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WEAPONS OF OLYMPIA: SOME OBSERVATIONS

Raimon Graells i Fabregat*

Key Words: *Archaic Period, Panoply, Sanctuary, votive offering, Tropaion.*

Parole Chiave: *Periodo arcaico, panoplia, santuario, offerta votiva, Tropaion.*

Abstract:

Olympia is the sanctuary that has brought the largest number of archaic Greek weapons back to us. The distribution of the weapons and the pattern of offering, as panoplies or as a reiterative series of weapons, are briefly presented here together with a couple of aspects that are often overlooked: the accumulation of weapons and the intention of the offerers that the weapons should remain in the sanctuary forever.

Olympia è il santuario che ha restituito il maggior numero di armi greche arcaiche. La loro topografia e il regime di offerta, come panoplie o come serie reiterative di armi identiche, sono qui presentati brevemente insieme a un aspetto spesso trascurato: l'espressa volontà degli offerenti che le armi rimanessero per sempre nel santuario.

Introduction

Olympia houses the largest arsenal of ancient Greek weapons, not by chance but at the express wish of those who deposited them there.

The practice of dedicating weapons to deities was common among the Greeks¹, and the reasons for this were many: private and public, with the full range of motivations involved in each domain². The first ones were a sign of gratitude for a successful, or long, military career; the second ones were a result of victories, for which ancient sources, and archaeology, indicate two practices: the offering of one's own weapons and the offering of weapons taken from the vanquished. The discussion on this point is vast and beyond the scope of this paper, but what is indisputable is that once offered in the sanctuary, the weapons left the warlike dimension to become divine properties³. Their meaning was clearly transformed for anyone who understood the religious code shared and practised in these cult spaces. Situations of extreme necessity or Celtic raids, which undoubtedly understood the religious meaning of offerings at shrines, are exceptions where the rules were consciously violated. Chronologically later, in Christian times, the offerings were understood as pagan goods without assessing the indissoluble link between sanctuary, object and the will of the offerer.

In the case of the Panhellenic sanctuary of Olympia, Greeks of all regions, but possibly more especially the western Greeks⁴, decided to dedicate there the *dékate* (a tenth part) of the booty obtained in their military victories between the 7th and 5th centuries BC. It was not the only sanctuary that received offerings of arms⁵, but it is the one that provides the largest number of such offerings.

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¹ The literature is extensive and complex. Some of the main works, or more up-to-date syntheses are: PRITCHETT 1979; JACKSON 1991; JACQUEMIN 1999; FRIELINGHAUS 2010; BAITINGER 2011; BAITINGER 2016a; GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2017b; BAITINGER 2018; SCARCI 2020.

² PRITCHETT 1979; SNODGRASS 1989-1990; GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2017a.

³ This is what J.-P. Morel (1989-1990) schematicised between offerings by destination and by transformation. A review and update of this topic in SCARCI 2021.

⁴ YALOURIS 1981; PHILIPP 1992; COLONNA 1993; PHILIPP 1994; DI VITA 2005; NASO 2006; DREHER 2013; BAITINGER 2015; BAITINGER 2016b.

⁵ Overview in BAITINGER 2011; see also GRAELLS I FABREGAT, LONGO 2018; SCARCI 2020.

