

Sport and the Games in ancient Greek society *

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In previous lectures I have presented at the International Olympic Academy, I have tried to show the important role that sport events played in ancient Greece and how closely athleticism and the games were linked with social life and the education of the young ; I also attempted to prove that physical education was not cultivated in the ancient stadia and the palaestras solely for practical and hygienic reasons, but that Greeks expected more essential achievements and results from such activities. With the games and exercise, the Greeks wanted to develop the perfect human being that Greek antiquity has handed down to us, moulded in bronze or marble, like the *Hermes* of Praxiteles, the *Ephebe* of Anticythera, the *Doryphorus* of Polykleitus or Lysippos' Aghia.

Today, since the special theme of our 18th Session is "*Olympism in contemporary society*" it might be opportune to consider the parallel question of "*Sport and games in ancient Greek society*" so that each of you can make the necessary comparisons and draw his own conclusions.

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* Conference given at Olympia during the 18th IOA Session.

In ancient times, society was a reflection of the State. The State, in the Greek sense, did not only include all the elements that make up a form of government in the modern sense, but life as a whole in each ancient city-state as defined by the laws. In Athens, for example, there was greater freedom in the form of government and the thoughts and actions of citizens, while in Sparta, everyday life was regulated in all its details by the State. In spite of the major differences between the two systems, however, both in Athens and in Sparta the State exerted a strong influence on the citizens' way of life, for the "*interest of the State*" prevailed in the mind and action of the people. The procedures in Athens were of course more liberal than the very strict rules of Sparta. But we can say on the whole that the State defined the way in which the citizens would be formed, keeping the city's interests foremost in mind. Thucydides identified the city and its regime with education, i.e. the concern to educate and train men in accordance with the interest of the State :

“Ευνελών τε λεγω την τε ποσαν πογω
της Έγγαδος παιδενοω εΐναι” (B. 41.1).

The great German educator Jäger believes that education is not a system of abstract ideas but that Greek history, which began together with man from the time he could stand upright on two feet, evolved later with learning and education, and he points out that without the Greek image of civilisation, there would be no "*antiquity*" in history and no "*Western civilization*" (Werner Jäger - Paideia, Translation by G. P. Verroios).

The history of education is defined by the basic changes that occur in the values, principles and rules that govern a community, a society, a city-state. All ancient societies had their rules of life, even in Confucius' China.

Games as a means of education

The sport games were at the centre of community life in Greece during prehistoric and historic times, and all the creative work of this long period, literature, philosophy, science and magnificent artistic achievements were strongly influenced by sporting activities.

The games in ancient Greece had a very marked educational character. Man became, thanks to the Greeks, a work of art because they were the first among ancient people who had learned how to offer a complete education. The moulded, formed, developed man.

The words "πλάθω," "πλάττω," "πλάττειν" (mould, shape) we find for the first time in Plato's works and they give the exact meaning of education. The craftsman gives form and shape to clay, the sculptor to marble or stone. They animate lifeless matter. If we want to create total men we use education which moulds the soul and tames the mind. Jäger again says that the Greeks were the true creators of men among all people.

This was possible because Greeks lived close to nature, which they knew well and could interpret and imitate. Greeks had an inborn sense of the natural. They were the first who defined the meaning of nature and its manifestations as it is revealed in all fields of life, in thought, words, deeds and actions. They lived within nature, close to its life-giving breath; they watched its constant and regular changes, its reactions and outbursts and they imitated it after having communicated with it. They were aware of the natural immutable laws according to which the physical and mental abilities of man become activated and thus, on the model of the forces that drive natural life, they created education, the cultural force that contributes to the perfection of man.

The course from the rigorous functionality of nature to the sophisticated individuality of man is linked to the mystic meaning that characterises the recreative powers of nature which result from its reviving bonds with the earth and the sun from which nature draws its own forces.

