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Agonistic Festivals, Roman Empire

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Festivals with athletic, equestrian, dramatic, or musical competitions (*agōnes*) stood in a centuries-old tradition. All Greek cities organized such festivals – but some, especially the great festivals at OLYMPIA, DELPHI, ISTHMIA, and NEMEA, occupied a special place in the Greek world. Festivals continued to flourish in the Hellenistic period, when cities and sanctuaries organized new games in great numbers, often with the active support of Hellenistic rulers; but in many ways the imperial period was the golden age of the agonistic festivals. Old festivals continued or were restored with the support of local benefactors or Roman authorities, and hundreds of new festivals were founded throughout the Greek-speaking provinces. Most of these were found in mainland Greece, and in western and southern ASIA MINOR, but they were also common elsewhere. In some regions, such as CRETE or SPARTA, they seem the product mainly of the imperial period (Robert 2010; Spawforth 1989). Moreover, in the imperial period, agonistic festivals became more common in Italy, where Rome itself became host to a number of Greek-style festivals, including the *Capitolia* (Newby 2005; Caldelli 1993). Together they formed an empire-wide agonistic network that was closely supervised by the emperors (van Nijf 2012). However, agonistic culture did not spread widely in the western provinces, although there is evidence for Greek-style athletics as far as GAUL and HISPANIA (Caballos Hornero 2004; Caldelli 1997).

The evidence for the continuing popularity of agonistic festivals is diverse: archaeologists have uncovered stadia, theaters, and gymnasia that formed the material infrastructure for this agonistic culture. Literary texts display a fascination with the traditional Greek agonistic festival and show its continuing relevance for contemporary Greek culture (König 2005; van Nijf 2003). The main sources, however, are numismatic, papyrological and, most of all, epigraphic (Pleket 2014). Greek cities continued to mint their own coins, and on many of these we find the names and titles of local festivals, as well as athletic symbols, such as strigils and prize-crowns. Thousands of honorific inscriptions commemorate athletic champions. Other texts record the foundation of festivals, providing us with details about the organization and funding of the festivals. The number of sources fluctuates, but it is clear that the reigns of AUGUSTUS and HADRIAN were particularly active periods. The highest number of new foundations is attested in the Severan age, which must reflect at least partly the changing preferences of individual cities and the class of benefactors who mostly funded the games (Leschhorn 1998; Mitchell 1990). When these types of evidence dry up in the course of the third century CE, this particular window on agonistic life begins to close, but it should not be assumed that agonistic life immediately came to an end.

Agonistic festivals were not an autonomous sector of society but were closely integrated in its religious and cultural life. Religious festivals typically consisted of a procession (*pompē*), sacrifices (*thusia*), and sacrificial banquets as well as athletic, equestrian, dramatic, or musical competitions. The importance of a festival rested on *all* these elements, but the contests were the most spectacular, and the most likely to be commemorated. There could be regional variations, but the basic core of these festivals did not change much over time, nor did the major disciplines. The main athletic events included running events, long-jumping, throwing the discus, wrestling, boxing, and a kind of free-style wrestling called *pankration*. Some festivals had more specialized contests, such as the long footrace in armour (*hoplitodromos*) that was the centerpiece of the Freedom Games (*Eleuthéria*) at PLATAIA (Philostratus *Gymn.* 8). The heavy contests (*barea athla*), as the combat sports were known, commanded social respect. Suggestions that they became more bloody

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under the influence of Rome, or that the increase in their number should be seen as pandering to lower-class tastes, are not supported in the evidence (Pleket 2010).

Outside the big festivals the evidence for equestrian events is limited, but chariot races remained popular until Late Antiquity. In classical Greece horse racing had been the preserve of wealthy individuals, but under Rome racing was arranged by professional companies and later by "factions" each named after a color. These events were, however, increasingly separate from the traditional Greek festivals. Dramatic competitions continued, but the prizes went to the performers of the "classic" plays, not to new playwrights. More creative activity was expected in the various musical and literary performances, where traditional Greek genres were still highly prized. However, it was a sign of the times that contests in prose or verse composition included subjects like the praise of the emperor. A novelty was the development of the genre of mime and pantomimes, which also became part of the world of the *agōnes* (Webb 2008).

