

How the Olympic Flame Became the Greatest Symbol of Olympism?

Olimpiyat Ateşi Olimpizmin En Büyük Sembolü Nasıl Oldu?

Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

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Received / Geliş Tarihi : 08.12.2025

Accepted / Kabul Tarihi : 25.12.2025

Published / Yayın Tarihi : 26.12.2025

Ethical Statement / Etik Bilgilendirme

This study does not require ethical
committee approval.

DOI: 10.53434/gbesbd.1837982

Abstract

Of all the symbols of the Olympic movement, the Torch Relay has become arguably the best known. Conveyed from Ancient Olympia to the Olympic Host city, it is designed to provide a link between the Games of Antiquity and modern Olympic sport. This article examines how the ritual was established and how it has developed into an important way in which to promote the Olympic movement. It highlights the importance of the key staging posts from the kindling of the Flame to the grand arrival at the Opening Ceremony to signal the start of the Games. There is also an examination of how the Relay has changed in character from a simple journey by the shortest geographical route into a much larger event which aims to engage as much of the host nation as possible.

Keywords: Olympic torch relay, Olympic movement, Ritualization in sports, Cultural symbolism

Özet

Olimpik hareketin tüm sembolleri arasında, Meşale Koşusu tartışmasız en tanınanı haline gelmiştir. Antik Olimpiya'dan Olimpiyatların düzenlendiği şehre taşınan meşale, Antik Oyunlar ile modern Olimpik spor arasında bir bağlantı kurmak için tasarlanmıştır. Bu makale, bu ritüelin nasıl ortaya çıktığını ve Olimpik hareketi tanıtmanın önemli bir yolu haline nasıl geldiğini incelemektedir. Ateşin yakılmasından, Oyunların başlangıcını simgeleyen Açılış Törenine kadar olan önemli aşamaların önemini vurgulamaktadır. Ayrıca, Meşale Koşusunun karakterinin, en kısa coğrafi rotadan yapılan basit bir yolculuktan, ev sahibi ülkeyi mümkün olduğunca çok dahil etmeyi amaçlayan çok daha büyük bir etkinliğe nasıl dönüştüğü de incelenmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Olimpik meşale koşusu, Olimpik hareket, Sporda ritüelleşme, Kültürel sembolizm

Introduction

In May 2024, there were astonishing scenes in Marseille when the Olympic Flame for Paris made landfall from the tall ship “Belem” after a voyage from Greece. At least 100,000 people including the French president Emmanuel Macron were present to witness its arrival accompanied by a flotilla of small boats. It was a perfect overture for an event which proved throughout its journey across France that the simple act of passing of a Flame from hand to hand is capable of inspiring feelings of warmth, community and friendship. It is 90 years since an Olympic Flame was kindled in Ancient Olympia for the first time. A Relay to the stadium in Berlin for the 1936 Olympics was designed to emphasise the connection between the ancient and modern Games.

In 1896, There had been no Olympic Torch when the Games were revived for the modern era in Athens. The metaphor of a Torch had however been used by International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Baron Pierre de Coubertin in his closing address at the 1912 Stockholm Games. “And now,

Gentlemen, through our mediation, a great people have received the Torch of the Olympiads from your hands, and has thereby undertaken to preserve and if possible, to quicken its precious flame.” Coubertin said.¹ It is thought that a Flame may have burned at some stage in Stockholm from the towers above the stadium, but there was no further Flame until the Amsterdam Games of 1928. This burned at the top of the “Marathon Tower” at the stadium, ignited by the simple flick of a switch. A Flame also burned above the Los Angeles Coliseum in 1932.

When a Torch Relay was added to the ritual, it caught the public imagination and rapidly became accepted as a major symbol of for the Olympic Movement. Key moments emphasise the importance of the ritual as an instrument to promote the Games. Originally participants were largely anonymous but now it has become a way to recognise worthy citizens and also honour some of the great champions and thereby inspire future generations.



Figure 1. The plaque at Tegea commemorating discussions about the Torch Relay

The Genesis of the Torch Relay

The 1936 Games had been awarded to Germany in 1931, two years before Hitler came to power. The Nazis quickly realised that such a large-scale international event could be harnessed for propaganda purposes. In any case, they had been enthusiastic to propagate the idea of connection between their mythology, the notion of a “Master Race” and antiquity. It was

certainly true that Germans had taken the initiative in the excavations at Ancient Olympia where the Olympics had taken place in ancient times. The Official Report of the 1936 Games records that ministerial Councillor Wilhelm Haegert suggested the concept of holding a Torch relay run from Olympia to Berlin. This idea was inspired by the antique relief of two “Erotes” at the Palazzo Colonna in Rome depicting a torch relay run.² The distinguished German historian Karl Lennartz believed that Carl

Diem, an educator destined to become the organising genius behind the Berlin Olympics, had first proposed the idea at his birthday party in 1931. He noted an article in which Diem stated, "at my suggestion, Berlin organised a Relay."

