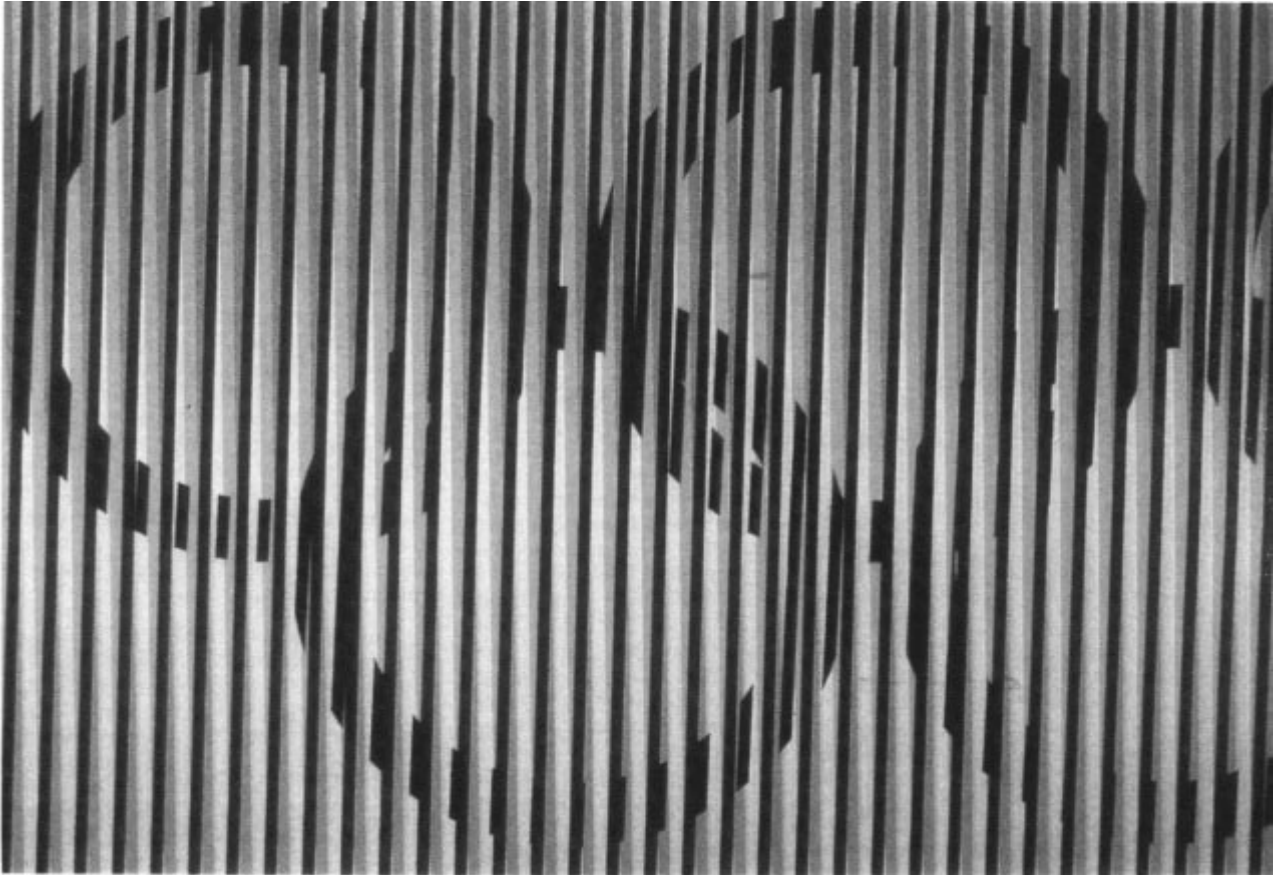


THIS GREAT SYMBOL



In early August 1984, I revisited for the fifth time the beautiful Greek archaeological site of Delphi, located on the south slope of Mount Parnassus high above the Gulf of Corinth. Near the end of my ramblings through the site on that particular occasion, I paused on a pathway near the Sacred Spring of Kastalia to tie a shoelace which had become undone. Hoisting my foot up on a convenient nearby stone, I commenced the knotting process. Suddenly, my casual exercise was distracted by what appeared to be an ancient carving on the stone. Unbelievably, I saw just below my foot a weathered but indelible symbol, one readily recognizable to millions of world citizens—the five ring logo of the Modern Olympic Movement.

