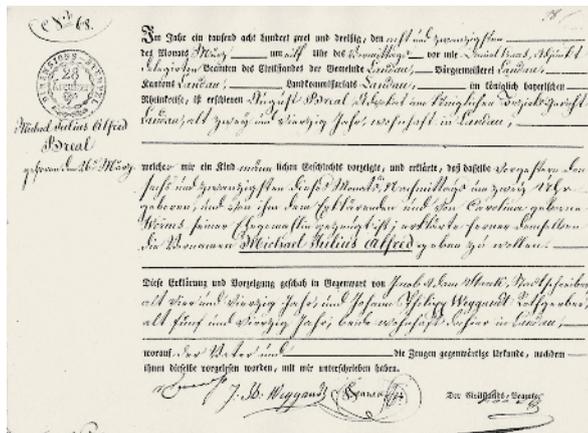


The “Inventor” of the Marathon race: Michel Bréal*

By Hans W. Giessen



Birthplace and birth certificate of Michael Julius Alfred Bréal. The former fortress town of Landau in the Palatinate on the ‘Wine Road’ was French territory for most of the period from 1680 to 1815. After the Congress of Vienna it was handed over to the Kingdom of Bavaria in 1816.

Photos: Hans W. Giessen, Landau City Archives

Introduction

Probably the most influential “invention” by Michel Bréal is the marathon race, if one considers that his idea has been spread across the world and in the most literal sense moves many millions of people. But beyond that he was in many respects a significant personality.

He founded his own scientific discipline, Semantics, and is regarded as one of the most significant scientists of his time. He studied in Paris and Berlin, was appointed Professor of Comparative Linguistics at the prestigious Collège de France, and later became Professor at the École Pratique des Hautes Etudes.

He was nominated Commander of the Légion d’Honneur and received Honorary Doctorates from the universities of Zürich and Bologna (the oldest university in Europe). Moreover, to underline Bréal’s significance, he got his honoris causa at Bologna on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the university’s foundation, together with the first Italian winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature Giosué Carducci). Authors from geographically distant cultural circles quoted Bréal in their works. So important was he at that time, for instance, that Leo Tolstoy in his novel *Anna Karenina*¹, where he has the hero read one of Bréal’s books at a decisive point.

His first son-in-law was the later Nobel laureate in literature, Romain Rolland. One of the most significant French politicians of his time, Jules Ferry, wanted Michel Bréal to join his Ministry, but he declined because he thought of himself as a scientist and teacher. Had there been at that time a list of the 100 most influential

contemporary Frenchmen, Bréal would certainly have appeared on it.

This contribution is intended to give an overview of the person and his life. It is essentially taken from my book *Mythos Marathon*, where further literary indications can also be found², but it partly reworks new discoveries. At the centre are the invention of the marathon race and the relationship between Bréal and Coubertin.

Childhood, Youth and Education

Michael Julius August Bréal was born on 26 March 1832 in Landau in the Palatinate, not far from the border between Germany and France, and both countries always remained important to him. The birth entry (with the German forename and the family name still without the acute accent or accent aigu) is today in the Landau City Archives.

The father August came from a Jewish family³, which had its home in Pirmasens in the Palatinate. His birth name was Abraham Machol. It was not until after the French Revolution and the conquest of the German regions on the left of the Rhine by the French



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revolutionary troops at the end of the 18th century that he adopted French nationality. After the decrees following on the Code Civil (which made fixed family names obligatory) the new, French-sounding made-up name “Bréal” – probably because at that time it looked as if the region would remain French for the foreseeable future.

But the Bréals were at home in both cultures. The newly-named August Bréal studied jurisprudence in Bavaria and in France and subsequently practiced law in Weissenburg in Alsace, where his mother lived with her second husband after his father's death. The framework of the Congress of Vienna had established that the Palatinate was to be separated from France, with the assurance that the Code Civil would remain in force there, and lawyers were needed who were familiar with both legal systems. His knowledge of French and Bavarian law instantly made the Jew August Bréal, who without the French Revolution could never have made a career in the service of the state, a sought-after man. In 1816 he became Public Prosecutor at the Royal Bavarian Regional Court in Landau.

In Landau in 1827 August Bréal married Karoline Wormser, who came from Metz in eastern France, but who was also from a German-Jewish family. The couple had three children, the middle one being Michael Julius Alfred.

Perhaps the mother, who had grown up in the French-speaking part of Lorraine, spoke French with the children. But at least to start with German was the dominant language. Little Michael went to a German school and had German friends, and retained good memories of his childhood and his first school years in Landau.⁴

When his father died unexpectedly, Michael was still at primary school. His mother first withdrew to Weissenburg, where she could expect family support, and her son – now called Michel Bréal – finished his primary education. They then returned to Metz, where Michel attended grammar school. As he was a good pupil, he was able to transfer to the most famous school in France, the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris. His examination results were so good that, after the *École préparatoire*, he was accepted into one of the celebrated Paris universities, the *École nationale supérieure*, rue d'Ulm, which he attended from 1852 to 1855.