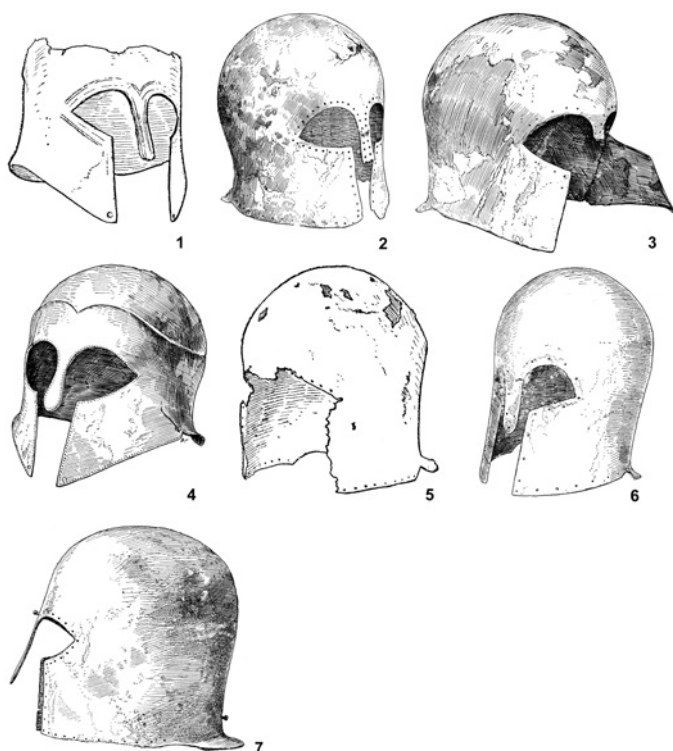


Fig. 1. Helmets from Olympia. GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2019b, fig. 4 (after LIPPERHEIDE 1896, nr. 669, nr. 294, nr. 227b, nr. 665, nr. 293, nr. 479).

843-859), which it mentions the shields obtained by Cleon in his victory over Sparta. The episode is particularly interesting because it refers to shields that had been displayed without being defunctionalized, a reason that intimidated people for fear of reuse in the case of revolt, the same applied for the episode of 379 BC, when the pro-Spartan Thebans armed themselves with the weapons displayed in the city's Stoa, which had not been ritually damaged (Xen. *Hell.* 5,4,8; Plut. *Mor.* 598D; Plut., *Pelop.* 12,1.). In both cases, they reversed the order and regulation agreed and shared by all¹⁰.

Pausanias (5.20.8) was the first to narrate the discovery of multiple remains of weapons in Olympia when a Roman senator proceeded to dig close to the pillar of Oenomaus for the erection of a monument. The attitude of all concerned, and it could not have been otherwise, was to leave the weapons *in situ* and cover them so that they would remain as they were intended to be at the express wishes of the donors, i.e., as the property of the deities residing in the sanctuary.

From collecting to study

At the end of the 18th century, however, the first travellers to Olympia became interested in recovering vestiges of its heritage (fig. 1). It was then that we began to record recurring reports of helmets¹¹, some of which even bore inscriptions, which were quickly acquired by avid European collectors, who took them from Olympia and brought them to their homes, to be sold subsequently or donated to great museums. It was towards the end of the 19th century when other weapons from the sanctuary, mainly breastplates and a few shields, were acquired. The explanation is simple. While a helmet, even a fragmented one, is easily recognizable and usually relatively well preserved because of the thickness of its sheet of metal, other types of defensive weapons (made of thinner sheets of bronze) are not so automatically identifiable, not to mention iron objects, which were not of interest to 19th-century collectors without a good state of preservation or a restoration that would present it in a comprehensive manner. Interest in the ancient arms of the sanctuary changed radically with the beginning of excavations at the sanctuary, when a detailed study of metal objects

An evolving practice but maintains its objective

The manner of dedicating arms in the sanctuary changed over time, with the addition of clearly readable inscriptions on some arms (in the case of helmets, preferably on the left side)⁶ and making a series of mutilations⁷ in order to display them hanging or fixed on pillars, walls or other organic elements⁸, about which we unfortunately do not know very much.

The reasons for these mutilations were of a practical nature, bearing in mind the convenience of flattening a curved surface such as that of a cuirass in order to fix it to a flat surface, or the same when the paragnatids of a helmet were bent outwards, thus taking three points of support to make it easier to display. But mutilation also had a ritual purpose, to inflict on the weapon a permanent "death" and public humiliation, as befitted the vanquished⁹. This alteration of the original form, in any case, allowed the gods to take pleasure in the bloody spoils and prevented reuse by those who did not respect religion and wanted to enrich themselves, or by those who, believing in religion, performed the ungodly act of robbing the gods because they needed weapons for rebellion. Remember the episode of the *Knights* by Aristophanes (vv.

⁶ On the inscriptions s. SIEWERT, TAEUBER 2013; FRIELINGHAUS 2011, 546-554.

⁷ JACKSON 1983; FRIELINGHAUS 2006; FRIELINGHAUS 2011; GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2016; GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2017b.

