

CHAPTER 20

The Role of Religion in Greek Sport

Sarah C. Murray

1 Introduction

A notable aspect of the athletic contests held at the major Panhellenic sanctuaries of the ancient Greeks (Olympia, Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea) was that the prize for victors was a simple wreath rather than a valuable material reward. In Lucian's dialogue *Anacharsis* Solon's Scythian interlocutor suggests that the Greeks are of questionable sanity insofar as they invest large amounts of time and effort in training for athletic contests for which the only reward is a heap of weeds. "As if it were not possible for anyone who wants them to get plenty of apples without any trouble, or to wear a wreath of parsley or of pine without having his face bedaubed with mud or letting himself get kicked in the belly by his opponent!" scoffs Anacharsis (9.2, trans. A. Harmon). Solon, ever full of serene wisdom, explains that Greek athletes compete not for the material prizes at stake, but for the honor of the victory itself, since "the one among them who succeeds in winning is counted equal to the gods" (10.3).

To the modern reader, accustomed to a largely secular world of athletes and athletics, the notion that a great athlete should be considered not only like but in fact equal to the gods is a striking one. However, in ancient Greece, organized, formal athletic competitions took place most commonly as components of religious festivals at either Panhellenic or local sanctuaries. Athletes were considered to succeed or fail at least partly because of the favor or disfavor of the presiding deities. And, as Lucian's Solon suggests, successful athletes were even occasionally elevated to something above human status and worshipped as divine figures. Pericles praised the Athenians for the frequency of their "games and sacrifices" (Thucydides 2.38.1), and it seems to be generally true that ancient Greek sport and religion went together as naturally as modern sport and corporate sponsorships.

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Although the association between sport and religion in ancient Greece is clear enough, the manner in which this link came about and was made manifest remains something of a puzzle. In this essay I consider the evidence for the interaction of religion and sport from three perspectives. First, I discuss how sport became closely tied to religious festivals. Then I move on to address elements of religiosity and ritual in sport as practiced at religious festivals. Finally, I consider the religious status of victorious athletes.

2 Religion and the Origins of Greek Sport

The majority of Greek athletic competitions took place in the context of religious festivals, and the religious tone of the major games cannot be denied. Sacrifices punctuated the schedule of events, sacred processions and truces conducted participants and officials to sanctuaries at which competitions were held, and athletes swore by and prayed to divine patrons before taking their place on the starting line. But was there an entrenched and meaningful link between athletic competitions and the sanctuaries and festivals in which they took place, or was their association instead based on coincidence, convenience, or historical accident? To clarify the nature of the relationship between athletic competitions and the religious festivals at which they took place, it is necessary to delve at least briefly into the fraught topic of the origins of formally organized athletic competitions in ancient Greece.

The rather sparse evidence for sport in the Aegean Bronze Age (c.3000–c. 1100 BCE)¹ suggests that the Minoans and Mycenaeans enjoyed watching acrobatic spectacles (including bull jumping) and combat sports such as boxing in public, if not necessarily ritual, contexts during the second millennium (see Chapter 2 in this volume). Some contemporary Hittite texts likewise point to the existence of physical contests during ceremonies that served to aggrandize their kings or to rank royal entourages (Bryce 2002: 187–95; Puhvel 1988).

Both literary (primarily the Homeric poems) and archaeological (remains from Olympia and inscribed bronze cauldrons) evidence dating to the eighth century indicate that by that point in time Greeks were holding formally organized athletic contests with some regularity. That evidence reveals a well-established tradition of holding athletic contests as part of funerary rites and suggests that athletic contests were also held at some local religious festivals (see Chapter 3). The date at which the Olympics were first held remains a subject of dispute, but it is probable that they were founded before the end of the eighth century (Christesen 2007: 18–21, 146–57).

There is, however, no compelling reason to draw a connection between Bronze Age sport and the formally organized athletic contests evident starting in the eighth century. We have no indication that formally organized athletic contests were held during the so-called Dark Age (c.1100–900) that separated later Greeks from the Bronze Age. Moreover, the Dark Age was marked by numerous and important discontinuities, and the eighth century was a period of great social change across a variety of indicators encompassing most areas of Greek life. Some caution is necessary because there are no extant literary texts from this period, and the archaeological record is less rich than one might hope. Nonetheless, the sources at our disposal, along with what we know about the period between 1100 and 700 in more general terms, both suggest that formally

organized athletic contests were an independent development that owed little to Bronze Age practices. The link between formally organized athletic contests and religious festivals cannot, therefore, be understood as an inheritance from the Bronze Age.

