

Honour where honour is due: News of the Olympic Champion Kostis Tsiklitis from Pylos¹

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Abstract

Kostis Tsiklitis, Olympic champion in the standing long jump in 1912, died in 1913 at the young age of 25 years old. He was one of the rare Olympic victors in the sport of track and field of modern Greece. His dilapidated childhood home at Pylos/Messenia (Greece) was renovated after a long struggle of the Cultural Club of Pylos NAVARINO; the club fought for many years against the later owner, the National Bank of Greece. Today, visitors can witness the erected bronze victor statue in the garden of this residency, as with the custom for Olympic victors in antiquity. The history of the Tsiklitis family is known up until his great-grandfather, who emigrated to the United States of America and returned in 1821 to participate in the Greek war of independence.

Keywords

Kostis Tsiklitis, Olympic victor, modern victor statue, Pylos, Cultural Club of Pylos NAVARINO.

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The athlete Kostis Tsiklitis (1888 - 1913) from Pylos (Messenia) holds a preeminent place in modern Greek sport history. As the Olympic champion in the standing long jump at the V modern Olympic Games in Stockholm 1912, he was not only the first Greek to take home the gold in track and field since Spyridon Louis's brilliant success in the marathon at the 1896 Athens Olympics, but for the following 80 years he remained the only Greek to achieve such success in the core programme of the world's greatest sports event. It was not until 1992 at the Barcelona Olympics that Paraskevi Patoulidou had a surprise victory (against the favourite Gail Devers, who tripped) in the 100 m hurdles and matched her predecessor's achievement. Another Olympic victory in a track and field discipline by a man would have to wait until the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, where Kostas Kenteris won the 200 m sprint.²

The dismay at the sporting hero's early death, caused by meningitis during the Balkan War in 1913, was emphasised in the commemorative volume marking the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Athenian sporting association Panhellenios³, of which he was a member, having joined during his education at the Attic Metropolis. A sign of the feeling for his exceptionalism is the life-sized statue that the state erected in his home town of Pylos in 1981, 69 years after his Olympic victory. This hometown wove the Olympic champion's sporting fame into an important date in Greek history. In the bay of Pylos (formerly named Navarino) on October 20th 1827 there was a decisive battle in the Greek struggle for freedom from centuries of foreign rule, which had begun in 1821, when a fleet of the European superpowers England, France and Russia entered into an almost coincidental battle and destroyed a Turkish-Egyptian fleet,⁴ a blast heralding the successful foundation of the modern Greek state in 1832.

In the article on the victor's statue mentioned in footnote 1, an exception in modern sport history, I also referenced the ruinous condition of the Olympian's birth house, unworthy of the stated intention of memorialising the young dead sporting hero for the national grief. At that time the statue stood on a small square over Pylos harbour with an eye on his imposing birth house, which holds a prominent place beside Pylos's town hall by the sea. In the meantime much has changed about the condition of the house and the statue's location, we also have new information on the origins of the Tsiklitis family. These new findings will be summarised briefly in the following⁵.

1. Refer to the commemorative volume for D. Quanz, which included my contribution on the victor's statue and the birth house of the Greek athlete in the early 21st century: Decker (2002).

2. The same athlete gained notoriety at the 2004 Olympics on Athens when he spectacularly fled from a drug test.

3. Linardos (1991, 162-164, 168-177).

4. Vakalopoulos (1985, 110); Turczynski (2003, 147).

5. For the most part this information comes from the text published by Baltas (2004).

6. In Baltas (2004) the second part contains a chronicle of the battle to save Kostis Tsiklitis's birth house, undertaken by the *Cultural Club of Pylos NAVARINO* from 1954 until 2004. It was composed by the Club's secretary, Giorgios Pouloupoulos, and can be found on the pages 65-90.

7. Baltas (2004, 67-68).

The house⁶

The house in which Kostos Tsiklitis was born was bought in 1886 by his physician father Herakles N. Tsiklitis (1850 - 1919), mayor of Pylos from 1879 to 1895.

Figure 1. The house where Kostos Tsiklitis was born after renovation, on the left town hall.



