

Fellow Athletes or Fellow Soldiers? συναθλέω in Phil. 1.27 and 4.3

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Abstract: There is no agreement between interpreters as to whether the verb *sunathleō* in Phil. 1.27 and 4.3 presupposes an athletic or a military metaphor. Given that first-century athletes were unlikely to compete as a team, the prefix *syn-* often puzzles those who interpret *sunathleō* as an athletic term, and it is also one of the reasons why others opt for a military background. While the use of the verb alone does not provide any certainty as to the presupposed imagery, in this article I argue that the presence of the prefix *syn-* does not preclude athletics as a plausible option. Even though team sports were not part of official athletic contests, based on epigraphic evidence I suggest that, in spite of fierce competition, there may have existed a sense of fellowship between ancient athletes in the Roman period. In addition, it is likely that it was enhanced by the existence of a 'worldwide' athletic association.

Keywords: Ancient athletics; athletic imagery; epigraphic evidence; Paul; Philippians; *sunathleō*.

Introduction

When reading Paul's letter to the Philippians in a modern translation, few people are likely to associate Phil. 1.27 or 4.3 with athletics. Verbs used to render the Greek word

συναθλέω vary quite significantly. The English renderings of συναθλοῦντες in 1.27 include, among others, the following: ‘striving together’ (KJV, NIV); ‘striving side by side’ (RSV, NRSV); ‘contending side by side’ (LEB); ‘battling, as a team with a single aim’ (NJB); ‘fighting with one accord’ (CJB); ‘fighting together’ (GNV); ‘struggling together’ (NABRE); ‘labouring together in the same conflict’ (DARBY); ‘labouring together’ (DRA); ‘working side by side’ (HCSB); ‘working together’ (JUB). When one turns to commentaries, however, especially those written in English, one often encounters the assertion that Paul’s use of συναθλέω evokes athletic imagery. Some commentators add that the prefix συν- suggests an image of athletes working as a team. Given that first-century athletes were unlikely to compete as a team, this interpretation has rightly been questioned by others. Partly for this reason, there has more recently been considerable support for understanding both συναθλέω and the noun ἀγών in 1.30 as pointing to a military, rather than athletic, metaphor. Ultimately, the use of the verb alone is not sufficient to allow any certainty as to which interpretation was intended by Paul, or how the Philippians were likely to have understood it.

In view of these factors, it is not my intention to contend that there is only one appropriate way to understand the imagery implied in Phil. 1.27 and 4.3. However, I do argue that, contrary to what has at times been asserted, connecting συναθλέω with ancient athletics is plausible, and that the presence of the prefix συν- does not preclude

an athletic metaphor. What is more, there are ways of making this connection other than those usually considered by commentators. While I agree that team sports were not part of official athletic contests, whether in Classical Greece or during the Roman period, I do argue that it is not warranted to claim that there was no sense of fellowship among athletes. I suggest that such a sense of fellowship is best attested in the inscriptions set up by professional associations.

Scholarly Approaches to συναθλέω in the Letter to the Philippians

The circumstantial participle συναθλοῦντες in Phil. 1.27, which qualifies the clause ὅτι στήκετε ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι, ‘that you stand in one Spirit’,¹ is often interpreted in light of Paul’s reference to the ἀγών in v. 30. The growing number of athletic contests of various

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¹ I agree with those commentators who understand ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι in Phil. 1.27 as referring to the Holy Spirit, rather than having more or less the same meaning as μιᾷ ψυχῇ (that is as referring to unified disposition within the community). Among the authors favouring the latter view, see Hawthorne 1983: 56-57; O’Brien 1991: 150; Witherington 2011: 103. Those who support the Holy Spirit interpretation include, among others, Fee 1995: 164-166; Bockmuehl 1997: 99. Fee discusses the issue in some detail, but in my view the decisive argument concerns the Pauline usage: whenever στήκω followed by ἐν occurs in a Pauline letter, ‘the prepositional phrase is invariably locative; that is, it defines a sphere in which one is to stand firm’ (Fee 1995: 165). In Phil. 4.1, as in 1 Thess. 3.8, this ‘sphere’ is the Lord (ἐν κυρίῳ). In 1.27 it is the Holy Spirit, and, as Fee also notes, in the verses which follow, Phil. 2.1-4, the appeal is resumed. Albeit worded differently, the references to the Spirit (cf. κοινωνία πνεύματος in 2.1) and the oneness of the soul (cf. σύμψυχοι in 2.2) are repeated in this context.

rank, coupled with Rome's increased involvement in the flourishing festival culture in the Roman East,² constituted the most spectacular manner (in a literal sense) – and the most present in public perception – of manifesting the agonistic ethos, which characterised different aspects of public life in the first century CE. Epigraphic evidence provides examples of the combination of the verb ἀθλέω and the noun ἀγών in inscriptions honouring famous athletes.³ Nonetheless, the term ἀγών as such could be used in different contexts, not limited to athletic or military spheres, but also, for example, with reference to lawsuits. The use of the term ἀγών does not therefore give us a clear indication as to how to interpret the imagery.

Almost half a century ago Victor Pfitzner, in his monograph entitled *Paul and the Agon Motif*, observed that there was a tendency among German commentators to see in συναθλέω (Phil. 1.27) and ἀγών (1.30) 'little more than a general idea of struggle with the added thought of suffering' (1967: 114). In Pfitzner's view English-speaking commentators, for the most part, found in this passage 'not only a clear athletic image,

² See Newby 2005; cf. van Nijf 2001; 2012.

³ See, for example, a long inscription from Aphrodisias, dated to 161-169 CE, honouring T. Aelius Aurelius Menandros (no. 91 in Roueché 1993; both the text and ET of the inscription are now available online at <http://insaph.kcl.ac.uk/iaph2007/iAph120920.html>; accessed on 9 July 2016). He is said to have been a 'xystarch for life of the contests in Colonia Antiochia (τῶν ἐν κολωνείᾳ Ἀντιοχείᾳ ἀγώνων), who practised as an athlete (ἀθλήσας) with honour and with concern, has reached such honour that, firstly, he has won with good fortune so many contests (ἀγῶ[ν]ας) and has brought honour at each contest (καθ' ἕκαστον ἀγῶνα) to his splendid homeland by proclamations and crowns'.

but also one from the gladiatorial arena' (Pfitzner 1967: 113).⁴ It may be disputed whether this distinction was ever that clear, and, since the publication of Pfitzner's work, two German monographs on Paul's athletic and agonistic imagery have appeared (Poplutz 2004; Brändl 2006), which makes such a distinction even less valid. In the most recent English monograph on athletic imagery in Philippians, Bradley Arnold supports the interpretation of συναθλοῦντες in 1.27 (as well as συνήθλησαν in 4.3) against the background of athletics, and, more specifically, the use of athletic language in ancient moral philosophy, and he is also more reluctant to see a gladiatorial image in this context (2014: 168 n. 35).⁵

In English-speaking contributions prior to Arnold's monograph, however, one may find considerable support for understanding both terms as implying military, rather than athletic, imagery. Edgar Krentz argues that Philippians is 'the Parade Example' of Paul's use of military imagery: 'One can interpret much of Philippians as the pre-battle harangue of a general, who (...) was normally present with the troops' (Krentz 2003: 355; see also Geoffrion 1993). He then goes on to translate Phil. 1.27-30 in a way that

⁴ Incidentally, that scholars could regard gladiatorial contests as perfectly representative of athletics is telling, but also ironic, given the ideological tendency (present both in modern literature and in some ancient sources) to contrast the supposedly noble, ethical, and aesthetically pleasing traditional Greek athletics with the ruthless, violent and bloody Roman games. As I comment below, such a differentiation does not find confirmation in the epigraphic evidence.