Greek historical traditions shed little light on the subject, as Classical literature presents a variegated and self-contradictory tapestry of mythology and legend about the connection between athletic contests and religious festivals. The foundation of the Olympics, for example, was variously ascribed to Zeus (either because he wrestled Kronos at Olympia or as celebration for his victory over Kronos to see who would be king of the gods), Herakles of Thebes (as celebration for his conquest of Elis), Idaian Herakles (as a contest for his brothers), Pelops (as celebration of his victory in a chariot race over King Oinomaos of Pisa or in honor of Oinomaos or Pisos), or Pisos (the eponymous hero of the Pisatans, who inhabited the region around Olympia). Like many Greek etiologies, these stories are difficult to reconcile with each other or with reality, and probably represent later inventions meant to legitimize contemporary social and political claims. Writing about Olympia in the first century, Strabo advised his readers that “one should disregard the ancient stories both of the founding of the sanctuary and of the establishment of the games . . . for such stories are told in many ways, and no faith at all is to be put in them” (*Geography* 8.3.30, trans. H. Jones).²

Scholars have put forward a variety of explanations for the appearance of games at Greek religious festivals. One possibility is that athletic competitions in Greek sanctuaries originated as a form of reiterative funeral games for local heroes. From an anthropological point of view, athletic competition at funerals can fulfill a variety of functions within society, for example, reemphasizing the distinction between the living and the dead, appeasing the restless spirits of departed individuals by entertaining them with activities that they would enjoy, and reintegrating and reestablishing a cohesive living community after the traumatic loss of an important member. Funeral games in ancient Greece are attested in Homer’s *Iliad*, in which Achilles gathers the Greek army to honor his fallen comrade Patroklos with a series of competitions pitting the strongest runners, throwers, boxers, and charioteers against one another for prizes (*Iliad* 23.257–897). Games associated with the death of great men, especially war heroes, continued in later times (for instance, the Spartan statesman Brasidas was so honored at his death in 422, see Roller 1981 for further examples), and it is perhaps not coincidental that at least three of the four major Panhellenic games were located at sanctuaries associated with a funeral cult (Pelops at Olympia, Melikertes at Isthmia, Opheltes at Nemea).³ On the other hand, the foundational stories associated with these games are in large part unsubstantiated by the archaeological evidence – for instance, the Pelopeion at Olympia was established much later than the cult of Zeus (Kyrieleis 2006; Rambach 2002) – so these stories may have been projected backward by historical Greeks to explain or legitimize the games instead of actually having played a role in their establishment. It is, at any rate, unclear to what degree funeral games incorporated actual religious activity – processions, oaths, and so on – so seeking the genealogy of historic Greek festival athletics in funeral contests remains problematic.⁴

A second possibility is that at least some religious festivals had their roots in initiation rites that included a footrace and that these religious festivals, as a result, had an athletic component from the outset. Rites of passage were widespread in ancient Greece, and frequently required that participants undergo a physical trial of some kind. Scholars who

trace the origins of the Olympics to initiation rites have pointed to the existence at Olympia of an athletic festival for unmarried girls, the Heraia, which was clearly initiatory in nature. They have also claimed to find in the various practices attached to the Olympics a cycle of separation, liminality, and reintegration that is standard in initiation rites all over the globe. One might also add that athletic contests associated with initiation rites in Greece always consisted of footraces, and the original program of the Olympics was thought to have consisted of a single footrace, the *stadion*. Although the evidence linking the Olympics to initiation rites is collectively impressive, it is less convincing than it might seem at first glance. Very little is known about when and how the Heraia came into being, no single feature of the Olympics can be definitively identified as being derived from an initiation rite, and the nature of the program of events at early iterations of the Olympics is impossible to reconstruct with any certainty. Here again we have a seemingly plausible but ultimately unprovable and probably flawed hypothesis.⁵

