

The Institutionalized Body Aesthetic or Ideology in Ancient Greek Sport

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ABSTRACT

In this article I argue that Ancient Greek sport, specifically of the Olympics was part of an ideological system of both institutional control and philosophical conceptions. In this sense one can see that the aesthetic and artistic expression of Ancient Greek culture overlaps with philosophical, political, economic and religious motifs. This suggests sport is both a cultural object of control as well as an artistic expression reflecting the much maligned concept of beauty. Since much of Western culture is based on the ancients, it behooves a similar analysis of modern sports and aesthetics.

Keywords: Ancient Greece; Olympics; art; sport; ideology.

INTRODUCTION

It is evident that social status, the fact of nudity at the games (of the athletes that is) and the interrelationship between the cult of victory and the gods combine to form an ideological impetus to the ancient Olympics. In this sense the curiosity of the Greek mind given the philosophical bent at the same time leads to a particular view of the body which has implications philosophically, psychologically and politically or socially. Such themes will be expounded upon in what follows without research into the consequences of this ideological framework. The interesting question that can then be asked is in what ways the Olympics of Ancient Greece has a bearing on modern sports, though this article simply lays the foundation for that exploration.

GREEK SPORT AND SOCIAL STATUS

The founding of the Olympic Games was in 776 BCE. From its inception throughout its long history of almost one thousand years, the equestrian event, writes Goldin (2008) was restricted almost without exception to the rich. The rich who were victorious were in a position to dedicate statues to the gods and the festival of the Olympics provided the platform for their performance. They could also commission praise poets such as Simonides, Pindar and Bacahylides to write songs in their honor. Certain such victors even had the power to strike commemorative coins. For example, the

chariot victory of Gelon, tyrant of Syracuse at the Olympics of 488 BCE, was marked by both a bronze monument at Olympia and the addition of a crowned image of Nike to his city's coins.

The games however were not just about those with wealth. The Olympics were also open to the public who could enjoy the dramatic events. As the 2nd century orator Lucian in Hemmingway (2008:16) describes:

“...no one can describe in mere words the extraordinary pleasure derived from the athletes and which you yourself could enjoy if you were seated among the spectators feasting your eyes on the prowess and stamina of the athletes, the beauty and power of their bodies, their incredible dexterity and skill, their invincible strength, their courage, ambition, endurance and tenacity.”

This may have given the viewer the sense of Greek superiority and thus pride in their Greekness or at least in the abilities of those athletes that represented their city-state. I am here concerned with the social relevance of the Ancient Greek Olympics in order to construct a link between sports and ideology and in so doing, argue that sport cannot be seen in isolation, as simply movements of the body for pleasure. It is entangled within a social matrix of which the sports act can be said – quite paradoxically - to allude to in a metaphorical sense. In other words, the sports act and the sporting event is a microcosm of religious,

philosophical and political ideals and the body's achievement can be seen as man's efforts to extricate himself from his limited existence.

In a philosophical sense, the victor represents Kosmos, that is, limit and order. He who contemplates the universe draws down Kosmos within his soul. And by extension, he who contemplates the victorious and shares in his victory through his sheer heroic strength and courage wins the favor of the gods. The Olympics could thus be perceived as a redemptive power in order to transform chaos to Kosmos, no less an artistic act and the institution of law through the bodily submission of the athlete simultaneous with their god-like skill. The people consequently are spectators to a divine event. The far-reaching consequences may be the ultimate brotherhood of Alexander the Great's vision but through Hellenic conquest. It is in this sense that sporting achievement is a means of propaganda in Ancient Greece with a view to the conquest of other lands both physically and via Hellenic culture. The spectator thus watches both a divine event and the desires of a nation to immortalize itself via conquest. The spectator aside, the agonistic accomplishment and the badge of gymnasium education were markers of high social status and even necessary passports to local politics, notes Goldin (2008:68). Consequently "sport is generally employed to express and emphasize the gulf between the free and the slave in the Ancient Greek world", writes Goldin (2008:39).

