

## BOOK REVIEW

### GREEK ATHLETICS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE: LITERATURE, ART, IDENTITY AND CULTURE

*Athletics and Literature in the Roman Empire.* By JASON KÖNIG. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xix + 398. Cloth, \$95.00. ISBN 0-521-83845-2.

*Greek Athletics in the Roman World: Victory and Virtue.* By ZAHRA NEWBY. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. xiv + 314. Cloth, \$150.00. ISBN 0-19-927930-6.

Recently the study of ancient athletics, once a lesser and even suspect subfield, has become attractive for the burgeoning research on Greek culture under the Roman Empire. These two ambitious studies both derive from British dissertations (Newby's with Jaś Elsner, König's with Simon Goldhill), and have overlapping concentrations and complementary strengths. Together, König's literary study, enriched by epigraphical evidence, and Newby's art historical study, enriched by relevant texts, reveal the sophistication and complexities of textual and visual representations of Greek athletics in the Empire. N. discusses some of the same authors (e.g., Lucian, Dio, Philostratus) as K., but less extensively, and both have a chapter on Pausanias. N. devotes three chapters to Rome and the West, which K. covers in one. Convincing and extremely well-read, the authors establish significant reinterpretations of later athletic history, art and literature.

Rejecting a traditional focus on Classical Greece and actual athletic practices, these scholars investigate the experiences, self-representations, identifications and cultural significance of athletics under the Empire. Charging that older studies made uncritical, piecemeal use of later sources to support scenarios of athletic decline or Roman opposition and corruption, they declare that we must appreciate the contemporary cultural discourse and diverse agendas that inspired and fashioned later athletic commemorations and representations. Expanding on the works of Louis Robert and recent scholarship,<sup>1</sup> the authors show the continuing significance of athletics, altered but still vital, different but not degenerate, in the lives of later Greek individuals and cities. Athletics, and not just intellectual en-

<sup>1</sup> E.g., A. Farrington, "Olympic Victors and the Popularity of the Olympic Games in the Imperial Period," *Tyche* 12 (1997) 15-46; H.W. Pleket, "Mass-Sport and Local Infrastructure in the Greek Cities of Asia Minor," *Stadion* 24 (1998) 151-72; O. van Nijf, "Local Heroes: Athletics, Festivals and Elite Self-Fashioning in the Roman East," in S. Goldhill, ed., *Being Greek under Rome: Culture, Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire* (Cambridge, 2001) 306-34; T.F. Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics* (Oxford, 2002) 40-63.

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deavors, remained fundamental to Greek ethnicity and the Hellenic tradition under the Empire. Athletic art, facilities and festivals were popular and prominent in the self-representation of cities, competitors, patrons and intellectuals. Simultaneously attractive and controversial, athletics were a central subject of cultural debate and productivity, as later Greeks felt compelled to negotiate with and appropriate early traditions. Further, while never threatening Roman spectacles, from the time of Augustus athletics became an increasingly popular form of public entertainment in the West itself.

After a substantial Introduction, each of König's next six chapters, all over 40 pages long, moves from an examination of some athletic institution (e.g., education in the gymnasium) and its textual representation toward a detailed reinterpretation of a single major text or set of texts. K. selects texts that reveal athletics as a high-status activity in civic life and festival culture, and a locus of conflicted elite self-identification and self-perception, as well as of broader cultural controversies about education, bodies, civic virtue and the Hellenic tradition. Relishing the variety and complexity of representations and assessments of athletics, he shows that diverse literary and epigraphical representations (e.g., Galen's writings and the inscriptions of the famous *pankration* victor Markos Aurelios Asklepiades) shared language, idioms, ambiguities and tensions, as they were entangled with cultural controversies and the self-representation and cultural self-scrutiny of their authors.