In 1934, the IOC gathered in Athens for their annual session. Berlin Organising Committee Chairman Theodor Lewald "reported a plan, thought out by the Organising Committee, to light a Torch on the Marathon Tower by a fire brought from Olympia." The IOC minutes record that the members "fully approved of his plan."³ After their formal meetings, the IOC members were taken to visit the ancient site in Olympia. They returned to Athens by way of the village of Tegea. Whilst they were there, further discussions are said to have taken place concerning the Torch Relay.

Back in Berlin, the first plans for the route from Olympia to Berlin were drawn up in September 1934. By November, the organisers were able to report that they had received agreement from seven nations for the passage of the Flame.⁴ "The relationship between this torch relay run of the modern Olympic Games and the ancient festival was expressed in the brochures published in connection with this event, these being designed in an especially artistic manner." said German officials. In September 1935, a scouting trip of the proposed itinerary was made by Organising Committee official Werner Klingenberg and Pay Christian Carstensen from the propaganda ministry.⁵

At the Hotel Olympo in Kelafari near Kifisia, Greek archaeologist and scholar Alexander Philadelphus attended a banquet held by the local rotary club, in honour of the visitors from Germany. Philadelphus took the opportunity to talk about lighting the Flame.

"In a very short speech, I praised the idea, launched by the Organisers, the truly splendid idea of taking the Olympic fire to Berlin. I added, however, that lighting this flame with ordinary means (matches) would be very prosaic. It would be infinitely more poetic to light the first Torch using a magnifying glass, directly from the rays of the Hellenic sun. For then, it would be Apollo himself who would lend his light to the great Germanic nation. The idea was warmly acclaimed."



Figure 2. The Bowl in which the Olympic Flame is kindled

Organisers promoted the Relay with maps, leaflets and posters. The Torches themselves were manufactured by the Krupp steelworks in Essen. Meanwhile, preparations were under way in Greece for the Flame Lighting Ceremony and the initial passage through Greece. This was to be conducted under the authority of the Hellenic Olympic Committee (HOC) and announced with the issue of a bulletin. "Greece is summoned after two and a half thousand years to give the light of its superior civilisation to the whole world."⁶

Koula Pratsika, a leading dancer and teacher from Athens was asked to perform the lighting Ceremony. She recruited a group of her dance students, including Maria Horss, then a 14-year-old dance pupil.⁷ Horss went on to a distinguished career in Greek theatre and 28 years later, she was put in charge of the Ceremony.⁸

In Ancient Olympia, buildings had been cleaned, roads modernised and a Post Office opened. On the day of the Lighting Ceremony itself great crowds made their way to the village. Coubertin was not present and never did witness the passage of the Olympic Torch, but he did send a message to Olympia.

"To you the athletes who were diligent hands will carry the symbolic fire from Olympia to Berlin, I as the revivor and honorary president of the modern Olympic Games should like to express the spirit in which my thoughts accompany you and the significance I attach to your achievement" He paid tribute to the development of sport in Greece and his message ended "May your course be accompanied by Good Fortune the quest on my behalf that the youth assembled in Berlin except the heritage of my work and complete what I began"⁹

Television was still in its infancy and in any case unable to undertake an "outside broadcast" of this nature, but cameras filmed the ritual and extracts were shown in cinema newsreels. Also present in Olympia was Leni Riefenstahl, director of the official film of the Games. Such were the crowds that it proved necessary for her to re-shoot many of the scenes at other archaeological sites. In any case, the scenes in her film were a "theatrical" performance. The act of lighting the Flame from an altar as seen in her film "Olympia" bore little relation to how the Flame had been kindled during the Ceremony. The first official runner was Konstantinos Kondylis, who carried a Torch away from the archaeological site, but he did not even appear in many of the staged photographs. Instead, a young German, Jürgen Ascherfeld, can be seen. His image was also reproduced on a souvenir matchbox produced for the occasion.

In the film "Olympia", the lighting was performed by a dark-haired youth. His name was Anatol Dobriensky and he had been discovered on the roadside by Riefenstahl, apparently after participating in the Relay. She persuaded him to accompany her around Greece to film further sequences for her film.



Figure 3. The Olympic Flame Matchbox 1936

The actual journey of the Flame through Greece caught the public imagination. Although officials were concerned about threats of sabotage posed by the Greek Communist Youth League, crowds lined much of the route. The Relay continued throughout the night, and people turned out to greet it as it passed in the small hours. The Athenian newspapers declared that “only the sick stayed at home!”