However a divide is not always easy to maintain as slaves were as necessary to the athletes as to other aspects of the life of the free citizen, and the status of sport itself could be so high that it blurred the distinctions that were of primary importance elsewhere. However, a sense of hierarchy was maintained in that only Greeks were allowed to participate in the Olympics, though as Greece expanded its border after the conquest of Persia in Alexander the Great's time and later India, the notion of "the Greek" changed somewhat. Moreover, Goldin (2008) concludes that in Greece, the legal and conceptual distinction between slave and free were sometimes ignored in ordinary life. Excluded from exercise or not, slaves might lend a hand or fist as required. And that other than the chariot races, men from various social or economic backgrounds could compete in the other events (pentathlon, boxing, pancration, running...). Therefore, sports were a vehicle through which a democratic spirit became

manifest, thus practically offering the talented individual the potential to rise beyond his means and through sheer will perhaps become a hero, a new man.

Spivey (2005) writes that the site of the Olympics must have stunk as hundreds of oxen were sacrificed. The chariot racing was a great risk to life and limb; the place was noisy as there were contests for heralds and trumpets. Most significant here is the presence of all strata of society: "poets and painters would strut around in gaudy robes, astronomers would ply their latest calculations about the cosmos and philosophers were known to make extraordinary appearances. That although it was an imitation and enactment of violence, it was civilized" (Spivey 2005:56). The aim was *kalokagathia* or beautiful goodness, that the outer should reflect an inner beauty (Spivey 2005:58). This idea was the lesson to the common man attending the games and marked the ideological distinction between say Athenian and barbarians or non-Greek; the Greek who unlike the barbarian could not carry a knife in public. The Greek who had an aesthetic sensibility. Socially, the game also provided for a cathartic experience, a purging element like Greek tragedy itself.

This "purging" aspect made the games an important part of Greek culture. The games were so integral to Greek life that the Greeks measured time by the Olympiads whereas Egyptians and Mesopotamians did so in terms of royal reigns or of dynasties.

In this sense, the hierarchy was not so much determined by despotic rulers, divine kings, an autocracy but a lively event open to all Greeks to a certain extent. Newby (2006) writes that in antiquity the games at Olympia were understood as the prime example of an athletic festival. Insofar as an athletic festival was pivotal to the social structure of society, one ought to be cognizant of the religious significance of such festivals. Olympia, restricted to Greek male citizens was in honor of the god Zeus, including sacrifices and processions, and oaths sworn by the athletes to Zeus over slices of sacred boars' flesh. There would be a truce between city-states during the Olympics.

The lessons of this social and religious event were clear: Athletic competition is agon meaning contest and the verb "athleno" carried suggestions of struggle and competition as well as physical activity. This is different from the connotations of leisure and fun carried by the words "sport" and "games". The evidence for

the more serious conception are literary, for example in the poems of Homer (the Iliad and the Odyssey). We find Homer's protagonist Odysseus chooses mortal life over the immortality of victory at the athletic games. Thus the Greek learnt of the travails of a hard-fought victory and that glory, fame and honor was too great a price, that he should be happy with mortal, domestic life. Thus while ideologically the games served to segregate the winner from the not so lucky, the Greek from the barbarian¹, the slave from the free-man, the grueling reality of the athlete perhaps does not overshadow the life of the ordinary Greek, the prize notwithstanding. In this sense, the ordinary Greek could be made to feel satisfied with his lot, even if he were not a sports-hero.

NUDITY AND EROTICISM

Over and above the social import of the athletic games, there is an aesthetic dimension to the ancient Olympics and this may have been one of the reasons for the athletes competing nude. Certain events were also accompanied by music, thus emphasizing the aesthetic and artistic considerations.

The Pentathlon, for example, which included long jump that required exceptional finesse and co-ordination, so much so that it was accompanied by the music of the *oulos*. Thus we see that the Greeks had a kind of artistic conception of sport and an aesthetic sense of the body.