In 1919, not long before his death, he exchanged it for a smaller house, which had previously been owned by the Greek national bank, of whom he was a creditor. This house stood on a rise above the harbour and had until then been the seat of the bank. After the exchange the bank moved into the larger house that had belonged to the father of the Olympic champion and was the birthplace of the latter; the first floor served as the bank manager's official residence. Around half a century later the national bank moved into a house directly beside Pylos's Plateia (main square) and left Tsiklitis's former house to fall into disrepair.⁷ The "Old Bank" house also eventually fell into a ruin, until it was fairly recently restored by private initiative. So the old site for the victor's statue in front of this house was also connected to the Olympic champion's family history, though the ideal site would of course have been the house of his birth.

Figure 2. Second house of Kostos Tsiklitis' father (purchased after Kostos passed away).



8. Dimitrios N. Papadimas (20.10.1924 Pylos – 1.4.2016 Athens) is buried at the cemetery in Pylos, the town of his birth.

9. Baltas (2004, 70); later a corresponding plaque was added in English.

After Tsiklitis's first house was placed under protection as a monument for its artistic merits, the local *Cultural Club of Pylos NAVARINO* began a campaign for the monument's restoration that lasted years. Here we must emphasise the Athenian publisher and book dealer Dimitrios N. Papadimas, who originally came from Pylos and as the active president of the association was the driving force behind this enterprise.⁸ In 1983 an inscribed marble plate had already been attached to the front of the house with a text in Greek identifying it as the birth house of Olympic champion Kostis Tsiklitis.⁹

Figure 3. Plate of memory on the house where Kostis Tsiklitis was born, English text.



Figure 4. Plate of memory on the house where Kostis Tsiklitis was born, Greek text.



Sadly, we must note that as the owner the national bank did not exactly cover itself in glory in its roll maintaining this house for almost half a century. In 1987 an application by the national bank to demolish the building was rejected by the cultural minister of the time, Melina Merkouri,¹⁰ in response to which an interest group *Pylos Initiative committee*¹¹ was formed to save the house, which suggests, in the face of the bank's continued lack of interest, that ownership of the house be transferred to the community of Pylos and that a museum of the sea battle of Navarino be opened there or to home the collection of French journalist René Puaux, which is connected to our subject in a broad sense.

In honour of Kostis Tsiklitis's one-hundredth birthday the Athenian association *Panhellenios*, indebted to the Olympic champion and his historic remembrance and of which he had been a member during his studies in Athens, organised a sports festival on 6.1.1989 that drew attention to the efforts to save the house of their former member. In addition the Athenian association sought public funding to revive the *Tsiklitiria* sports festival that had carried the honoured Olympian's name, but had been abandoned due to a lack of financing.¹² In connection to this it is noteworthy that Kostis Tsiklitis is "Greece's greatest athlete in terms of [Olympic] medals".¹³ Surprisingly, when, in 1990, the national bank decided to allocate 95,000 Drachma to commence the restoration of the Tsiklitis House, they put the money into roofing work on their local bank building.

On 11.10.1992 (riding the momentum of the Barcelona Olympics) the Pylos city council unanimously directed the national bank to "settle the debt to Olympic champion Tsiklitis and his historic remembrance" as well as saving his house from ruin "and to save the bank from the disgrace and shame of destroying a national monument."¹⁴ In 1994 the *Initiative Committee* announced publically that the national bank would bear the costs of restoring two old houses in the centre of Athens and declared itself willing to cover the work required on the Tsiklitis house.

The year 1996, the centenary of the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896, presented an excellent opportunity to reintroduce this topic. The old Athenian sports association *Panhellenios* once again admonishes the director of the national bank to restore the house. On 31.10.1996 the influential Athenian newspaper *Kathimerini* published a letter to the editor,

10. Baltas (2004, 71-72).

11. Formed on 20.10.1987, the 160th anniversary of the Navarino sea battle: Baltas (2004, 72). There are now finally negotiations and suggestions for the renovation of the house, which included the *Cultural Club of Pylos NAVARINO*, the national bank, the cultural ministry as well as the Athenian sports association *Panhellenios*.