When it reached Athens, it was greeted at the Parthenon by soldiers dressed in the costume of ancient times, poetry and a ceremony of flags at the Panathenaic Stadium. “Now the Olympic Flame is pursuing its course towards Berlin as a great and sacred symbol of peace, our thoughts are with all those who are carrying the Flame on its way to Germany.”¹⁰ It headed North to the border with Bulgaria and through Yugoslavia, Austria, Czechoslovakia. When it reached Germany, the Relay became a triumphant procession,

On the day of the Opening Ceremony a simple cauldron in the stadium was lit by Fritz Schilgen, a blond athlete. By this time, the IOC had chosen Tokyo to host the 1940 Olympics. Japanese officials had observed the journey of the Flame and the enthusiasm it inspired.

“The question of whether a torch relay would be held or not due to the distance between Greece and Tokyo, was brought up several times before the organising committee and taking into consideration the wish of the IOC, Tentative plans had been made.”¹¹

Coubertin again used the imagery of the Torch in a message written shortly before he died.

“The task of celebrating the XII Olympic Games will be the greatest ever given to a country, for it does not mean merely to pursue the Olympic Torch through the universe and to unite the whole of Asia with the Modern Olympism in a most cordial manner, but also to combine Hellenism, the most precious civilization of ancient Europe, with the refined culture and art of Asia.”¹²

The official Olympic magazine was by that time published from Berlin and edited by Diem. It carried an article by Swedish geographer Sven Hedin on the possibilities for 1940. “As the first scheme of having a relay of runners with the sacred flame of Olympia had been so dazzlingly successful in a double sense, Dr. Diem expressed the hope that the sacred fire would never be missing from the Olympic Games of the future” wrote Hedin.¹³

Tokyo officials stated “If the proposed Torch relay had materialised, much would have been gained in diffusing the Olympic spirit in the districts where the knowledge of the Olympic movement is as yet very scanty”¹⁴

In 1937 however, the Japanese government embarked on an aggressive military invasion of China and the resources needed to support this war trumped any requirement for holding the Olympics. Helsinki took on the mantle of staging the 1940 Olympics. At the 1939 IOC Session in London, Organising Committee President Jukka Rangell pledged to organise a Torch Relay. Discussions were held with Diem and Angelo Bolanachi, IOC member for Greece. Helsinki officials then drew up a detailed plan in conjunction with the Olympic Institute in Berlin.

“The 1940 Organising Committee fully understands the great idealistic and propaganda value of this relay, particularly in the countries through which it passes.”¹⁵

The proposed itinerary through 10 countries in a journey of around 6,832 kilometres.¹⁶ It was planned that the torches would be similar in design to those used in 1936. By early 1940 however, Soviet forces had attacked the Finnish border. War had also broken out in other parts of the continent which made international and Olympic sport impossible. The Helsinki Games were never held.

Restoring the Olympic Games and its rituals after the second world war.

The decision to resume the Olympics was taken at an IOC Executive Committee meeting in London a few weeks after the end of the war. At the 1946 IOC Session in Lausanne, the idea of reviving the Torch Relay was announced. “This is an interesting piece of propaganda, and the Executive Committee proposes holding it again.”¹⁷ It was warmly welcomed by Prince Axel of Denmark, who suggested that the Flame be brought across the Channel from France on “a type of boat taking part in the London Games.” The Relay proved instrumental in building enthusiasm and interest in the first Olympics to be celebrated in 12 years.

Frederick William, “Bill” Collins, a retired Royal Navy officer had offered to help and was given the task of making arrangements for the Relay. At first, there was opposition to the idea in the British press. A London evening newspaper described the Olympic Flame as “an antiquarian Sham”¹⁸ In response, Collins, fired off an angry retort and confided to colleagues that “these newspapermen can be the very deuce!”¹⁹

Despite his naval background, Collins encountered bureaucratic obstacles from the British Admiralty, although he eventually persuaded them to allow Royal Naval ships to carry the Flame. Approval was only gained after he threatened to approach the Greek, Italian and French navies.

Civil war in Greece made it impossible for the nominated priestess to travel from Athens to Olympia to light the Flame. Instead, a local girl was pressed into service. The Flame was not conveyed to Athens for a "Handover Ceremony" but taken from Olympia to the nearby port of Katakalo. From there a Greek ship carried the Flame to Corfu. After a short stop on the island, it was taken aboard HMS Whitesand Bay, a ship in the British Mediterranean fleet, for the passage to the Italian port of Bari.

In Italy, the runners were drawn from the Italian military. All wore khaki uniforms when carrying the Flame. Surviving newsreel footage also shows women athletes escorting the torch bearers. This is believed to have been a first.²⁰ The Flame briefly visited Milan before the runners continued to the Swiss border.