In Chapter 1, "Introduction," K. situates himself within the scholarship and establishes his interpretive premises. Preferring "Imperial period" to Philostratus' "Second Sophistic," which denigrates both athletics and later Greek literature, K. charges that earlier scholars (e.g., E.N. Gardiner, H.A. Harris), using later texts without adequate consideration of rhetorical contexts, internal tensions and wider cultural polemics, underestimated the significance of athletics in elite identity, education and masculine self-display. In contrast, K. applies recent studies of rhetoric, representation, identity and bodily display to athletics, and, like New Historicists, reads claims, valuations or assertions as contestations that indicate alternative opinions or rival claims to identity and status. Declaring that "culture" lacks objective reality and is an ideal presented and imagined in different ways for multiple purposes, he sees identities, cultures and texts not as monolithic, but as contested, unstable and ambiguous. For K., identification—the suggesting of individual, local, professional or broad Hellenic identities—involves the "never-ending and always partly subconscious" (p. 11) negotiation between shared and highly contested opinions, between self-confidence and fixity against uncertainty and instability. K.'s Introduction, however, grows lengthy when he summarizes the history of early athletics and the modern

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misuse of ancient athletic customs, in the first instance to note early social elitism, athletic ties to education, and a critical literary tradition, and secondly to suggest parallels between the Imperial era and modern times, as representations in both ages exaggerate athletic continuities and mix imitation with distortion.

Chapter 2, "Lucian and Anacharsis: *Gymnasion* Education in the Greek City," demonstrates how Lucian reveals the absurdity and irony involved in hallowing athletic forms of Hellenic tradition. Lucian satirically juxtaposes and undermines two conflicting conventions, one applauding the gymnasium for preserving authentic Hellenic traditions and providing respite from everyday life, the other rejecting the military or political value of gymnastics and mocking archaizing attempts to recreate Classical culture. K. explains that gymnasium inscriptions themselves include conflicting viewpoints, at times suggesting or denying the practical usefulness of athletics, at others stressing connections with or distance from agonistic festivals. Chapter 3, "Models for Virtue: Dio's 'Melankomas' Orations and the Athletic Body," with all but one of K.'s 12 illustrations, shows that representations of athletes in statues and inscriptions involve cultural aspirations and tensions, as they praise victors as beautiful and inspiring citizens, but also espouse unattainable ideals of proportion and virtue. Similarly, while Dio's funeral orations for Melankomas seem to praise and criticize athletics inconsistently, K. shows how Dio examines and reveals persistent problems in his own life and career concerning the challenge of combining the virtuous life of philosophy with participation in civic and political life. Chapter 4, "Pausanias and Olympic Panhellenism," continues current re-evaluations of Pausanias' recording, ordering and structuring of Olympia as an emblem of Panhellenic culture.<sup>2</sup> K. argues that Pausanias' selection and emphasis of athletic commemorations (inscriptions and statues), his "Olympic enumeration as thaumatography" (p. 174), reflects contemporary tension between attempts to recapture or distance the past. Turning to Rome and Latin epic, Chapter 5, "Silius Italicus and the Athletics of Rome," examines the contested place of athletics at Rome and in formations of Roman identity. As Rome introduced and later institutionalized athletic contests, the Roman elite used athletic stereotypes in literature as a "peg" (p. 212) for their own cultural self-examination.<sup>3</sup> K. suggests that Silius in *Punica* 16 added violent

<sup>2</sup> E.g. J. Elsner, "Structuring 'Greece': Pausanias' *Periegesis* as a Literary Construct," in S. Alcock, et al., eds., *Pausanias: Travel and Memory in Roman Greece* (Oxford, 2001) 3–20. See now W. Hutton, *Landscape and Literature in the Periegesis of Pausanias* (Cambridge, 2005); J. Akujärvi, *Researcher, Traveler, Narrator: Studies in Pausanias' Periegesis* (Stockholm, 2005). On Olympic chronography, see now P. Christesen's work on Olympic victor lists (Cambridge, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, see H. Lovatt, *Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics and Poetics in the Thebaid* (Cambridge, 2005).

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gladiatorial combat to the Greek funeral game tradition to express Roman anxieties about the brutalizing, desensitizing effects on society of prolonged exposure to conquest and civil warfare.