A third possibility, primarily associated with the work of David Sansone (1988), is that ritual and sport are inherently connected because all athletic competitions are a stylized remnant of ceremonial prehunt rituals conducted by Paleolithic men. Sansone saw all sport (ancient and modern) as a sacrifice of human energy meant to imitate the exertion needed by early man to hunt and kill wild prey. From this perspective, the sacrifices and feasts at the center of all Greek festivals mimicked the outcome of a successful hunt, while athletic competitions reproduced the hunt itself, suggesting that the two were in fact intimately joined and closely complementary. Sansone sought to tie various characteristics of sport as practiced at Greek religious sanctuaries to early hunting ritual. For instance, crown wreaths given as prizes at the Panhellenic games are portrayed as vestigial elements of foliate camouflage, and the exclusion of women from the games as related to the need for early hunters to undergo a period of sexual abstinence before they embarked upon their mission. There are numerous difficulties with Sansone's arguments, not least the enormous temporal gap between Paleolithic hunting and eighth-century athletic festivals (for further discussion, see Kyle 1988).

A fourth possibility is that athletic contests were intended to entertain and honor the anthropomorphic gods that made up the Greek pantheon and that religious festivals thus naturally included sport. This explanation accords well with the athletic contests held in honor of Apollo on the island of Delos as they are described in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, composed around 650: "Yet in Delos do you most delight in your heart; for there the long robed Ionians gather in your honor with their children and shy wives: mindful, they delight you with boxing and dancing and song, so often as they hold their gathering" (146–50, trans. H. Evelyn-White). Greek myths depict jealous and agonistic gods who take part in the same kinds of athletic contests held at actual festival games (see, for example, Pausanias 5.7.10). In addition, Greeks believed that gods enjoyed the same kinds of pleasures, such as wine, dancing, song, and even beauty contests, as their terrestrial counterparts. Performances of great aesthetic virtuosity were considered suitable gifts for the immortals, and it is likely that this applied also to elevated athletic performances. While the argument that festival games were literally meant to be a kind of gift to the gods is a compelling one that dovetails well with our knowledge of Greek religion overall, it holds little explanatory power, since it does not fix any rationale for the timing of the advent of religious games or the peculiarities that characterized the events therein.

It is not entirely impossible that the correspondence of games and gods was a matter of pure happenstance. E. Norman Gardiner, an early historian of the ancient Olympics, argued that the natural agonism of the Greeks led to the more or less spontaneous foundation of athletic competitions, and that festivals – as gathering places for large groups of Greeks from a variety of city-states – simply provided a convenient context in which already popular games could occur. Gardiner stated that “there is no ground for attributing any religious significance to the games themselves . . . the fact is that Greek athletic sports, though closely associated with religion, are in their origin independent and secular” (1925: 67). Likewise, Mark Golden has concluded that one should not “make too much” of the connection between religion and sport, since almost every aspect of Greek society was to some extent pervaded by “cult activity and invocations of the gods” (1998: 23).

Given the incomplete nature of the evidence, the origins of the connection between athletic contests and religious festivals are likely to remain shrouded in mystery. Perhaps the question of when or how sport came to be associated with religious festivals may have proven so difficult to answer because it is entirely wrongheaded to begin with. Colin Renfrew argues that “it is not appropriate to assume that the Greek religion, as we see it fully fledged in the fifth century BC, was already in existence in the earlier days of the eighth or seventh centuries” (Renfrew 1988: 20). From this perspective, it is possible to envision athletic competitions playing an active role in the formation and crystallization of Greek religion. As Renfrew argues, “it may be true that the early Greek religion developed through the influence of the great Panhellenic sanctuaries in which competitions played a major role” (1988: 23). Thus, attempting to disentangle the way in which games and festivals came to be associated becomes an exercise in teleology, with neither religion nor sport having any ordered existence separate from one another.

3 Religiosity and Ritual in Festival Games

However athletic competitions came to be associated with religious festivals, by the Archaic period (700–480) the games and the sacred rites of the festivals where they took place were inextricably linked. Greek religion was based more on practice than on belief, and by the sixth century the enactment of athletic competitions was an important and integral manifestation of worship. At the same time, certain aspects of the games remained distinct and separate from the parallel cult activities, and so it is still possible to question the strength of the link between the athletic and ritual aspects of the festivals.