In Switzerland, the Flame visited Lausanne. At the Olympic headquarters at the Chateau of Mon Repos. "We noted the presence of Marie, Baroness de Coubertin. In spite of her age still wished to associate herself with the work of her husband,"²¹ said local newspaper *Gazette de Lausanne*.

"At precisely a quarter to five, the athlete carrying the torch appeared at Mon Repos, flanked by runners representing athletic and gymnastic clubs of our town." Georges Bridel, President du Grand Conseil, was there to welcome the flame at Mon Repos, then the headquarters of the IOC, speaking of "the concord that was possible between peoples"

The route continued into France, Luxembourg and Belgium but pointedly, it did not pass through Germany. In those days, the host Organising Committee was even responsible for invitations to compete in the Games. Germany and Japan were not invited to take part. Once again, as had been the case in 1936, the Relay continued through the night, and each stage was greeted by large numbers of spectators regardless of the hour.

When it arrived in Britain, all the runners were drawn from local athletic clubs. The final bearer at Wembley Stadium was a Cambridge University medical student called John Mark. a member of the prestigious Achilles Club. He had been practising in secret at Wembley Stadium. An Achilles Club teammate Angus Scott had been named as reserve runner. The selection prompted great speculation in the British press who spoke of a "Mystery Blond to Carry the Torch,"²²

Papers as far away as Australia reported "according to rumours current in London, the Duke of Edinburgh will be the "unknown athlete" to carry the Torch on the last lap. All efforts to check the rumour have been unsuccessful."²³ After the Opening Ceremony, a further Relay took a secondary Flame to Torbay for

the sailing events. London 1948 had played a crucial role in re-establishing the Olympic idea and to a great extent, also re-established the concept of the Torch Relay as a symbol synonymous with the Olympics.

The first Winter Relay

In 1952, a Flame Relay to the Winter Games was conducted for the first time. The Flame was kindled in the Norwegian village of Morgedal, at the cabin of Sondre Norheim, revered as the "father of modern skiing." From there it was taken to Oslo.

It was presented as "not an Olympic flame to be fetched from Morgedal to Oslo, but rather a torch-greeting from the birthplace of modern ski sport,"²⁴ Although the Relay was very short, it set a precedent for subsequent Winter Games although it was not until 1964 that the Winter Flame was kindled in Ancient Olympia.

Key moments of the Relay

The Journey of the Flame is an important way in which the Olympic message is promoted. The excitement is built with key moments from the Lighting Ceremony in Ancient Olympia, the Ceremonial Handover in Athens, the arrival in the host nation and the final lighting of the cauldron. Each of these landmark moments build a narrative and heighten enthusiasm.

The Lighting Ceremony

The Flame is lit by the rays of the sun in the precincts of the ancient temple of "Hera". The ritual is performed by a "High priestess", always played by a distinguished Greek theatrical actress. She is accompanied by "maidens" who perform celebratory dance movements that invest the ritual with a striking visual aesthetic. Rehearsals of the Ceremony take place for months, initially in Athens and then for the last week in Ancient Olympia.

Since 2008, these have been under the direction of Artemis Ignatiou, an experienced dancer and choreographer. Before lighting the Flame, the High Priestess recites an invocation to Apollo in Greek.

"Apollo God of sun and the idea of light, send your rays and light the sacred Torch, and you Zeus give peace to all peoples on earth and wreath the winners of the Sacred Race".²⁵

As a precaution a flame is lit and conserved in safety lamps after each of the final rehearsals. This is done to ensure that a Flame kindled from the rays of the sun at Olympia can be used even if the day of the official lighting proves cloudy. This happened on the day of the Paris Lighting Ceremony. On this occasion, the tense of the wording of the invocation spoken by the Priestess is altered slightly.

"Apollo God of sun and the idea of light you have sent us your rays and light the sacred Torch."



Figure 4. The High Priestess with the Torch at Ancient Olympia

After the Flame has been ignited, another priestess known as the “Estiada” steps forward. The Flame is placed in an archaic bowl and is carried in procession through the archaeological site. The Priestesses form up on the hillside above the ancient stadium as the Flame appears. The bowl is placed on an altar. The High Priestess recites a further invocation before the first Torchbearer steps forward and receive the Flame. Before 2020, the first runner had always been a man but then, to support the IOC’s ideas of gender equality, pistol shooting gold medallist Anna Korakaki was selected as the first female torch bearer to carry the Flame in the ancient stadium.

The first bearer carries the Flame to a marble memorial to Baron Pierre de Coubertin. There, a silent tribute to the founder of the Games is paid. At the Gates to the memorial, the first handover or “Kiss” takes place. Over the last 20 years, the second bearer has typically been a runner connected to the nation staging that year’s Games. In 2024, Olympic swimming champion Laure Manadou was the first French bearer.

