

Women at Olympia

by Conrado Durantez

I. The Heren Games



Well known to our readers, Conrado Durantez, Director of the Centre of Olympic Studies at the National Physical Education Institute in Madrid, has sent us the chapter on women from his encyclopedic work on "Olympia" just

before its publication (see "Olympic Review" No. 99).

We thank him very much, and thus complete our dossier on women and sport.

The role of Greek women was very important in the field of physical education and agonistics. In the Greek myths which, by their very nature, always contain a certain amount of truth although even that which we accept as truth is part of the myth¹, we come across hardened and intrepid goddesses who jumped, ran and wrestled against men, competing against them for a cultural and sociological place which, finally, men were to fill. Artemis and Atalanta are the divine symbol of an ancient matriarchal primacy with law and power, which, right from the beginning of its evolution, was to find concretion in other leaders of the same sex who were to maintain their original power through their symbolic attribute of fertility. Hera, Hippodamia and Penelope were among these. However, in the new trilogy of fertility which arose among the mists of local legends and the rhapsodies of Homeric poems, there was already a differentiating degree, the principle of the generic decline that women were to undergo in relation to their ancient and an-

cestral attributes. Hera was the divine symbol of fertility, but Penelope and Hippodamia were fertile human rewards offered to the deserving man to crown his triumph and his boldness. This is why, "contrary to Artemis and Atalanta, women did not only stop defending themselves and struggling by themselves, but they even became rewards"².

Already in the scenes of history, before the historic Greek period, at the time of the in-

The kidnapping of Helen by Theseus. Red figures of an Athenian amphora attributed to Futimides (510 BC). Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen.



tegration of the prodigious Cretan world, linked to its ancient and sublime remoteness from the myth itself, we see the real dimension of the ludic and agonistic aspect of women who, independent and free, practised the most varied physical exercises, sometimes associated with men. "The Cretan woman", says Assa, "attends all the events and seems to circulate freely, with or without her husband. In any case we see her taking up, just like men, many gymnastic and sports activities which have some of the characteristics of worship and play. They dance of course. But they also run. They drive fast chariots drawn by horses, and they even practise the two major sports of the Cretans, pugilism and bull-fighting".³ In the newly formed insular, peninsular and continental Greek communities women continued to train and effectively exercised their ancient rights to play, physical education and occasionally organised public competition. In the Spartan community, the most faithful follower of this tendency, young girls were more often than not trained and coached with men, which provoked jeering and hilarity from their Athenian compatriots. But the severe laws of Lycurge laid down not only running exercises, ball and hoop games, but also discus throwing, wrestling and even pugilism for the country's young girls. With this training women would thus be capable of managing the family's affairs, and sometimes those of

Young people washing and dressing. Detail from Athenian stamnos (435 BC) from Vulci. Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen.



Young girl preparing to wash. Interior ornamentation of a cup with red figures by the painter Onesimos, about 490 BC, from Chiusi (Etruria). Brussels, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire.

public importance, with the necessary firmness during the multiple occasions when the men were away on the battlefield. The nudity in which women very often had to fight against men made for comradeship between the two sexes, although the women's instinct and all the education they had received conditioned them to an extremely important mission—to be the fertile mother of a robust line. Hence Gorgia, wife of Leonidas, replied to a stranger's question on the mysterious power that only the women of Sparta could exert on men: "We alone give birth to men!"⁴ This was why the woman champion of Sparta was given the laudatory title of "crisophore" (carrier of gold), because her body was the guarantee of the best development of the future embryo.⁵

However, although the training and preparation of Greek women were directed towards the demands and privileges of physical education, their official participation in public competitions or the great Pan-Hellenic Games was very isolated. We therefore take particular note of the rare information we have today on the sports competitions in which they alone could take part or at least those in which their participation was

permitted. Thucydide⁶ described one of the latter, which took place on the island of Delos, in honour of Apollo and Artemis. A large number of Greeks of Asia Minor regularly came, accompanied by their wives and children, to take part in the dancing, musical and athletic events which constituted the programme of the Games' festivities.