His youth was thus marked by the loss of his father, a change of country and an enormous learning curve. There are various indications as to how Michel Bréal coped with the burden. He had clearly idealised his youth in Landau and later admitted that his image of Germany was at least partly formed by wishful thinking.⁵ That is certainly understandable: his childhood in Landau was carefree, his father still alive, his

first school years shaped by a kind teacher. In any event, he was again and again drawn back to Germany.

First he had to complete an internship after finishing his studies at the *École normale supérieure*. He applied for Alsace and went to Strasbourg. After his *agrégation* in 1857 he was offered a teaching position in his old school, the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris, but again he applied to go elsewhere: his target was this time the university in Berlin, where he continued his studies for two years, from 1857 to 1859.

Germany, France and the Language History

Michel Bréal found in Berlin an academic climate that suited his interests. He studied linguistics – German linguistics at that time led the world. One of its best-known representatives was Franz Bopp (1791–1867), who himself had studied in Paris and was a pupil of a famous French linguist and Sanskrit expert, Antoine-Léonard de Chézy (1773–1832) – who in turn corresponded with Goethe and married a German poet, Wilhelmine von Klencke (1783–1856). Such German-French cooperation was no longer possible in the later course of history, but at that time it was still taken for granted.

Alongside Bopp, Albrecht Weber (1825–1901) was Bréal's second significant teacher in Berlin. Weber was Professor of Sanskrit. Bréal remained in contact with both teachers after he had returned to Paris.⁶ He was particularly fascinated by ongoing research into the common origin of the Indo-European languages, in of which German linguistics at that time was the leader.

Soon after his return, Bréal had begun to translate Franz Bopp's monumental magnum opus – the *Comparative Grammar of Sanskrit, Send, Armenian, Greek, Latin, Lithuanian, Old Slavic, Gothic and German*⁷ – into French. In his Foreword he made it clear that it was not just a question of the exciting research into the common origin and history of most European languages and perhaps of populations, but that this research would also have consequences for the present.

In his Foreword, Bréal elucidated why the new discoveries represented a radical change: only now could it be recognised that languages had grown historically. “These are great discoveries,” he wrote. “The languages that had formerly been regarded in isolation, as if they had been conceived at a stroke by the pen of the classical poets of one particular country, were graded according to their position in the course of history.”

In addition, the national languages were surrounded by dialects and even by new languages that had arisen from them. One can “study them in their development and their alteration”.⁸



The ‘inventor’ of the marathon race in 1835 at the age of three.

Photo: Bréal Family Archive



The research showed, for example, how closely related are not only German and French, but also how close are the cultural links of the Germans and the French to the great civilisations of antiquity – the Greeks, the Persians, the Indians. They also seemed to provide evidence that it was no disgrace to grow up with a Palatinate dialect of German – for in the end every language and every dialect represents a legitimate further development of the common original language, no less valid than the standard languages which had imposed themselves in the course of history.

Chance – mighty generals or extraordinary thinkers who had the good fortune to impose themselves in their cultural area – led *inter alia* to the dominance of one linguistic variant over the rest. The dominance of one dialect or one language is clearly just as little “god-given” as that of a king. The new scientific discoveries led Michel Bréal to the conviction that there was no reason to consider as inferior those whose speech was tinged with a dialect.

The investigations into the history of languages had for Michel Bréal further, quite concrete considerations as a consequence. Our “mother tongues” are nothing immobile or sacred – on the contrary, they exist as they are only because of previous changes. The search for linguistic perfection, for perfect mastery of a language, presumably necessary because language itself is something perfect, a search which until then had driven on teachers and professors and led to the position that learning a language in the first half of the 19th century

was – far more than today – essentially an obstinate learning of rules by rote (with dramatic consequences for many pupils), in that one swotted up foreign languages not to be spoken but only for their grammar: this was barking up the wrong tree! If languages had historically developed, they would continue to do so. It is futile to oppose the process. The most important thing is surely that people can communicate with one another meaningfully! Of course, this means that one should be able to speak in the standard language, which makes sense for many reasons – for instance so that all citizens can follow the debates in parliament.

For that, however, rules are necessary and inescapable. But they should serve communication, not hinder it. Language learning must thus become a “communicative learning” and not remain a dull learning by heart! Such reflections would haunt Michel Bréal for a long time. They are the basis of his continuing preoccupation with the school system, and in that also he would soon take a leading role. In this context he would later develop his contact with Baron Pierre de Coubertin.

Languages and Myths

There is one further aspect that led to the idea of the marathon. Michel Bréal was enthused by his stay in Berlin because the themes were of interest to him. He liked languages but had always been interested in history and in stories – an obvious connection. Anyone who concerns themselves with ancient languages must not merely compare grammatical structures, but also be able to read and translate ancient stories, heard by nobody for thousands of years. The researcher acquires insights into ways of life long past, often quite foreign to present day culture – and all the more fascinating for it. To this interest, this fascination of Bréal, we will later owe the invention of the marathon race.