Although this has brought an additional international element, in 2000, it also sparked controversy when Sophie, the 11year old daughter of IOC Vice President Kevan Gosper, took the Torch on behalf of Sydney. There were unfavourable headlines when it emerged that a Greek Australian girl, originally listed for the honour, had been moved to a less prominent leg.²⁶ Invitations have often been given to other overseas representatives to take part as the Relay continues its journey across Greece.

In 1996, members of the Atlanta Organising Committee (ACOG) were invited to participate and a group of young people who had participated in an International Olympic Academy (IOA) session were also permitted to join the Relay. In more recent years students from the IOA Masters Programme have also usually given the opportunity to escort the Torch.

It had been planned for a number of young Japanese runners to participate in 2020, but the arrangements were cancelled as part of precautions as the spread of the COVID-19 virus

became apparent. The runners in Olympia did however feature two students from Colorado Springs and a runner from a twin city, Olympia in Washington.

The relay to Beijing 2022 also shortened in response to the pandemic. Runners only carried the Flame at the archaeological sites and there was no relay through Greece. When the Flame reached China, the scale of the Relay was much reduced. Participants carried the Flame in a “Closed Loop.” which took place on the three days before the Opening Ceremony.

The International Relay

Although there had been stopovers when the Flame crossed continents for the 1956,1964 and 1968 Games, it was not until Sydney 2000 that a genuine international Relay was undertaken. Before arriving on Australian soil, the Flame was taken to almost all neighbouring countries in Oceania.

When Athens was awarded the 2004 Games, their presentation had included “the unique proposal that the Olympic Flame should take a route covering all five continents and all previous Olympic Host cities.”²⁷The philosophy was further developed with objectives set out.

1. To United the Olympic Family
2. Visit all the continents symbolised by the Olympic rings.
3. To include cities with a particular sporting historical of cultural significance.

The Greek government proposed three further cities in neighbouring countries. Sofia, Nicosia and Istanbul. The Flame had visited Istanbul before, as a stopover end route for Melbourne 1956 and Tokyo in 1964 but its arrival on July 6, 2004, was viewed as a gesture of goodwill and friendship. The celebratory cauldron in Istanbul was lit by triple Olympic gold weightlifting gold medallist Naim Suleymanoglu. In all, the Flame visited 34 cities in 27 countries. The International Relay even had a theme song. “Pass the Flame Unite the World”

For the Beijing 2008 Games, there was a similar global Relay, which was promoted as the “Journey of Harmony.” In many cities however, the Flame was greeted by protests which sought to highlight the Chinese government’s policy in Tibet. Such was the disruption that the IOC made it clear that would not sanction any international Relays in the future.

Women in the Relay

In the early years women had not officially taken part in the Torch Relay although women participated as escorts on some legs in Italy in 1948 and others did so in 1952 in Helsinki. Roller skating world champion Alberta Vianello carried the Torch for the 1956 Cortina D’Ampezzo Winter Games. She may well have been the first woman officially nominated as a bearer.

Women also took a prominent role in the relay to the 1956 Olympic Equestrian competitions, held that year in Stockholm.

(As a result of strict quarantine measures imposed by the Australian government Melbourne was unable to host them.) A special relay on horseback was organised to carry the flame through Scandinavia. The Danish dressage rider Lis Hartel may well have been the first female Olympic medallist to carry an Olympic torch. Members of equestrian societies in Sweden took a leading role in transporting the flame to Stockholm. Many of them were women. In the stadium, gymnastics gold medallist Karin Lindberg was one of those to carry a Flame to a cauldron at one end of the stadium. Women took a greater part in the Relay for Tokyo in 1964 and then finally, Norma Enriqueta Basilio of Mexico became the first to light the final cauldron at the Opening Ceremony in 1968.



Figure 5. Participants from the International Olympic Academy carry the Flame in the Taigetos Mountains

The Olympic Torch Relay as a “Showpiece event”

With the exception of 1948 when a civil war prevented it and in 1984 after a dispute between Los Angeles Organisers (LAOOC), the flame has usually been taken to Athens. The Relay in 2020 was however, truncated as a precaution against COVID. The Relay for Beijing 2022 was even shorter.

In the early years, although the torch relay took a more or less straightforward route to the Host City with little or no deviation even though considerable distances were sometimes involved. It was in 1984 that the entire scale and ambition of the event was changed by LAOOC President Peter Ueberroth. It was an initiative which came with problems of its own. LAOOC proposed that “would be” participants could make a donation to a fund described as a “Youth Legacy Kilometer” (YLK) in exchange for the opportunity to carry the Torch. Proceeds were to go to youth sport.

This caused a bitter dispute with Greek authorities. One of the most vocal critics was Spiros Fotinos, Mayor of Olympia at the time. He claimed that the Relay had been commercialised. For a while it was uncertain whether a flame for Los Angeles 1984 could be lit in Ancient Olympia at all.