12. Baltas (2004, 73-74).

13. Baltas (2004, 74).

14. Baltas (2004, 75).

characterising the situation much as we have done here, from a frequent visitor to Pylos who had witnessed the dramatic state of the house in the preceding years.¹⁵

When the 2004 Olympic Games were awarded to Athens the *Cultural Club of Pylos NAVARINO* renewed its efforts to save the building through press work and official applications to the cultural ministry to save the house from ruin as a “cultural centre with a library, picture gallery or museum of folklore” and to relieve the national bank of ownership.¹⁶

With a letter to the *Athens 2004 Organising Committee for the Olympic Games*, which had been founded in the meantime under the presidency of Stratis Stratigis, dated 5.6.1998 the initiative of the *Cultural Club of Pylos NAVARINO* gained momentum. There is certainly no lack of clarity in the letter’s final words: “We request that you campaign... to have the house of Kostis Tsiklitis in Pylos restored in preparation for [the Olympic Games in] 2004 on the grounds of paying the slightest tribute to the Olympic champion and sporting hero Kostis Tsiklitis and so that the visitors from Greece and foreign tourists do not find the house in its present miserable state, which would be a disgrace to us all.”¹⁷

In the same year 1998 his Athenian sports club *Panhellenios*, decides to revive the *Tsiklitiria* sports festival, stopped in 1979 due to a lack of funds, which causes considerable media interest. In this context the leading Greek sports journalist Petros Linardos suggests the house should be converted into a Tsiklitis museum.¹⁸ Despite all these efforts the Greek national bank, as the owner of the house, remain faithful to their practice of cultural disregard and the sole consideration of material gain. In 1999 they suggest to the mayor of Pylos that the city pay for the renovations to the house and that after 20 years of use by the city the house should then be returned to the bank.¹⁹

Finally, on the anniversary of the Navarino sea battle (20.10.1999), two lawmakers start a petition in the parliament to save the Tsiklitis house. In the political correspondence which followed the national bank has the audacity to claim that negotiations with the city of Pylos had not lead to a fruitful result for reason beyond their (the bank’s) control.²⁰ At his point two further publications in the Athenian press increase the pressure on the bank.²¹

15. Baltas (2004, 77). Which includes such sentences as: “A marble plaque on the outer wall cynically informs us that this is the house in which the Greek athlete was born who lost his life fighting for his fatherland just a few months after his Olympic triumph. ... Does Greece so quickly forget citizens who have distinguished themselves?”

16. Baltas (2004, 78). Herakles L. Tsiklitis, nephew to Kostis Tsiklitis, who also wrote the foreword to Baltas, 2004 (p. [11]), declares himself prepared to make items in his possession, once belonging to Kostis Tsiklitis, available for exhibition. In fact there were several cups and other victor’s trophies originally exhibited in the restored house, though they are now stored in another, unknown location. The greater part of such objects had been lost during the German occupation of Greece: Linardos, (1991, 176).

17. Baltas (2004, 79).

18. Baltas (2004, 79-80).

19. Baltas, (2004, 80-81).

20. Baltas (2004, 83).

21. Baltas (2004, 83-84). To Vima on 24.11.1999 (I. Theodorakopoulos): “...the victory in Stockholm, its resonance in Greece, the fate of the Olympic champion, the pinnacle of Greek sporting excellence in the 20th century, 19-time Greek champion and owner of four Olympic medals from a period of four years.”