Initially the myths had the upper hand. After his return he had no problems, as a graduate of the École normale supérieure, in obtaining a suitable post. As a language specialist, he found outstanding working conditions in the department for Oriental manuscripts of the Bibliothèque Imperiale (now the French Bibliothèque Nationale). It was particularly welcome, of course, that he had success with his interests. A short study on the subject of the origins of the Persian Zoroastrian religion was awarded the prize of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres of the Institut de France in 1862.⁹

In the following year he acquired his doctorate. At that time a doctorate required two pieces of research. The so-called Secondary Script had to be written in Latin – and for that Michel Bréal chose a linguistic theme.¹⁰ In contrast, his Thèse principale was a study in comparative myths. It had the title *Hercule et Cacus, étude de mythologie comparée*.¹¹

After studies in Paris and Berlin Michel Bréal received a doctorate in 1863. The photo shows him two years later.

Photo: Bréal Family Archive

Hercules is, of course, one of the best-known Roman heroes; the Greek variation of the name is Heraklês. Hercules is often equated with Heraklês, correctly so in later history as the cultural contacts between Rome and Greece were so great that the Romans had largely adopted the Greek legend. But in earlier times, there were individual versions which were nonetheless very similar.

In comparative myth research, it is a question – just as with comparative linguistics – of examining whether themes and motifs in different cultures exist and perhaps indicate an original story. This could be evaluated as a further proof of a common cultural past.

In fact, variants of the Heraklês story are to be found in all Indo-European cultures. Michel Bréal compared the old Roman legend of Hercules and Cacus with the Greek story of Heraklês and Geryon, the Indian myth around Indra and Vritra, the Iranian myth concerning Ormuzd and Ahriman as well as with Germanic myths. His conclusion was that the story should be counted one of the oldest Indo-European myths, even when matched with the different peoples and their cultural idiosyncracies.



In 1864, Michel Bréal was nominated as Professor of Comparative Linguistics for the Collège de France

Photos: Hans W. Giessen, Bréal Family Archive

Michel Bréal's preoccupation with the cycle of myths around Heraklês is of interest against the background of the Olympic Games, to whose revival he later contributed. Heraklês in Greek mythology is considered the founder of the Olympic Games.

In the year after concluding his doctorate, 1864, Michel Bréal was nominated Professor of Comparative Linguistics at the Collège de France. Already in 1862, he had applied for the Chair of Sanskrit at the Collège (occupied previously by Antoine-Léonard de Chézy), but was not awarded it. Two years later (in the year of his doctoral thesis) the Chair of Comparative Linguistics became free, and Bréal applied again. The assembly

of professors placed him second. However, the chosen candidate had to withdraw on political grounds and Bréal was appointed. But resistance was initially great, so that he was appointed for a restricted period. After only two years, in 1868, his professorship was upgraded to permanent Chair by a unanimous vote.

The Road to the Marathon race

The shift in emphasis from research to linguistics did not mean that Bréal no longer occupied himself with his former themes. Classical myths and stories remained a passion all his life. Even the last book he published (it appeared in 1906)¹², had Homer, the great poet of legends, as its subject. In the last analysis, we owe it to this interest in old stories that we know the marathon race today as a separate athletic event. Without Bréal's fascination with Greek history, without his sense of the fascination of myths and, of course, without his ability to arouse enthusiasm, no one would have come on the idea of having runners race from Marathon to Athens within the framework of the First Olympiad.

And yet, the most significant innovation, which is bound up historically and epistemologically with the name Michel Bréal, is a linguistic thought which has led to completely new fields of research. Until then, grammatical and phonetic rules had been described – initially in isolation, now at least in their historical context. Bréal, however, took the view that it was senseless to occupy oneself solely with form. After all, language served communication – thus it was obvious to suppose that the content-related component contributes to the change. He therefore occupied himself with the interaction between form and content, between the meaning of words and grammatical structure.

Bréal could, by reference to numerous individual studies in various languages, show that meaning does not merely shape the choice of words, but also the development of grammatical forms, even pronunciation. He considered both aspects of language in their mutual relationship, the form and the content – two aspects seldom seen together until then – but only thus would it be possible to analyse language and its alterations more exactly.

Bréal systematically worked out the factors to be considered when foreign languages, language change and change of meaning are examined. He thus took a decisive step from a comparative, historical linguistics to a general linguistics. He assembled his reflections in his book *Essai de sémantique*, which appeared in 1897¹³, and was built on his preliminary studies from his time in Berlin. These reflections had again not just theoretical consequences that are of influence until our days¹⁴, but also formed the basis of Bréal's political action. Above all, he fought to ensure that languages should not be

taught as dead or abstract subjects. As early as 1868, when Bréal had just turned 36, the Minister for Public Education asked him to help with the foundation of a reformed university, the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, and to become Director of the new Institute for Comparative Grammar, where he could implement and test his ideas.

Privately, too, his good fortune held. In 1867 Michel Bréal had married Henriette Bamberger, a German from a well-off Mainz family. In 1869 their first son, Auguste, was born. Of course he and the next children Clotilde and Henri, were brought up bilingual.

But the end of this halcyon time full of scientific curiosity, career plans and German-French naturalness came surprisingly quickly. In 1870 war broke out. France lost and quickly developed a desire for revenge against Germany. A man like Bréal, attached to both sides, now stood between the fronts.