So it was that a few weeks before the scheduled Lighting Ceremony, the IOC sent staff members Jean- Loup Chappelet and Michelle Verdier to Olympia in secret where they lit a Flame. This was transported back to Lausanne, but later authorities in Greece relented and an official Ceremony did go ahead.²⁸ At this, IOC members Nikolaos Nissiotis and Georgio Di Stefani handed a lantern containing the Flame to LAOOC representative Richard “Dick” Sargent. It was reported that a demonstration against LAOOC had taken place at the town hall in Ancient Olympia,²⁹

“All nations and all athletes should come to this sacred place and experience the ceremony because they will only then understand fully, the meaning of the Olympic movement and its contribution to world peace,” Sargent said.³⁰ Greater details on the controversy have been set down by LAOOC President Peter Ueberroth in his memoir on the 1984 Games³¹ and scholar John McAloon in his wider study of the Torch Relay.³²

The lantern was flown straight to New York without the usual handover in Athens. In New York, it was carried by Jim Thorpe Junior, grandson of 1912 double gold medallist Jim Thorpe and Gina Hemphill, granddaughter of Jesse Owens, to begin an 84-day journey to the Los Angeles Coliseum where the Games were to open.

“The success of this Torch run has exceeded our fondest dreams. Millions and millions of our fellow Americans stood by along the road-sides, cheering the runners and thereby becoming part of the Olympic Movement.” LAOOC President Peter Ueberroth told spectators at the Opening Ceremony.³³ The template established by LAOOC was very soon adopted by all future host cities.

From Greece to the “Hospitable” Olympic City

The handover is always considered a significant moment and in recent years it has been televised live. In 1992, Barcelona Mayor Pascal Maragall recited a poem written for the Barcelona “People’s Olympiad” of 1936 which was cut short by the Spanish civil war. “Not for hate, not for war, do we come to struggle beneath the blue sky, our only cry is one of joy, peace!”³⁴

In 2012, there was great excitement in Athens at the prospect of David Beckham attending the handover, although rain fell throughout so crowds could not easily see him under an umbrella. More recently, Covid-19 precautions forced the 2020 handover ceremony to be scaled down. No spectators were permitted. It had been intended that participants would fly from Japan but instead the flame was received on Tokyo’s behalf by 1996 Japanese swimming Olympian Naoko Imoto. She was already in Athens where she was working for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Imoto was drafted in with less than a day’s notice.

In 2021, it was a similar story for the Relay to the 2022 Winter Games in Beijing. There was a very limited passage of the Flame in both Greece and China. The showpiece handover,

traditionally an event at which spectators enter without charge returned to its former glory in 2024. It took place on a sunny evening, and long queues of spectators could be seen on the approaches to the marble stadium in Athens for the Handover to Paris. The Greek singing superstar Nana Mouskouri was invited to lead the performance of “La Marseillaise” and as the Greek anthem. The Flame was carried around the stadium by bearers from both France and Greece.



Figure 6. In 2016, the Flame was displayed in the host city of Rio during the Games for all to see

Arrival in the host nation

Although the Relay was a much shorter event in the early years, organisers did their best to promote it. After the Lighting in 1936, German State Radio accompanied the runners. They recorded audio reports on wax discs and transmitted regular updates throughout the journey. By the time the Flame crossed the German border at Hellendorf on the eve of the Games, it was greeted by a large and enthusiastic crowd,

In 1948 the arrival of the flame in Dover was also accompanied by a radio broadcast, this time on the BBC. Petty Officer Herbert Barnes ran down the gangplank of HMS Bicester, and after speeches from municipal officials, Sidney Doble of the Dover Cooperative Athletic Club set off with the torch. In subsequent relays, each country welcomed the arrival in a distinctive fashion.

For Montreal 1976, the Flame was transmitted by an electronic pulse From Athens to Ottawa. “If the ancient Greeks could see this lightning transmission of the Flame, then they would say how it was done with the intervention of the gods,” declared Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.³⁵

In 1988, an expansive relay involved Korean personalities from different walks of life and these even included Miss Korea. Foreign journalists were also given the opportunity to participate.

The arrival of the flame on Spanish soil in 1992 was particularly notable. It had travelled by sea from the Greek port of

Piraeus on a Spanish Navy vessel. A smaller craft brought it ashore at the ancient archaeological site of Ampurias, a site had been chosen because it had been an ancient Greek settlement established in around 575BC.