They went so far as to institute nudity in the games which was said to elevate the body of free persons into the "realm" of endurance, grace and harmony of form. It would serve to communicate excellence while the body of slaves was said to exist in the realm of physical degradation, namely poor clothing, fatigue, and isolation or "in short a realm of what is transient" (Goldin 2008:54).

But in another sense nudity would mask social inequality. It was also devised for the admiration of the male body. Probably the main reason however was to distinguish the Greek from the barbarian (non-Greek), shocked as the

latter were by what they perceived merely as public nudity.

Athletes would oil their bodies, possibly because it produced a glistening body which was aesthetically pleasing and desirable. This is documented and depicted in certain vase paintings and sculptures. The well-oiled body also meant it was difficult to get a grip in the wrestling event, one cut less easily and as a protection against a potentially scorching heat. These young oiled bodied men would meet and train at the gymnasium as part of the leisure and education of Greek citizens while only a few actually competed. "Gymnasium" derives from Greek word "*gymnos*" or naked. Ancient education in the Gymnasium was carried out by the *paidotibes* in the *palaestrae* or physical training halls wherein training consisted of training in letters by the *didaskalos* as well as musical training. This education was largely determined by greater family wealth. It aimed at the balanced education of mind and body as Plato (Laws 795d) outlined in making the distinction between the balance of body (*gymnos*) and that of the soul (musical training). Aristotle adds drawing to the latter and stipulates that the education of the body should precede education of the mind (Politics 37b – 38b – p74). This education often consisted in forming certain friendships. The ideal form of relationships in ancient Athens is the friendship wherein an older man or lover would select a younger, his *eromenos* or beloved in order to educate him in politics and philosophy and sometimes enjoy a sexual relationship. Platonic dialogues show how this relationship might form in the confines of the gymnasium. This did not necessarily make for good soldiers. Greek writers criticized that athletes and their exploits could be useful training for warfare. Euripides writes, for example: "what man ever defeated the city of his ancestors by wrestling well, by being fleet-footed or by winning a crown by throwing the discus or hitting his opponent in the chin? Do men fight their enemy with discuses in their hands or throw them from their hands to punch through shields? No one is so stupid when he is standing in front of a weapon" (Euripides Autolykos fragment 282 in Miller 2004:92). Therefore, sport is seen as an alternative background to war where civic rivalries were played out and the gymnasium was seen as an educational institution. In this sense, sport like philosophy could be perceived as an ideal realm, transcending the mundane, the practical and the utilitarian. At the same time,

¹ Though the distinction between the Roman gladiator contest and Greek athletics is that between the barbaric and the more cultured, it is also true that Greek boxing and chariot racing were extremely dangerous and violent, hence from the term Agon we derive "agony".

this ideal realm could be perceived as a means for integrating the mind and the body in a harmonious way. Thus the arts and sport co-exist simultaneously.

This co-existence appears all the more likely given that the Schools of Plato, Aristotle and the skeptics were founded in the settings of the gymnasium. The educational system consisted of several activities – dance, sculpture, choruses, music, song and athletic exercise. The ideological purpose was that of *arête* (manly excellence), *andreia*² (courage), *ponus* (toil), *kartenia* (endurance) toward a greater good for the entire polis. Thus the “bloom” or prime of the body, the glow and peak of beauty that was axiomatic in Greek love poetry, the essential quality of sexual attractiveness was merely the outer form toward an inner drive for knowledge and virtue, for godly inspiration. In fact, orderly civic affairs, the sustaining of civic harmony, brought about the introduction of institution of Eros.

Eros represented *philia* (friendship), eloquence and strength, freedom, noble values to a society freed from tyranny, as well as tender charm. She takes on the attributes of Heracles as he acquired the club and lion skin; a kind of statement that “love conquers all”. Male athletic valor like Eros reinforced the traditional order of the polis and enhanced reputation of the community through his honor and fame, thus “effecting matters non-athletic by transmitting and validating heroic-type ideology and behavior” (Miller 2004: 283). In effect the athletes were sex-symbols, validating a certain body type which had associations with the gods and their influences on the polis. Hence the body is necessarily ideological while the gymnasium was said to “make a city”.