When the spiritual and mental world of man was still in the period of infancy, physical

superiority was the only attribute that distinguished the elect and the superior. The strong man could dominate and impose his will as the head and leader of the tribe. He was admired and respected by all since he was different from the others. This is clearly expressed by Anthilochus, King of the Phaeacians when he invited Ulysses, who had become shipwrecked on his shores, to take part in the games he had organised in his honour.

"Come stranger, be told him, and take part in the games, for in our times man's honour and dignity is

"ὄ,τι ποσσ' ὦν τε ρέξη και χερσῶ ἐήσω"

(what he can do with his hands and with his legs).

These men, it was felt, possessed the highest good - virtue. In Homer, the word "ἀρετή" (virtue) never refers to moral and intellectual attributes, on the contrary, according to the mentality and customs of those times, the term meant power and agility of the body of the warrior or athlete and above all heroic prowess, which is not considered as a moral act but is part of the elements that make up physical strength and muscular perfection. The poet Sin&rides, much later (6th Century B.C.) defined the idea of virtue which man should possess with great clarity.

"ἄνδρ' ἀγαθὸν μὲν ἀγαθῶς γενέσθαι χαλεπὸν χερσὶ τε καὶ ποσὶ καὶ νόῳ τετραγώνου ἄνευ ψόγου τεταγμένον"

(man, in order to become truly perfect, should be strong in the arms and legs, square of mind, that is, correctly balanced).

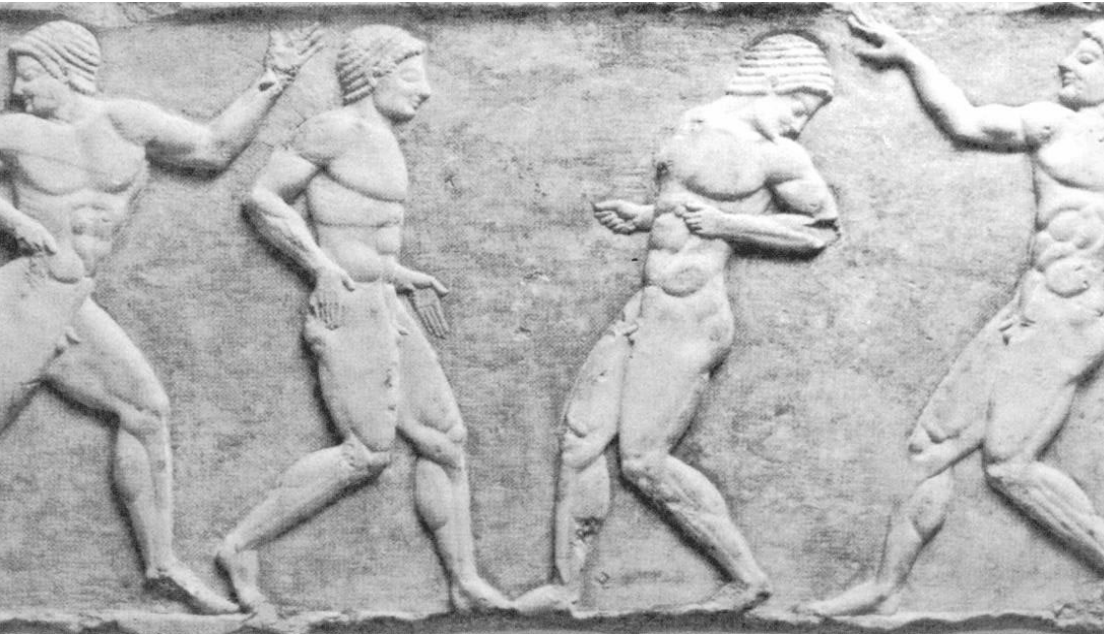
Physical valour and mental harmony

However, with the progress of civilisation, strong men also had to possess political and intellectual abilities, so as to be able to serve usefully their city and tribe. In this way an integrated human being, almost perfect and strong in body and soul could be formed. He was represented by the mythical hero of all Greeks, Hercules, brave and irresistibly strong, with admirable mental abilities, i.e. the perfect human type, the protector of the weak, the fighter of evil.