⁸ FRIELINGHAUS 2011; GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2017b.

⁹ GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2016 with prev. Literature.

¹⁰ PRITCHETT 1979; KRENTZ 2002.

¹¹ GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2019d.

from the first excavation campaigns (by A. Furtwängler¹²) was concerned with characterizing the enormous variety of types, forms and chronologies of the weapons, as well as opening up a fundamental discourse on the distribution of the weapons in the sanctuary itself.

Subsequent excavations uncovered an enormous quantity of weapons, ranging from complete weapons to those preserved only in fragments. This mass of data was combined with information on other types of offerings from the sanctuary, whether ceramic, metallic or lithic.

The huge amount of material evidence recovered in the sanctuary of Olympia forced archaeologists to manage their study by means of typological division. Furthermore, analysis based on separate functional categories or types does not enable an overview to be obtained of offering practice, of its nature and motivations, or of the private or public character of those offerings. The published votive objects (more than 12,000 in number) can be studied only by statistical analysis, thereby accepting the use of incomplete catalogues (continuously updating and/or updated). This has been attempted in a recent project funded by the DFG and coordinated by the PD Dr. R. Senff and PD Dr. H. Baitinger¹³. The complexity of the challenge, in any case, requires continuity in the project.

In any case, the directorate of the Olympia excavations has always paid special attention to the weapons their publication thus becoming the fundamental bibliographical reference for study of these instruments of war in antiquity¹⁴. However, the actual history of the sanctuary and the state of preservation of its stratigraphy have created some doubts as to the reliability of the data: on the one hand, because of the intense activity during the Byzantine period, during which many offerings were looted and removed so the metal could be recycled¹⁵; on the other hand, because of the difficulty in defining reliable closed contexts that provide *ante quem* dating, as in the case of the wells (*Brunnen*), which have broad dates¹⁶, defined by the chronologies of the objects deposited inside them (which could be objects removed from the exhibition, mixing pieces from very different chronological periods) and not by a horizontal stratigraphy; or in the case of the overlapping of the Stadiums slopes¹⁷.

However, the reliability of the typological proposals made for most of the weapons recovered in the sanctuary has been supported by archaeological and iconographic data from contexts outside the sanctuary, thus providing precise and reliable documentation.

This process of studying the weapons of the shrine, in addition to presenting the catalogues as completely as possible, classifying and dating each group, has been concerned with understanding the distribution of the weapons in the sanctuary. Two areas concentrate the greatest number of weapons: the northern and southern areas of the Stadium, mainly inside wells, but also in the fill of the slopes.

Trophy or tropaion?

A few weapons have been preserved *in situ*, and it is necessary to quote some shields found near the stadium (fig. 2)¹⁸ which, for some researchers, would indicate an exhibition in the manner of a *tropaia*¹⁹. Others²⁰ would see this as an accumulative exhibition (*Waffenmal* or trophy), in which the quantity marks the meaning of the offering; they would in no way declare a single panoply as a reproduction of the trophy on a battlefield. I believe that the distinction between these two concepts in the display of weapons obtained after victory defines two contrasting and complementary ritual practices. The accumulation of artefacts from the archaic period in the sanctuary, has been used politically for the numerous pilgrims visiting the sanctuary²¹, while the trophy on the battlefield, from the classical period onwards²², had a close relationship with the effort, with the sincere gratitude and with the *acmé* of war. The functions of each were therefore opposed: the former (*Waffenmal*) perennial and the latter (*tropaion*) peremptory.

In addition to these two areas, an enormous number of weapon fragments, mainly helmets, have been documented from the area around the Temple of Zeus. These fragments, in the form of broken paragnatids or nasals, raise the question of whether they are the result of recasting of offerings in the Byzantine period or whether they are the result of practices rendering these weapons unusable in the ancient period. It is also difficult to explain the abundant presence of these weapons in the riverbeds of the Kladeos and Alphaios.

¹² FURTWÄNGLER 1890.

¹³ DFG Project 327468989 "Olympia: Diachrone Entwicklung der Votivgaben vom 10. bis 5. Jahrhundert v. Chr. im Zeusheligtum".