He brought his wife over the frontier to Aachen, where she had relatives. There he debated with his German brother-in-law Ludwig, who thought that it was not "really" a war against France: the Franco-Prussian war was a war of unification for the Germans, who until then had not lived in a national state but in numerous independent principalities, with frontiers which were sometimes hermetically sealed.¹⁵ Michel Bréal wanted to believe him, but it was also clear where his loyalties lay.

At first his brother-in-law seemed to be right. After their victory, the Germans founded their Reich, into which they incorporated Alsace-Lorraine. Bismarck declared that Germany was "saturated"¹⁶. It seemed to Bréal that the relationship between Germany and France could level off again. In 1872, he concluded the translation of Bopp's work. It was important to him now to make the leading lights of German science well known in France. He was especially convinced that he could drive forward science on the basis of Bopp. So he intensified his pedagogical efforts. After his war experiences, school seemed to him the best, perhaps the only, possibility of preserving common sense and culture and of counteracting the catastrophes of war and civil war.

In 1872, he published *A Few Words about Public Education in France*¹⁷. In spite of the title, Germany is his second subject. Bréal described the school systems of both countries, explained to the French the advantages of the German system, and presented much as positive and worthy of imitation.

Was this bold and courageous, so soon after the end of the war, in a time of political and economic depression? The impression is rather the reverse. The French wanted, on account of the defeat, to know what others did differently. It was in the educational sphere that they looked outside – besides Germany, the USA and England were in the centre of interest.

One expert on the English educational system was Pierre de Coubertin. The common need to analyse pedagogical subjects united the two, just like their methods of approach and the experiences they had had outside France – even if these referred to different countries and had differing emphases in relation to school subjects. Bréal was, of course, concerned with language teaching, Coubertin with sport and gymnastic teaching. Both would meet even more frequently before the background of pedagogic questioning and plans for reform. Both were incidentally surprisingly successful in their criticism of the French school system. In fact, Education Minister Jules Simon summoned Michel Bréal into his circle of advisers shortly after the publication of his booklet.



In 1874 Bréal again set out on a journey through Germany to measure his memories and adventures in reading against reality. His reports appeared in 1875 under the title *Memories of an Educational Journey through Germany*¹⁸. He noted that teaching in Germany, as it had been during his youth in Landau, was marked by closer contacts between teachers and pupils than in France, where hierarchy and learning by heart were in the foreground. German teachers, he thought, were better trained and had the more definite aim of communicating knowledge and were allowed more scope to teach. The aim in Germany was, far more than in France, to attract pupils to apply knowledge and facts in practice, in languages as in the sciences. For that reason, said Bréal, German pupils were not drilled to dull learning by rote like their French contemporaries; they were brought up to think independently and to solve problems. In France, he estimated, they were still far away from that.

The Institut de France asked Michel Bréal to become a member in 1865. He refused a move to the French Education Ministry, but got involved in plans for reform. Left: the house where he lived and died in Paris.

Photos: Hans W. Giessen, Bréal Family Archive

But Bréal also looked at other subjects, for instance at school sport. He was fascinated by the importance Germans placed on physical fitness, unlike the French. His origins had enabled Michel Bréal to form especially well-founded judgments. Because of his knowledge of languages and mentality he had easy access to first hand information. He was rarely attacked because of his German background, rather his role as a mediator was generally accepted. His French enemies could, moreover, use simpler possibilities. Anti-Semitism was always in the air. Occasionally Bréal was vilified as a Jew in an extremely aggressive way¹⁹. He obviously did not let himself be impressed by this, and did not need to be. He had contacts and invitations from fellow professors, and from political, economic and artistic circles. In addition, he was offered more and more positions which were important in the academic and social life of France.

In 1875, he became an honorary member of the Institut de France, and in 1879 the Education Minister Jules Ferry asked him to join the ministry and help with the plans for reform. Ferry is considered one of the most important French politicians that France has had. He introduced universal compulsory schooling, campaigned for free and general popular education; later he was several times Foreign Minister and Prime Minister. But Michel Bréal declined the Minister's request, as previously mentioned: He gave it thorough consideration, was flattered, but then his position was clear: he was not suited to being a politician, but wanted to remain a scientist. Nonetheless, a short time later he accepted nomination as leader of the supervisory board in charge of higher education²⁰; to Jules Ferry he quickly became

indispensable. Bréal remained in his office until the reorganisation of the supervisory board in 1888.

Ferry gave him further advisory posts. In 1880 he appointed him for instance to the High Council of Public Education²¹, where Michel Bréal remained until 1896. In his reforming activities in the education sector he showed no presumption: he was engaged in reform of universities as well as primary schools.

In these positions Bréal had frequent contact with Coubertin, who at this time was General Secretary of the Union des Sociétés françaises de Sports athlétiques²². Both men chafed against the ossified traditions of the French educational system. Coubertin's proposal to solve this was well known – he wished to counter this "monotony" with a striving for "enthusiasm".

The "Invention" of the Marathon race

On 23 June 1894, Pierre de Coubertin founded the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Michel Bréal was present at that event at the Sorbonne. He even sat in a place of honour, directly on Coubertin's right. His other table companion was the American historian William Milligan Sloane. Coubertin also assigned Bréal to make the first speech at the Olympic Congress; the classics scholar Bréal gave a lecture about the motto *citius – altius – fortius*²³.