⁵ Other contributions during the past ten years which deal with Paul and athletics/agonistic imagery include Sisson 2005; Esler 2005; Harrison 2008a.

indicates ‘the military cast to the language’, by, for example, rendering πίστις in v. 27 as ‘oath’ (‘fighting together for the oath of the gospel’). This way of translating Paul’s text is misleading in that it does not give justice to the ambiguity of the original, suggesting that the imagery evoked by the Greek terms is unequivocal. As for the decision to render πίστις as ‘oath’, there is no reason to suppose, given the frequency of πίστις in the Pauline letters, that its sense departs from Paul’s usage elsewhere. What is more, even if in non-biblical Greek πίστις does sometimes appear alongside the usual Greek word for ‘oath’, ὄρκος,⁶ this suggests that Greek speakers regarded them as having distinct denotations rather than implying that they could be treated as synonyms.

While Krentz overstates his case for military imagery, it is equally wrong to assume that the use of συναθλέω automatically presupposes an athletic metaphor, as is sometimes the case in commentaries, with or without an explicit comment on the meaning of this verb. In a number of commentaries συναθλέω is either glossed over or, confusingly and without any evidence, referred to as supposedly part of standard athletic vocabulary. In the next section I propose to look closer at the use of this verb in the available textual evidence. Even if this will not give us a clear indication as to the

⁶ For examples, see the entry in LSJ (available online at <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=85843&context=lsj&action=hw-list-click>; accessed on 9 July 2016).

most plausible interpretation of the imagery in Phil. 1.27, it will allow us to correct some common misconceptions.

συναθλέω, ἀθλέω and Ancient Athletics

To state, as Bruce (1983: 139) does, that συναθλέω is ‘a forceful athletic term’ is misleading.⁷ This could imply that the verb is frequent and that it has a Classical provenance, but this does not seem to be the case. At least based on the results of a search in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, the term is attested just *once* prior to the letter to the Philippians, that is, in Diodorus Siculus’ *Bibliotheca historica* 3.4.1 (first century BCE).⁸ Here the term is used in a rather unusual metaphorical sense, and can

⁷ See also Silva 1988: 99, who, when commenting on the term ἀγών in v. 30, makes the following remark: ‘Here in Philippians the presence of συναθλέω in 1:27 and the more explicit imagery in 2:16 and 3:13-14 justify seeing an athletic allusion in 1:30’. Silva thus regards it as self-evident that συναθλέω in v. 27 necessarily refers to athletics. Similarly, Hawthorne (1983: 57), while acknowledging that συναθλέω is a ‘rare word’, hastens to add that ‘with it Paul changes the picture from soldiers at battle stations to athletes working as a team’. (On whether the image is likely to have been that of an athletic team, see below.)

⁸ Ordering results by date in TLG is confusing in that it shows yet another occurrence as supposedly even earlier than Diodorus Siculus. The source in question, however, which is often overlooked, is a tenth-century compendium (by Constantine Porphyrogenitus) of remarkable stories about animals, which combines material excerpted from Aristotle by Aristophanes of Byzantium (third/second c. BCE, hence the date found in TLG), mediated by later sources, with that of some later writers, including authors such as Aelian (third century CE) and Timotheus of Gaza (fifth century). For the text, see Lambros 1885: 131. The passage in which συναθλέω occurs appears to have been excerpted from Timotheus, thus belonging to the fifth century. The verb is used in the description of a female deer, who takes her young to the cliffs and other dangerous places, exercises/trains (γυμνάζει) them to run/for a race, sharing (κοινωνεῖ) with them sweat, and as they toil (πονουμένοις), she also συναθλεῖ beside each of them. Even though it is late, this passage is noteworthy in that here the notion of strenuous physical exercise and athletic imagery are implied, albeit in relation to an animal. We could almost envisage this deer as a teacher in a gymnasium, yet a teacher who not only makes sure that the ephebes prepare well for their civic responsibilities by sufficient exercise, but also participates in their toil.

thus scarcely be classified as standard athletic vocabulary. While explaining Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, Diodorus notes that it does not express the intended concept by means of syllables joined to one another, but, in C.H. Oldfather's translation, 'by means of the significance of the objects which have been copied and by its figurative meaning which has been impressed upon memory by practice (μεταφορᾶς μνήμη συνηθλημένης)'.⁹ It is thus the *exercise* of memory that συναθλέω denotes in this context.¹⁰ That the verb is likely to evoke athletic imagery is confirmed later in the same section (3.4.4), which refers to the training of the souls 'through exercising for a long period and by memory/memorisation' (μελέτη πολυχρονίω καὶ μνήμη γυμνάζοντες τὰς ψυχάς).

In view of the limited attestation of συναθλέω prior to the New Testament writings, it is noteworthy that Paul employs this verb twice, in both cases in metaphors, and within the same letter, with reference to members of the Philippian community. In Phil. 4.3 Paul refers to Euodia and Syntyche as αἴτινες ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ συνήθλησάν μοι. As in the case of 1.27, the imagery is ambiguous, and the range of interpretive options is similar. Military imagery ('fighting together') cannot be excluded.¹¹ Yet, given the

⁹ Both the Greek text and ET are taken from the LCL edition.

¹⁰ BDAG: 964, and some commentators, possibly following the BDAG entry, suggest that the meaning of συναθλέω in the Diodorus passage is 'to help'. It is not clear to me, however, what is the basis for such an understanding of the verb in this context. Cf. also the French translation by Bibiane Bommelaer: 'une transposition imprimée dans la mémoire par un long exercice' (1989); the Italian by Aldo Corcella: 'metafore tratte da questi, che con la pratica vengono impresse nella memoria' (1988); the Spanish by Francisco Parreu Alasà: 'la metáfora practicada de memoria' (2001).

¹¹ Cf. Portefaix 1988: 141: 'fellow-combatants'.

connotation of toil attached to ἀθλέω since its earliest attestation (see below), and in view of the absence of references to opponents/enemies in the immediate context, I suggest that the imagery of strenuous physical exercise is more plausible in this context. Such an exercise would take place in the regular athletic training of ephebes (in which case it would be combined with military training), or that of professional athletes. We may note that in all of these cases the metaphor would have a countercultural ring. Only men fought in the Roman army; similarly, ephebic training was, as a rule, reserved for elite male adolescents, although we know of Spartan women who received extensive physical training as well.¹² As for athletic contests, in addition to evidence for contests aimed specifically at women, there are also indications that sometimes women participated in the most prestigious games, including some of the Panhellenic festivals, such as the Isthmian and Nemean Games.¹³ This notwithstanding, students of ancient

¹² Miller (2004a: 154) quotes Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lakedaimonians* 1.4 and Plutarch, *Lykourgos* 14.2-4.