While it is true that games often took place at religious sanctuaries, it is equally true that athletic facilities at those sites were, by the Classical period (480–323) at the latest, typically topographically separated from spaces used primarily for religious purposes. At Olympia, the sacred core of the site (the *Altis*) contains both the oldest and the most extravagant architecture (see Map 8.2). The ash altar dedicated to Zeus Olympios, the symbolic and actual center of worship at the site, was situated in the *Altis*. That altar, which was almost certainly in use from the beginning of the worship of Zeus at Olympia around 1000, was gradually surrounded by an array of structures, many of which served religious purposes. Those structures included temples to Zeus and to Hera, a shrine to the hero Pelops, and treasuries holding dedications to the gods.

While athletic events were probably originally held in the *Altis* itself, by the middle of the sixth century a formal stadium had been laid out on the eastern edge of the *Altis*, and later athletic facilities, such as the *gymnasion*, were also located outside the core area of the sanctuary. A similar disposition of spaces emerged over the course of time at Delphi, Nemea, and Isthmia, creating a spatial separation of the sacred areas of festival sites and the areas where athletic events took place. That separation can be seen as either incidental, a result of the fact that games grew up around preestablished cult places, or the result of a desire to dichotomize spaces devoted to gods and to games. It may be worth noting, however, that while in strictly spatial terms religious and athletic facilities were distinct, other links between the two existed. For instance, it has been shown that the length of the foot used to measure out the stadium at Olympia was the same as that used to measure the Temple of Zeus.⁶

Like the architectural geography of the sanctuaries, the division of labor and schedules of events at festival games suggests a close but always technically separate relationship between sport and religion. Religious laws that survive from Olympia demonstrate the degree to which those officials who had authority over athletic matters were distinct from the religious personnel of the sanctuary. In terms of Olympic rules, “there is a remarkable separation of the agonistic sphere from the ritual sphere of the sanctuary” (Siewert 1992: 116). It is clear from the survival of a number of the sacred laws governing Olympia that the majority of the religious officials who worked at the sanctuary were not involved in the administration of the games and that the primary athletic authorities, such as the *Hellanodikai* (on which, see Chapter 17), were more or less secular.

At the same time, the supreme authority over any particular games was the god of the relevant sanctuary. At Olympia one of the first things that competitors did upon entering the sanctuary was to swear by Zeus to uphold the rules of the games (Pausanias 5.24.9). When lots were drawn to determine starting positions, they were drawn from a vessel that was consecrated to Zeus, and each competitor took his turn after reciting a prayer to the god (Lucian *Hermotimos* 40). Fines for infractions by athletes and states at the Olympic Games were paid to the deity, and the proceeds from these infractions went to the creation of the *Zanes*, statues of Zeus that were set up in the sanctuary to remind all comers of the eternal shame endured by cheaters (Pausanias 5.21.2). According to Pausanias, the third of these statues bore an inscription “declar[ing] that the image stands . . . to be a terror to law-breaking athletes” (Pausanias 5.21.4). The degree to which the pious terror of the gods was an effective deterrent may have varied, but the idea that the threat of divine retribution may have dissuaded some potential bribers or cheaters suggests that religion was not completely absent from the thoughts of the competitors.

Thus, the tone of festival games was explicitly religious. But did the athletes themselves think much of the role of religion in the games? To what degree did the experience of the athlete presuppose willing participation in ritual? Procedurally, athletes were indeed enmeshed in a variety of rites throughout their time at the games. Athletes preparing to compete at Olympia swore by Zeus Horkios that they would perpetrate no evil against the games and that they had trained responsibly for the preceding 10 months (Pausanias 5.24.9–10). Victors at the major Panhellenic games received wreaths made from sacred plants and made dedications to the gods after victory (see, for example, Pausanias 5.15.3 and 6.1.1–16.9, respectively). But of course, going through the motions required by the

festival officials does not necessarily entail the belief in divine authority over one's behavior or the possibility that the gods could snatch away or grant victory.