Chapters 6, "Athletes and Doctors: Galen's Agonistic Medicine," and 7, "Philostratus' *Gymnasticus* and the Rhetoric of the Athletic Body," discuss doctors, trainers and rival opinions about athletics and proper care of the body. Galen, advocating balance and moderate exercises that benefit both body and soul, presents the medical profession as a true philosophical art in contrast with the fraudulent expertise of avaricious athletic trainers who abuse bodies with harmful regimens. For his part, Philostratus defends athletic training as an analytical form of wisdom in order to champion the value of rhetoric in contemporary cultural self-scrutiny. His ideal trainer was a moral representative of Hellenism who, like Philostratus himself, could interpret both athletic bodies and the reflection of Hellenic traditions in contemporary athletics. K.'s work closes with a brief Conclusion, a detailed bibliography and three indices.

Newby's work, with some 95 helpful illustrations (including nine color plates), explores the prominence, significance and social and cultural roles of athletics for both Greeks and Romans by focusing especially, although not exclusively, on the abundant visual and material evidence. Applying art historical expertise to well-selected examples over a broad scope, N. demonstrates that athletics were crucial to Greek ethnicity and were indeed significant in the West. Like K., she examines athletics in constructions of Greek culture and identity, and in negotiations with Roman culture and power. Unlike K., she reads athletics as a generally positive form of self-fashioning. Later Greeks, while celebrating contemporary accomplishments, consciously asserted their Hellenic identity as worthy heirs of classical Greece by evoking ennobling links to athletic, intellectual and military virtues of the past; and athletics aided an ultimately positive interaction between Greek and Roman culture, and between Eastern Greeks and the Imperial administration, especially via the emperor cult. Her work consists of nine chapters: an Introduction, a Conclusion and seven main chapters organized into two parts, on the Roman West and the Greek East.

N.'s Introduction asserts the continuity, vitality and centrality of athletics in Greek self-representation at the individual, civic and regional levels, and in Rome's perception of Greek culture, in part because the majority of athletes were Greek. She outlines the growth and acceptance of athletics from Augustus to the Severans as part of the Empire's "spectacle culture" or system of public entertainments, in part because movements of peoples from the East brought a more cosmopolitan culture to the West. Part One, "Athletics in the Roman West," discusses the evidence for Greek athletic contests at Rome,

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exercise in baths and athletic decorations (mosaics and sculpture) in villas. Chapter 2, "Greek Athletics in the Heart of Rome," details the introduction of athletics in Roman spectacles from 186 BC on, the patronage and festivals of Augustus and Nero, major developments with Domitian's stadium and his festival of 86, continued support under the Antonines and a zenith under the Severans, notably Alexander Severus, a "keen athlete" (pp. 63, 74–5), and Julia Domna. N. declares that the Romans gradually but enthusiastically accepted athletics, and that, in addition to mosaics and monuments, literary criticisms of athletics, as in Juvenal and Tacitus, show popularity rather than opposition. She concedes that, with different ideological values, few Romans went beyond watching contests or exercising in baths, and she explains how Rome carefully controlled athletics by imperial supervision (e.g., of officials and pensions), locating the synod headquarters at Rome and inserting Roman festivals into the hierarchy of Panhellenic crown games. Chapter 3, "Visualizing Athletics in the Roman Baths," examines numerous athletic scenes in mosaics from baths in Italy (e.g., Ostia, Pompeii), Western provinces and the Baths of Caracalla at Rome. Beginning with Agrippa's baths in the Campus Martius, N. suggests public baths with *palaestra* areas encouraged exercise and athletic training, and bathers, drawn by the exotic and erotic Greek allure, appreciated and associated with the activities depicted in mosaics and statues, even imagining themselves as the athletic "stars" of the day. She notes similar interests in Gallia Narbonensis and North Africa, in cities like Massilia with Greek roots, or those, like Gafsa, with aspiring local elites or imperial patronage, but she admits that the rest of the West was less enthusiastic. Chapter 4, "Idealized Statues in Roman Villas," examines the fashion of decorating bathing areas or peristyles of villas, especially those constructed under Domitian and Hadrian, with carefully selected and arranged copies of idealized Classical Greek statues. Statues of athletes with strigils suited bath complexes, and the beauty and eroticism of pentathletes' bodies enhanced the popularity of images of discus throwers. Statues evoked the Classical gymnasium, but the activities nearby were more mental than physical.

