

# The Olympic Flame

By Anthony G. Maroussis

In the west of the Peloponnesus, a few miles inland from the Ionian Sea, the main road leads into legendary ancient Olympia's green and beautiful valley which is surrounded by two rivers and dotted with pines and olive trees.

Nowadays, every four years, the Lighting of the Olympic Flame takes place inside the ancient Sanctuary of Olympia, a few months before the start of the modern day Olympic Games. A ritual of enormous symbolism is enacted amongst the ruined remains of the once magnificent temples of glorious Olympia, whose destruction was ordered in 426 AD by the Christian Roman Emperor Theodosius, known for his advocacy to annihilate the religion of the Greeks.

On a Thursday noon in March 2004, the sun shone brightly on ancient Olympia, as usually does; but that day with a reason! Precisely at midday, the sun was generously sending down his rays to light the Olympic Flame in the traditional ceremony that marked the start of the Olympic Torch Relay and begun the countdown to the August 2004 Olympic Games.

As the white-clad young 'priestesses' performed the choreographed ritual that ceremonially summons the 'divine light of Apollo,' the torch blazed forth bravely when it was lowered, with perfect timing by Zeus' high priestess, into the concave metal mirror used to focus the sun's rays.

The ceremony was attended by numerous dignitaries, as well as 30,000 spectators from among the ordinary public. As the sacred flame kindled by sunrays lit the torch inside the shiny mirror, the crowd burst into cheers and applause.

Those present were then addressed by the dignitaries, some of them visibly moved, who were quoted to state:

*"Olympia is a global city, a centre of spirit and culture,"*

*"The ancient and modern symbolisms of the flame - the values of peace, truce, security, brotherhood, cooperation - are more relevant today than ever,"*

*"For a few moments, thousands of people in every city in the world will be able to see the Olympic spirit. Today, more than ever, we must be united. All together for the good of the Olympic ideal and of peace, for the good of the world,"*

*"The sacred flame, for the first time in its history, will blaze on all five continents. And we hope that this light will light up people's hearts and inspire them" and*

*"This torch relay is the torch relay of all cultures."*

All this sounds interesting, but really, how many people attach importance to, or connect with all that was said and done that morning in Olympia?

Consequently, one might wonder if all that was just a typical overstated significance to the ceremony or there was something else, unseen, perhaps some symbolism concealed in the sign of the flame or in the lighting of the torch?

For certain, there was symbolism in the enacted ritual, but where was it? One might reflect on the millions of rays beaming down from the 'life giving' sun – each ray signifying a human life, one living soul, each one of us, and all rays together signifying humanity – that in one sacred moment all rays came together and formed a single bright flame that signified all humanity as One! This dazzling light came to life to symbolize humanity in a celebration of its togetherness and in cheer of its commonality.

The significance of the ceremony to light the Olympic Flame is illuminated on the ancient Hellenic core values of Olympism: peace, brotherhood and cooperation; benchmarks of human creativity, excellence and extraordinary achievement.

The ceremony marked the start of the Olympic Torch Relay as the high priestess handed the flame to the first torchbearer and sent it off to a truly global journey, planned to be carried by

over 3,600 torchbearers, visiting 27 countries and 34 cities on all five continents - including Africa and South America for the first time in history.

Along its global journey the Olympic Torch Relay was received by crowds, dignitaries, staged ceremonies and speeches, cheers and applause.

The Torch Relay was watched by 260 million people as it promoted the message of "the flame that unites the world," the Hellenic Light which formed on five continents a chain of people who adhered to the values of peaceful coexistence.

During the time of Ancient Greece, crowds were also drawn along the way to cheer the torch relay, which actually started out as a religious ritual. There were torch relays in various regions of Greece, mostly performed during the night and dedicated to various gods, but most importantly to Prometheus, the one god who personifies the archetype of all human existence. Prometheus story is of tremendous significance to the symbol of the flaming torch.

According to the story, Prometheus 'stole' the flame from the gods and gave it to men. One ancient version accounts that the theft of fire took place at the workshop of Hephaistos, which it was believed to be on the island of Lemnos; then according to Hesiod, Prometheus stole the fire from Zeus, presumably from the hearth fire of the palace of the gods on Olympus; and by another still later version Prometheus reached the wheel of the sun and tore a brand from it.

As a result, Prometheus gets punished by Zeus, with stretched out arms he is suspended in bonds nailed on a rock at the highest point of the Caucasus. There, he is suffering the attacks of an eagle sent daily to devour his immortal liver. All that the eagle tore away during the daytime grows again by the night, as Prometheus is nailed up there in torment, hanged helpless, with an open cut bleeding at the right side of his torso. Prometheus' punishment is intended to be a lengthy one, last for all eternity, so that men should never again have such a cunning divine ally. Prometheus brought fire to mankind, the possession of which is denied the animals who live without fire – that is the very nature of animal existence – and with the gift of fire to mankind, Prometheus introduced the difference and made human existence '*human*'. It is Prometheus, a god, who among all the gods of the ancient Greeks, stands in the most extraordinary relation to mankind. Prometheus defends the cause of humanity, he intervenes for mankind, becomes 'the good' thief, the *philanthropos* and men's *savior* as Aeschylus calls him, who then suffers injustice, torment and humiliation for his relation to man.

The significance of the story of Prometheus as related to human existence is enormous. To men who previously had been living like vulnerable beasts in mountain caves, the possession of fire set them apart from the animals and saved them from extinction. Initially, fire enabled them to survive by keeping themselves warm through the freezing cold winters and by keeping the night predators away from their caves, and fire enable them to see through the darkness of night and cook their food to avoid disease and stay healthy. Men were brought together around the fire in peace, to form family and community bonds and over time to develop essential forms of communication, a language for storytelling and for the exchange of vital information. Finally, using the power of the flame man was able to create and be creative, as men were brought together to make pottery and metal tools, to generate art and develop technologies.

We should come to recognize that the possession of fire, not only brought men together, but civilized man, moved him out of the cave, refined him and eventually send him off to unimaginable heights, on a trip to the moon! Human civilization is most fittingly symbolized in the image of fire, and in the flame of the Olympic Torch lies humanity's most precious symbol.

In Ancient Olympia, man collected in a mirror the wheel of the sun and tore a brand from it, and like a modern day Prometheus, each Olympic Torchbearer with eager hands held high above and with nimble feet beneath carried out to the world the Hellenic Light, the symbol of our existence, togetherness and the driver for all human civilization and extraordinary achievement.