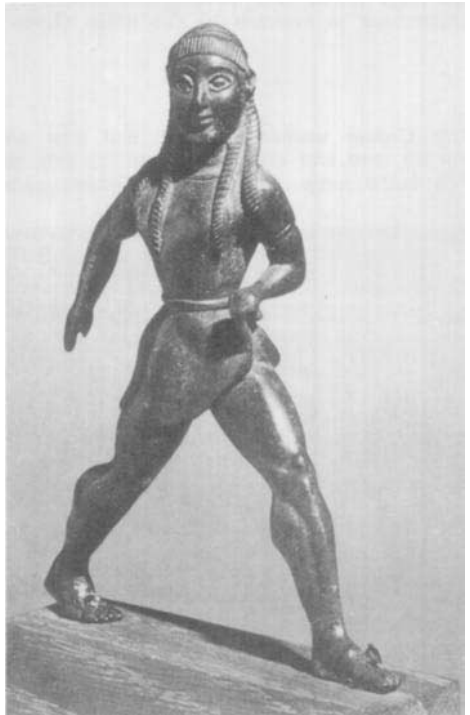
In Olympia there were official competitions programmed specially for women, called the Heran Games, described for us by Pausanias. "Every four years", he says, "the Sixteen Women weave a "peplos" or a tunic for Hera; they themselves also celebrate the Heran Games. These Games consist of a running race for girls. They are not all of the same age. Those who run first are the youngest; then come those who are a little older, and to finish with the oldest among the girls. They run in the following manner: hair loose, tunic slightly above the knee, and the right shoulder bare to chest level. The Olympic stadium is also reserved for their Games, but the length of the stadium, in the race of the same name, is shortened for them by about one sixth. The young winners are given crowns of olive and part of the cow sacrificed to Hera. They can also dedicate statues bearing the inscription of their name. Those who lead the Sixteen are married women, like the Presidents of the Games. The girls' Games go back a long way; it is said that as a token of gratitude towards Hera for her union with Pelopes, Hippodamia called the Sixteen Women together to inaugurate the Heren Games with them."⁷

Apart from Pausanias' concise but accurate text, we only have rare information from other sources on the Heren Games. Their origin, or the reason for their creation, is uncertain. From the above quotation and the evolution which took place for centuries in the Olympic Sanctuary, we can deduce that the Games, which were held in honour of Hera even in historical times, have their distant origins in the pre-Dorian cults of fertility embodied by the sacred marriage of Pelopes (abundance) and Hippodamia (fertility). For this reason, when the competitions subsequently continued to be held in honour of Hera (also a native me-Dorian divinity at Olympia) they still retained part of their ancient essence in the prizes awarded to the winners. The latter could eat the meat of the cow sacrificed in honour of the goddess, which implies communion with the divinity (Hera had shown herself to humanity in the form of a white heifer). The other prize, the

olive crown, on the contrary implies an ancient transposition of the original rites since the winner of the young girl's race received a pomegranate, the symbol of fertility and attribute of the great feminine divinity of the Sanctuary⁸.

The separation of the competitors into three age groups could be the origin of an archaic and ritualistic symbolism claiming that the ground cultivated was worked and sown "three times a year", producing three harvests by its fertility⁹; or, more simply, the separation of the competitors corresponded to a technical principle of classifying the athletes by age, as they were habitually divided into three categories in the great pan-Hellenic men's competitions, except for the Olympic competitions. Pausanias describes the light sports clothing worn by the competitors during the race, which is corroborated by

Young Spartan girl running. Bronze figure, 550 BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum.



various discoveries of statues and ceramics and in particular by the famous “Olympic runner”, a Greek copy of a fourth century BC bronze which is now in the Vatican Museum. “The artist has given the girl—about 18 years old—the same expression of harmony that we find in young athletes today; hair thrown back according to the “Olympic hairstyle”, eyes fixed on the winning post, mouth closed and tight, powerful chin, tense expression, waiting for the word go; her bosom is firm, she wears the chiton, the sports clothing, which leaves one breast bare, and is held by a belt high above the waist. One can appreciate the line of the musculature, one can guess the pulsation of the veins under the skin.”¹⁰

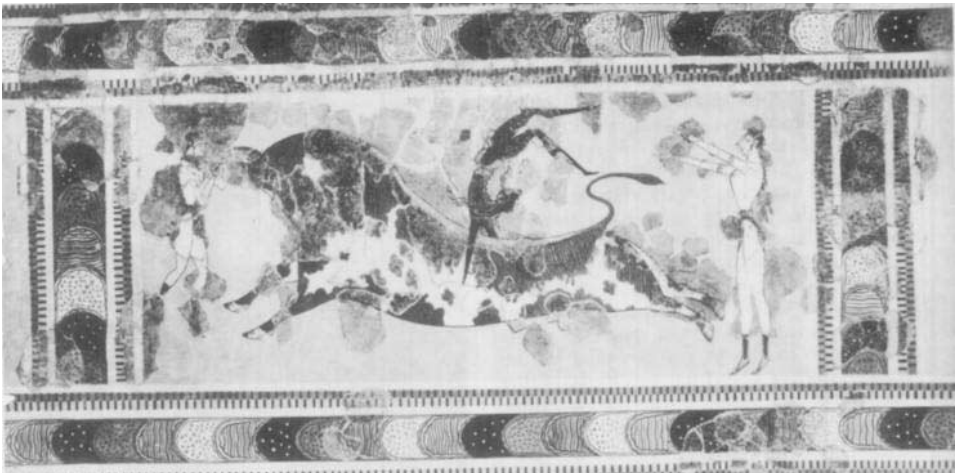
The Heren Games, like the Olympic Games, were held every four years. Probably at the beginning, instituted as propitiatory ceremonies in honour of the natural beneficent forces, they were celebrated annually¹¹, as the reproductive cycle, natural par excellence, is annual¹². However, when the new liturgy to Zeus imposed a quadrennial festivity by halving the old cycle of eight years, the Heren Games, like all the major festivities of the time, although of secondary importance in relation to the other Olym-

piads for men, had to adopt the same periodic cycle and take place every four years¹³, one month before or after the Olympic Games, or at least separated by two weeks from their opening or closing date¹⁴.