Part Two, "Athletics and Identity in the Greek East," demonstrates the importance of athletic festivals and ephebic education for claims to status and cultural identity. Chapters 5, "Training Warriors: The Merits of a Physical Education," and 6, "The Athenian *Ephebeia*: Performing the Past," discuss ephebic training, contests and festivals in Athens and Sparta as evidenced by texts, inscriptions and commemorations (e.g., herms, stelai, dedications). N. reads later ephebic contests and military performances (e.g., Athenian naval mock battles and parades in armor recalling Salamis and Marathon, Spartan whipping contests promoting courage and endurance) as evocations of

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past glories and incitements to traditional virtues and values. Using inscriptions, Lucian and Pausanias, she argues that later Greeks saw the ephebic training of cadets as essential for producing fit, beautiful and patriotic soldier-citizens—even during the Pax Romana.<sup>4</sup> In Chapter 7, “Olympia and Pausanias’ Construction of Greece,” N., like K., discusses both Pausanias’ attention to Archaic and Classical victor monuments at Olympia in his construction of a Panhellenic past, and the enduring value of victor statues for civic claims to identity and achievement. Chapter 8, “Gymnasia, Festivals, and Euergetism in Asia Minor,” discussing various locations (e.g., Aphrodisias, Hierapolis, Side), but focusing mostly on sculpture in the gymnasia at Ephesus, shows the desire by donors of facilities, decorations and festivals to publicize their status and ethnicity. As opportunistic individuals and rival communities, with roots of varying depths, Eastern Greeks sought validation and advancement. Honors for recent athletic victors, like cults to ancient victors, represented positive links between past and present. Euergetism also assisted the accommodation or solicitation of Roman imperial rule, as in the foundation of sacred crown festivals, for which the emperor was consulted, received acclamations and was flattered in monuments and coins. Rather than resistance or domination, N. paints a picture of assimilation and negotiation, as Greeks, especially elite patrons and fathers of ephebes, asserted their superior cultural identity, but accepted imperial patronage and supervision. A summarizing Conclusion, bibliography and index complete the volume.

I offer a quibble and a caution. The essential Greek meaning of “athletics” concerns physical contests for prizes, but both K. and N. use “athletics” broadly to include bathing, private exercise, personal care of the body and relaxation at villas.<sup>5</sup> Gymnastic affectations in decorating villas were no more athletic than Trimalchio’s “exercises” at the baths, nor do rhetorical or Christian metaphorical appropriations of athletic terms and imagery constitute athletic activities. Also, as the authors acknowledge, their studies concentrate on the urban elite, to which most athletes, ephebes, benefactors and intellectuals belonged. Public baths allowed some social equalization, but even the magnificence and decoration of baths (or villas) do not prove that lowly or rural Romans bathed or exercised regularly. Baths and gymnasia may say more about the intentions of donors than the habits of the lower classes. Most Romans and non-elite Greeks probably continued to experience intense athletics indirectly as viewers of public games.

<sup>4</sup> Now see N.M. Kennell, *Ephebeia: A Register of Greek Cities with Citizen Training Systems in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Hildesheim, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Addressing the issue, K. (pp. 29, 32–5) admits that private exercise and care of the body were “far removed” from the training of competitive athletes.

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An art historian stressing nostalgia, allusions and idealizing more than conflict and ambiguity, N. draws sound conclusions from often-fragmentary physical evidence and copies by usually unknown artists. A cultural historian elucidating complexities and tensions, K. details highly nuanced readings of (generally) complete texts by known authors. Seeking a broader audience, both translate documents and summarize arguments made and to be made,<sup>6</sup> but each main chapter of both works harnesses well over 100 learned footnotes.

Essential for scholars and serious students of ancient literature, art and sport, these stimulating works expand, refocus and raise the study of athletic art and literature to the level of sophisticated cultural history. Both get beneath the surface of documents and decorations, exposing Imperial (and modern) layers of reception, perception and representation. Like the authors and artists they interpret, K. and N. rewrite history and reevaluate culture according to their tastes, tensions and needs; they negotiate in their present with the near and distant past, promoting their scholarship in rivalry with earlier readings of athletics, and tempting us with stimulating new approaches.

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<sup>6</sup> P. Christesen, review of Newby, *BMCRA* 2006.07.32; cf. Newby's brief *Athletics in the Ancient World* (London, 2006).