

# COMMENTARY | A FORUM FOR OTHER VOICES, IDEAS AND OPINIONS

## THE OLYMPIC TORCH

# A symbol of peace, humanity, civilization

BY MICHAEL B. COSMOPOULOS

Last Thursday, in a majestic ceremony reenacting ancient rituals, the Olympic torch was lit in Olympia, Greece. After traveling all over Greece, the flame will depart on a world-wide tour of 27 countries and 41 cities that have hosted Olympic Games. Total torchbearers will number 11,300, and over 260 million people will have the chance to see it.

In the United States, the flame will visit Los Angeles, Atlanta, New York and, of course, St. Louis. On June 17, it will travel an estimated 30 miles through the St. Louis metropolitan region before arriving at Art Hill in Forest Park, where a unique celebration will mark the centennial of our own 1904 Olympics.

The torch relay ("Lampadedromia") originated in Greece's mythical past, when torchbearers would run through the night as part of the worship of Zeus, the mighty father of gods and mortals. Later, the relay was incorporated into the Olympic games held in ancient Olympia in honor of Zeus, and it became one of the most popular sports events.

In modern times, the lighting of the torch and the relay were revived for the 1936 Games in Berlin; the Olympic flame was carried by land from Olympia to the German capital. Since then, it has traveled all over the world on foot and by car, airplane, boat and bicycle. For the 2000 games in Sydney, Australia, it was even carried under the ocean along the Great Barrier Reef.

The Olympic flame bears heavy symbolism. In Greek mythology, fire symbolizes the creation of the world and of the survival of humankind. It is a symbol of civilization and the very essence of human achievement. It was fire, after all, that Prometheus stole from the gods and offered to mortals.

In the classical world, the life of every household revolved around the hearth as a source of

light, warmth and sustenance. In the Greek city-states and Rome, the state fire was never allowed to go out and was cared for by special priestesses. In Olympia, there was an altar dedicated to Hestia, the goddess of the hearth. On this altar burned the sacred flame — lit, then as now, from a concave mirror gathering the rays of the sun. The High Priestess (called the "Prothiereia") places the torch on the focal point of the mirror, and it instantly ignites from the heat of the concentrated rays of the sun.

In addition to symbolizing civilization, the Olympic flame represents the ideals for which the Olympic games stand: peace and international cooperation. About 3,000 years ago, the Greeks established — for the first time in western civilization — the theoretical and philosophical framework for the need for peace and cooperation among states. Held under a holy truce that prevented armed conflict, the games became a means of reconciling differences in a peaceful and honorable way.

Not coincidentally, it was the Greeks who first expressed in their literature and culture the devastating impact of war on human lives. (An international conference on this subject, "Achilles in Iraq: War, Peace, and Humanity," will be held at the University of Missouri-St. Louis on April 16 and 17.)

Human nature has changed little in the last three millennia, and today, more than ever, we need the Olympic flame to remind us that we must work and fight for peace. We should turn out June 17 to welcome the Olympic flame to the streets of St. Louis and experience the thrill and excitement of seeing with our own eyes this glorious piece of our past.

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**The Olympic torch will come through St. Louis on June 17.**



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**High Priestess Thalia Prokopiou lights torch directly from the Sun during the Olympic Flame ceremony for the Ather on March 25, 2004 in Olympia, Greece**