TRICKS OF HISTORY

By Robert Knight Barney

After taking several pictures of the relic, I resolved in my mind to pursue the exciting prospect of explaining the linkage between this universally known modern symbol and one seemingly known to Greeks over twenty-five hundred years ago. Hardly had I started on this project when I learned I had been scooped. A fellow sport historian, the American classicist David Young, had previously seen the stone and pursued the same scholarly mission that I envisioned.⁽¹⁾ The following, then, is a combination of Young's observations, together with some of my own thinking on the subject.

ON OLYMPIC RINGS AND COLOURS

Most people in the world now recognize the Olympic five ring symbol. It appears on products we eat, drink, drive, wear, and otherwise use in our daily lives. Most, however, are uncertain as to how the symbol came to be. Olympic history buffs know that in June 1914 the Baron Pierre de Coubertin greeted delegates to the IOC's 20th anniversary celebration of the birth of the Modern Olympic Movement with a display of flags produced especially for the occasion. Across the flags' white background was arranged the five ring symbol that we know so well. Months pre-



vious, Coubertin had written briefly about the symbol. In his own words:

L'émblème choisi pour illustrer et représenter ce Congrès mondial de 1914 qui mettra le sceau définitif à la rénovation olympique a commencé d'apparaître sur divers documents préliminaires: cinq anneaux régulièrement enlacés. (2)

Given the stone at Delphi, weathered and faded by time, it is tempting to speculate that Coubertin's inspiration for his now famous symbol came from antiquity, if not from the stone at Delphi, then from one similar at Olympia, an historical site the Baron visited more than once in his lifetime, indeed, the hallowed sanctuary of the final resting place for his heart (it is interred in a stone pillar located in a grove of trees above the remains of the ancient stadium). However, despite the assertions of some modern authors, there is absolutely no link between the modern Olympic symbol and one similar existing in antiquity.⁽³⁾

First, a note on Coubertin's real inspiration for the five ring symbol he unveiled at Paris in 1914. To find the origin in Coubertin's mind of symbols in the form of interlocked rings, one has but to scan his personal sport involvement in France before any Modern Olympic Games ever took place. In early 1890, Coubertin became president of Union des sociétés françaises des sports athlétiques (USFSA), the French sport-governing body equivalent, for instance, to its well known 1890s contemporary, the American AAU. The USFSA had evolved as a result of a union between Georges de St. Clair's Union des sociétés françaises de courses a pied and Coubertin's Comité Jules Simon.⁽⁴⁾ The logo of the USFSA, created to symbolize the union of two sports bodies, was the simple interlocking of two rings. The new federation's two ring symbol was displayed on its athletes' uniforms at least as early as 1893, a full year before Coubertin convened his now famous Sorbonne Conference in Paris where the Modern Olympic Movement was hatched.

On April 10, 1896, outside the village of Marathon, near Athens, a French runner representing the USFSA, one A. Lermusiaux, toed the starting line in the front row of history's