Finally on May 21st 2000 the long-standing, gruelling battle to save Kostis Tsiklitis's birth house ended with a purchase agreement between the national bank and the mayor of Pylos.²² In the period which followed the house and grounds were restored excellently (the estimated cost 1,080,000 Euro). It was trusted with the extensive collection of documents on the Greek struggle for independence that the French journalist René Puaux had amassed over the course of his life. The permanent exhibition is divided into the following modules:

- 1) René Puaux – A French journalist shows exceptional interest in the Greek struggle for independence
- 2) Maps of the Peloponnese
- 3 The Struggle for Freedom
 - Typical Battle Scenes
 - The Protagonists
 - Women in Battle
 - Unsung Heroes
- 4) Philhellenes, Helpers from Outside
- 5) Mesolonghi and Lord Byron
- 6) The (military) Morea Expedition
- 7) The Sea Battle of Navarino
- 8) The Founding of the Greek State
- 9) Landscapes
- 10) Daily Life
- 11) Caricatures of the time relating to the Greek struggle for independence²³

The victor's statue

In erecting the victor's statue an ancient practice was renewed that was once intended to honour Olympic champions by placing life-sized bronze figures in Olympia, which over the course of the centuries of Olympic history eventually numbered the hundreds. The Greek author Pausanias, who visited Olympia towards the end of the 2nd century CE, gives us an impressive description of around 200 selected examples of this type.²⁴ Such victors' statues are also known to have been in other competition cities and champions' hometowns, though they were to be found in far smaller numbers outside Olympia.²⁵ They are usually posed on stone base plates, which have inscriptions giving the identity and athletic achievement

22. Baltas (2004, 84). The sales price was 108,693,000 Drachma.

23. Simosi/Argyri (2015). For several years before the collection was displayed in the Tsiklitis house it had been on display in the Maison House in Pylos's new Kastro, where today the remarkable local archaeological museum has found its home.

24. Pausanias VI 1-18; Herrmann (1988); Rausa (1994); Decker (2001).

25. For Athens see Klauser (2016). – A list of the few preserved examples in Decker (2002, 200-201); and add Hemingway (2004) on a monument to an equestrian champion from the sea of Cape Artemision.

of the respective athlete.²⁶ There are very few originals remaining since over the centuries their metal was usually reused for other purposes (weapons, machinery, coins).

Figure 5. Victory statue of Kostis Tsiklitis, old location.



26. A collection of such victors' inscriptions in Moretti (1953); Ebert (1972).

27. The content of the inscription is somewhat idiosyncratic, although when Kostis Tsiklitis won at the Stockholm Olympics in 1912 he did also take the bronze in the standing high jump, there is no mention of his two silver medals (also in the standing long jump and standing high jump) from the preceding Olympic Games in London in 1908. 'Kotinos' refers to the wreath made from wild olive tree branches with which Olympic champions were crowned at the ancient Olympics. In addition, the language of the inscription, a mixture between Ancient and Modern Greek, is not grammatically correct. Neither Hans Eideneier, one of the most renowned experts in Modern and Ancient Greek, nor several Greek experts could make sense of the grammatical structure. – On the career of Kostis Tsiklitis cf. Baltas (2004, 23-43), which also includes the triumphant reception of the Olympian in Athens and the speeches that were made, p. 36 including the acceptance speech of the one honoured.

28. Lydakis (1981, 422-424).

The statue of Kostis Tsiklitis, which depicts the athlete collecting himself before jumping a standing long jump, a discipline that (like the standing high jump) could only be found on the programme of the modern Olympic Games from 1900 to 1912, bears the inscription:

ΟΛΥΜΠΙΟΝΙΚΗΣ ΚΩΣΤΗΣ ΤΣΙΚΛΗΤΗΡΑΣ
ΠΥΛΙΟΣ ΤΟΥΔΕ ΚΛΕΩ ΝΙΚΗ ΜΕΣΣΑΝΙΟΥ
ΟΣ ΠΟΤΕ ΞΕΝΗ ΑΛΜΑ ΔΙΣ ΚΟΤΙΝΟΝ ΕΣΤΕΦΘΗ

The Olympic Champion Kostis Tsiklitis,
the Pylian, of whose Messenian victory I boast,
who once abroad was crowned twice with the Kotinos in
jumping.²⁷

The artist who made the statue is Mary Papakonstantinou, immortalised with her signature on the base plate.²⁸

After Kostis Tsiklitis' birth house had been restored and the garden was organised, the bronze sensibly received a new site behind this house.

Figures 6, 7 and 8. Victory statue of Kostis Tsiklitis, new location in the garden of the house where the Olympic victor was born.