¹³ The most remarkable piece of evidence is the dedication by Hermasianax at Delphi, dated to ca. 45 CE. In this inscription (SIG³ 802 = no. 63 in Moretti 1953), a father from Tralles mentions his three daughters, Tryphosa, Hedeia and Dionysia, and their impressive athletic achievements, including victories at Pythian, Isthmian and Nemean Games. For the English translation of this and other ancient sources concerning women and athletics, see Miller 2004b, nos. 149-62. For a general introduction to women and ancient Greek athletics, see Miller 2004a: 150-59; for the Roman period more specifically, see Mantas 1995. To some extent analogous questions may be asked concerning the extent to which slaves may have participated in Greek athletics. They may have been excluded from ephebeia and from exercising in the majority of gymnasia (although as opposed to women, they were found there as attendants), but as Crowther (1992: 39), notes, there is evidence that during the Imperial period they were admitted to some of the gymnasia. Even more importantly, while slaves were not allowed to compete in the Panhellenic games, they were allowed to take part in some of the local contests (cf. Crowther 1992: 36-37).

athletics have noted how strongly the ideology of athletics is linked with the ideal of masculinity. While the latter is more readily acknowledged with respect to the Classical and Hellenistic periods, van Nijf (2003) has demonstrated the immense significance of athletics for the construction of masculinity as attested in the sources from the early Imperial period.

The compound form *συναθλέω* is therefore rare in the extant Greek sources. The simple verb *ἀθλέω* is more frequent, and it does appear also in Classical Greek in explicitly athletic contexts, even though it is not limited to it. The term occurs even before the Classical period. It is already found twice in the *Iliad* (7.453 and 15.30), although here it is best translated as ‘to toil, labour’ rather than ‘to contend’ (*pace* LSJ).

Inscriptions provide numerous examples of the use of cognate terms in reference to athletics. Based on my search of the Packard Humanities Institute database (<http://epigraphy.packhum.org/inscriptions>), the root *αθλ-* appears over 800 times in the Greek inscriptions. Although the majority of these are substantives, including *ἄθλον*, *ἀθλητής*, *ἄθλησις*, *πένταθλον*, *ἄθλημα* and others, the verb *ἀθλέω* (or *ἀεθλέω*) is also used. Among these examples there is a funerary epigram for gladiator Euchrous from Amphipolis (SEG 55:672¹⁴), a wealthy city in Macedonia, halfway between Philippi and Thessalonica. We note that in this case a *gladiator* is honoured, but during the first

¹⁴ = no. 100 in Carter 1999; cf. nos. 104 & 189.

century the use of traditional athletic vocabulary in reference to gladiators is well attested (see also my further comments in the next section).

In the New Testament the simple verb ἀθλέω is found only once, in one of its well-known athletic images: ἐὰν δὲ καὶ ἀθλῆ τις, οὐ στεφανοῦται ἐὰν μὴ νομίμως ἀθλήσῃ (2 Tim. 2.5). In the NRSV the verse is rendered as follows: 'And in the case of an athlete, no one is crowned without competing according to the rules'. The imagery is clearly that of an athletic contest.

In brief, the verb ἀθλέω and its cognates, both prior to and during the New Testament period, occurred frequently in athletic contexts, although their use was not limited to such settings. Given the frequency with which ἀθλ- terms appear during the Imperial period in inscriptions honouring athletes, it is likely that first-century inhabitants of the Roman East associated those terms with athletics. At the same time, we must not assume that this is the only connection that first-century readers would make.

To return to the compound form, in the New Testament the use of συναθλέω is limited to the letter to the Philippians, and in the Greek literary sources which postdate Philippians, the verb is used almost exclusively by Christian authors. Even if Phil. 1.27 or 4.2 are only occasionally quoted, the usage often appears to be inspired by the Pauline vocabulary. In Ignatius's *Letter to Polycarp*, the imperative form of συναθλείτε is one of

the six compound verbs with *συν-* which Ignatius uses in his appeal to the Smyrneans for unity in obedience to the bishop, Polycarp. *συναθλείτε* is followed by *συντρέχετε*, ‘run together’, making it more likely that the verbs are intended to evoke athletic imagery.¹⁵ Whether Ignatius knew Paul’s letter to the Philippians or not,¹⁶ it is noteworthy that the six verbs, both thematically and in being prefixed by *συν-*, echo their use in Paul’s letter. The verb *συναθλέω* occurs also in the *Martyrdom of Ignatius*, a text whose dating has been a matter of considerable debate. Other than that, we find it recurring only several centuries later, in various fourth- and fifth-century patristic writings. Interestingly, John Chrysostom, when commenting on Phil. 1.27, seems to understand *συναθλοῦντες* in the sense of ‘wrestling’ (*παλαίω*).¹⁷

The imagery presupposed in Phil. 1.27 cannot be determined with any certainty, based on the use of the verb *συναθλέω* alone, but there are indications that ancient Christian interpreters were more likely to understand the metaphor against the backdrop of athletics. With regard to the Pauline usage, as noted by Arnold, the verb

¹⁵ The other verbs are: *συγκοπιᾶτε ἀλλήλους*, *συμπάσχετε*, *συγκοιμᾶσθε*, *συνεγείρεσθε*. Schoedel is right that *ἀθλέω* ‘covers a wide range of physical exertions’ (1985: 275) but in view of Ignatius’ earlier exhortation to Polycarp to ‘bear the illness of all as a perfect athlete’ (1.3: *πάντων τὰς νόσους βάσταζε ὡς τέλειος ἀθλητής*), and to ‘be sober as God’s athlete’ (2.3: *νήφε ὡς θεοῦ ἀθλητής*), it is legitimate to see in *συναθλείτε* more than a general image of physical exertion.

¹⁶ See Foster 2007: 172, who concludes: ‘The four epistles for which a strong case for Ignatius’ usage can be supported are, in declining order of likelihood, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy’. Cf. Lindemann 2007.

¹⁷ *μη γὰρ πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἐπάλαιον*; *In epistolam ad Philippenses homiliae, Hom. 4* (PG 62.208).

that Paul employs elsewhere to convey military imagery is *στρατεύω* and its cognates, not *ἀθλέω* (2014: 167).¹⁸ Furthermore, while Paul later in the letter (Phil. 2.25) calls Epaphroditus his ‘fellow soldier’ (*συστρατιώτης*) a more extended athletic metaphor occurs in 3.12-16, where Paul depicts his own striving in athletic terms, in particular using the imagery of a runner.

Athletics and the Local Context

While it is highly unlikely that any of Paul’s addressees were professional athletes, and only few, if any, may have had ephebic training as adolescents,¹⁹ festival culture was an

¹⁸ See Rom. 7.23; 1 Cor. 9.7; 2 Cor. 10.3-4; Phil. 2.25; Phlm. 1.2.