Moreover, Hamilton (1942) argues that Greece can be equated to life versus Egypt which he associated with that of death in its obsession with the “life beyond”. Hence in Greece we find play, beauty, reason, freedom of speech exemplified by the shrine at Delphi which reads “know thyself” and “nothing in excess” – both statements marked by the absence of priestly formulae. Callebat (1998:56) goes further and claims that the Olympics are like “festivals of eternal youth” that, as it were, exorcized death – a relationship of the divine supernatural

² C.f. Rosen, R & Sluiter, I (ed.), *Andreia: studies in manliness and courage in classical antiquity* (2003), London: Penguin - for a detailed exposition of the concept.

interacting with the secular religion of Olympism is forged. The body is seething with life and the present is venerated: Greece is unashamedly naked basking in the light of the day. Its nudity represents the self-control of the Greeks, their superiority, that within passion there is yet a steadfast soul. The Greek ideal can thus be construed as life-affirming and fruitful marked by the exposed genitalia, the mystical instrument of propagation and symbol of nature (if woman³ are ever represented at the games and in the art documenting the games they wore short dresses and one breast was exposed).

In this section, I have been arguing that nudity and eroticism was a means of marrying the sensual aspect of life with the cerebral and aesthetic. Sport, as institutionalized within the framework of the Gymnasium, was a system that offered the possibility for the harmonious balance and combination of the mind and the body that offered a rounded education. However, it was not simply nudity and sexuality that stimulated the Ancient Greek, it was also the play of the gods that, as it were, were enacted via sports at the Olympics and represented the cult of the hero or icon.

VICTORY AND THE GODS

The fatherland of Greece was a community formed not out of political arrangement alone, but through its cultural production. This non-verbal force – culture - binding them via athletics, constituted the biggest single gathering in the Greek world and lasted from 776 BCE - 395 C.E. Given its longevity it is reasonable to say that Greeks culture was very much defined by the Olympics. One could say it was precisely because sport is a language easily assimilated or appreciated and sanctioned by specific institutions that it became a means through which the Greeks both united amongst themselves and expanded culturally beyond its borders. I would therefore suggest that this cultural force in the Ancient Greek world links with my earlier deductions of sport as something ineffable, non-verbal, imaginative and institutionally cemented as a certain “form of life”. That “form of life” is embedded in its religious significance. In this last respect, I consider how it was that the gods were part of the Olympics and indeed, how the athlete aspired to be like a god through his victory. I shall describe in the foregoing the ritualistic

³ The reality is that this was rare and woman were not allowed to be spectators at the Olympic events.

aspect of the games and the place of the gods in order to understand the religious significance of the games, that is, how the institution of religion informed sport of the time and indeed, the images that supported or expressed these concerns. In this respect, both art and sport combined to promulgate a theological and philosophical system of belief in a very real and dramatic sense which could be easily assimilated by the populous.

At Olympia Zeus was the focus of the festivals' main ritual held in the second full moon after summer solstice. There was a sacrifice of one hundred oxen at Zeus's conical altar in the Altis, created from the ashes of earlier offerings. Other religious observances at the festival included a procession led by the priests of Zeus around sixty three other altars also located within the Altis and sacrifices at the shrine of Pelops. Ancient Greeks and officials also took an oath before an image of Zeus to contest fairly.

Like Zeus, the athlete aimed to be a god. The enduring goal of the athlete was to achieve immortality – the god-like status of a Zeus - through superhuman effort. The temple of Zeus was constructed in 460 BCE and was a major monument of Olympia and centre of Altis. The eastern pediment told the story of the first Olympic Games. The western pediment of the temple of Zeus depicted the battle of the centaurs presided over by Apollo, the god of music and culture: "...it is an allegory of the struggle between the centaurs bestiality and the Lapith's civilization, between barbarianism and Hellenism, and served to unify and edify all the Greeks who came to Olympia" (Miller 2004:89). Behind the Temple of Zeus to the west was the sacred olive tree from which the Olympic victors' crowns were cut and scattered throughout the Altis where there were dozens of altars to various gods. There were hundreds of dedications, statues set up by athletes and horse owners after a triumph at the games.

