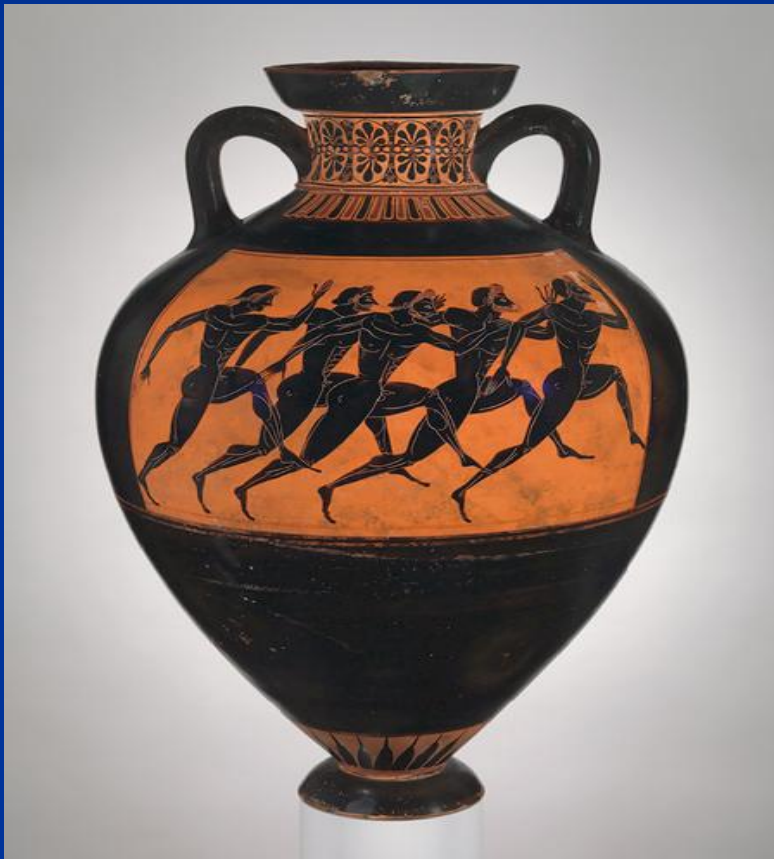


CLCS4007

ATHENS VS. ROME: LIFE AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY



Lecture 26:

Athletic Contests
and Olympic
Games (Ancient
Greece)

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The World of Greek Athletics

- *Athlon* = a prize or reward. This prize can take any form: money, victory crowns, shields, amphoras filled with olive oil.
- *Athleuein* = to compete for a prize.
- *Athletes* = the competitor, athlete
- Athletics was not simply about competition: it concerned winning a prize.
- *Gymnos* = naked; *gymnazein* = to perform in the nude. Greek athletes performed naked.

The World of Greek Athletics

- *Gymnastes* = an athletics coach.
- *Gymnasion* = place of athletics training.
- *Gymnikos agon* = the nude competitions; the athletics.
- The ancient athlete's equipment: a jar of olive oil (rubbed on body before exercise) (*aryballos*); a strigil (a curved tool for scraping body after exercise); sponge; a cap (to hold hair down in practice) and dust or powder (for cleaning).
- No team competitions; no prize for second place.

The Crown Competitions

- The *stephanitic* (or crown) games of ancient Greece (the central focus of ancient athletics and of the Panhellenic athletic festival cycle):
 - The Olympic Games (at Olympia): established 776 B.C. (but date controversial)
 - The Pythian Games at Delphi: 586 B.C.
 - The Isthmian Games: 580 B.C.
 - The Nemean Games at Nemea: 573 B.C.



The stadium at Olympia



The *Gymnikos Agon* (Nude Competitions)

- The Footraces: the *stadion* race was the premier event of the *gymnikos agon*.
- One stadion – 600 ancient feet (equivalent to 200 meter sprint).
- The *stadion* was the only event at the Olympic Games from 776 to 724 B.C: the victor gave his name to the entire four-year Olympiad. We know the names of almost every ancient Olympic stadion winner because the Greeks used Olympiads to record time.

Other Footraces

- *Diaulos* = double-stadion race (introduced in 724)
- *Dolichos* = long distance foot race (20 or 24 laps of the stadium track) (about 7.5-9 kilometers)
- Nemea: *hippios* = 'horsy race'. 4 stadions in length, no other details known.
- *Hoplitodromos* = 'race in armour' (two stadia in length): introduced in 520.