In this way and cultivating these ideas, the ancient Greeks during many years honoured physical strength and intellectual harmony, combining them in virtue, the highest good that could ever be attained by man. All these elements were combined, associated and established as an idea, because the ancient Greeks believed and proved that with fair and constant emulation, with competitive exercise and the parallel development of the spirit, perfection could be achieved for man.

godsent blessing, a joy and pride for the city, its fame and prestige, and they recognised the victors as men worthy of respect and honoured them with great distinctions. They were lodged at the Prytaneum, they erected their statues in the agora, the gymnasia, the palaestras and their name was mentioned in the dithyrambs.

Not because they considered the few and elect as exceptional human beings, but



This perfection was the concern of the city, the State of that time, for it was in its interest to form able citizens who could not only protect it by taking up arms in moments of danger, but also participate in civic affairs and worry about the development, organisation, progress and fame of their city.

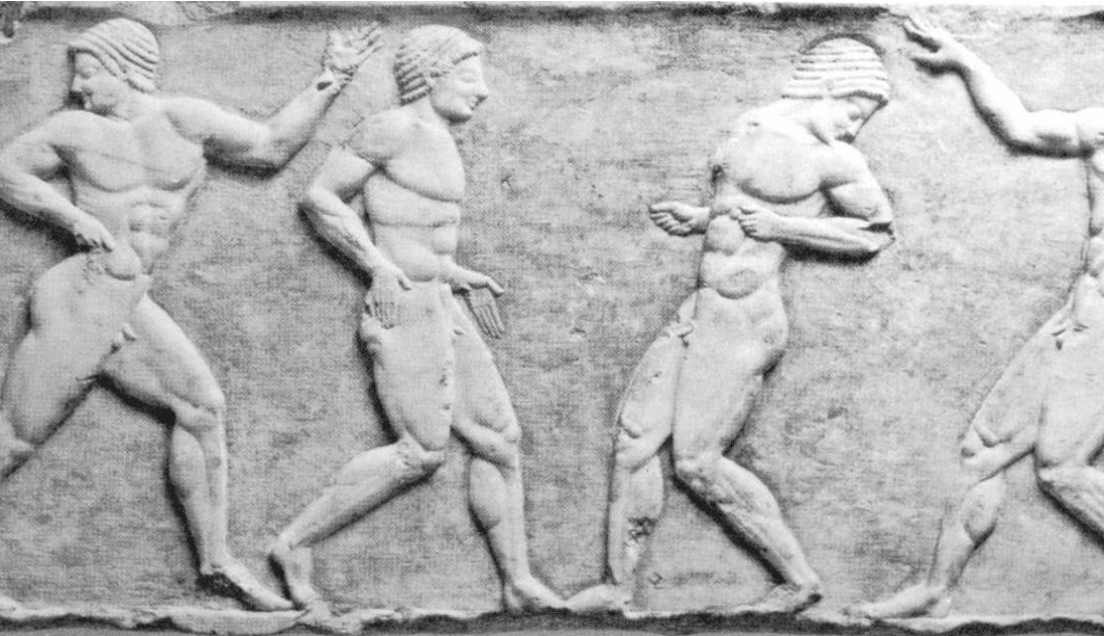
After realising the effect that the games could have on the formation of integrated human beings, physically and morally strong, the ancient Greeks turned competition into an institution on which they based the education of their citizens. They presented the victory at major games as a

because the few and exceptional individuals were used as examples to influence the many, the people as a whole, and to attract the young to the clean and useful life of the gymnasium. These are the reasons for which they promoted the games in such splendour and majesty and considered them as the basic element of education. Solon in Anacharsis explains this with convincing arguments : *"We believe that the eagerness to frequent the gymnasia and practise sport, should characterise all citizens and not only the few who excel. And we encourage them to exercise their body, not only in order to distinguish themselves in the games or win*

awards—for we know that very few among the many will succeed—but because we believe that their contribution for the whole city and the citizens will be much greater than that of the few who have won important victories.” (Lucian, Anarcharsis, 36).