The motto itself is older²⁴, but it is unclear who or what caused Bréal to give his keynote address on this motto. Of course, he could have been asked or at least inspired by Coubertin. On the other hand, it seems certain that Coubertin always accepted Bréal as an authority on ancient myths and subjects. He seems at times almost to have courted Bréal to profit from his mystique for himself and for the Olympic Idea.²⁵ By the same token Bréal agreed his role as an expert consciously. For that reason we might suppose that the propagation of the Olympic motto originated with Bréal.

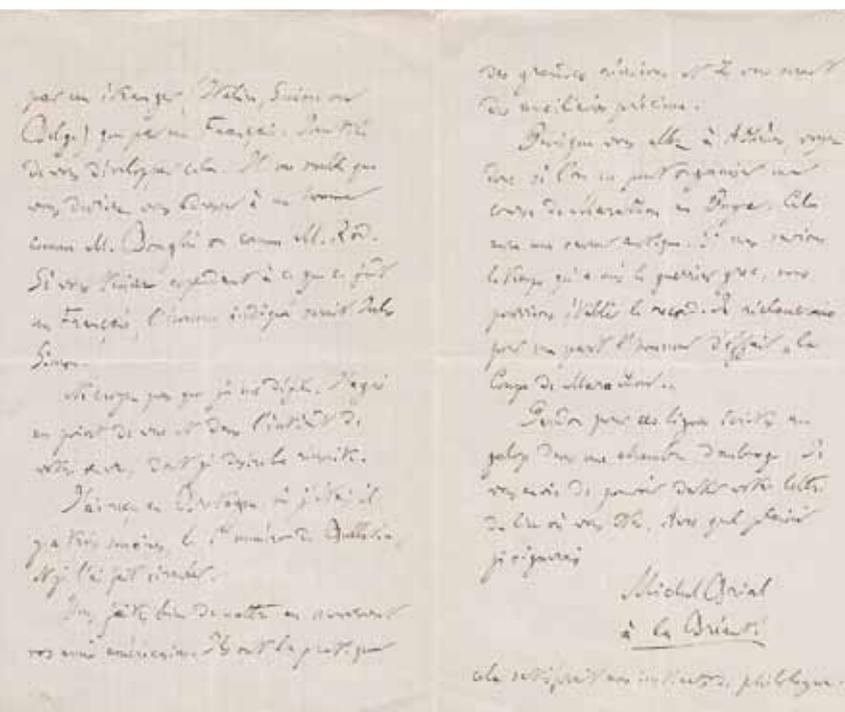
What is beyond doubt, and is also confirmed by Coubertin, is the fact that it was Michel Bréal who at this time developed the idea of a Marathon race.²⁶

Of course, it was not an event known in history; in the ancient Olympic Games such a type of sport was unknown. It was in fact associated with the first Olympic Games of modern times. Bréal seized on the legend of the Greek runner who, after the battle on the plains of Marathon ran to Athens, and from it he developed a new myth.

How did that happen? In the official communiqués of the IOC it is stated that "Monsieur Michel Bréal, the famous member of the Institut de France, in his enthusiasm from the revival of the Games in the run up to their reinauguration, had written that he would donate a cup if this event were to be added to the programme".²⁷ The "reviver" was of course Pierre de Coubertin.

"If you go to Athens, you might try to see if a race cannot be organised from Marathon to the Pnyx. That would have an antique flavour." Letter to Pierre de Coubertin of 15 September 1894, in which Michel Bréal encouraged the introduction of the marathon race on the programme of the First Olympiad in Athens.

Photo: Olympic Museum Lausanne



At the time Bréal was on holiday in Glion in the Swiss canton of Vaud, and he had time to think a lot of things over. The idea came to him, seemingly spontaneously, as can be gathered from his letter of 15 September 1894 to Coubertin. The original is today in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne. Its wording runs:

If you go to Athens, you might try to see if a race cannot be organised from Marathon to the Pnyx. That would have an antique flavour. If we knew the time the Greek soldier took, we could establish a record. As form me, I request the honour of donating the "Marathon Cup".

Excuse these quickly written lines which I have written in my hotel room.

[...] that satisfies my instinct as a philologist.²⁸

What is more, Bréal adhered to the minute and informed President Demetrius Vikelas of his idea at the same time as he informed Coubertin, who was then IOC General Secretary²⁹.

In other passages, the short text confirms how much Coubertin looked after Bréal. Clearly, he had urged him to become a member of the French Olympic Committee. Bréal confirmed in this letter that he was willing to accept. He also made the suggestion to Coubertin to join the Olympic Games with the international peace movement promoted by Jules Simon. Tactically, he is considering that a suitable request from abroad could be brought to the IOC.