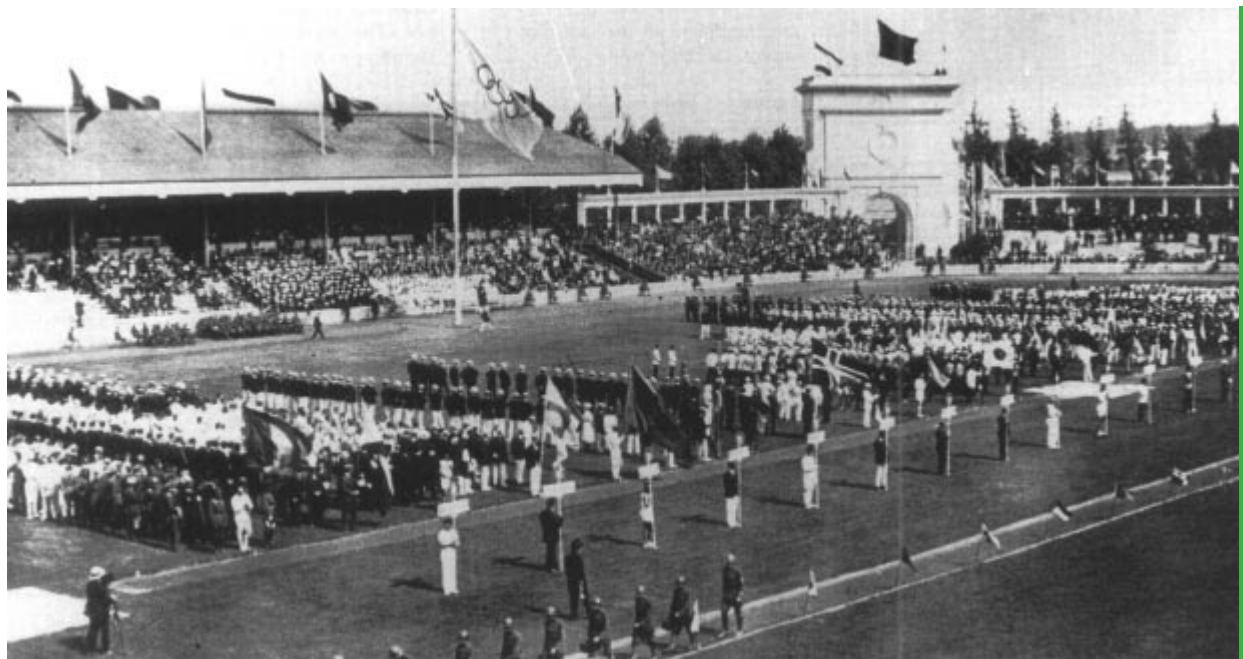
first Olympic marathon race. Emblazoned on the front of his singlet was the Union's interlocking two ring symbol. French Olympic athletes continued to display the USFSA two ring symbol on their jerseys until the Games of the VIII Olympiad in Paris. It seems quite obvious, therefore, that Coubertin's affiliation with the USFSA led him to think in terms of interlocked rings or circles when he applied his mind towards conceiving a logo for his commemorative conference of 1914, indeed, a ring-logo that would symbolize his Olympic Movement's success up to that point in time, just as the interlocking of two rings had signified the successful marriage of two distinct societies into one, the USFSA. Circles, after all, connote wholeness (as we are told by the psychologist Karl Jung), the interlocking of them, continuity.

But why five circles? Olympic literature has long held that they signify the five continents of the world. But Coubertin never spoke of "continents" in 1913/1914, only of specific areas of the world "désormais acquises à l'Olympisme."^(S) Because the Baron orig-

inally designed the five ring symbol as a logo for the 20th anniversary congress celebrating the IOC's establishment, it is probable, as David Young postulates, that Coubertin's five rings symbolized the five Olympic Games successfully staged before the time of the 1914 Paris proceedings. As for the five different ring colours, Coubertin did not think in terms of each colour representing a continent, as we are often told in many contemporary Olympic publications. Rather, the white background of the flag, together with the green, red, yellow, black and blue rings, represented at least one of the colours present in the flag of each nation represented in the Games of the first five Olympiads. To cite Coubertin himself:

...De plus les six couleurs ainsi combinées reproduisent celles de toutes les nations sans exception. Le bleu et jaune de Suède, le bleu et blanc de Grèce, les tricolores français, anglais, américain, allemand, belge, italien, hongrois, le jaune et rouge d'Espagne voisinent avec les innovations brésilienne ou australienne, avec le vieux Japon et la jeune

At Antwerp in 1920, the Olympic flag was raised for the first time.