¹⁹ This is obviously part of a broader debate concerning the social composition of early Christian communities. I would certainly not go as far as to argue that the gymnasium was the primary venue for education of a significant number of Christians, as Dutch (2005) asserts concerning education of some of the Corinthian Christians. This does not mean, however, that familiarity with evidence regarding the training of young men of the higher strata of society cannot help us to gain a better understanding of certain aspects of Paul’s letters. See, for example, Harrison 2008b, who discusses evidence concerning the pastoral role ascribed to gymnasiarchs as compared with that of Paul’s pastoral leadership role. One of the problems in deciding how likely it is that members of Pauline communities had a gymnasium education is related to the fact that evidence concerning those who were likely to have been educated there is fragmentary and ambiguous. There is a well-known inscription from Beroea (SEG 27.261), a city which Paul, according to Acts 17.10-14, visited after having left Thessalonica. For the English translation of the inscription, see Miller 2004b, no. 185. The inscription, dated to the Hellenistic period (first half of the second century BCE), contains the most elaborate set of laws and rules known from antiquity, detailing the operation of the city’s gymnasium. It lists those who were not allowed to attend the gymnasium, including slaves, freedmen, their children, and those practising a ‘vulgar (?) craft’ (or: ‘exercising a craft in a market place?’), *ἀγοραία τέχνη*. It is not clear what exactly *ἀγοραία τέχνη* denotes, but it is possible that Paul and some of his co-workers, such as Prisca and Aquila, who were also *σκηνοποιοὶ τῆς τέχνης* (Acts 18.3), would be regarded as practicing an *ἀγοραία* trade. Whether rules such as those from the Beroea inscription were also in force elsewhere, and what is more, whether they would have persisted until the Roman period, is far from obvious. It is telling, at the same time, that noncitizens are not explicitly excluded from attending the gymnasium. There is evidence that outsiders could gain citizenship by

integral part of civic life in the Roman East. Rome's involvement led to the organisation of events aping the well-established Greek festivals also in the Western part of the Empire, mainly, albeit not exclusively, in Rome.²⁰ The most prominent of the festivals in the Roman West was, rather unsurprisingly, given the city's strong Greek identity, the *Sebasta* festival in Naples.

This 'agonistic explosion'²¹ of the Imperial period is attested in various parts of the Roman Empire. Epigraphic evidence is especially prolific for Asia Minor, including cities such as Ephesus. While there is no consensus as to where Paul wrote Philippians, Ephesus is one of the possible candidates.²² Even if Paul did not write Philippians in Ephesus, he spent a significant amount of time in that city during the course of his missionary career. Yet another city very well known to Paul was Corinth. There, too, he must have experienced some of the agonistic fever associated not only – and most

participating in *ephebeia*, suggesting that while on the one hand gymnasium education played a part in excluding certain categories of inhabitants from the civic community, it could simultaneously act as a means of opening access to it for certain individuals. See König 2005: 60.

²⁰ On Greek athletics in the Roman West, see especially Part I of Newby 2005.

²¹ Cf. van Nijf 2012: 47, who in turn had borrowed the expression 'agonistic explosion' from Louis Robert.

²² Traditionally Rome was regarded as the place of this letter's origin, and there are still a number of commentators during the last few decades who hold this view, including Silva, O'Brien, Fee, Bockmuehl, Witherington. Since the 18th century several alternative locations have been proposed, with Caesarea and, more recently, Ephesus, gaining substantial support among commentators. For a helpful overview of the arguments for and against Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, and Caesarea, respectively, as well as the main proponents of the specific places where Philippians may have been written, see Hawthorne & Martin (2004: xl-l). Note that whereas an Ephesian provenance is espoused in the edition of this commentary revised by Martin, Hawthorne's original edition (1983) was based on the assumption that Philippians was written in Caesarea.

famously - with the Isthmian games. Paul's prolonged stays in cities such as Ephesus and Corinth meant that he was certainly exposed to athletic festivals. Even if he himself did not receive Hellenistic education, a gymnasium would have also been familiar to him from Tarsus, if this indeed is where he was born.²³

Paul's familiarity with athletics, whether he approved of them or not, can be quite reasonably taken for granted.²⁴ What about the Philippians? Some scholars' preference for military imagery in interpreting 1.27-30 is due not only to arguments based on the text,²⁵ but also the alleged setup of the Philippian Christian community.

²³ Cf. Strabo, *Geography* 14.5.12: 'As for Tarsus, it lies on a plain, founded by Argives wandering in search of Io. The Cyndus River flows through the middle, past the gymnasium of the young men' ('Η δὲ Ταρσὸς κείται μὲν ἐν πεδίῳ κτίσμα δ' ἐστὶ τῶν μετὰ Τριπτολέμου πλανηθέντων Ἀργείων κατὰ ζήτησιν Ἰοῦς· διαρρεῖ δ' αὐτὴν μέσσην ὁ Κύδνος παρ' αὐτὸ τὸ γυμνάσιον τῶν νέων).

²⁴ With regard to Paul's familiarity with the use of athletic imagery in ancient moral philosophical discourse, it can be reasonably assumed that he was acquainted with its use in a popular form, thus without the necessity to presuppose his familiarity with specific philosophical writings. The same, as Arnold argues (2014: 64-69), was likely to have been the case for his addressees, in spite of their low socio-economic profile.

²⁵ It is beyond the scope of this article to engage in a detailed discussion of the various arguments which have been put forward in this context, so I limit myself to just one allegedly linguistic argument. According to Poplutz, 'Mit τῶν ἀντικειμένων sind immer die feindlichen Gegner bezeichnet – an keiner Stelle die Gegner in einem athletischen Agon!' (2004: 301). It is not clear which corpora of Greek writings to which she makes reference in this context (in a footnote she provides a number of LXX and some NT references), but a quick TLG search shows that her statement is not correct, at least if one takes into account early Christian usage. In *The Letter of the Churches of Vienna and Lugdunum to the Churches of Asia and Phrygia* athletic imagery recurs several times. This includes Blandina being described as 'clothed with the great and invincible athlete, Christ (μέγαν καὶ ἀκαταγώνιστον ἀθλητὴν Χριστὸν ἐνδεδυμένη)'. She is then said to have on many occasions 'overpowered the adversary (ἐκβίασασα τὸν ἀντικείμενον), and in the course of the contest (δι' ἀγῶνος) had woven for herself the crown of incorruption' (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.42). Similarly, in the *Martyrdom of Saints Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice* 35, Papyrus is compared to a 'noble athlete' (γενναῖος ἀθλητής) who 'received the anger of the adversary (τοῦ ἀντικειμένου)'. This text is also quoted by Arnold (2014: 169), although he erroneously refers to the martyr in question as Carpus. Even though both of these martyr accounts are later than Philippians, and it is possible that they allude to Paul's athletic metaphors, this shows that at least Greek speakers in the Roman period did not regard it as unnatural to

When Philippi was re-established as a Roman colony after the battle of Philippi in 42 BCE, veterans of the Roman army settled there. As a result, so the argument goes, Paul's recourse to a military metaphor is more plausible, because such imagery would have been close to the experience of his original readers. Paying attention to the specific situation of individual communities is obviously commendable. Even though exegetes have for a long time recognised that Paul's writings must not be read as theological treatises but as occasional letters, the materiality of the places to which they were sent has only recently been more seriously taken into account. However, in the case of Philippi, as noted by Oakes (2001), it is a fallacy to assume that military men must have constituted the majority of the Christian community. The colony was founded almost a century before Paul arrived in the city, and by that time none of the veterans to whom the land in Philippi had originally been allocated would have still been alive. Even though some veterans later chose to settle in Philippi, we must not exaggerate their numbers. As Oakes observes, 'By the middle of the first century, Philippi was far from any potential area of conflict and hence not of substantial military importance' (2001: 51). Veterans or their descendants may have been represented in a high proportion among the

refer to the opponents in an athletic context with the participial form of *ἀντίκειμαι*. If any of these were indeed an allusion to Paul's athletic imagery, then this would only reinforce my earlier point, namely that early Christian interpreters were likely to understand Phil. 1.27 against the background of ancient athletics.

authorities, even though they did not constitute the majority of the city's population.²⁶ However, the likelihood that veterans constituted a significant portion of the letter's hearers is almost non-existent.

