

BOOK REVIEW

The End of Greek Athletics in Late Antiquity. By SOPHIE REMIJSSEN. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xviii + 340. Hardcover, \$115.00. ISBN 978-1-107-05078-5.

Interest in the history of Greek athletics, and also in Late Antiquity, has increased in recent decades, and Remijsen impressively combines these topics in her timely re-examination and explanation of the collapse and disappearance of the international network of civic athletic contests (*agones*) in Late Antiquity. The breadth and sophistication of her research, and her masterful use of very challenging and often fragmentary evidence from papyri and inscriptions to mosaics and late literary texts, make this work, based on her dissertation, an original and substantial contribution to our knowledge.

Remijsen's Introduction suggests that earlier attempts to explain the decline of athletics (by which she means sets of contests at *agones*) have been hindered by a traditional approach concentrating on Olympia and a few major games, and on the archaic and classical periods. Another impediment has been the amateurist paradigm of emergence, golden age and lamentable decline. Instead, she offers a "workable and non-judgmental redefinition" of decline: "the decline of a custom or institution is a loss of interest by the parties involved, observable through a relative decrease of references in the source material and through an inability or unwillingness to adapt to changing historical circumstances." (12)

Focused on gymnastic, non-equestrian contests, the work is organized in two Parts, each with a conclusion. In Part I, "An Overview of Athletics in Late Antiquity," seven chapters comprehensively describe the history of athletics by regions (Greece, Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, Italy, Gaul, and North Africa) from the late third century CE to the end of our evidence under Theodosius II. Remijsen shows that, after flourishing to a height around 250, the basic form of games continued but programs of *agones* changed with new popular events such as pantomimes and a free-style form of wrestling called *pammachon*, from about 300 on. The interconnected circuit of games started declining in the second quarter of the fourth century. Some professional athletes still had international careers, and games still survived in the third quarter of the fourth century, but the games

at Olympia, Ephesus, and Isthmia ended around 410–435. With the collapse of the circuit and the major games, before the mid-fifth century “... athletics had more or less come to an end.” (167) By the second half of the fifth century the last regular meeting of amateur athletes was the Antioch Olympics, which lasted into the early sixth century.

In Part II, “*Agones* in a Changing World,” six thematic chapters explain changing athletic participants and perceptions as athletics declined. First, Remijsen rejects any religiously motivated imperial ban on athletics by Theodosius I or another emperor. The end was not sudden or simple. After original pagan cultic elements had been removed or secularized, athletics and Christianity were compatible. Also, although they preferred circus shows, Late Emperors were not opposed to *agones*. In reacting to petitions, they tended to be supportive of athletics.

Remijsen contrasts two groups of athletes. The upper class career athletic professionals, who competed at *agones*, were organized by the xystic synod at Rome. However, with the fourth-century spread in the east of Roman circuses attached to imperial palaces, another group developed as circus directors arranged expensive Roman-style shows (e.g. horse races, acrobatics, *venationes*). Excluded from *agones*, the new lower class ‘athlete performers’ appeared in troupes, put on demonstrations between races, and joined factions. As local circuits collapsed, traditional athletic professionals were gone by the late fourth century. Although gymnasia were turned into baths and ephobic education had ended by, some wealthy conservative elite amateurs still associated athletics with aristocratic status. Disdaining lowly occupational ‘athlete performers,’ they continued to perform their culture by training and competing in the few remaining major competitions.

Next, Remijsen details how practical organizational and financial problems for *agones* increased in the third century. The circuit of civically supported games was overextended and vulnerable. Hyperinflation undermined funding for contests, and Diocletian’s increased government control of finances hurt civic support for circuit games. Capital cities in each province soaked up resources, and politically ambitious urban elites turned to investing in Roman-style entertainments. Remijsen indicts the wealthy elite “stakeholders” (e.g. career athletes, games organizers, members of the xystic synod), who had the means and traditionally participated in and supported athletics, for their lack of support and their disinclination to adapt adequately to institutional changes as the circuit of games started declining in the fourth century.

A final chapter relates the end of athletics to the increased popularity of multi-dimensional Roman-style shows (*spectacula, thea*). Spectacles shifted emphasis from the performers to the spectators and their satisfaction, and athletic *agones* became just part of spectacles. When games no longer represented traditional perceptions of athletics, they ceased being relevant for society. Characteristic cultural features of Greek athletics (e.g. competitiveness, nudity, vanity) yielded to Christians' admiration for asceticism and humility. By the sixth century athletic performers still offered shows, but traditional athletics were no more.

Remijsen's intended readers are scholars of antiquity who will appreciate her nuanced arguments and bountiful footnotes. Refreshingly well produced, the volume has nine illustrations, six maps, a Bibliography, an Index of Ancient Sources, and a General Index. For anyone seriously interested in ancient sport or Late Antiquity this work will be of lasting value.

DONALD G. KYLE

University of Texas at Arlington, kyle@uta.edu