Chine. Voilà vraiment un emblème international.⁽⁶⁾

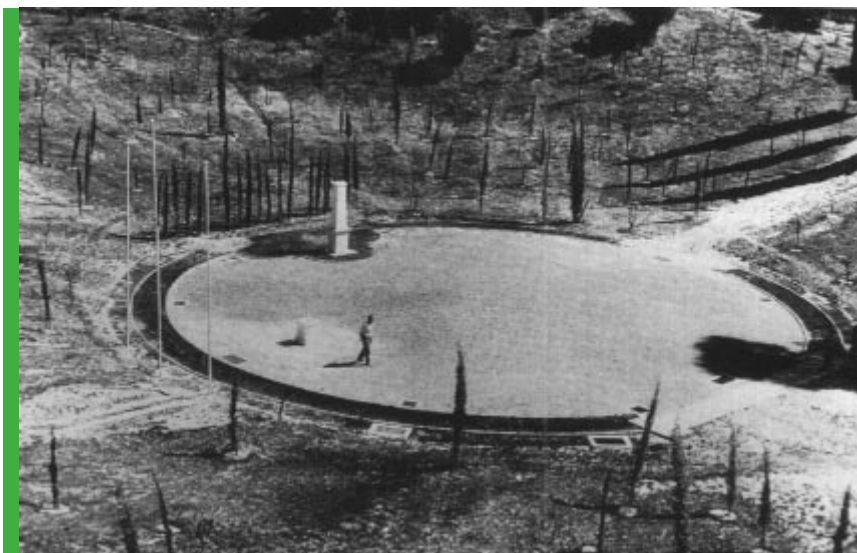
If the rings truly signified the continents of the world, then why wasn't Africa mentioned? Africa, at least in Coubertin's thinking related to the Olympic Games, did not figure in the logo scheme. True, South African whites had competed in the Modern Olympic Games from the outset, but always under the patronage and representation of Mother England. Not until the 1950s, when European colonial entities on the continent commenced to evolve into independent countries, did true African participation in the Modern Olympic Games begin.

ON FALSE LINKS TO ANTIQUITY

If the Baron de Coubertin's stimulation for shaping a Modern Olympic Symbol in the form of interlocked rings stemmed from his experience with the USFSA in the early 1890s, how, then, did the mistaken impression come to be established and perpetuated that his creative action was prompted by symbols from antiquity? Here again, David Young provides the answer.

Many are familiar with the fact that Carl Diem, president of the Berlin organizing

committee for the 1936 Games of the XI Olympiad, was instrumental in organizing and carrying out a German plan to conduct a torch relay of the sacred flame, from its lighting point of origin in the Altis adjacent to the ancient stadium of Olympia, to the great Olympic stadium in the suburbs of Berlin. Diem and his cohorts were masters of ritual and symbolism, overlooking few opportunities to orchestrate the Berlin Games of the XI Olympiad in the aura and circumstance perceived to have been the Olympic atmosphere in antiquity. The relay route of the torch progressed from Olympia on the Peloponnese, through northern Greece to the Danube, hence through Austria, and finally, to Germany itself. Realizing the athletic and religious significance of Delphi in antiquity, Diem planned for the torch detour west from Athens to Delphi for special ceremonies to be conducted in the ancient stadium perched high above the sacred temple of Apollo on Mount Parnassus. Among Diem's contrived theatrical props for the stadium ceremonies at Delphi was a rectangular-shaped dressed block of stone, some three feet high. Etched into each of the four sides of the stone was chiselled the modern Olympic five ring symbol. The stone was placed on the ancient starting groove structures near the sphendome



In Olympia, the stele enclosing the heart of Pierre de Coubertin is an obligatory stop for the Olympic flame.

(west end) of the stadium. After the ceremonies were concluded, the torch runners departed for points north. But the stone remained in place on the ancient starting line sills... for years.

In the late 1950s, two British authors, Lynn and Gray Poole, visited the Delphi stadium, observed the stone with its familiar symbols etched on its sides, and in their *History of the Ancient Games*, published a photo and commentary which described the piece as an ancient altar at Delphi:

In the stadium at Delphi, there is a stone altar on which is carved five rings symbolic of the quinquennial timing for the celebrated games. The design of the five circles on the Delphi altar is today the symbol of the Olympic Games. The circles form a link between ancient and modern Olympics.(7)

Are the Pooles the “experts” General Grombach refers to in his book?