It also received a new plinth at this point that was significantly lower than the one that had stood in front of the smaller house that his father had swapped for the birth house.

On the left side of the plinth a poem can be read about the sporting hero:

Ο Ολυμπιονίκης

Γεοργίου Στρατήγη

Έφηβε, ωραίε και αντάξιε στην Πραξιτέλεια σμίλη,
που την Ελλάδα δόξασες παντού σ' όλη τη γη,
μιας άλλης άλκιμης γενιάς εσύ ήσουν, χαραυγή
και του Ναού της Νίκης μας η πιο μεγάλη στήλη.

Σαν έκλεινες καμμία φορά στο μάθημα τα χείλη,
εγώ δεν απελπίστηκα σ' εκείνη τη σιγή,
κι εμάντενα πως κάπου αλλού το μέλλον σε οδηγεί,
ω μαθητά, κι άλλη θέα πως στην ψυχή σου ωμίλει.

Και πέθανες με τη στολή την τίμια στο κορμί σου
που μόνο ο Χάρος νίκησε, Ολύμπιε Νικητή,
που όλος ο κόσμος θαύμαζε με φτερωτή ορμή σου

Στο χώμα, που δεν ένοιωθε το ανάλαφρό σου βήμα,
όσα παιδιά κι αν έκλαψε η Μάννα η λατρευτή,
και δάκρυα και δαφνόφυλλα θα σου σκορπάει στο μνήμα.

The Olympic Champion
by Georgios Stratigis

Youth, fine and worthy, as sculpted by Praxiteles,
Bringing glory to Greece the world over,
Aurora of another mighty generation
And prime pillar in the temple of our victory goddess.
How you could close your lips in class,
Did I not despair in that silence,
And prophesy, that the future would lead you elsewhere,
oh pupil, and that another goddess speaks in your soul.
And you died, the noble uniform on your body,
Whom Charos alone defeated, Olympic victor,
Admired by the whole world for your winged swing
On the ground that did not feel your light step.
As many children as the honoured mother has mourned,
She will spread tears and laurels on your tomb.²⁹

In their session of 5.10.1959 the Pylos city council had already come to the unanimous decision to erect a bust in honour of the Olympic Champion Kostis Tsiklitis, which was to stand on the site of the Pylos Archaeological Museum. At this decision the mayor was informed, who was to order and account for the installation.³⁰

Apparently encouraged by this city council decision, the *Cultural Club of Pylos NAVARINO* took the initiative, as can be inferred from a letter of thanks dated April 20th 1960 from the Athenian sports association *Panhellenios* addressed to the chairman of the cultural club, here is an excerpt:

“We have been deeply moved by your noble intention
to erect a statue to that titan of Greek sport, the
unforgettable Olympic champion of the jump Kostis
Tsiklitis.”³¹

Interestingly, the *Cultural Club of Pylos* had raised the city council's proposal into a greater dimension. The sports association *Panhellenios* even gave some thought to the best installation site and suggested the entrance to the Pylos stadium (also named after the Olympic champion). Besides the museum, the “old bank” house and Kostis Tsiklitis's birth house this fourth potential location was considered.

29. The text is not engraved on the plinth, but on a separate writing surface attached to the side and sealed in a frame.

30. Baltas (2004, 44-46).

31. Baltas (2004, 47).

The family history³²

As far as the ancestors of Olympic champion Kostis Tsiklitis can be traced his great-grandfather Nikolaos Tsiklitis (1791?-1840) emigrated to America, where he had already landed in Boston one year earlier in 1813 as a sailor in charge of cargo. Together with the Greek crew of his ship he had given the American Hellenist John Pickering³³ an object lesson in Greek pronunciation. In America this Nikolaos Tsiklitis married the French woman Katherine Ouvré,³⁴ with whom he had two children. After the death of his wife he returned to Greece in 1821 when he heard about the efforts to rebel in his homeland. He had to overcome the death of his daughter during the return crossing. From the year 1827 until his death he served as a magistrate in Pylos.