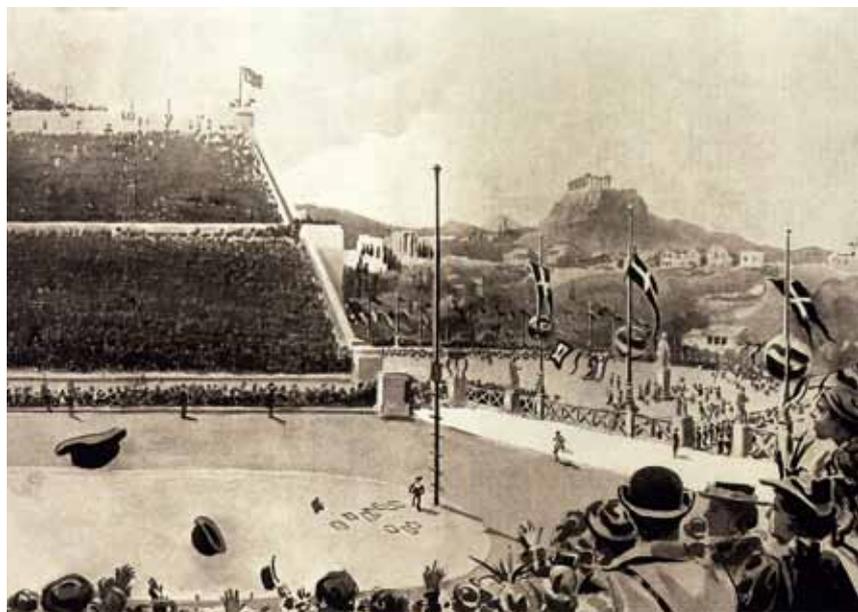
From today's standpoint, the marathon race is of course the key point of the letter, even if it was only one of three points and for Bréal perhaps not even the most important one. In accordance with his political ideas, the international peace movement may have been more important to him. The "marathon race" was just a spontaneous thought that had occurred to Bréal on holiday.

Coubertin made Bréal's proposal his own. As early as 1894, when he travelled to Athens to prepare the Games, he had sketched the planned programme in his own handwriting. He was clearly so fascinated by the idea of the marathon race that he did not include it in the list of other running events (starting with the 100 metres), but retained it as a separate part of the programme.

Running event, called Marathon, over a distance of 48 km from Marathon to Athens, for the cup donated by Mr. Michel Bréal, member of the Institut de France.³⁰

The distance cited by Coubertin may cause surprise. But one should be aware that at that time there were two possible routes: a shorter one over the mountains (which was partly impassable and thus was not used), and a longer one, which led south round the mountains. The direct, mountainous path would only have been 35 kilometres – probably that was the route used by the historic

runner. But the longer route consists of only about 40 kilometres³¹. In fact, in the "detailed programme" which was published later we find mention of a "Race from Marathon (40 kilometres)"³². The statement of 48 kilometres was probably a mistake.



Vikelas too was enthusiastic, for he saw at once that this idea would give even greater value to the host country of the Olympic Games (and its glorious past). The trio were proved right. The Greeks were sold on the idea of the marathon race even before the Games, as they saw their cultural inheritance enhanced. The enthusiasm was so great that it was decided to hold the marathon race as the last event of the athletics programme on 10 April 1896 (29 March) – as the climax and finale. The starting shot rang out in Marathon at 13.56.

On the very day of the race Vikelas sent a telegram to Michel Bréal, who had remained at home and didn't participate at the successful running of the event and the victory of the Greek Spiridon Louis. On 11 April Bréal wrote back to give his congratulations on the success of the Games.³³

With the marathon race (and not least of course because of the fact that the winner was a Greek native) the concept of the Olympic Games had established itself in Greece. Even in times of crisis the Greeks have been among the most faithful supporters. A large part of the fascination of the Games is also down to Michel Bréal and his Marathon idea.

The winner's cup of 1896, which bears Bréal's name, remained for a long time in the possession of the family of Spiridon Louis. But in 2012, at the high point of the financial crisis, his descendants had the trophy auctioned at Christie's in London³⁴ and it fetched £ 541,250 (\$ 958,423, or € 658,840) – at that time the highest price ever paid for an item of Olympic memorabilia.

The first winner of the marathon race was a Greek – Spiridon Louis. The lithograph shows his arrival at the Panathenaic Stadium. Below: the 'Bréal Cup' before its auction at Christie's.

Photos: Volker Kluge Archive, Christie's



The contact to Coubertin was continued

In the year of the first Olympic Games in Athens Michel Bréal was already 64, but still extremely active. In the following year he published his *Essai de sémantique*³⁵.

Just two years after the first edition there followed the first translation into another language, Spanish; the following year saw the first English translation. Editions appeared in London and New York, and were still being printed in the second half of the 20th century. As late as 1990, the work was again translated, this time into Italian, and in 1992 a Portuguese edition came out in Brazil.

Michel Bréal would have liked to attend the Olympic Games in 1908 in Rome, but they were transferred to London. His state of health at this time did not permit any long journeys. The 1905 photo shows him with his daughter-in-law, the wife of his son Auguste, and the grandchildren Henriette and Michel. Michel Bréal Junior was later French Consul-General in Beijing, and then Ambassador in Afghanistan, Laos and Siam.