While it is impossible to truly know how much of their performance Greek athletes felt depended upon or was meant to entertain and glorify the gods, plenty of evidence suggests at least a healthy level of superstition on the part of competitors (Mikalson 2007). A number of lead curse tablets discovered in Corinth, at Isthmia, and in Athens show athletes invoking divine aid to inhibit the performance of their opponents. One example, from the *agora* (marketplace) in Athens, directed against a wrestler named Eutychian, features phrases such as "Let Eutychian be deaf, dumb, mindless, harmless, and not fighting against anyone," "Bind Eutychian in the unilluminated eternity of oblivion and chill and destroy also the wrestling that he is going to do this coming Friday," and "If Eutychian does wrestle, [let him] fall and disgrace himself" (Jordan 1985: 214–15). Though it is not possible to be sure that curse tablets such as these were commissioned or written by the intended victims' athletic rivals (as opposed to enemies they had made for other reasons), the texts at least suggest that some Greeks thought that the gods did have power over athletic events.

Likewise, literary sources indicate that Greeks in general believed that the gods presided over athletic victory. In Homer's *Iliad*, Athena interferes in the footrace (23.740–97) at Odysseus's behest. While Odysseus clearly would not have won the race without his own active efforts and skill at running, there is also a passive element of his victory, dependent upon his acquisition of good will from the divine.

A similar concept of this "modality of self-determination" (Crotty 1982: 3) is suggested in *epinikia*, odes written by commissioned poets in honor of the victors at important games (see Chapter 4). A considerable number of these works, many of them composed by the lyric poet Pindar in the early decades of the fifth century, have come down to us and provide a good sense of the way in which the divine role in athletic victory was conceived. A typical victory ode both exalts the efforts of the athlete and acknowledges the role that the god had in enabling the triumph to happen. The general tone is that while the strength and training of the athlete is an essential component for winning at the games, the help of the god matters more. For instance, in *Pythian* 8, Pindar warns that "if someone has gained success without long labor, he seems to many to be a wise man among fools . . . but those things do not rest with men: a god grants them, exalting now one man, but throwing another beneath the hands" (73–6, trans. W. Race). The final phrase is a metaphor taken from wrestling, and helps make the point that success both in sport and in life more generally is dependent on divine assistance.

4 The Religious Status of Victorious Athletes

The evidence suggests, then, that athletes participating in festival games thought that the gods had a hand in the success or failure of their efforts. The other side of this coin was that part of the reward for victory or for a particularly distinguished record of athletic achievement may have been a chance at some measure of immortality. As Solon suggests in his conversation with Anacharsis, there were many rewards for Olympic victors in addition to the sacred olive crown. The conquering hero was often granted *sitesis*, free dining at the town hall, for the rest of his life (Currie 2005: 142–3). Statues were set up, either in a suitable Panhellenic sanctuary or in his hometown, in his honor. Pliny notes

that Greeks did not customarily erect statues of men “unless they had earned eternal preservation for some illustrious reason, especially victory in the sacred games, in particular Olympia” (*Natural History* 34.16, trans. B. Currie). These statues seem to have had a ritual function beyond the strictly secular utility of commemorating a victory, and may have been intended to facilitate the perpetual reenactment of the moment at which the winning athlete received the sacred crown (Kurke 1993: 144).

In addition, the Greeks believed that winning at one of the major Panhellenic athletic festivals such as Olympia endowed an athlete with a semimagical invincibility known as *kudos*, which set him apart as favored by the gods and worthy of exaltation by his fellow men (Kurke 1993; though cf. the skeptical comments in Kyriakou 2007). The idea that athletic victory could earn a man a special place within the mortal–divine spectrum may be the most overtly religious, even mystical, aspect of the world of Greek sport and spectacle. The Spartans positioned crown game victors near the king at the front of the army when marching out for battle (Plutarch *Lycurgus* 22.4), evidently because they were believed to possess a special aura.

A certain number of Greek athletes literally became objects of worship. There is evidence that at least a dozen athletes were heroized, which meant that they were believed to have attained a status somewhere between human and divine and were worshipped in local cults (Christesen 2010; Currie 2005; Lunt 2009). Most of these cults seem to have been founded in the fifth century, but many endured for centuries. For example, Theagenes of Thasos, who had an improbably successful athletic career in the first half of the fifth century, became after his death an object of cult both in his hometown and elsewhere and was believed to have notable healing powers. Pausanias, writing in the second century CE, states that the cult was active in his own time (6.11.2–9), and remains of an altar to Theagenes, complete with an inscription dating to c.100 CE, have been found in Thasos (Miller 2004: 163–4).