32. The history of the Tsiklitis family rests on the chapter “The Origins of the Olympic Champion Tsiklitis” in Baltas (2004, 17-21) (on p. 16 there is a family tree), as well as on the text on the grave of the Olympian’s grandfather, Nikolaos Tsiklitis junior (1813-1895), in the Pylos graveyard.

33. Cf. Baltas (2004, 19) footnote*, where the name that was transcribed here appears in Greek.

34. The true orthography of the name cannot be guaranteed as this was in turn transcribed from the Greek: Baltas (2004, 19), footnote**.

Figure 9. Stele on the grave of Nikolaos N. Tsiklitis, grandfather of the Olympic victor

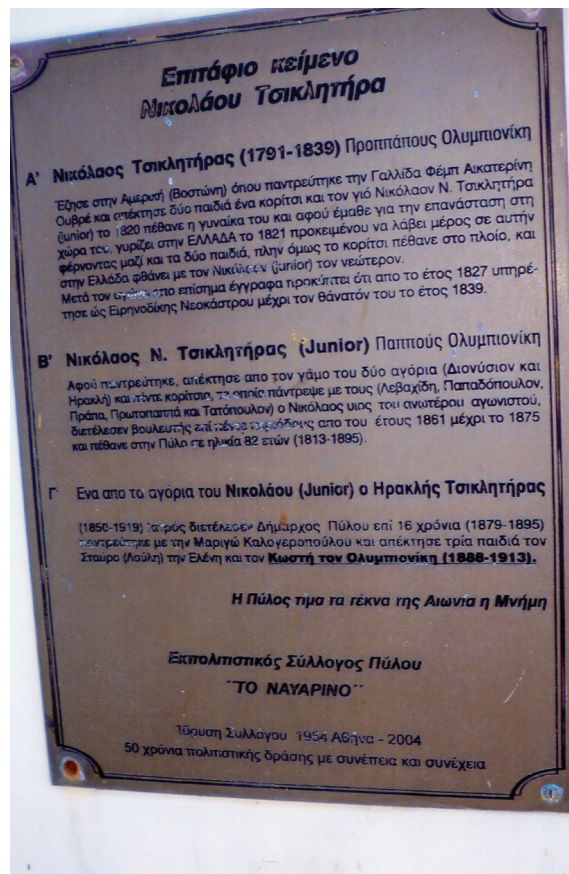


Figure 10. Text of the short history of Tsiklitis’ family on the stele of Nikolaos N. Tsiklitis.

His American born son Nikolaos Tsiklitis (1813-1895), the Olympic champion’s grandfather, served as a member of parliament from 1861 till 1875.³⁵

35. His grave can be found at the Pylos graveyard, cf. note 31 above. The inscription engraved on the stele says: “Nikolaos N. Tsiklitis, died 1895 at an age of 82 years”.

Of his seven children Herakles Tsiklitis (1850-1919), the second, was the Olympic champion's father. He was a doctor and for many years – from 1879 until 1895 – served as mayor of Pylos. He and his wife Kalliopi, née Katakouzinou, had three children, Stavros, Kostis, the Olympic champion, and Eleni. His nephew Herakles Tsiklitis, the son of Stavros, made great efforts for the memorial to the Olympian.³⁶

Figure 11. Stamp in honour of Kostis Tsiklitis, edited in 2004



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Besides erecting the victor's statue and restoring his birth house, was finally achieved after decades, which can be called nothing less than scandalous, the athlete from Pylos was honoured further at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, bringing his remembrance back into public consciousness. The Greek postal service devoted the stamp to him in the "Greek Olympic Champions 1896-1912", a series of five portraits – beginning with Spyridon Louis – of which his had the highest value (3.60 Euro). It was released on January 15th 2004 in a run of 300,000 copies.³⁷ The *Cultural Club of Pylos NAVARINO* was awarded a prize by the Athenian Academy, the highest intellectual and cultural authority in the land, for their efforts to restore the birth house of Kostis Tsiklitis that had spanned over half a century.³⁸

36. Cf. The remark above 16.

37. Baltas (2004, 88), cf. the image of the stamp p. 87.

38. Baltas (2004, 90).

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