It's a place of victory personified by the Nike on the outstretched hand of the cult statue of the Olympian Zeus. There were ritual purifications sprinkled with the blood of a pig and then washed in the spring water – only then could they enter the sanctuary of Zeus. The games were, at their core, a religious festival⁴. Before arriving at the stadium they passed twelve

bronze statues of Zeus, statues paid for out of the fines levied against athletes who were caught giving and taking bribes to throw a match. Thus there was a warning to other athletes that an Olympic victory is not bought or sold; if they cheat the shame of their corruption will live long past their life time. Sport and art thus reinforced one another as the image was a code informing the contestant of the rules. Heroes arose owing to athletic accomplishments. He was said to be the offspring of humans or a god and a human achieved a quasi divine status. Members of the leading families in Greece took part in the games and the "victor of the games was looked upon with awe, as a man whom the gods have favored with the spell of invincibility, on whom the blessing of victoriousness rested, and to commemorate and perpetuate these signs of divine grace" (Gombrich 1967:58). Heroes were thus believed to be gods that coupled with human beings.

Thus we find that the prize was hefty: Evidence from the Panathenaic amphora's show that a jar of olive oil, considered very precious, was offered as prizes at the Panathenaic games. One side (of the amphora) depicted the goddess Athena striding forward with a shield and spear in defense of her favorite city, frequently with the painted notation "the prize of Athens". The prizes, other than the jar of oil as already mentioned also consisted of money or valuable objects, but the most prestigious is the single wreath.

The victor would also get free meals for the rest of their lives at public expense, a triumphal entrance to their cities and immunities from public duties, everlasting glory including statues and victory odes, often commissioned and paid for by the athlete or his family or trainer, though often funded by his city as a proud record of its ability to produce a Panhellenic champion. In sum then one may say that the ancient Olympic Games offered a vision of overcoming adversity by the individual winner who, in effect, was the incarnation of the godly realm on the soil of Greece.

So Athlon meaning "prize" or "reward" consisted of money, victory crowns and shields. *Athleuein* or "to compete for a prize" through competition meant that to be an athlete did not consist in sports-for-sports-sake; the glory of victory was the primary motive within the rules. If a foul was committed or some transgression of rules there would be a public flogging, and this "equality before the law inherent in the

⁴ C.f. Spivey (2005), Girginov (2010), Young (2004) and Harris (1964) for a more detailed exposition of this statement.

custom may be the most significant contribution of athletics to the ancient world” (Scanlon 2002:103). There were no team competitions and only first place was recognized. Victory was for the individual alone even as he represented his city-state.

Victory itself was said to recall the deeds of the gods. The ancient Olympics is a revival of older contests instituted by the gods and heroes. For example, that Zeus himself wrestled with his father Kroanos in Olympia and thus instituted the games to commemorate his victory over his father whom he ousted from the throne in which the Olympian gods all took part.

There are stories of gods such as Heracles as well. One can thus argue that the contest is a continuation of the activities of heroes and gods, that the athletes enact the activities of the gods or represent the gods. In this sense the actions of the athletes can be likened to living gods, a presence that the polis can easily perceive, quantify and believe in. One could thus argue that the prowess of the athlete, his struggle and torment was a means for bringing the godly realm into the human sphere and in the process sports embodied a metaphysical concept within the dramatic actions of the hero which in turn was returned, so to speak, to the metaphysical or “immaterial” realm via the arts, as the Olympics and its heroes were immortalized in painting, prose and especially, sculpture.

CONCLUSION:

In terms of the argument that the athlete and athletics carry an aesthetic appeal in classical Greek, one may cite social status, nudity and victory as carrying an aesthetic dimension which is a form of ideological content and is fuelled by a certain view of the body and the body as part of the institutions of the day. What

exactly the implications of these views are (as it historically informs our views today) is a worthy area of further research in the humanities

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