners-ups also received awards. At most events, amphorae filled with olive oil were given as prizes and considered high-quality works of art. These amphorae are 60 cm tall; they are black-figured pots with a crimson background, constructed using a special process. A picture of the event for which the amphora was the prize is on one side of the vase, while Athena is on the other. There are Doric columns with roosters on the right and left of Athena. The pre-Euclidean Attic alphabet inscription 'From the Athenian Games' adjacent to one of the columns indicates these amphorae were used in Panathenaic Games. Each Panathenaic amphora contained about 36 kg of oil. The first prize in the competitions was usually 50 to 70 amphorae, but the winner of the chariot races received 140 amphorae.⁷³

The attributes of Athena are represented through Panathenaic amphorae, which are among the most important objects in Greek sport.⁷⁴ Athena, the Olympian goddess of wisdom and war, is Zeus's daughter. In Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Athena is mentioned and associated with the owl and olive tree. Athena, dressed in armour and wearing a helmet, carries a shield and spear. Her shield is adorned with the head of Medusa, she can thus turn her enemies into stone. Roosters on Doric columns in Panathenaic amphorae are also items associated with Athena. The rooster came to Greece from Persia in the seventh century BC. It was called the 'Persian bird' until the sixth century BC and was named Alektor or Alectryon, which later became the common name. The root of these two names is the verb meaning 'to defend' or 'to fend off'. In Greek mythology, Alectryon was considered, literally, a



Figure 4. Nike the charioteer: 25 and 60 lepta stamps. © British Library Board (F60111-42 & F60111-45).

defender or a protective warrior. In the middle of the sixth century BC, the rooster was etymologically associated with the protective and military defence qualities attributed to Athena, and the Alectryon became a suitable symbol for Athena.⁷⁵ Nike, the goddess of victory, is another major figure presented on the stamps. Nike is located on two columns on the right and left. Nike holds a wreath in one hand and a trumpet called Salpinx in the other. This musical instrument enables her to announce victory.⁷⁶ Nike was occasionally merged into a single character in Greek mythology, known as Athena Nike.⁷⁷ Nike is generally seen crowning Athena, and Athena usually holds a miniature Nike figurine in her hand.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the Athenians constructed a tiny temple to Athena Nike atop a bastion above the Acropolis's entrance.⁷⁹

The goddess of victory, Nike, is depicted as the driver of a four-horse chariot on stamps worth 25 and 60 lepta (Figure 4). Chariots are vehicles used in warfare. In ancient iconography, the chariot is a dynamic symbol of royalty, spiritual authority, mastery of gods, and heroism.⁸⁰ Chariot races played an important role in the ancient Olympics and other major ancient athletics festivals. Obviously, the Greeks recognized that chariot races were inherently different from rivalries involving humans alone. However, considering that two types of competitions can coexist, they recognized the four-horse chariot race as the most important and prestigious event of the festivals. Chariot races were first held in the ancient Olympics in 680 BC.⁸¹ Chariots are single-seat vehicles drawn by four horses or four mules, depending on the situation. Hundreds of chariots are estimated to have travelled 12 laps on the hippodrome in this race for nearly 14km. Collisions made chariot racing a risky sport. For example, following a 41-vehicle start at the Pythian Games of 482 BC, the winning car finished the race alone. The official contestants in a



Figure 5. Stadium and Acropolis: One drachma stamp. From the Collection of Turkish Olympic Philatelist M. Edip Ağaoğulları.

chariot race were usually the wealthy owners of the chariots, not the drivers. Hence, the champions were the chariot owners. An Olympic chariot victory was the greatest achievement of public life for the Greek aristocracy and rulers. To commemorate such a victory, the winner might ask a lyric poet like Pindar to compose a victory song.⁸² The chariot race winners often had victory monuments built for themselves. The surviving monuments generally do not credit the driver and often completely ignore their participation.⁸³ Depictions of charioteers are often replaced by Nike, the goddess of victory, who was depicted as the charioteer of Zeus.⁸⁴ Particularly with fourth-century monuments for chariot victories, Nike commonly replaced the charioteer.⁸⁵ Other striking items on the stamps are the columns on the right and left. A column represents the union of sky and earth and is often decorated to emphasize this connection.⁸⁶ The columns presented on the stamps in Figure 4 are decorated with male figures called atlantes, the name of which is derived from the mythological figure Atlas, who with his head holds the heavens.⁸⁷

