

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Victor's Crown: A History of Ancient Sport from Homer to Byzantium.* By David POTTER. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. (First published in the UK by Quercus, 2011.) Pp. xxx + 416. Paperback, \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-19-984275-9.

The last decade has seen a series of introductions to ancient sports, all by authors possessing both extensive experience teaching this subject and substantial scholarly achievements to their credit.<sup>1</sup> To this collection can now be added *The Victor's Crown*, which reflects the many years David Potter has spent researching Roman entertainment and teaching classes on ancient sports. Potter is particularly concerned with presenting the history of the ancient games in a way that will be readily understandable and appealing to non-specialists. Yet when considered as a potential textbook (as is the focus of this review), this approach can represent a drawback. In trying to make the story of the ancient games straightforward and compelling, Potter sometimes glosses over cases where students need to be informed that the evidence presents us with problems or that scholars hold widely divergent opinions about significant phenomena.

After an introduction pointing out how ancient and modern society share an interest in watching competitive sports, Potter proceeds in the first three chapters to cover the various topics involving Greek athletics that students would normally encounter in a sports course, such as Homeric sports and what it was like to attend the Olympics. A few subjects, notably athletic nudity, are treated in less depth than some teachers might like. This is balanced out by the fact that others, notably the gymnasiarchical law of Beroia and athletics under the Ptolemies, receive more attention than in similar books. Not surprising given his research interests, Potter devotes the last two chapters, nearly half the work, to the Roman

<sup>1</sup> Some of these introductions deal solely with Greek athletics: S. Miller, *Ancient Greek Athletics* (2004) and Z. Newby, *Athletics in the Ancient World* (2006); others like Potter treat the Roman world as well: D. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* (2007) and N. Crowther, *Sport in Ancient Times* (2007); and some just the Roman world: A. Futrell, *The Roman Games* (2005) (strictly a source book but with a substantial amount of commentary interspersed among the selections). This list is not exhaustive but includes those works which I have had the most experience using with students.

games including some less commonly treated topics like the fate of the games as Constantinople became the center of the empire. While the nature of the evidence used to reconstruct the history of the ancient games is not specifically discussed, a student would get a good sense of the written sources from the many passages quoted, including from some less familiar authors like John Malalas. Visual evidence is not particularly prominent but the twenty-three nicely reproduced color illustrations include the “before and after” of the Minoan bull-jumping fresco (the re-restoration removed any evidence for the participation of women) and two wall paintings from Paestum with early evidence for gladiatorial combat and chariot racing.

More than other introductions to Greek and Roman sports, Potter’s arrangement of topics appears to be governed by his sense of how best to convey the story of ancient athletics to readers with little prior knowledge of the ancient world. So instead of treating all the Olympic events in a separate section, as is standard in most books, Potter combines his description of the various events with a discussion of nudity and of the agony of competing in the Olympics under the heading “Winning.” In the process of trying to show readers that the history of ancient athletics does not just involve technical details, he brings to the fore some interesting features of the ancient games. For example, his thoughts on the parallels between the diets of modern and ancient athletes (139–44) would certainly provoke some discussion among the kinesiology students I have taught. As well, his extensive list of tombstones set up by the wives of gladiators (259) suggests that we may have underestimated the number of gladiators who were free men or were freed during their careers. Above all, Potter constantly has his eye on making sure the reader realizes that ancient sports did not develop in a vacuum, as he does in his lively section on athletics and the polis (“Sport and Civic Virtue”).

Potter is largely successful in his attempt to tell the story of Greek and Roman sports in a compelling fashion. In the process, however, students do not always receive an adequate overview of the field, as can be seen with Potter’s discussion of the role of women in ancient sports (Chap. 25). First, some of his suggestions are sufficiently controversial that he needed to explain more fully the basis of his views. Contrary to his assertion (255), Domitian did include women in his Capitoline games, unless Potter has some unexpressed reason to disbelieve Dio (67.8.1–9.1) and Suetonius (*Dom.* 4). Conversely, Potter is the first scholar, to my knowledge, to assert that Nero imported female Spartan wrestlers to compete in his Greek games (255). However, the evidence he cites needed to be dis-

cussed in some detail; otherwise students will be in the dark about why some scholars might have reservations about his claim.<sup>2</sup> A more important gap is that no mention is made of the Heraia at Olympia. As a result, students would not realize that scholars have long debated whether these races were truly athletic or constituted a ritual like the ceremonies for Artemis at Brauron.

While the average reader is likely to find *The Victor's Crown* an enjoyable account of the ancient games, it probably does not represent the best choice as a textbook for a sports or classical civilization class. Because Potter tends to be discursive and to eschew technical terminology wherever possible, students would find it hard to determine quickly, say, the dates individual events were introduced in the Olympics or the parts of the Roman circus. Yet I could see assigning or suggesting particular sections to students, since Potter is successful in conveying the sense that understanding the Greeks and Romans requires understanding why their games developed as they did.

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<sup>2</sup> He cites the scholium to Juvenal 4.53 but that note simply says that Palfurius Sura wrestled [it may mean "competed"] during the reign of Nero. It is the less than trustworthy Gregorius Valla who says that Palfurius wrestled during the reign of Nero with a Spartan girl in some unspecified contest, not specifically in Nero's games. Potter also needs to explain why Suetonius would have ignored such a remarkable event.