Given the role of the army in the Roman empire, military imagery raises interesting questions concerning the relationship between the rights, duties, and loyalties of a soldier and a good citizen. Yet another issue that could be further discussed in this context is the complex relationship between athletics and the military (see Crowther 1999). On the one hand, their semantic domains often overlap, and the analogies between the two are emphasised.²⁷ The gymnasium in Greek antiquity was a place where young men were prepared for the duties of a citizen, and this included military service, so that athletic training could not be very strictly separated from

²⁶ Cf. Oakes 2001: 52-53: 'Unlike the original veteran settlement quite a high proportion of the veterans who settled later, individually, are likely to have attained decurial status'.

²⁷ Worth mentioning in this context is the phenomenon of ancient Greek athletic competitions in which contestants wore armour and/or which reflected manoeuvres from battlefield. See Reed (1998), who refers to these competitions as 'war games'. They included the Hoplitodromos (race in full armour), the Pyrric dance (with participants wearing helmets, carrying shields and either spears or swords), the Euandria (contest involving the manipulation of two shields), the Hoplomachia (duel between heavily armed hoplites), and the Aphobates (competition requiring the contestant wearing armour to dismount and remount a moving chariot). The traditional view has been that these 'war games' used to be so popular in antiquity mainly because the onlookers would have consisted primarily of citizens/soldiers, who would have found the manoeuvres familiar based on their own training. As Reed observes, however, most of these manoeuvres and tactics would have been abandoned by the Classical period. Furthermore, one of the important differences between these games and actual military conflict was that in 'war games' individual achievement, not teamwork, was highlighted.

military training.²⁸ On the other hand, some of the sources present the two as incompatible with each other. Especially interesting in this regard is the propaganda vision of Roman peace in which wars ceased, and innumerable games reigned.²⁹

While *Pax Romana* surely did not benefit all the subjects of the Empire, during the middle of the first century relatively few of them were likely to experience war. By contrast, athletic training and athletic contests of various kinds, especially in the Roman East, would have been familiar even to those who themselves did not, due to their social status, receive such training themselves. As a Roman colony the situation in Philippi may have differed from places such as Ephesus, which retained the structure and institutions of a Greek *polis*. However, even if during the first century the official character of Philippi appears to be Roman, while athletics were traditionally associated with the Greek lifestyle, the relationship between Greek identity and athletics was far more complex

²⁸ Note the prominence of military training in the aforementioned gymnasiarchal law of Beroea (cf. n. 19). On the other hand, the value of athletic training as preparation for war is something that Greeks themselves had already debated, and echoes of these debates recur in the literature of the Imperial period. See König 2005: 57. Cf. Spawforth 2012: 132.

²⁹ Note for example Aelius Aristides, *Roman Oration* 99: πόλεις τε οὖν δὴ που λάμπουσιν αἴγλη καὶ χάριτι καὶ ἡ γῆ πᾶσα οἷον παράδεισος ἐγκεκόσμηται. καπνοὶ δ' ἐκ πεδίων καὶ φρυκτοὶ φίλιοι καὶ πολέμιοι, οἷον πνεύματος ἐκρπίσαντος, φροῦδοι γῆς ἐπέκεινα καὶ θαλάττης· ἀντεισῆκται δὲ θεᾶς πᾶσα χάρις καὶ ἀγώνων ἄπειρος ἀριθμὸς. ('Cities gleam with radiance and charm, and the whole earth has been beautified like a garden. Smoke rising from plains and fire signals for friend and foe have disappeared, as if a breath had blown them away, beyond land and sea. Every charming spectacle and an infinite number of festal games have been introduced instead'.) Cf. the advice addressed to an orator who is to deliver a speech in praise of festivals, found in a work ascribed to Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ars Rhetorica* 1.7), in which the emperor is referred to as 'the real agonothete', as the one in charge of peace, which enables the organisation of contests: 'Ὁ δὲ σοι τοῦ παντὸς λόγου οἰονεὶ κολοφῶν ἐπήχθω τοῦ βασιλέως ἔπαινος, καὶ ὅτι τῶ ὄντι ἀγωνοθέτης πάντων ἀγώνων ὁ τὴν εἰρήνην πρυτανεύων, δι' ἣν καὶ τοὺς ἀγῶνας ἐπιτελεῖν οἷόν τε.

than that by the middle of the first century. As attested in the Western part of the Empire, some Romans had by then adopted some aspects of athletics and the festival culture (see esp. Newby 2005). Even more so in the East, athletic training and contests were favourably looked upon by the Romans, in spite of the Roman moralists' disapproval of Greek athletics.³⁰ Obviously neither Philippi nor any other place in Macedonia could ever be as famous for athletic contests as the hosts of the four prestigious Panhellenic games - Olympia, Pythia, Nemea and Isthmia - all of which were situated in Achaia.³¹ This region's privileged position in the agonistic world continued in the Roman period (Spawforth 1989), although, especially during the second century CE, some of the cities in Asia gained a strong position in this respect as well.

The significance of athletics in ancient Macedonia and also Macedonian participation in the major athletic contests are well attested, even though not self-evident at the outset.³² Prior to the Roman period we know mostly about the victories reported for kings at the Olympics, including the horse chariot of Philip II in the year 356 BCE (ol. 106).³³ It is worth noting that Philip's (first) victory is documented on coins,

³⁰ Newby (2005: 40) mentions in this context Cicero, *Tusc.* 4.70 and Pliny, *Ep.* 4.22.3, 7.

³¹ An interesting epitaph from Beroea, quoted by Papazoglou (1988: 203), commemorates a baker who visited Olympia twelve times to watch the Olympic Games. This shows that, in spite of the substantial distance, it was not unthinkable to travel regularly from Macedonia to the Peloponnese to attend the games.

³² For a helpful overview, see Adams 2008.