The one drachma stamp depicts the Panathenaic Stadium and the Acropolis (Figure 5). On the stamp, just behind the rightmost part of the stadium, is the Temple of Zeus at Athens and the Acropolis of Athens above. The ancient use of the modern word stadium was *stadion*, which first appeared in Greek literature in the early fifth century BC in the songs of Simonides, Pindar, and Bacchylides. There are many references to the stadion as a structure used for races in odes created to honour athletic heroes. The stadion was later used as a measure of distance by Herodotus and Thucydides in the fifth century BC. Herodotus describes the stadion as equivalent to 600 feet. The word is inscribed on a Panathenaic amphora held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. On the front, Athena is depicted, while, on the reverse, three sprinters are portrayed. A painted inscription in the athletic scene identifies the tournament from where the amphora was won. The inscription reads 'stadion race for men'. The amphora is dated to the middle of the sixth century BC – at least 20 to 30 years before the first literary use of the word stadion.⁸⁸ Panathenaic Stadium hosted the Panathenaic festival which, like the ancient Olympics, evolved over the centuries. The traditional founding date of the Panathenaic Games is 566 BC, but the festival may have started earlier.⁸⁹ The Panathenaic Stadium in Athens was built in 331 BC, reconstructed in 160 AD, and then reconstructed again in 1896 for the first modern

Olympic Games. These structures, which emerged to suspend hostilities so that the games could be played, had a clear and important civilian role.⁹⁰

Praxiteles's statue *Hermes and the Infant Dionysus* is one of the most famous sculptures in the history of art. It is presently housed at the Olympia Archaeological Museum and is depicted on the two drachma stamp (Figure 6). The statue is 2.13 m high and dates back to 330 BC. In this statue, Hermes, holds the baby Dionysus in his left arm and tilts his own head towards the baby. Dionysus raises his head and, mocking Hermes's younger brother, reaches for the bunch of grapes Hermes holds in his right hand. In this depiction, the two gods are presented as mortals engaged in daily activity.⁹¹ According to legend, Hermes, the messenger and envoy of the gods (especially to Zeus), wears a winged hat and winged sandals symbolizing his speed. He also carries a winged messenger staff called the caduceus: a symbol of balance and harmony.⁹² Hermes, an attractive and picturesque god, is the son of Zeus and the demigod Maia. He is the patron of land travel, commerce, messengers, rhetoric, weights and measures, cunning, and thieves. Hermes is thought to be derived from the Greek word *herma* (herm in English), which means a marked pile of stones. In an age when travel was uncomfortable and perilous, Hermes protected travellers and was worshipped on piles of marked stones that represented him, especially at intersections.⁹³ Hermes is the mythological inventor of wrestling and the sport's universal patron. He is the father of Palaestra, the personified goddess of wrestling, according to certain myths. The palaestrae (wrestling schools) were presided over by a herma, which represented the 'Hermes of the contest'. This herma was a sculpted head-shaped statue with an erect phallus standing on an unworked rectangular marble plinth.⁹⁴ Hermes is connected with safe travel, transportation, and communication in various myths, making him a natural icon for the postal service. On numerous countries' postage stamps, Hermes, the embodiment of communication, has been depicted as an icon.⁹⁵

The statue of Nike, the goddess of victory, which is the masterpiece of Paionios from Mende, is depicted on the stamp worth five drachmas (Figure 7). The statue, made between 425 and 421 BC, had a height of about 3 m with its wings. In ancient times, it stood on a pedestal 9 m high in front of the Temple of Zeus in Olympia. The inscription on the front of the pedestal reads as follows: 'This work was offered by the Messenians and the Naupactians to Olympian Zeus as a tithe for the spoils of war ... It was made by Paionios from Mende, who was distinguished as the winner (in a contest) for the making of the akroteria for the temple'. Accordingly, the statue was a votive offering after the victory in the war in 425 BC. In this depiction from Paionios, Nike is seen as gently descending from the air to the ground. The presence of an eagle with its wings spread under its right foot indicates that it is still in the air. With one hand, Nike lifts her dress, while in the other, she holds a crown of wild olives with a palm or a laurel branch. In the statue's current form, the eagle's wings and some parts of Nike's dress, face, arms, and hands are missing.⁹⁶ Nike, whose depiction on the stamp is complete and holding a victor's sash in her right hand, is the goddess of victory, both in war and in peaceful competitions. The goddess, who did not appear in any story in ancient Greek culture, was not an object of cult worship and became a symbol of victory.⁹⁷ When Zeus gave victory to a warrior, he sent Nike to deliver the



Figure 6. *Hermes and the Infant Dionysus*: Two drachma stamp. © British Library Board (F60111-41).



