

## BOOK REVIEW

*Sport and Identity in Ancient Greece*. By ZINON PAKONSTANTINO. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2019. Pp. xii + 221. Hardback. \$140.00. ISBN: 978-1-4724-3822-5.

Zinon Papakonstantinou has produced a relatively straightforward exhibition of how ancient Greeks articulated athletic identities through sport and sport-adjacent arenas. Papakonstantinou demonstrates the ways that people of various classes, though primarily elite men, tried to emphasize their connection to athletic training, competition, victories and promotion of athletic culture in their communities. *Sport and Identity in Ancient Greece* is divided into seven chapters and contains only six figures—frustratingly few for a topic with such strong visual qualities. A useful, combined index of personal names, place names and themes appends the book, though no *index locorum*, which might have been useful for the numerous inscriptions referenced in this monograph.

Chapter 1 is a general introduction that lays out two agenda items. First is a very general survey of modern literature on ancient Greek sport, mostly from the last 25 years. Papakonstantinou notes the important shift in scholarly writing from the “fact-establishing” days of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to the more analytical approaches of the past four decades (1). The author’s approach to the subject is through the application of sociological and anthropological models and theories. This reviewer was gladdened to see even a cursory definition and explanation of what the author meant by “identity,” a concept often left implicit in ancient history and classics literature (2). Second is a somewhat overly-detailed roadmap of the book’s contents, which included many illustrative examples of the larger points from later chapters.

Chapter 2 examines perceptions of Greek sport in the Archaic Period by focusing on elites to the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Elites relied on the “Homeric” model of physical athletic prowess. Papakonstantinou demonstrates that as broader trends toward egalitarianism and the democratization of sport in Greece spread, elites had to adapt their commemorative practices to portray their

athletic victories as “exemplary citizens” of the *polis* community (32). Elites gravitated toward equestrian contests as an exclusive elite domain, and the prosopographical analysis of the Alcmaeonidae, Philaids and Kalliads in Archaic Athens illustrated the ways in which athletic victories were targets of intra-elite competition and negotiation (38-53). Not much that would surprise readers here, but it was useful to learn that not only did elites leverage their hippic victories for their political advantage, but their descendants also capitalized on the inherited tradition of those victories as part of a continuing discourse of elite ideology.

Chapters 3 and 4 share a great deal of overlap in their themes of how athletic rules and regulations shaped and were shaped by cultural identity. In the brief discussion of spectatorship, we learn that spectators were not passive observers but could sometimes influence the outcomes of events or otherwise disturb a festival’s proceedings. A significant portion of these chapters centers on the question of sport as a driver of Hellenicity through analysis of the *hellanodikai* (“Greek judges”) at Olympia. Papakonstantinou concludes that Greek sport was primarily defined by exclusion (see now, however, Remijsen 2019).<sup>1</sup> He also generally assumes that Olympia was the gold-standard of “Panhellenic” Greek athletics and that later imitations (the *isolympic* games common during the Imperial Period) were proof. Yet, the vast majority of festivals, including those on the *periodos*, went through great lengths to assert their local distinctiveness. The organizers of the Panathenaia, for example, would never have tried to imitate Olympia, yet they were just as capable of attracting contestants and spectators from afar. There was also a missed opportunity here to discuss the role of *theoroi* and *theorodokoi* in the spread and maintenance of Greek identity through festival networks.

Chapters 5 and 6 are by far the most significant contributions of the book. Chapter 5 analyzes the discursive nature of the athletic body, particularly in the civic sphere. Papakonstantinou demonstrates convincingly that poets and Athenian authors, as well as a range of civic honorary decrees, could deploy the athletic body either as a symbol of normative or deviant masculinity. The author is clearly most comfortable in his analysis of honorary decrees and monuments, many of which come from Asia Minor during the Hellenistic and Imperial Periods. Through philological examination of adjectives which embodied both athletic prowess and social beneficence, Papakonstantinou demonstrates how elites

<sup>1</sup> Remijsen, Sofie. 2019. “Only Greeks at the Olympics? Reconsidering the Rule against Non-Greeks at ‘Panhellenic’ Games.” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 67: 1-61.

used these epigraphic opportunities to promote their *philoponia*, both as athletes during their youth and as notables in the political sphere.

Chapter 6 engages with the intersections between athletics and the themes of liminality, reflexivity and hybridity. Papakonstantinou deploys what might already be familiar ideas of social subversion (Victor Turner's concept of liminality and Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of the carnivalesque as subversive space) to demonstrate the ways in which ancient Greek festivals (and their concomitant athletic activities and spaces) allowed subaltern groups (women, enslaved peoples) to "challenge, and temporarily transform, normative identities, hierarchies and values" (165). This can be seen in the establishment of doles and foundations for the disbursement of olive oil, access to *gymnasia* and participation in athletic events by subaltern groups. We are unfortunately left to rely on the self-fashioned portrayals of the elites, yet Papakonstantinou concludes that "all the evidence suggests that members of subaltern groups consciously, and perhaps enthusiastically, engaged with the symbols and spaces of normative cultural and civic status habitually open only to male citizens (sports, *gymnasia*, oil), possibly in an attempt to assimilate to the powerful triad of Hellenicity, athleticism and religiosity" (167). While the evidence mustered is not definitive in this regard, it is nevertheless suggestive and a powerful way of recovering subaltern experiences. Papakonstantinou also notes several examples of elite women during the late Hellenistic Period who consciously took on the representational language and symbolism of athletics in their monuments; yet, as he notes, these women also retained their "feminine and domestic virtues" (175). Hybridity is also explored in the reception of Roman sports (gladiator fights and wild animal hunts) by Greeks in the eastern Mediterranean (particularly Asia Minor). Victors in these Roman-style contests, as well as sponsoring benefactors, appropriated the long-present discourse of Greek agonistic commemoration. Traditionally Greek athletic and festival facilities (*gymnasia*, *stadia* etc.) were also adapted to host Roman-style games. A brief epilogue recapitulates the contents of the book. Reading the digital version provided by the press for this review was mired by the use of linked endnotes within each chapter, making quick reference to the bibliography difficult—it would have been useful for works cited in endnotes to be linked to the bibliography.

The question of audience looms large and uncertain in a book like this. The absence of a strict chronological approach will likely mean that it does not find its way into undergraduate syllabi (though perhaps a graduate seminar, if they exist

for Greek sport, might be a useful introduction). It does not appear to be aimed at specialists of ancient Greek sport or identity. Rather, *Sport and Identity in Ancient Greece* is perhaps an *apologia* to the fields of classics/ancient history that research on ancient athletics studies has caught up in terms of its deployment of interdisciplinary approaches. It will be seen whether or not scholars of ancient sports can make new advances in turn.

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