¹⁴ Synthesis in JARVA 1995, to which has to be added BAITINGER 2001; FRIELINGHAUS 2011; GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2019a; GRAELLS I FABREGAT under press.

¹⁵ VÖLLING 2019. – Cf. LINDERS 1989-1990.

¹⁶ GAUER 2012.

¹⁷ SCHILBACH 1992.

¹⁸ KUNZE, SCHLEIF 1937/1938, pp. 11-12 Taf. 7; p. 22; KUNZE, SCHLEIF 1938/1939, p. 7 fig. 2; pp. 10-11.

¹⁹ KYRIELEIS 2011, 85-86; BAITINGER 2012; FRIELINGHAUS 2012.

²⁰ GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2016; GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2019a.

²¹ GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2019a.

²² GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2019b.

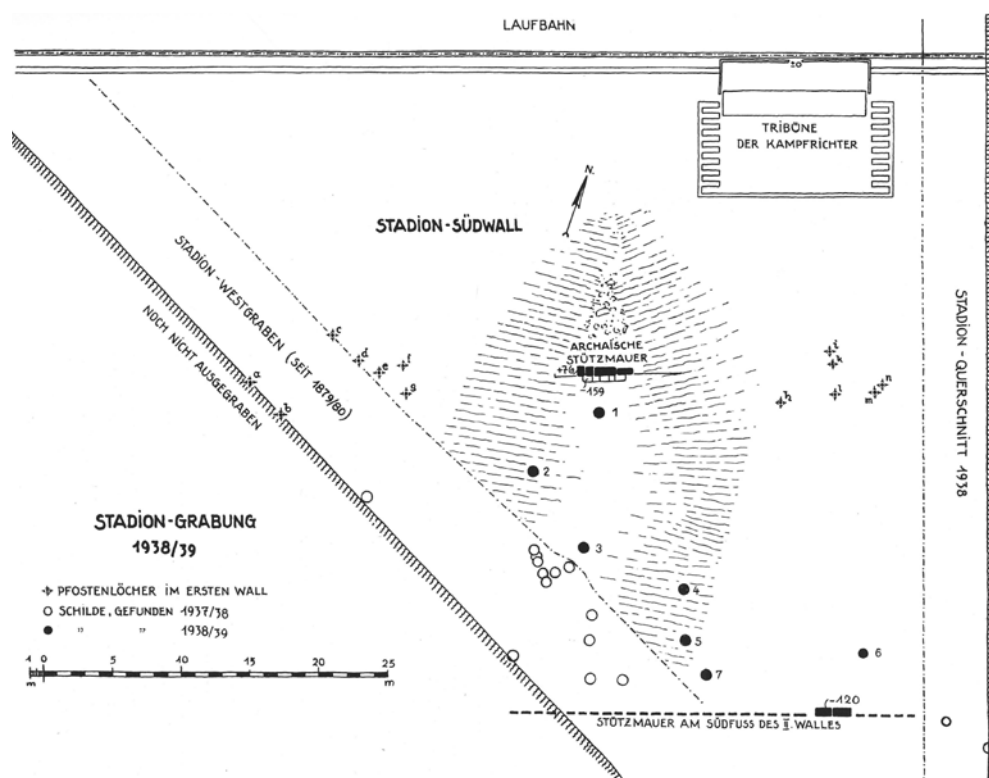


Fig. 2. Location of the shields *in situ* in the Stadium. KUNZE, SCHLEIF 1938-1939, p. 7 fig. 2.

These are evidently the result of the erosion of areas of the sanctuary where weapons were exposed, but this makes it necessary to extend our understanding of these areas and where they were located. If it is accepted (on the basis of the distribution of weapons excavated in the official campaigns) that the Stadium was the place of maximum concentration, the presence of weapons in the riverbeds requires some brief reflection. Proposing that the ideal place for the exhibition of military victories should be in the Stadium seems logical if we understand this place as the one that concentrated the greatest number of visitors and, therefore, was potentially the most visible spot during celebration of the games.