Figure 7. *Nike of Paionios*: Five drachma stamp. © British Library Board (F60111-40).

message and bestow the honour of the victory. In addition, Nike presented the awards to victorious athletes.⁹⁸



Figure 8. Acropolis and Parthenon: 10 drachma stamp. From the Collection of Turkish Olympic Philatelist M. Edip Ağaoğulları.

On the stamp worth 10 drachmas, a depiction of the Acropolis of Athens is presented as it was in antiquity (Figure 8). Other notable items on the stamp, apart from the Acropolis, are the caryatids, the female equivalent of the atlantes, on the right and left. A caryatid is a decorative column represented as a clothed woman holding a ceiling structure with her head.⁹⁹ The word acropolis comes from the Greek words *acro-* (high) and *polis* (city). A vital feature of most ancient Greek cities, the acropolis often refers to a castle on a hill, providing both a sanctuary from attack and an elevated religious sanctuary.¹⁰⁰ When the word acropolis is written in lowercase (i.e. acropolis), it refers to the central hill of any Greek city-state or city. Whereas, when it is written in uppercase (i.e. Acropolis), it refers to the rocky plateau rising in the centre of ancient and modern Athens: the most famous of all acropolises. There are a set of religious temples and shrines on the Acropolis of Athens.¹⁰¹ The Parthenon, which stands on the highest point of the Acropolis, is the most relevant structure on the stamp. This temple dedicated to Athena was built on the highest point of the Acropolis from 447 to 432 BC. The Parthenon was built in the Doric architectural style and is still largely standing today. It is often regarded as the most majestic structure from antiquity. In antiquity, the temple was a hotspot for foreign tourists (as it is now). Because of its outstanding design and craftsmanship, it has had a nearly 2,500-year lifespan.¹⁰² The Parthenon was a physical manifestation of Athens's unique spirit. This structure was also important in its display of artistic representations of numerous mythological characters and scenes. Ninety-two metopes extending just above the columns along the four sides of the building once displayed scenes depicting Greece's victories over the forces of barbarism and disorder. The larger-than-life mythological figures atop the pediments were perhaps the most stunning of the Parthenon's mythological statues. Each scene had approximately 22 enormous figures and illustrated one of Athena's key myths.¹⁰³

The images on the 1896 Olympic stamps showcase important values of ancient Greece and Athens, including art, mythology, architecture, and athletic traditions. Athens was one of the leading cities of the ancient Greek period and was prominent in politics, culture, and the arts. Including the city's most important architectural and artistic works and prominent figures from Greek mythology on the postage stamps promoted Athens and Greek culture. The images related to the Panathenaic Games represent Athens's power, prestige, and athletic history. The

1896 Olympic stamps not only remind the origins of the modern Olympic Games but also display the artistic achievements of ancient Greece and honour the Greek heritage.

Reading the First Olympic through Commemorative Stamps

Sport is a spectacle. Therefore, for most people, sport experiences are largely visual, and visual representations have an important place in the history of sport. Commemorative stamps, which are visual representations of sport, are usually the end product of a long and sometimes controversial process of imagining, planning, and campaigning. Understanding these processes can provide valuable information about the cultural and ideological meaning of the commemorated subject and historical processes.¹⁰⁴ As Huggins states, 'sport historians need to think about the visual materials of sport in terms of their cultural significance, social practices and power relations'.¹⁰⁵ Images on the first Olympic stamps of modern times contain messages about ancient Greek culture, art, aesthetics, rituals, ceremonies, war, peace, and victory. The cultural significance of stamps arises from the ancient origins and heritage of Greece. The stamps prepared for the 1896 Olympic Games created an opportunity for Greece to remember their national identity and to revive the national consciousness, designed to remind Greece of its ancient origins. In addition, when considering the need for commemorative stamps – and the difficulties, impossibilities, and power balances experienced during the organization of the Olympic Games, these stamps have a compelling place in the history of sport.

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