The celebrations took place in the evening as the small rowing boat arrived in the harbour with the flame. 15-year-old actress Marian Aguilera, representing the “Goddess of Fire,” was carried ashore with the Flame. After performances of music and dance before the Relay across Spain began. Media coverage of the early days again played an important role. “The fact is that the reaction of the public and of the press were closely linked. Reports of the popular success of the torch on the first relays were the signal for a huge celebration in which everyone wanted to take part”³⁶

For the Sydney 2000 Games, a spirit of reconciliation with indigenous peoples was prominent. The journey across Australia began from Uluru, a symbolic rock central to Aboriginal culture. The first runner was indigenous hockey player Nova Peris, who took off her shoes to run barefoot. Once more the ceremony was covered extensively by television.

The Lighting of the Cauldron

The identity of the athlete or athletes chosen to light the final cauldron is inevitably a subject of intense speculation. In the Summer of 1952, Helsinki was the first host city to harness the power of the celebrity. They selected two of the greatest athletes in the world, both Finns, to carry the Torch at their Opening Ceremony. The crowd in Helsinki were electrified by the entrance of Paavo Nurmi with the Torch and the appearance of 1912 gold medallist Hannes Kolehmainen. The Flame itself burned from the Marathon Tower, 72 metres above the stadium.



Figure 7. The Royal Rowbarge Gloriana added to the excitement when it conveyed the Olympic Flame past the Tower of London in 2012

Although the ignition of the cauldron was often simple, symbolism was also important. In 1964, Tokyo’s cauldron was lit by 18-year-old Yoshinori Sakai, born on the day the atomic

bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. Unusually, his identity was revealed before the day of the cauldron lighting.

In 1968, the choice of Norma Enriqueta Basilio to light the cauldron in Mexico was also significant, for she was the first woman to do so.

In 1988, the arrival of 76-year-old Torchbearer Sohn Kee Chung at the stadium in Seoul had resonance for many Koreans of the older generation. He was the winner of the marathon at the 1936 Berlin Games but had been forced to compete in the colours of Japan because Korea was under occupation at that time. He did not light the final cauldron but there was additional symbolism in the choice of three lighters to represent sport, science and culture.

A sense of theatre took the moment of lighting to a new level at Barcelona 1992. Antonio Rebollo, a Paralympic archer, fired an arrow at the cauldron which then burst into life.

The choice of Muhammad Ali for the Centennial Games in Atlanta will perhaps never be equalled. Known to so many people throughout the world, he transcended sport. When Ali died in 2016, Bill Clinton, the United States President in 1996 recalled “the man I watched take the last steps to light the Olympic Flame when I was President, seeing his hands shake and his legs shake and knowing that he was going to make those last few steps no matter what it took, the Flame would be lit, the fight would be won, the spirit would be affirmed.”³⁷

In 2000, Australian runner Cathy Freeman was invited to light the cauldron to communicate a message of “reconciliation” for Australia’s indigenous communities. All the final bearers at Stadium Australia were female as a commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the first women to participate in the Olympics.

The Impact of the Pandemic

The Flame for the Tokyo 2020 arrived in Japan shortly before an announcement was made that the Games would be postponed for a year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even so there were festivities when it landed at the Matsushima air base. These included a fly past from Japan's elite “Blue Impulse” aerobatic team. When the flame was put on display at municipal locations including a railway station, crowds flocked to see it.

The Flame was conserved in a lantern for a year. Then the Relay resumed in earnest from Fukushima, an area badly affected by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. The first bearers were members of the Japan team which had won the 2011 FIFA Women’s World Cup.

Despite COVID precautions, the completion of the Torch Relay was seen as an essential part of the Games. It was however conducted under strict protocols to minimise the possibility of infection. The IOC President had taken part in each Relay since 1992, but Thomas Bach opted not to participate.



Figure 8. Social distancing was the watchword when the Flame was displayed in Tokyo

Paris 2024 – “Les Jeux Ouvertes”

The journey of the Torch to Paris was important in that it represented a return to normal with mass participation and engagement. There was a voyage across the oceans to French territories in the Caribbean and also to Tahiti the surfing venue.

To mark Olympic Day on June 23rd, the Relay visited the winter resort of Chamonix, in 1924, it had staged an event which was later designated as the first Winter Olympic Games. Among other symbolic stages The Relay visited Mirville, Coubertin’s childhood home in Normandy. On Bastille Day, the Flame made its way down the Champs Elysees. In the early part of the day of the Opening Ceremony, the Flame continued its journey through the city.

The Paris organisers had already departed from normal practice by opting not to stage the Opening Ceremony in a stadium but centred on the River Seine. In fact, the Ceremony began with a film sequence. This showed a runner, ostensibly the final Torchbearer arriving at the Stade de France only to discover it was completely empty because the Ceremony had been moved to the river. French World Cup winning footballer Zinedine Zidane then appeared to rescue the situation and make sure Torch reached its destination. With the help of group of young people, the Torch emerged on the River Seine to the cheers of watching spectators. Organisers opted to use film sequences to represent the further progress of the Flame.

