The Olympics in ancient Greece with La Trobe University’s Professor Christopher Mackie

What was it like to be there? Well it would be a very male event, as I mentioned. A very male setting for the reasons of Greek society, very patriarchal society. It’s estimated in the fourth century BC so quite a few hundred years after the beginning of the games in the traditional day. It’s estimated a hundred thousand people would have gone there. There are virtually, one assumes, only very or no facilities there, you bring what you need, you camp. Unless you’re rich, if you’re rich it’s always different. But I’m talking about the average person and remember it can take you a while to get to a place like this, Olympia is on the western side of this area called the Peloponnese in Greece and it’s going to take you a while to get there from Sparta or from Athens or from Corinth or from these big cities, even further if you come from Sicily or south Italy and so forth. But it’s estimated there are as many as 100,000 people there. It’s the middle of August, it’s incredibly hot, there is apparently no shade, phenomenal heat, apparently mosquitoes were rife. So you roll it all together and it sounds pretty bleak actually, but people went.

The games went for five days, so it’s a long time to be out in the sweltering heat and so forth. You ask basic questions like where do they go to the toilet, who knows? But it may have been pretty bleak. Greek society is very simple, people have this idea it’s a bit like Rome, full of glorious buildings and facilities and so forth, but early Greece and even classical Greece isn’t like that at all.

It’s difficult to exaggerate, but almost everything the Greek’s do in their public life is associated with religion in one way or another. The question isn’t really why does it take place in a religious context, the question is, why would the Greek’s think anything else? Probably it’s best to turn the question around, they would say to us “why do you guys have your Olympic games in a secular context?” It would seem very strange to them and it’s because of the fundamental religious outlook on life generally.

There are many similarities in some ways. Some of the words we use, the pentathlon and the wrestling, they’re all fundamentally coming from the Greek tradition. Those games that I talked about called the Crown games, that’s partly because the winners of the various contests won crowns of wild olive in Olympia, bay leaf at Delfie and so forth.

There’s certainly no money coming to the winner and you could compare the gold, silver, bronze in the contemporary modern Olympics and so forth. The fact is though that these people who won events in ancient Olympia went back to their cities and they were fated and they did well indirectly but they didn’t receive a pay as such. It seems to me the modern Olympics are kind of in that same spirit, although clearly there’s different sort of prizes to be won.