This would imply a periodic renewal of the weapons on display so that successively more outstanding poleis or tyrants with greater competitive ambitions could promote their propaganda. These weapons, once removed from the exhibition, would have been deposited in wells scattered around the sanctuary and, especially, in the area where visitors would camp on the occasion of the games.

If this had been the case, the wells would logically have returned lots of synchronous materials or, at the very least, coherent trophy packs of weapons. But this is not the case, and what is documented are small sets of weapons that are not always consistent with one another or of the same chronology. Evidently, the documentation is partial and has been subject, as I have already mentioned, to a long period of looting to recover metals. Nevertheless, the record admits other possibilities related to the topography of the sanctuary and to the objectives of optimizing the propaganda of the victories achieved.

The case of the three helmets with the inscription of Hiero of Syracuse may serve this purpose (fig. 3), since one comes from the course of the Alphaios, another from the area of the new Museum near the Kladeos, and another from the finds made in 1817²³. If the three helmets, thanks to their inscriptions, refer to the same victory and come from three different areas, can it be proposed that three trophies were erected at the same time? Or, on the contrary, was a single trophy of arms dismantled and deposited in three separate contexts? We must therefore ask: why?

Earlier, we drew attention to interest in using the sanctuary for political propaganda, and in order to optimize this objective, it would make sense to have three different trophies distributed around the sanctuary: one in the western area, perhaps related to access to the sanctuary from the coast and which was repeatedly eroded by the floods of the Kladeos; another in the area where the pilgrims camped, affected by the action of the Alphaios; and another, possibly inside the sanctuary, or in an area close to the Alphaios other than the previous helmet, probably closer to the old riverbed and therefore destroyed much earlier. If this was not the distribution of the trophies, it was the distribution of the dismantling of a supposedly unique monument, which reflects the same idea.

²³ GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2019a.



Fig. 3. Negau Helmet from Olympia M 844. BORN 2009, p. 102, Abb. 61a.



Fig. 4. Armguard Olympia B 4880. ARAPOJANNI 2002, p. 240.

How were the weapons offered?

This plurality of spaces for the display of weapons, together with a particular system of accumulation, led us, in the framework of the afore mentioned project, to ask ourselves whether the weapons documented in the sanctuary reproduced a regular pattern in the form of panoply or whether, on the contrary, they responded to accumulations of more or less serial pieces (as cited in the sources, albeit in relation to historical times when the practice of offering arms at the sanctuary of Olympia would no longer be so relevant). For this research, we had several premises to consider²⁴: Firstly, systematic looting and river erosion had equally affected the entire sanctuary and, consequently, all the weapon types deposited there; a dossier on more than 125 years of excavations allows for a quantity and quality of data that no other ancient context offers; we limited the analysis to quantification and statistics on the weapons, according to well-accepted and corroborated typologies and sequences; we desisted adopting the speculative approach of ancient sources for reconstruction of the weapon offering systems and relied exclusively on archaeological data.

The first observation was that the presence and quantity of all types of weapon could not be assessed in a continuous manner, since some types had a particularly short life span (*saurotères*²⁵ and armguards²⁶) (fig. 4). Simultaneously, other types were under-represented. The study thus became a more complex exercise than initially envisaged, since the chronology, the types present at each moment and the quantity of each type at each point in time had to be assessed together. This made it possible, quite convincingly, to observe a logical sequence in the composition of the Greek panoply, noting changes in complexity and composition that correspond to the iconographic and historical data²⁷.

As there is no complete publication of the finds of the sanctuary, and the volume of published items is apparently significant in terms of obtaining statistical results, the data were analysed by generally accepted statistical methods: aoristic analysis mainly. This evidence allowed us to identify spatial and chronological patterns. These patterns provide keys to investigation of the organization of ritual activities, in order to understand whether accumulations of objects reflect the intentionality of the people who dedicated votives in the sanctuary.

Weapon artefact depositions in Olympia began at around 800 BC and reached their peak at the end of the 6th century BC. From then on, the number of weapons began to decrease progressively, until the end of the 5th century BC. By far, the most commonly represented weapons are shields and helmets, rather than offensive weapons such as spears.

²⁴ GRAELLS I FABREGAT, SCHMID in press.

²⁵ BAITINGER 2001, pp. 63-64.