³³ According to Plutarch (*Alex.* 3.5), the victory of Philip's horses at the Olympics was the second piece of good news which reached Philip after he had taken Potidaea; the third was the birth of his son Alexander.

further underscoring the significance of this victory, and ascertaining his Greek identity. The tradition of the link between the Macedonian kings and the Olympic Games goes back even earlier, to the Classical period. Alexander I Philhellenos (first half of the fifth century BCE) seems to have been the first Macedonian monarch to compete at Olympia, after having proved that he was an Argive. The latter was needed to overcome the objections of other participants, 'saying that the contest should be for Greeks and not for barbarian competitors', *φάμενοι οὐ βαρβάρων ἀγωνιστέων εἶναι τὸν ἀγῶνα ἀλλὰ Ἑλλήνων*.³⁴ There is no athletic tradition associated with Alexander's son, Perdiccas II. His son Archelaus, in turn, is reported to have had his chariot teams win at the Olympic and Pythian Games. What is more, according to Arrian, he also founded an athletic contest based on the Olympic programme at Aigai in Macedonia.³⁵

It is to the kings that the right to participate in the Olympics was first granted. This did not immediately broaden the notion of Greekness, for, as the story recorded in Herodotus suggests, Macedonian monarchs were originally allowed to participate in the Olympic Games not as Macedonians but as members of the Argive house. Initially Macedonians not belonging to the royal family were not yet allowed to take part. The

³⁴ As reported by Herodotus, *Hist.* 5.22. Adams (2008: 58) rightly notes that irrespective of whether the story is true or not, its point is that 'Alexander I used it to identify his Greek ethnicity, and did so in the context of sport'. See Adams (2008: 58) for other sources where Alexander's connection with the Olympics is attested.

³⁵ See Arrian, *Anab.* 1.11.1.

inclusion of other Macedonians must have happened in the course of the fourth century BCE, as in the year 328 BCE (ol. 113) the victory of a certain Kriton of Macedonia is recorded (*stadion*).³⁶

The lists of Olympic victors which Luigi Moretti has attempted to reconstruct (1957; 1970; 1987; 1992; see, more recently, Christesen 2007), while fragmentary, do nonetheless give us an idea as to the geographical areas represented in Olympia. Several 'Macedonians' are listed without specifying the city, but Pausanias records a victory of Lampos of Philippi which took place in 304 BCE.³⁷ During the Roman period, at least based on available evidence, we do not come across any Philippians among Olympic victors.³⁸ This, however, cannot be conclusive, given the fragmentary nature of the evidence. Besides, Philippians could have been more successful in other contests, especially some of the local festivals, for which there are even fewer records.

There is no clear first-century evidence for athletic training or athletic games organized in Philippi itself. Maps of the site refer to one of the buildings as *palaestra*, yet its dating is uncertain.³⁹ Epigraphic evidence for athletic training and festivals in

³⁶ See *POxy* 1.12; according to Eusebius, *Chron.*, this person's name is Kliton.

³⁷ See Pausanias, *Descr.* 6.4.10.

³⁸ Incidentally, there are a number of winners from Ephesus, where Paul spent a significant amount of time and where, as mentioned above, he may have even written Philippians. For an interesting discussion of the changing catchment areas of Olympic victors during the different periods, see Farrington 1997.

³⁹ Lemerle (1937: 100), who first suggested this identification, dated the building to the period after the death of Antoninus Pius (161) but before 175. Lemerle's tentative identification has more recently been confirmed in a large scale geophysical survey; see Boyd and Provost (2001: 507-509), who consider it

Roman Philippi is also much later than the first century. If Philippi were a typical Greek *polis*, the existence of a gymnasium, a quintessential aspect of the Hellenic way of life, could have been taken for granted. Comparing it with other Roman colonies in the East is of limited help, given the distinct situation of each of those colonies.⁴⁰ Corinth's location next to Isthmia and the tradition of its involvement in the organisation of the Isthmian games led to the situation that the highest-ranking municipal service in Roman Corinth was that of the agonothete of the Isthmian games, thus demonstrating the enduring prominence of this festival in that Roman colony. For Philippi this was not the case.⁴¹ Yet if we may assume at least some level of continuity between Hellenic Philippi and the Roman colony, it is possible that there was a gymnasium there also during the first century.

While the significance of athletic contests continued in the first few centuries of the CE, and a lack of continuity between Hellenistic Philippi and the Roman colony is rather unlikely, we need to bear in mind that athletics in the first-century Imperial

plausible that the baths and the *palaestra* were erected together, some time in the second half of the second century, although they do not exclude the existence of the *palaestra* prior to the construction of the baths.

⁴⁰ As Levick (1967: 74, 83) notes, the office of the gymnasiarch is attested (in Latin!) in Pisidian Antioch. On Pisidian Antioch, see also Mithell and Waelkens 1998.

⁴¹ But note a third-century inscription, set up by the association of the worshippers of Sarapis, honouring a certain Quintus Flavius Hermadio, the ἀγωνοθέτης of great Asklepeia, and a son of the gymnasiarch and archpriest (Pilhofer 311/G411): Κο(ιντον) · Φλάβιον Ἐρμαδίωνα υἱὸν Κο(ιντου) Φλαβίου Ἐρμαδίωνος τοῦ κρα(τίστου) γυμνασιάρχου κα<ι> ἀρχιερέως οἱ θρησκευτὲ τὸν ἴδιον ἀγωνοθέτην τῶν μεγάλων Ἀσκληπειῶν. For a helpful commentary and further bibliography, see Brélaz 2014: 170-172.

context did not necessarily evoke the same associations as it did a few centuries earlier. Scholars often exclude gladiatorial shows from discussion of ancient athletics, even though they have been proposed as a possible background of Phil. 1.27.⁴² We can at least state quite confidently that, based purely on linguistic grounds, this is not implausible. As Louis Robert, in his seminal work on gladiators in the Greek East, has demonstrated, and as has been confirmed more recently by Michael Carter in his doctoral thesis, in the Roman period the vocabulary in the earlier periods typically associated with athletic competitions was also applied to gladiatorial contests (Robert 1940; Carter 1999).⁴³ Robert has also showed how the traditional distinction between supposedly Greek athletic games, as opposed to Roman bloody sports, such as gladiatorial shows or *venationes* (animal hunts), was contradicted by the evidence. Interestingly, in Corinth, where the majority of official inscriptions are in Latin, all those associated with the Isthmian games are in Greek, seemingly confirming the stereotype.

⁴² Cf. Lightfoot 1913: 106, who, in commenting on *στήκετε*, states: 'Here the metaphor seems to be drawn rather from the combats of the Roman amphitheatre. Like criminals or captives, the believers are condemned to fight for their lives'. Later on, when commenting on *ἀγῶνα* in v. 30, he remarks: "'a gladiatorial or athletic contest", as 1 Tim vi. 12, 2 Tim iv. 7; compare *συναθλοῦντες* ver. 27'. Interestingly, Bockmuehl who observes concerning *συναθλοῦντες* in 1.27, 'The vocabulary here suggests the joint exertion of athletes or soldiers working as a team; both metaphors would be very familiar at Philippi', concerning *συνήθλησαν* in 4.3, notes the following: 'sunathleō, a gladiatorial term continuing the athletic imagery if 1.27; 3.12-14' (1997: 99).

⁴³ Robert notes that those who played down the increasing importance of gladiatorial shows in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire, and who asserted that Greeks expressed mostly distaste at these bloody shows, were sometimes misguided by the vocabulary employed in the inscriptions. See also Chapter 3 ('Greek Games and Gladiators') in Golden 2009. On the presentation of gladiators in terms traditionally associated with Greek athletes, see also the recent work by Mann 2011.