As a reward for their victory the Heren winners could dedicate their votive statues carrying their inscription¹⁵, or simply carve their name on commemorative tablets which would later be encrusted on the columns of the Heraion, where we can see today the casts at eye level¹⁶.

Pausanias sought the origin of the supreme college of the Heren Games formed by the Sixteen Women in one of the incidents in the eternal struggle which the Pisans and Eleans waged with so many uncertain alternations. “The history of the Sixteen Women is as follows; it is said that Damaphon, while tyrant of Pisa, caused the Eleans considerable damage. But when he died, since the people of Pisa disowned the misdeeds of their tyrant and the Eleans, too, were quite disposed to forget the offences, it was decided to elect a woman from each of the sixteen towns of Elis in order to settle the dispute, the woman having to be the oldest, noblest and most esteemed of all the women. The women of these towns therefore made peace between

The Cretan woman danced. But she also ran; she drove fast chariots drawn by horses, and she even practised the two major sports of men—pugilism and bull-fighting. The bull's jump. Fresco from Knosos palace. XVth century BC. Heraklion Museum.





Hippodamia was a fertile human reward offered to the deserving man to crown his triumph and audacity. Henceforth, not only did women cease to defend themselves and struggle, but they even became a reward. Pelope carrying Hippodamia away. Detail from an Athenian amphora with twisted handles from Casalte (Etruria). About 410 BC. Arezzo. Civic museum.

Pisa and Elea. Later they were entrusted with the control of the Heran Games and the duty of weaving the "peplos" for Hera.¹⁷ Just as the hellanodics, the famous college of women could not take up its administrative functions without being suitably purified by the sacrifice of a pig and ritual ablutions at the Piera fountain.¹⁸

Outside the Olympic sphere, we have good reason today to think that women had access to participation in other large pan-Hellenic festivities: the Isthmian, Pythian and Nemean Games. In his well-documented study on ancient Olympic champions¹⁹, Piernavieja quotes the praiseworthy work of Mrs. Rachel S. Robinson²⁰, based on the inscriptions of a pedestal found at Delphi. According to him, three famous champions—Trifose, Hedeia and Dionysia—three sisters and daughters of Hermesianacte, were victorious in the individual competition in the Isthmian, Pythian, Nemean, Sicyonian and Asclepian Games. The facts can be situated at the beginning of the Christian era, in 41-47, and they are items of inestimable value for the elucidation of ancient women's championships. However one has never been able to establish, although it is of extreme importance, whether the Games at which the three valorous sisters gained their successes were mixed or, on the contrary, specially reserved for women.

(To be continued)

¹ Nogués, J.G.: Illustrated universal mythology. Buenos Aires, 1960, page 285.

² Piernavieja, Miguel: Ancient Olympic Champions. C.A.F., 1963, page 410.

³ Assa, Janine: Women and Sport in Antiquity. In Citius, Altius, Fortius, vol. V. Madrid, 1963, page 430.

⁴ Plutarch: Parallel lives, Licurge XIV, Greek biographers, Madrid, 1964.

⁵ Diem, Carl: History of Sport. Barcelona, 1966, page 130.

⁶ Thucydide: History of the Peloponnesian War, III, 104, 1-4. In the Greek Historians, Madrid, 1969.

⁷ Pausanias: Itinerary of Greece, V, 16, 2-4. In the Greek Historians, Madrid, 1969.

⁸ Drees, Ludwig: Olympia. Gods, artists and athletes. London, 1968, page 29.

⁹ Drees, L.: Op. cit. page 29.

¹⁰ Diem, C.: Op. cit. page 130.

¹¹ Piernavieja, M.: Op. cit. page 414, according to Pausanias (VI, 20, 7).

¹² Drees, L.: Op. cit. pages 15 and 29.

¹³ Drees, L.: Op. cit. page 29. Schoebel, Heinz: Olympia and its Games. Mexico, 1968, page 96.

¹⁴ Diem, C.: Op. cit. page 131.

¹⁵ Pausanias: V, 16, 3.

¹⁶ Diem, C.: Op. cit. page 210.

¹⁷ Pausanias: V, 16, 5-6.

¹⁸ Pausanias, V, 16, 8.

¹⁹ Piernavieja, M.: Op. cit. page 417.

²⁰ Sources for the History of Greek Athletics. Cincinnati, 1955.