The stadium at Delphi



Wrestling

- Added to the Olympic programme in 708 B.C.
- Ancient wrestling: beginning from a standing position, the aim was to throw one's opponent to the ground.
- Starting stance: *systasis* (standing together): the wrestlers lean into each other with foreheads touching.
- The competitors were sorted into pairs by drawing lots.
- The wrestler who threw his opponent 3 times without first suffering 3 falls himself was the winner.
- 632: wrestling for *paides* (boys) added.



Boxing

- Boxing (*pyx*) introduced to the Olympic Games in 688.
- Evidence for blows to the head, bloody noses and other cuts is omnipresent (often identified in art through blood).
- Boxing gloves (*himantes*): leather straps wrapped around the hands (about 4 meters long).
- Pairs determined by drawing lots.
- No rounds and no time limits (but breaks could be taken by mutual agreement).
- One was not allowed to hit a man while he was down.
- Victory was decided when one of the boxers either would not or could not continue. In the former case, he would signal his defeat by raising a single finger.
- Fatalities were known in boxing.



Pausanias (8.40.4-5) on boxing at the Nemean Games

The Argives gave the crown of victory at the Nemean Games to Kreugas of Epidamnos although he was dead, because his opponent, Damoxenos of Syracuse, broke the agreement reached between them. While they were boxing evening came on, and they agreed in front of witnesses that each would allow the other in turn to land a punch. Now at that time boxers did not yet wear the hard himas on the wrist of each hand, but boxed with the soft himantes, which were bound in the hollow of the hand so that the fingers were left bare...Now Kreugas aimed his punch at Damoxenos' head. Then Damoxenos told Kreugas to lift his arm, and when Kreugas had done so, Damoxenos struck him under the ribs with his fingers straight out. The combination of his sharp fingernails and the force of his blow drove his hand into Kreugas' guts. He grabbed Kreugas' intestines and tore them out, and Kreugas died on the spot. The Argives expelled Damoxenos on the grounds that he had broken his agreement by giving his opponent several blows [that is, one for each of his fingers] instead of the agreed-upon single blow. They gave the victory to the dead Kreugas and erected a statue of him in Argos.

The Pankration

- This was the most violent of ancient athletic competitions: combined wrestling and boxing into the ‘all-powerful’ event described by the word.
- Entered the Olympic Games in 648.
- Prohibitions on biting and gouging one’s opponent.
- Brutality was a key feature of the pankration. One athlete specialised in bending fingers – and breaking them if necessary (Pausanias 6.4.2)
- Kicking was also allowed, as well as various defensive moves against kicking.
- Victory determined by the inability or unwillingness of one of the opponents to continue.



The Pankration

- “The pankratiasts...practice a dangerous brand of wrestling. They have to endure black eyes, which are not safe for the wrestler, and learn holds by which one who has fallen can still win, and they must be skillful in various ways of strangulation. They bend ankles and twist arms and throw punches and jump on their opponenets. All such practices are permitted in the pankration except for biting and gouging.” (Philostratus, *Pictures in a Gallery*, 2.6)
- “Arrhachion’s opponent, having already a grip around his waist, thought to kill him and put an arm around his neck to choke off his breath. At the same time he slipped his legs through Arrhachion’s groin and wound his feet inside Arrhachion’s knees, pulling back until the sleep of death began to creep over Arrhachion’s senses. But Arrhachion was not done yet, for as his opponent began to relax the pressure of his legs, Arrahachion kicked away his own right foot and fell heavily to the left, holding his opponent at teh groin with hisleft knee still holding his opponent’s foot firmly. So violent was the fall that the opponent’s left ankle was wrenched from his socket. The man strangling Arrahachion...signalled with his hand that he gave up.” (Philostratus, *Pictures in a Gallery*, 2.6).

The Pentathlon

- Pentathlon – a single winner collected one prize for the five competitions. Introduced to the Olympics in 708 BC.
- Two of the five competitions were contested both as pentathlon and independent events: the stadion race and wrestling.
- The other three were only contested as part of the pentathlon: the diskos throw, the halma (jump) and the akon (javelin throw).
- We don't know the exact criteria for victory in the pentathlon, but winners had to be good at more than one sport.
- **The diskos throw**: stone, iron and bronze diskoi, weight about 2 kilograms (as with modern discus). Pausanias (6.19.4): three diskoi “the number that are used in the pentathlon” were kept in the treasury of the Sikyonians at Olympia. The athlete who threw furthest won.

