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Whence 776? The Origin of the Date for the First Olympiad

776 BCE, ostensibly the date of the first celebration of the Olympic Games, is widely considered to be the first firm chronological point in ancient Greek history. This date is ultimately derived from the Olympic victor list, which was first compiled by Hippias of Elis in the late fifth-century BCE and was subsequently updated by Aristotle and Timaeus among others. The purpose of this paper is to argue that the date of 776 was calculated on the basis of generational reckoning using the Spartan king list and is at best only approximately accurate. This conclusion has significant ramifications since it means that many Olympiad dates found in the ancient sources, which are universally converted to Julian calendar dates based on the assumption that Olympiad 1 corresponded to 776, may be less precise than they appear.

The key components of the argumentation I will present can be summarized as follows:

1. Hippias compiled the first Olympic victor list from a diverse array of sources and did not draw on archival records.
2. In the absence of a continuous register of Olympic victors, Hippias or one of his immediate successors established the date for the first Olympiad recorded in the Olympic victor list by the association of that iteration of the Olympics with the Elean king Iphitos and the Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus. There is a range of evidence to support this assertion, including the facts that (a) ancient Greek chronographers relied on generational reckoning for establishing dates before c. 500 BCE, and the best known generational sequence was that of the Spartan royal houses, to which Lycurgus was related, (b) in Phlegon of Tralles' account of the founding of the Olympics only one figure, Lycurgus, is given a genealogy, which would have been critical information for calculating the date of Olympiad 1, (c) Plutarch (*Lycurgus* 1) states that Aristotle assigned a date to Lycurgus on the basis of a discus at Olympia on which the names of Iphitos and Lycurgus were inscribed, (d) Hippias produced the first Olympic victor list at a time when Sparta was threatening to end Elean control of the Olympics, and he would have been aware that his claim that Iphitos and Lycurgus had jointly founded the Olympics made it more difficult for the Spartans to terminate Elean control of the Games.
3. Generational reckoning was imprecise, and widely divergent dates for Lycurgus circulated in the ancient world. Even if one accepts the link between Olympiad 1 and Lycurgus, the date of 776 is uncertain at best.
4. The archaeological evidence potentially supports a range of dates for the first athletic contests at Olympia, but the excavators at the site have proposed a date of sometime around 700. The argumentation presented here removes one major objection to this date.