Although contests were similar, they were not equal. A certain hierarchy developed. Local contests were organized in the context of gymnasia, or as part of local religious festivals, but could also be celebrated in honor of local benefactors, or Roman emperors. Normally, money prizes were offered by organizers of local games to attract contestants. At the other end of the scale we find the traditional crown games at Olympia, Isthmia, Nemea, and Delphi, where wreaths were offered as symbolic prizes although the victors could expect a considerable reward upon their return home. Local festival organizers wanting to emulate their success insisted that a victory in their games should carry a similar privilege. Moreover, local Olympic, Pythian, or even Actian games were organized that tried to capitalize on the reputation of their namesakes. These festivals were called crown games (*stephanitai*) but in the Roman period they became known as sacred games (*hieroi*). They were supported by the emperors, and the emperor TRAJAN seems to have introduced a special category of eiselastic games that offered victors the right of triumphal entry (*eiselasis*) in their hometown, as well as a financial reward (*opsōnion*, *siterēsion*) (Remijsen 2011). Egyptian papyri show that the monetary value could be considerable. Other games offered crowns of precious metal, the value of which was frequently specified.

It is often said that ancient athletics differed from modern sport in that it lacked the contemporary preoccupation with records. Although there were no mechanisms for precise time-keeping, there were other types of record to be celebrated, such as being the first of their region or city to win in a particular festival (Young 1996). Knowledge about such records was widely shared, which presupposes that that they were systematically documented. And indeed, we find references to formal declarations of victory that were issued by cities and could be used by ATHLETES to claim privileges in their hometown (e.g., *I.Ephesos* 14; *P. Agon* 10).

There has been a long-standing debate on the social and professional status of ancient athletes. It is now the orthodoxy that they were never amateurs in a modern sense (Pleket 2010). Athletic champions were amply remunerated, which will have made athletics an attractive avenue of social mobility to some. However, the majority of the athletes seem to have belonged to the upper and middle classes, as is clear from the many honorific monuments that commemorated victorious athletes. These texts reveal that aristocratic values dominated the field to the end, but *all* athletes were happy to cash in the money prizes that were on offer. These were not perceived as wages but conceptualized as prestigious gifts. The prizes varied between the different disciplines. The organizers tended to follow widely shared conventions: in musical and dramatic contests the highest prizes were for tragedians and *kitharōidoi* (singers to the kithara), while in athletic *agōnes* the heavy athletes tended to receive higher prizes than did runners. In addition, it is likely that famous stars could be tempted with a high reward for merely gracing a local

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festival with their presence (*epideixis*) (Pleket 2010). Athletics was mainly a pastime for (young) men; a few texts suggest that women were occasionally able to compete. Women had of course long been allowed to enter chariot races in the contests at Olympia and elsewhere, but there were also foot races for girls, which may have grown out of girls' initiation rituals. A rare but spectacular example is an inscription from Delphi that recorded the athletic and other victories of three girls at various location – the monument was set up by their proud father (*FD* 3.1, 534). Female participation was less rare in the cultural or musical competitions: there are female victors on record in these disciplines. On the other hand, women are more frequently on record as gymnasiarchs or festival organizers (Lee 1988).

Athletes and dramatic or musical performers (*technitai*) organized themselves in empire-wide associations, whose titles combined religious, political, and professional identities. The complexity of these organizations is a reflection of the growing importance of the empire-wide network of agonistic festivals. The imperial organizations grew out of the regional associations of the Hellenistic age. Athletic associations are only attested from the first century BCE onwards, but they served similar ends, and eventually they were merged. Festival organizers had to negotiate about timing and prize levels with representatives of the world-wide travelling organizations of worshippers of DIONYSOS (performers) or of HERAKLES (athletes). In some cases, they organized contests on their own. The associations thus secured income and privileges for their members, but they were also supposed to guarantee that their members showed up. Associations had a presence at the festivals, where they helped to maintain order among the participants, and there were local branches that kept a detailed administration of individual members and their victories. Central headquarters were eventually located in Rome, and the presidents of the associations became imperial appointees (van Nijf 2006). A recently found inscription from the reign of Hadrian shows the high levels of imperial control to which these associations were subjected (Petzl and Schwertheim 2006 = *SEG* 56.1359).