One could then expect that epigraphic evidence for gladiatorial contests would be in Latin; this, however, rarely turns out to be the case, whether in Corinth or elsewhere. Concerning the popularity of gladiators and *venationes*, it is well known that during the Roman period the theatre at Philippi was altered to make it more convenient to accommodate animal fights.⁴⁴ Eventually, as a result of these alterations, it was no longer possible to include spectacles other than gladiatorial shows and *venationes*. This final transformation is only dated to the third century, but gladiatorial shows and animal fights are also likely to have taken place in Philippi prior to that period, as inscriptions honouring *munerarii*, spanning from the first to the third centuries, suggest.⁴⁵

To sum up, then, the connection between ancient Macedonia and athletics is well attested, even though specific evidence for first-century Philippi is lacking. It is nonetheless clear that it is not warranted to privilege military imagery as the alleged background to Phil. 1.27, taking into account both the usage and the popularity of athletics in the East during the Imperial period. We do need to keep in mind, however, that athletic terminology at that time could also be applied to gladiatorial contests.

⁴⁴ On the transformations that the theatre in Philippi underwent, see Collart 1937: 371-88.

⁴⁵ The *munerarii* inscriptions in Philippi include: Pilhofer 252/L467 (2nd-3rd c. CE); 253/L447 (1st c. CE); 395/L780 (2nd c. CE). *Munerarii* from Philippi are also attested in inscriptions from other Macedonian sites; cf. Pilhofer 493/L113 (Drama). Finally, note the inscription from Raktcha (Pil 087/L265), commemorating a rich donor who sponsored both gladiators' fights and *venationes*. The distinction between gladiators and *venatores* is often blurred. Cf. SEG 3:499 (= Pilhofer 142/G562), which Kloppenborg and Ascough (2011: 330-32) interpret as referring to an association of gladiators, or 'gladiator friends', who participated in the *venationes*.

Fellow athletes – but in what sense?

Accepting that Phil. 1.27 (and 4.3?) can be interpreted against the backdrop of ancient athletics, one still needs to account for the prefix *συν-* in *συναθλέω*. Arnold draws attention to ‘the emphasis in this letter on the Philippians being as one person ... reflected in the expression *μὲν ἓ ψυχῆ*’ (2014: 167). While he does not state this explicitly, it seems that this emphasis could also explain the use of the prefix. I agree with Arnold concerning the ethical emphasis in Paul’s exhortation.⁴⁶ He is also right that the association between civic and athletic imagery familiar to us from the writings of moral philosophers⁴⁷ may be yet another argument for an athletic background to *συναθλοῦντες* in 1.27 (cf. *πολιτεύεσθε* at the beginning of the verse). Yet I would like to suggest that more could be said about the imagery evoked by *συναθλοῦντες* in 1.27 and *συνήθλησαν* in 4:3.

From a modern perspective it is tempting to think that the compound form *συναθλέω* in an athletic context is likely to refer to team effort. As one commentator puts it, the picture is that of ‘athletes working as a team, side by side, playing the game not

⁴⁶ Cf. the following comment by Arnold: ‘The force of the entire clause ... is for them to join together as one person in struggling, as athletes engaged in a difficult context, to live a certain kind of life shaped by the gospel’ (2014: 168).

⁴⁷ While Arnold’s focus is on moral philosophers, in this context it is equally important to bear in mind the entanglement of athletics and politics, so well attested in epigraphic sources of the early Imperial period. On the interplay between athletes, or the festival culture more generally, and both local and state politics in the Roman period, see van Nijf 2001; 2007; 2012.

as several individuals, but together as one person with one mind' (Hawthorne 1983: 57).⁴⁸ This way of interpreting the text is rather anachronistic, as it is based on images familiar from modern Olympic Games and other contemporary athletic contests. The situation was quite different in antiquity. Even though team sports were not unknown to ancient Greeks, they were not sufficiently prestigious to have their audiences, if any, documented (cf. Crowther 1995). They are not attested as being part of any of the numerous athletic contests, whether Panhellenic or local.

While team sports may not have been particularly prestigious or widespread, this is not to say that no bonds of unity ever developed in the context of athletics. To begin with athletic training, we do not necessarily need to limit ourselves to professional athletes. Bonds of lifelong friendship were likely to have developed in the context of the athletic training of ephebes, as suggested by references to *συνέφηβοι* long after ephebic training had been completed.⁴⁹ Even in a professional athletic context, in spite of the absence of team competitions, solidarity and some sense of unity between athletes are attested. We encounter it especially in the context of professional associations. Notably, while the compound verb *συναθλέω* is attested, albeit infrequently, in literary material,

⁴⁸ Even more confusingly, Bonnie B. Thurston states: "‘Struggling together’ represents a Greek compound verb used only here and at 4:3, where Paul urges Euodia and Syntyche to work together. Its root word is ‘athletics’ and connotes team spirit. In Hellenistic Greek it was used of athletics, but in classical Greek in contexts of war or battle' (2005: 69).

⁴⁹ Cf. Chariton's *Callirhoe* 8.6: *συνέφηβοι και συγγυμνασταί* ('fellow ephebes and friends from the gymnasium?'), who wish to greet Chaireas upon his return.

epigraphic evidence shows that in the Greek of the first two centuries CE a compound noun *συναθλητής* was also in use. Not surprisingly, perhaps, we find it in inscriptions of athletic associations.⁵⁰

Martin Brändl has already drawn attention to the latter of the two inscriptions in which the noun *συναθλητής* appears, concluding that ‘*συναθλητής* at the beginning of the second century CE described a “fellow athlete” of ancient athletic associations’ (2006: 343). The inscription to which Brändl refers originates from Aphrodisias and is dated to the reign of Hadrian (117-138).⁵¹ It records a decree of the ‘sacred, xystic, pious, venerable synod and the entire xystus’ (ἔδοξεν τῇ ἱερᾷ ξ[υστικῇ πε]ριπολιστικῇ εὐσεβεῖ σεβαστῇ [συνόδῳ καὶ] τῷ σύνπαντι ξυστῶ) to honour a pancratis Kallikrates, a ‘sacred and multiple victor’, forced to retire on health grounds. This was decided ‘in order that through this decree, in his heaviness of heart at an inexorable destiny, the gracious gift of the honours may make our *fellow athlete* well-consoled’ (ἵνα διὰ τούτου τοῦ ψηφίσματος τὸ βαρύθυμον πρὸς εἰμαρμένην ἀπαραίτητον αἰ τῶν τειμῶν χάριτες εὐπαρηγόρητον ἡμεῖν τὸν *συναθλητὴν* καταστήσωσιν). *συναθλητής* here is thus indeed a fellow member of an athletic association. This, again, should not surprise us, given the frequency of *συν-* compounds in the inscriptions of professional associations.

⁵⁰ On athletic guilds, see Forbes 1955; Pleket 1973.

⁵¹ No. 89 Roueché 1993; both the text and ET are available online at <http://insaph.kcl.ac.uk/iaph2007/iAph120719.html>; accessed 9 July 2016.