5 Conclusion

On balance, it is clear that there is indeed something to the connection between sport and religion in ancient Greece. But is it, as Golden (1998: 23) suggests, “a mistake to make too much of it”? Greeks explained the origin of their athletic contests by appealing to the gods and heroes that they worshipped and to whom they gave credit for many of the successes and failures of their lives. Athletic competitions were thoroughly saturated with religious activities such as sacrifices, oaths, and prayers. Songs in praise of athletes frequently acknowledged the role that the gods played in their victories and defeats, and great achievements in the games were thought to endow men with special powers of invincibility. At the same time, ancient Greece was a place in which the gods and religion seemed to permeate most parts of everyday life, and so the commingling of sport and worship in this environment does not necessarily imply that religious concerns outweighed secular, political, and social interests in ancient sport. Given the difficulty that previous scholars have encountered in their attempts at sorting out the religious from the secular in ancient Greek sport, it seems likely that the best way to move forward on this topic will involve a move toward seeking to explicate and shed light on the thick entanglement of religion and sport rather than to separate out the one from the other.

NOTES

- 1 All dates are BCE unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 On ancient explanations for the foundation of the Olympics, see Golden 1998: 10–23.
- 3 The situation at Delphi is complicated because the relevant myths do feature a death, but of a snake rather than of a human being.
- 4 The single most important piece of scholarship that traces the origins of Greek athletic contests to funerary rites is Meuli 1975 (1941): 881–906, though see also Drees 1962 and Herrmann 1962. Variants on this basic line of thought trace the Olympics to cults for the dead and hero worship. The voluminous scholarship on the origins of the Olympics is surveyed in Ulf and Weiler 1980. Much has been written about the Olympics since Ulf and Weiler's survey (see, for instance, the interesting arguments presented in Valavanis 2006 and Instone 2007), but the only fundamentally new theory put forward is that of Sansone, which is reviewed below.
- 5 Arguments in favor of tracing the origin of the Olympics to initiation rites can be found in Jeanmaire 1939: 413–8; Brelich 1969: 449–56; and Burkert 1983 (1972): 93–103. On initiation rites in ancient Greece, see Graf 1996 and the bibliography cited therein. On cycles of separation, liminality, and reintegration in initiation rites, see van Gennep 1960 (1906). On the Heraia, see Kyle's essay on female sport, Chapter 16 in this volume. On the program of the events at the early Olympics, see Christesen 2007: 476–8.
- 6 On the early history of the sanctuary at Olympia, see Eder 2001 and Kyrieleis 2006. On the development of the architecture at the site, see Mallwitz 1988 and Miller 2004: 87–95. On the stadium at Olympia, and the use of the temple foot in the stadium, see Romano 1993: 9–24. On the architectural history of the other Panhellenic game sites, see Miller 2004: 95–112 and the bibliography cited therein.

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GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Useful introductions to the topic of religion and Greek sport can be found in works by Golden (1998: 10–23) and Scanlon (2002: 25–39). The origins of athletic and religious festivals are discussed at length by Sansone 1988 and in Evjen's more evenhanded essay (Evjen 1992). On possible Near Eastern influences on Aegean Bronze Age sport, see Decker 2004. Kyle (2007: 23–53) offers an excellent summary of the evidence for possible Bronze Age predecessors of Greek athletic festivals. Morgan's (1990) extensive account of the early genesis of the sites where the most important athletic festivals took place has much to offer anyone interested in how religion and sport became associated.

For a good overview of how religious ceremonies were integrated into the day-to-day activities of athletic festivals, see Adshead 1986: 53–7. Mallwitz 1988 summarizes the evidence for the religious and secular geography at Olympia, while Siewert 1992 goes into some detail on the division of labor among religious and secular officials. Ulf and Weiler 1980 survey scholarship on the origins of the Olympics.

A compelling and expansive examination of the heroization of athletes can be found in Currie 2005, while Mikalson 2007 compiles a significant amount of literary evidence pertaining to the role that gods played in athletic competitions. Two works by Kurke (1991, 1993) offer an excellent introduction to the concept and use of *kudos* in Greek sport and society.