Local festivals served above all the collective self-representation of the cities and their elites. They added considerably to the prestige of a city, and they were advertised on local coinage. Gymnasium-contests were regularly organized, funded by the city treasuries, but the pride of the cities must have been the organization of one or more periodic contests that were open to competitors from outside the cities as well. Festival organizers sent out formal invitations to other cities, and special seats were reserved for foreign guests in the stadia and theaters. A uniquely complete epigraphic dossier that records the foundation of a local festival under the emperor Hadrian in the small city of Oinoanda shows in detail the impact that such festivals could have on local life and local institutions (*SEG* 38.1462; Mitchell 1990). Festivals attracted relatively large numbers of participants and spectators to the city, but economic opportunities also attracted traders, travelling sophists, street performers, quacks, and even prostitutes. As the population of the organizing city could be as much as doubled, all other public life may have come to a standstill. Cities appointed festival presidents (*agōnothetai*) and other officials to keep the events under control, and panegyriarchs to supervise the festival markets and fix the prices of foodstuffs.

Agonistic festivals were a central ingredient of the urban culture in the Roman provinces. The elite organizers used festivals to secure their own high status in society. Processions, seating arrangements, and formal banquets were organized along hierarchical lines that represented the community as a hierarchy of status groups, with local magistrates and their families in top-position. Funding for these festivals often came from private sources: wealthy benefactors stepped in where civic funds could not be found. Benefactors claimed patriotism as their motivation, but they may have been equally concerned with securing their own reputation for posterity. The victors at prestigious games could expect a prominent position in

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local processions, and reserved seats in the stadia and theaters of their hometowns. But the victors in local games were also honored. The permanent records of their achievements were the numerous honorific statues that were set up in the center of each city. Successful athletes were commemorated alongside priests, magistrates, and benefactors, with whom they were often related. Athletic excellence was thus presented as a class attribute (van Nijf 2001).

The big festivals continued to flourish and attract competitors from all over the *oikoumene*, that is, the civilized world, which became synonymous with the world ruled by Rome. New games were written into the traditional circuit, such as the ACTIA, the imperial games at Actium that were founded by Augustus. In each Greek-speaking province agonistic festivals were instituted as part of the imperial cult, which became an important driving force behind the increase of agonistic festivals (*see* RULER CULT, ROMAN). In some cases, gladiatorial shows were held alongside the athletic competitions. Permission for these events had to be sought from Rome, and such festivals were hence known as an imperial gift (*dōrea*) and they often bore the name of the emperor. Some titles persisted, but often the imperial name was replaced at the next regime change. The agonistic festival was an important way of demonstrating a shared Greek culture in a world-empire, but Rome itself was an important factor in their spread (van Nijf 2003; Mitchell 1990).

The popularity of agonistic festivals declined in Late Antiquity as we saw above. Yet, local games persisted, and a bronze plaque found in Olympia lists contestants from throughout the Greek world well into the fourth century CE. When the emperor THEODOSIUS I abolished the Olympic games with other pagan religious festivals in 391, he was acting against a living tradition, but even after this date agonistic festivals only gradually gave way to other types of entertainment. It is hard to say what exactly caused this decline, as it was most likely a combination of factors. The traditional idea that Christianity was largely to blame should probably be abandoned but changing attitudes to the body will have played a part. At any rate, local elites, who had largely carried the burden of the agonistic structure, lost their interest in this costly way of gaining prestige. At the same time other types of mass entertainment (chariot races and gladiatorial games) were easier to organize and more in line with the imperial message. Yet Greek agonistic festivals seem to have long persisted in some places, as they did in Antioch (Remijsen 2015). The agonistic imagery had slipped into the Christian ideology as monks could be described as "athletes of God," and *askēsis,* the Greek word for training, acquired the connotation of Christian self-discipline and renunciation of the body (Roueché 1993). Greek athletic ideals would largely disappear until they were resurrected in the nineteenth century as part of the rise of modern sport.

SEE ALSO: *Agon*; Agonothetes; Benefactors; Festivals, Greece and Rome; Gladiators; Gymnasium, Classical and Hellenistic times; Isthmian Games; Music, Greece and Rome; Processions, Greek; Pythian Games; Sport; Theater, Greek and Roman.

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