While the Aphrodisias inscription is noteworthy, the earlier of the two inscriptions in which the noun *συναθλητής* occurs is even more significant for our purposes.⁵² The original location of this inscription is uncertain, but in all likelihood it was Elaea or Pergamon. It records a decree of consolation upon the death of Marcus Alfidius who had died during the celebration of the aforementioned *Sebasta* festival (quinquennial), established in 2 BCE in Naples in honour of Augustus, one of the greatest athletic contests of the ancient world. The deceased athlete is honoured by ‘the worldwide victors in sacred and crown games, and their trainers’.⁵³ He is referred to as a *συνιερονίχης*, ‘fellow victor in sacred games’.⁵⁴ The term *συναθλητής*, however, is this time employed not with reference to Marcus Alfidius, but to other athletes, for whom he was ‘the most excellent example, both with regard to self-control/moderation and with regard to practice’ (*τὸ κράτιστον ὑπόδειγμα καὶ κατὰ σωφροσύνην καὶ κατὰ πράξιν*). The noun in this inscription appears to have a more universal denotation: *συναθληταί* are not only those who belong to the same association, but presumably all the athletes, especially the junior ones, for whom Marcus Alfidius, the most admirable man (*ἀνὴρ*

⁵² Published originally in Bean 1965; for corrections and perceptive comments, see Robert 1968.

⁵³ See II. 46-48: οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς οἰ[κουμέ]νης ἱερονίχαι καὶ στεφανεῖται καὶ οἱ [τούτω]ν ἐπιστάται (cf. also II. 1-3 and 23-26).

⁵⁴ L. 49. Cf. *συνιερονίχαι* in I. 33. Note also that in I. 2 the victors in crown games are referred to as ‘fellow victors in crown games’ (*συνστεφανεῖται*).

θαυμασιότατος), could have served as the finest example.⁵⁵ Given the genre of honorary decrees, and the inevitably stereotypical praise of famous athletes who must have excelled in every respect, none of this can be taken at face value. Yet for our purposes this *rhetoric of fellowship* is especially telling. Whether there was a sense of fellowship and community during the games, while athletes were competing with one another, was another issue. But epigraphic evidence suggests that an attempt was made to create the notion of a worldwide athletic community, enhanced no doubt by common interests. The addition of the prefix *συν-*, while introducing the sense of fellowship and community, also leads to a de-emphasis of the expected result (winning, presupposing competition), and a stress on the process (striving, common effort).⁵⁶

Whether the addressees of Paul's letter to the Philippians would, upon hearing Phil. 1.27, have made the link with athletic associations cannot be ascertained, but especially the second of the inscriptions referred to above shows us in what sense the notion of a fellow athlete could have been understood in the first-century context. It also suggests that it is more likely that, by choosing to use the verb *συναθλέω* in Phil. 1.27

⁵⁵ Note in this context that in Phil. 3.17 Paul exhorts his addressees to become 'fellow imitators' of him: *συμμιμηταί μου γίνεσθε*. He envisages his role as that of their model (*τύπος*). Since this verse follows the athletic metaphor in vv. 12-16, one may imagine the Philippian *συμμιμηταί* as Paul's *συναθληταί*, for whom he serves as a model to imitate, just as Marcus Alfidius was supposed to serve as a model for other athletes.

⁵⁶ This, incidentally, is consistent with the meaning of the verb *συναθλέω* as attested in the literary sources, discussed above.

(as well as 4.3), Paul wished to emphasise the positive aspect: striving and toiling *for* rather than *against*.⁵⁷ Even though this does not exclude military imagery, it shows that understanding the verse against the backdrop of ancient athletics does not need to be limited to the aspect of competing, as is customarily the case. This has implications for modern translations of the two verses: ‘to strive (together/side by side)’ remains to my mind the best rendering of the verb in Phil. 1.27 and 4.3.⁵⁸

Concluding remarks

In view of the elusiveness of the imagery, it would have been far-fetched to attempt a definite interpretation of Phil. 1.27 or 4.3, or to wish to ascertain beyond any doubt what kind of imagery is presupposed in Paul’s use of *συναθλέω*. This, however, has not been the aim of the present essay. Instead, in assessing the plausibility of reading *συναθλέω* in Phil. 1.27 (and 4.3) against the background of ancient athletics in a first-century context,

⁵⁷ Pfitzner (1967: 116) is thus right that *τῆν πίστει* is to be taken as a dative of advantage, but he too strongly emphasises the notion of fight.

⁵⁸ I would thus rather avoid verbs which focus on the negative aspect, such as ‘to battle’ (NJB), ‘to fight’, or ‘to struggle’ (CEB). Similarly, I would not use the verb ‘to compete’, which highlights the element of rivalry rather than communal strenuous effort. ‘Competing together’ is the translation equivalent proposed by Esler 2005: 381. By limiting his interpretation of the athletic imagery to that of the actual athletic contest, he encounters what he regards as insurmountable difficulty. Well aware that in Greek athletics group events were very rare, Esler makes the following comment: ‘It is ... artificial of Paul to push the metaphor to embrace a group appearing in the same event against opponents. This artificiality discloses the inherent difficulty in utilising a field of endeavour so tied up with individual success in the construction of group identity’. The difficulty to which Esler points could be solved if he had broadened his understanding of the athletic background possibly presupposed in Phil. 1.27.

I have concentrated on the elements which have to date either not received sufficient attention or have remained unnoticed. Besides a more careful review of the use of the verb *συναθλέω* in ancient textual evidence, my focus has been on the local context, on the one hand, and on the significance of epigraphic sources more generally, on the other. Without dismissing military imagery as a possible backdrop, I have offered some suggestions as to the associations that the verb may have evoked, either for Paul or, possibly, for some of the Philippian Christ believers. I have shown that, even with regard to ancient athletics, there are different ways of applying the imagery to the situation envisaged by Paul, and the stereotypical image of an individual athlete competing against his opponents does not take into account other aspects of first-century athletes' existence. Even though only individuals could be victors in specific categories, epigraphic evidence offers us glimpses of the sense of fellowship that was propagated, especially in the context of the athletes' professional associations. This sense of community may also have been part of athletic training, in the course of which the most successful athletes were presented as role models to be imitated, like the deceased athlete Marcus Alfidius, *τὸ κράτιστον ὑπόδειγμα*, for his fellow athletes. This sense of fellowship, in spite of fierce competition, was enhanced by the existence of an association of athletes which claimed to be 'worldwide' (*ἀπὸ τῆς οἰκουμένης*). This universalistic claim also raises interesting questions in view of similarly universalistic tendencies in the early Christian

movement, in spite of the latter's predominantly local character. To discuss this, however, would be to move beyond the scope of this essay.⁵⁹

Suggesting that *συναθλέω* in Phil. 1.27 and 4.3 may be understood against the backdrop of ephebic training or that of professional athletes is not to imply that Paul himself or members of his communities had first-hand experience of such training, even though ephebic education in the case of some of the early Christians is not entirely implausible.⁶⁰ While it is highly unlikely that any of the Christ believers were part of any of the athletic guilds, it is more plausible to envisage some of them as members of local voluntary associations. Given that *συν-* compounds abound in the inscriptions set up by such associations, just as they do in the letter to the Philippians, the discourse of fellowship associated with this, I suggest, would not have been alien to Paul's addressees.

⁵⁹ I only note at this point that translocal professional associations, apart from one article by Richard Ascough (1997), have received far less attention by Early Christianity scholars than the local ones.

⁶⁰ See n. 19 above. In addition, the business of athletic training was not limited to trainees, but it involved also the service of the members of the lower strata of the society, first and foremost slaves.

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