A “Mysterious Torchbearer” carried the Flame across the city rooftops visiting many Parisian landmarks. He was based on

masked characters in French culture including the demon Belphegor, “The Man in the Iron Mask,” “The Phantom of the Opera”, masked criminal “Fantômas,” Ezio from the computer game “Assassin’s Creed” and Arsene Lupin.³⁸ It was particularly unfortunate that heavy rain fell throughout which rather diminished the visual effect and also made it obvious which segments had been pre-recorded.

Since 2000, the lighting of the cauldron has been the final act of any opening ceremony. In Paris, Zidane re-appeared at the climax of the night to receive the Flame from the “Mysterious Torchbearer”, Zidane in turn passed the Flame to Rafael Nadal, revered in France for his performances at the French Open tennis. The Flame was taken out along the river once more. Eventually it emerged in the centre of Paris where a succession of champions and other personalities carried the Torch towards the Jardin des Tuileries. Finally, judoka Teddy Riner and former runner Marie Jose Perec, both triple Olympic gold medallists, were revealed as the final Torch bearers.

Instead of a burning cauldron, a balloon 30 metres high had been placed in the Jardin de Tuileries. This had a ring seven metres in diameter in which were set 40 LED spotlights. “The Olympic Flame will shine without fuel. A meticulous combination of a cloud of mist and beams of light, the Olympic Flame

will flicker with electricity as its sole source of energy, visible and warm, this Flame is also a technical feat”³⁹

Throughout the Games, the “Vasque Olympique” was lowered to the ground during the day. It proved very popular and entry to the viewing area was soon oversubscribed. Each evening after sunset the balloon was raised into the air. This spectacle also attracted a large crowd to the courtyard outside the Louvre Museum. It was quite clear that despite this unorthodox display the Olympic flame had lost none of its lustre. 90 years ago, Coubertin sent a message to the Closing Ceremony in Berlin. “Remember the fire lit by the ardour of the sun that came to you from Olympia to shed light on us and warm our age.”⁴⁰

Financial Sources

The preparation and writing of this study were completed without financial support from any institution or organization.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to publication of this study.

Author Contributions

Research Idea: PB; Research Design: PB; Data Collection: PB; Data Analysis: PB; Writing: PB; Critical Review: PB

Notes:

¹ Coubertin Paroles de Cloture, June 26,1912

² 1936 Official Report of the IX Olympic Games

³ 1934 IOC Session Athens minutes 18 May 1934

⁴ 1936 Official Report of the IX Olympic Games p.91

⁵ Ibid p.92

⁶ HOC Bulletin K67-1 -E12 cited in Historical Archives of the Hellenic Olympic Committee (ed Koulouris) .“Greece created the Olympic Games in antiquity. In Greece the modern Olympic Games were held. In this way, Greece proves that it continues to believe in the ideals of the Olympic light. Greeks help us convey the Olympic light”

⁷ Authors interview with Maria Horss – April 2004

⁸ Horss was the head choreographer from 1964 until 2006 and succeeded by Artemis Ignatiou who is the present artistic director of the Lighting Ceremony.

⁹ Coubertin message for the Flame Lighting Ceremony -July 20, 1936

¹⁰ Proia – July 24, 1936

¹¹ Tokyo 1940 Olympic Games – Progress Report p118

¹² Coubertin letter July 29,1937

¹³ (Olympia-Tokyo. Sven Hedin- Olympische Rundschau (Olympic Review) 1940 April No. 9 p. 24-28

¹⁴ Tokyo 1940 Olympic Games – Progress Report p118

¹⁵ Helsinki 1940 Olympic Organising Committee – undated project dossier “Course de la Relais de Flambeau”

¹⁶ ibid

¹⁷ 1946 IOC Session Lausanne minutes 5 Sept 1946

¹⁸ Evening Standard – May 31,1947

¹⁹ FW Collins undated private memorandum

²⁰ British Pathe Newsreel 245719 -July 1948

²¹ Gazette de Lausanne – July 26,1948

²² Daily Herald – July 21, 1948

²³ Australian Associated Press July 23, 1948.

²⁴ 1952 Official Report - Winter Olympic Games Oslo p.170

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³⁰ ibid

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- ³⁵ The Montreal Star - 16 July 1976 p1
- ³⁶ Official Report 1992 Olympic Games vol 3 p37.
- ³⁷ Sports Illustrated June 13 2016 - Eulogy by William Clinton at the funeral of Muhammad Ali, Louisville June 10, 2016
- ³⁸ Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony Media Guide page 9 part 2
- ³⁹ EDF Energy media release July 27,2024
- ⁴⁰ Coubertin – Message to the Closing Ceremony, 1936 Olympic Games Berlin.