The volume is considered to mark the birth of semantics and thus of modern linguistics, which disengages itself from the historical viewpoint and reaches a comparative and pragmatic view of the phenomenon of language. This was appropriately honoured in 1997 when, to mark the 100th anniversary of the first publication of the *Essai de sémantique*, several scientific congresses took place, in France³⁶ for obvious reasons, but also for example in Spain. The congress there was so large that the documentation required two volumes with around 1600 pages, so important does Bréal's work still appear.³⁷

The contact between Coubertin and Bréal continued after the Athens Games. If we inspect the guest lists of the IOC's social events, published in minute detail in the *Revue Olympique*, edited by Coubertin, Bréal appears at very élite receptions. For instance, he took part in an event on 22 May 1900 at which the hosts were Baron and Baroness Coubertin as well as Princess Jeanne Bonaparte and around four dozen further guests, overwhelmingly from the aristocracy of Europe.

Bréal and his family continued to step in when there were problems, notably in the run up to the 1904 Games. After the failure of the 1900 Paris Games, integrated into the World Exhibition which was held at the same time, Coubertin wanted to prevent a similar disaster in St. Louis, although the circumstances were initially similar. There, too, the Games took place in the context of a World Exhibition ("Louisiana Purchase") and threatened to disappear without trace in all that was going on.

Coubertin tried, with the help of his contacts to the Bréal family, to save the 1904 Games so that they would not again become a footnote to a World Exhibition. Bréal's son Henri, who in the meantime had advanced in his career, worked by then as a diplomat in the French consulate in Chicago and was the President of the Franco-American Friendship Society. As Coubertin did not want to upset the host country, America, but did want to dissolve the problematic link between the World Exhibition and the Olympic Games, he asked Henri, via his father, if he could help to transfer the Games to Chicago. An extensive correspondence ensued which resulted in Henri Bréal even emerged as the official representative of the candidature of Chicago (at that time the third largest city of North America) for the 1904 Olympic Games.³⁸ In the end his efforts failed, as US President Theodore Roosevelt had decided on St. Louis.

Since Michel Bréal was not present in Athens in 1896, he wanted to take advantage of the opportunity and attend the Olympic Games of 1908, which Coubertin had intended for Rome. Bréal knew his way around the city, for in the early 1880s he had done some research at the *École française d'histoire et d'archéologie de Rome* and retained pleasant memories of it. On that subject too there was a correspondence with Coubertin. But these plans came to nothing. Rome cancelled the Games because of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, whereupon London stepped in at short notice. In any case, Bréal was by then plagued by health problems.

Slowly forgotten

All in all, Michel Bréal had a rich social life. He gave lectures, was celebrated and criticised. He published in great number scientific articles, and is considered to be one of the most productive researchers. Academic societies were eager to have him as a member. He was asked to give words of welcome on numerous occasions, wrote introductions to popular works (for instance to the most important collection of songs from France, produced over decades, the "School and Family Songs to the most popular Melodies from the Regions of France"³⁹). At the same time he was an extremely popular teacher. All this consumed much of his time, but he did not regard it as a burden, for he liked to be fully occupied, as he confirmed in many letters.

But this was the summit. Slowly his significance in society as in the scientific arena diminished, for varying reasons. Firstly, Bréal had suffered since 1903 from knee problems; he could climb into a carriage only with difficulty. He could no longer undertake long journeys; he could scarcely get to the university. In 1905, he had to give up his Chair at the Collège de France. Thus he slowly disappeared from the Parisian scene. In addition, the deepening conflict between Germany and France had

Photo: Bréal Family Archive

an effect. Bréal dedicated the ensuing years more fixedly than ever to mediating between German and French cultures; he published, for example, in France a slim volume about the German poet and universal scholar Goethe.⁴⁰

But his efforts no longer matched the Zeitgeist. Politicians and public wanted no understanding, no closer approach – on either side. Now what was important to him was unpopular, and he was met with an unfamiliar, if benevolent, lack of interest. Fortunately, that did not remain the case. Gerhard Seither, a Landau University Professor who rediscovered Bréal for his native city, ended an article from the year 1982 with the words: “That his best hopes did not drain away into nothingness, of that we are today grateful witnesses.”⁴¹ And so we should qualify the impression of failure.

And of course Bréal was and remains today far better known than an average university professor of his time, not least because of the study of semantics he founded but especially because of the triumph of his marathon invention. ■