²⁶ GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2019c, pp. 275-286.

²⁷ GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2021; GRAELLS I FABREGAT, SCHMID in press.

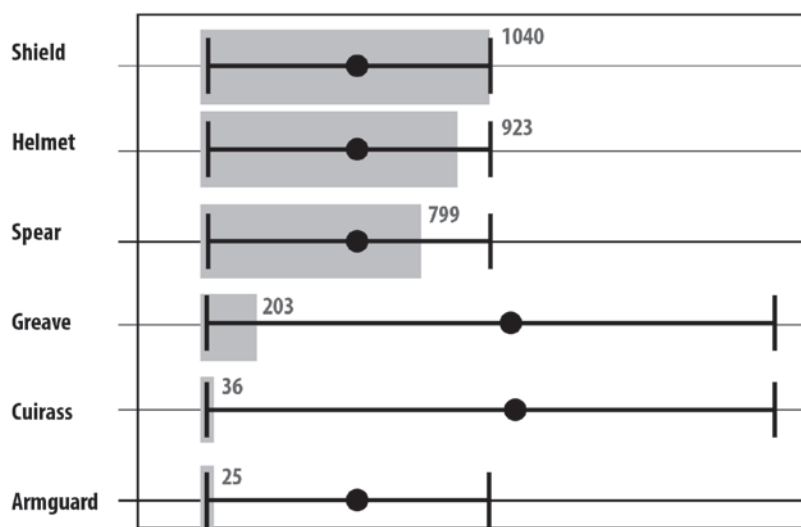


Fig. 5. Graphical representation of the number of weapons documented at the sanctuary of Olympia and the expected number of weapons, line (Drawing C. Schmid modified).

Surprisingly, armour is extremely under-represented. While the number of helmets and shields is similar in ca 1000 cases, breastplates slightly exceed 30 cases (expected ca. 2000) and greaves, slightly more than 200 (expected ca 2000), which makes it impossible to think of uniform panoplies over time (fig. 5). Furthermore, the number of spears should be similar to the number of shields (ca. 1000), as this would be the most frequent weapon in ancient panoply. While, for breastplates and greaves, an absence due to metal recycling could be supposed, for iron spears, this does not seem to be an acceptable explanation, and it would have to be thought that the iron was poorly preserved in the environment of the sanctuary. Evidently, neither of these two suppositions seems satisfactory. Breastplates and greaves should have been affected by the same looting of the site as shields and breastplates, so their under-representation must be explained by a lower frequency as offerings, no doubt due to their exceptional nature within the armour; spears, like most offensive weapons, are under-represented because they do not express the celebration of victory with the same intensity as defensive weapons.

A diachronic reading of the data reveals a series of changes in the associations, which corresponds fairly reliably to what has been observed in the iconography²⁸. The period from 800 to 650 BC began with only spears, with progressive addition of helmets and metallic shields; in the period from 650-500 BC, different pieces of body armour (mainly greaves and cuirasses) were then added to the previous combination and, for a short lapse, limb guards; finally, from 500 BC onwards, panoply became homogeneous, with the removal of body armour.

Summing up

The approach detects, in any case, and to a limited extent, the arms and associations of arms that the ancients wished to dedicate at the shrine in order to commemorate their victories and express their gratitude. Understanding that these weapons were displayed there to express complex messages, both political and religious, is something we should not forget. Today, unfortunately, some of these archaic weapons have been grouped together to reconstruct warriors from archaic battles (although this reconstruction may well not reflect the panoply of any particular battle)²⁹, and attempts have even been made to exchange them with monuments from other sites for present-day political purposes (as in the case of the Etruscan helmet of Hiero, with a marble foot from the Parthenon³⁰). The weapons of Olympia bear witness to ancient warfare, of course, but also to the order and civilization that the Greeks established in order to live together in peace, with rules, games and fraternity.

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²⁸ GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2021.

²⁹ Exhibition: *Glorious Victories. Between Myth and History*, Εθνικό

Αρχαιολογικό Μουσείο, Athens (20.10.2020 – 28.02.2021).

³⁰ GRAELLS I FABREGAT 2019a, pp. 45-46.

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