The Pentathlon

- Long jump (halma): contestants used weights called halteres (sing. Halter) of two types: spherical and long. Accompanied by a flute player (supposed to help the athlete establish his rhythm and timing).
- The javelin (or akon) throw: about 1.9 meters long, made of wood and tipped in bronze. The throw began with a run up. The winner was determined by the length of the throw.
- How the overall decision of the winner of the pentathlon was reached is not well documented. Order of events: probably stadion, diskos, halma, akon, pale (boxing).
- The winner of any three of the competitions was the overall winner of the pentathlon event.

The Hippikos Agon (Horse Races)

- A fundamental component of the ancient games, esp the four-horse chariot race. Added to the Olympic programme in 680.
- The tethrippon (four-horse chariot race): 12 laps around the hippodrome (horse track) but length of hippodrome is not known (no Greek hippodrome has been completely excavated). The charioteer was usually a slave or a professional driver. He is always shown wearing a long chiton (tunic) and holding a long lash and a number of reins. Successful teams were cherished and often had lengthy careers. Regardless of who drove, the winner in the horse race was the owner of the horses and his name was entered on the list of victors at Olympia and elsewhere. City-states as well as individuals could enter the chariot race (so the victor was not necessarily an individual).
- A woman could win an equestrian victory at Olympia (even though women were prohibited from attending the games): the first female victor was Kyniska of Sparta (probably in 396).
- A popular spectacle.

The Hippikos Agon (horse races)

- The horseback race (keles) added to the Olympic programme in 648: it seems to have covered a distance of six stadia (approx. 1.2 kilometers). The jockeyts were small boys (probably slaves) who rode without benefit of saddle or stirrups but with reins and a whip.
- Successful horses were as famous as they are today.
- The two horse chariot race: added in 408, 8 laps of the hippodrome (9.5 kilometers).
- No details about size and shape of the track. It is not clear how many entrants participated in the various horse races (modern estimates: from 15 or 20 to 50 or 60 chariots).

Musikos Agon (musical competition)

- Musikos Agon: never part of the Olympic Games nor originally part of the Nemean Games but integral to Pythian and Isthmian Games (so theatres at Delphi and Isthmia for the competitions but no theatres at Nemea or Olympia).
- The musikos agon was not added to the Nemean Games until after they transferred to Argos where there is a theatre.
- Pythian Games: kithara (lyre) singing; the playing of the aulos (flute). The winner of the aulos competition at the Pythian Games received an extra reward: he would play the flute to accompany the Pentathlon at the Olympic Games.

Other events

- The herald and the trumpet events: formal components of the Olympic Games from 396.
- Delphi and Isthmia: competitions in poetry writing and prose composition. The entrants included women.
- Delphi: competitions in tragic acting
- Delphi and Isthmia: competitions in painting established in the middle of the fifth century BC.

Olympia

- Not a *polis* (city-state): administered by the *polis* of Elis (60 km away).
- Sanctuary of Zeus, Heraion (Temple of Hera) and Pelopion (shrine of Pelops)
- Prytaneion: house of Hestia, goddess of the hearth, whose eternal flame attested to the health and welfare of Elis. The victors at the games were given a banquet here.
- Shrine of the hero Pelops: worshipped with libations and sacrifices. Pelops was a key divinity at Olympia. It is vital to note the central role played by a hero at Olympia: heroes and their cults represented enduring goal of the athlete to achieve immortality through superhuman effort and they offer encouragement.
- Dedications of statues set up by athletes and horse owners after their victories: all over sanctuary .
- Gymnasion and wrestling school (palaistra): from third century B.C.
- Stadium and hippodrome.

Women and Athletics

- Prohibition against women of marriageable age attending Olympic Games.
- Evidence for women's involvement in athletics is fragmentary and uncertain: but evidence appearing in recent decades suggests women did participate in athletics.
- Women could and did win Olympic victories (e.g. Kyniska of Sparta: first female Olympic victor, although as a horse owner she did not participate directly).
- Other women also won victories at horse races in Olympia.
- Evidence of women winning stadion and kithara singing at Pythian and Nemean Games.
- Sparta: physical training important for women.
- Competitions for girls and young women at places other than Sparta: the games of Hera in Argos, games at Dodona, games of Hera held at Olympia (held at a different time from Olympic Games), sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron, Attica (girls and young women running in visual evidence).

Further Reading

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