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- 3 Re family history: Seither, Gerhard, Michel Bréal, in: Fendler, Rudolf (Ed.), *Von der Lateinschule des Rates zum Eduard-Spranger-Gymnasium Landau in der Pfalz 1432–1982*, ESG, Landau 1982, pp. 283–297; Volz, Günther (2007), Michel Bréal – ein Weltbürger aus Landau, in: Giessen, Hans W.; Lüger, Heinz-Helmut; Volz, Günther (Eds.), *Michel Bréal – grenzüberschreitende Signaturen*, VEP, Landau 2007, pp. 15–42; Giessen 2010, op. cit.
- 4 Bréal, Michel (1908), Erinnerungen an Deutschland, in: *März, Halbmonatsschrift für deutsche Kultur*. Vol. 2, 1908, pp. 75–83.
- 5 Ibid, op. cit.
- 6 For the relationship between Bréal and Weber cf. Rabault-Ferhahn, Pascale, Wissenschaft im Krieg, Michel Bréal und der Indologe Albrecht Weber, in: Giesen/Lüger/Volz, pp. 43–72.
- 7 Bopp, Franz, *Vergleichende Grammatik des Sanskrit, Send, Armenischen, Griechischen, Lateinischen, Litauischen, Alt-slavischen, Gothischen und Deutschen*, Dümmler, Berlin 1822–1852, 6 Volumes (French translation from Bréal, Michel, *Grammaire comparée des langues sanscrite, zend, grecque, latine, lithuanienne, slave, gothique, et allemande*, Imprimerie imperial, Paris 1866–1872).
- 8 De grandes découvertes ont été faites: les idiomes que l'on considérait autrefois isolément, comme s'ils étaient nés tout à coup sous la plume des écrivains classiques de chaque pays, ont été replacés à leur rang dans l'histoire, entourés des dialectes et des langues congénères qui les expliquent, et étudiés dans leur développement et leurs transformations, (Bopp, Franz, *Vergleichende Grammatik des Sanskrit, Send, Armenischen, Griechischen, Lateinischen, Litauischen, Alt-slavischen, Gothischen und Deutschen*, Dümmler, Berlin 1822–1852, 6 Volumes (French translation from Bréal, Michel, *Grammaire comparée des langues sanscrite, zend, grecque, latine, lithuanienne, slave, gothique, et allemande*, Imprimerie imperial, Paris 1866–1872).
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- 10 Ibid, *De Persicis nominibus apud scriptores graecos*, Facultati litterarum Parisiensis thesım proponēbat, Paris 1863.
- 11 Ibid, *Hércule et Cacus*, étude de mythologie comparée, Thèse présentée à la Faculté des lettres de Paris, Paris 1863.
- 12 Ibid, *Pour mieux connaître Homère*, Hachette, Paris 1906.

- 13 Ibid, *Essai de sémantique, science des significations*, Hachette, Paris 1897.
- 14 V.e.g. Eco, Umberto, Fünf Bedeutungen des Begriffs “Semantik” – von Bréal bis heute, in: Giesen/Lüger/Volz, pp. 191–210.
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- 19 Boutan, Pierre, *De l'enseignement des langues. Michel Bréal, linguiste et pédagogue*, Hatier, Paris 1998.
- 20 Inspecteur général de l'enseignement supérieur (see Caplat, Guy, *Les inspecteurs généraux de l'Instruction publique au XXe siècle*, INRP, Paris 1997)
- 21 Conseil supérieur de l'instruction publique.
- 22 Union des Sociétés françaises de Sports athlétiques (USFSA).
- 23 Müller, Norbert (2007), Bréal und die Idee des Marathonlaufs, in: Giesen/Lüger/Volz, pp. 93–115.
- 24 Ibid, Henri Didon. Der Urheber der Olympischen Devise “citius, altius, fortius”, in: Müller, Norbert; Messing, Manfred (Eds.), *Auf der Suche nach der Olympischen Idee*, Agon, Kassel 1996, pp. 49–62.
- 25 Ibid 2007, op. cit.
- 26 Coubertin, Pierre de, *Une Campagne de vingt-et-un ans*, Libr. d'Education Physique, Paris 1909.
- 27 Ce fut M. Michel Bréal, illustre membre de l'Institut de France, qui, dans son enthousiasme, avait écrit au rénovateur des Jeux, au lendemain de leur rétablissement qu'il offrirait une coupe si cette épreuve était inscrite au programme. (Qui fut l'initiateur de la course de marathon dont l'épreuve figure au programme des jeux olympiques depuis 1896? in: *Revue Olympique* 1955, p. 30)
- 28 “Puisque vous allez à Athènes, voyez donc, si l'on peut organiser une course de Marathon au Pnyx. Cela aura une saveur antique. Si nous savions le temps qu'a mis le guerrier grec, nous pourrions établir le record. Je réclamerais pour ma part l'honneur d'offrir ‘la Coupe de Marathon’. Pardon pour ces lignes écrites au galop dans un chambre d'auberge. [...] Cela satisferait mes instincts de philologue.”
- 29 Müller 2007, op. cit.
- 30 “Courses à pied, dite de Marathon, sur la distance de 48 kilomètres, de Marathon à Athènes, pour la coupe offerte par M. Michel Bréal, membre de l'Institut de France”, *Bulletin du Comité international des Jeux olympiques*, juillet 1894.
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- 32 “Course de Marathon (40 kilomètres)” (“Programme détaillé pour les Sports athlétiques et la gymnastique”, in: *Les jeux Olympiques. Messager d'Athènes*. 1896: 7.
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- 38 Minutes, 4th IOC Session, Paris 1901, IOC Archives.
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- 40 Ibid, Deux études sur Goethe: *Un officier de l'ancienne France; Les personages originaux de la “Fille naturelle”*, Hachette, Paris 1898.
- 41 Since 1982, op. cit., p. 297.



Michel Bréal died in 1915 at the age of 83. The family grave in which he was laid to rest is in the cemetery of Montparnasse in Paris.

Photo: Hans W. Giessen