The interlocking circles found on the altar at De/phi and definitely connected with the ancient games, are considered by 3 experts to be 3,000 years old.(8)

The published result of the Poole’s misguided interpretation was not revealed to Greek officials at Delphi until the late 1960s. As part of the torch relay hype preliminary to the Munich Games of 1972, the Greek Committee for Olympics and Bequests planned for an all-night ceremony to be conducted in the Delphi stadium, complete with burning torches and the spiritual presence of “Diem’s stone.” The joke of Diem’s 1936 “Delphic Altar” had gone far enough. Mr. Petrarchou, in charge of the Delphi archaeological site at the time, balked at the Committee’s proposal, fearing that damage might occur to the hallowed precincts of Greece’s most beautiful tourist attraction. Instead, he offered an alternative—the celebrations might be held outside the Delphi site proper, that is, on the roadway near the sacred spring of Kastalia, well removed from “things valuable”. At that time, May 1972, Petrarchou ordered the offending fake antiquity with its five ring symbols moved to the very spot where my foot came to rest on it some twelve years later. But don’t look for it there today. Restoration work above the sacred spring has prompted



The five Rings have a modern history.

the “Diem stone’s” removal to still another location at Delphi, the entrance to the Roman agora which, as some will recognize, confronts folks as they purchase their tickets to enter the archaeological site proper. A guardian of Delphi’s antiquities, Mr Efstathios Sidiras, showed it to me on my latest visit there this past August. Even there, at the entrance, the stone captures no more attention from pilgrims to the glorious site than it did in its previous location.

It is hoped that Olympic Review readers will refer this historical notation to those who continue to believe that ancient symbols and symbolism guided the Baron Pierre de Coubertin in his creation of what John MarAloon has called “This Great Symbol.” “A Great Symbol” the five ring logo obviously is, but clearly one conceived from late nineteenth century brainstorming, rather than from the symbolism essence of ancient Greek Olympic Games. It should be equally clear that the Baron’s five ring creation connoted the successful accomplishment of history’s first five Modern Olympic Games, and that the ring colours exemplify hues represented in the flags of each of the countries participating in the Games of Olympiads I, II, III, IV, and V.

R.K.B.

(The Endnotes are on page 641 .)

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End notes to the article **This Great Symbol**, p. 627.

1. See David C. Young, Coubertin and the Olympic Logo, Proceedings of the XIth HISPA International Congress (J.A. Mangan, ed.), Jordan Hill College, Glasgow, Scotland, 1985, pp. 326-327.

2. See *Revue Olympique*, August 1913. English translation: "The emblem and the flag chosen to represent this 1914 World Congress, which will place the definitive seal on the Olympic revival, has started to appear on various preliminary documents: five rings regularly interlocked."

3. For instance, see John V. Grombach, *The Official 1980 Olympic Guide*, New York: Times Books, 1980, p. 280. Here, Grombach makes an entirely misleading interpretation: "... any number of *Olympic* four and five interlocking circles on marble plaques and doors have been found at Olympia dating back to 500 B.C." Italics mine. Whereas ancient Greek artists at times did use interlocking circles as geometric decorative borders and design accents on structures and pediments, not one interlocking ring arrangement ever resembled the modern five ring symbol, with its three rings above, two rings below configuration. Equally, interlocking ring motifs from antiquity have never been shown to be symbolic of the ancient Olympic Games and their quadrennial occurrence.

4. The scenario of unification is spelled out briefly in John J. MacAloon, *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp. 157-158.

5. See *Revue Olympique*, August 1913. English translation: "Won over to Olympism."

6. *Revue Olympique*, August 1913. English translation: "Furthermore, the six colours (including the flag's white background) thus combined reproduce the colours of all the nations, with no exception. The blue and yellow of Sweden, the blue and white of Greece, the tricolours of France, England and America, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Hungary, the yellow and red of Spain next to the novelties of Brazil or Australia, with old Japan and new China. Here is truly an international symbol." Parenthesis mine. Notably absent from the Baron's list of countries are any from the continent of Africa, further proof for the fact that Coubertin's "colour inspiration" was derived from national flag hues, rather than from continents and their respective racial connotations.

7. Lynn and Gray Poole, *The Ancient Olympic Games*, London: Vision Press, 1963, p. 119. The caption beneath the Poole's illustration reads: "Altar in stadium at Delphi, with the five rings indicating the quinquennial spacing of the Games. The five rings were adopted by the Modern Olympics as their official symbol."

8. See Grombach, 1980, p. 280. Ital. mine