The people of course admired the crowned victors, worshipped them as gods, related their deeds, embellishing them with exaggeration and considered them blissful, fortuna-

described in considerable detail the enthusiastic participation of the crowds, their passion and fanaticism during the games and the celebrations that went on after the victory of a countryman. They screamed, jumped up and down, raised their arms, waved pieces of clothing, embraced their neighbours, acclaimed the victors, showered them with flowers and leaves, bore them away in triumph and crowned them with flower wreaths.



te and glorious. Poets extolled and sang their achievements :

*“ὁ δὲ νικῶν λοιπὸν ἀμφὶ βίοντον ἔχει
μελιτόεσσαν εὐδίαν ἀέθλων γ’ ἔνεκεν”*

(He who wins will live a life of joy thereafter because of his deeds). (Pindar, O1. 1, 97.)

Gods and poets

Plutarch, Pindar’s disciple, Philostratus, Dion Chrysostomus and other authors, have

They knew, however, that even after victory man should retain his humility and composure, for the wise men taught them that above all they needed the protection and consent of the gods. The athletic events had been invented by the gods who were the first competitors and now were the protectors of athletes and games. The special skills which some chosen people possess together with the talented athletes have been given to them by the gods and can be taken away again if men show disrespect, if they ignore the divine gift or are swollen with arrogance and pride. This is why men honour the gods before the

beginning of the games, and thank and praise them at the end with thanksgiving sacrifices and offer the valuable crown of their victory to the patron god of their city when they return home covered in glory.

Poets always counselled and guided them so that victory should never lose its human meaning and become a moral teaching

“καί μήτε νικῶν ἀμφάδην ἀγάλλεο μηδέ
νικηθεῖς ἐν οἴκῳ καταπεσῶν ὀδύρεο·
ἀλλά χαρτοῖσίν τε χαιρε καί κακοῖσιν
ἀσάλα μὴ λίην· γίγνωσκε δ' οἷος ρυθμός
ἀνθρώπου ἔχει”
(Archilochus, 67).

If you win, never boast about your victory publicly and provocatively and if you lose do not lament, prostrated in your home; be content with the joy that comes your way and do not be too angry with your misfortunes; and be aware of the importance of rhythm and order in the life of men).

We see here that the poet encourages them to rise above despair and rely on their pride in case of failure or defeat. When they win, they should accept success with humility, for “rhythm”, that is, order and coherence, should prevail in everyday life, since happiness and unhappiness are part of man's destiny which is part of the natural order of existence.

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Conclusion

In ancient Greece, the State exerted a strong influence on all details of civic life and was responsible for the education of citizens. Pericles in his description of the Athenian State has shown that it affected all private and public life, education, cultural activities, economy, customs, the rights and duties of citizens.

Even at the time of Homer, the perfect, able and handsome man is defined as “kalos”. The “kalos” was the ideal human type, i.e. the strong and well-built man. Later the concept of “ἀγαθός” was added, at which time, among the qualities of the perfect man, were also included personal

value, morals, deeds, “virtue”. Man should therefore combine a beautiful body, an exemplary attitude, a noble soul and a bright mind. The ancient state strived to achieve virtue for its citizens and it used exercise and games to attain this objective. The palaestras and gymnasia were centres of life in ancient Greece, for old and young alike, together with the agora in the case of political events.

Today, sport as a social phenomenon constitutes a vital cultural factor and a strong communication medium among people, with a wide popular appeal to the large public since it has moved beyond national confines and is looking for common points of cooperation at the international level. All modern athletic activities are described with the general term “sports” and participation in them is mostly free and on an amateur basis.

In antiquity, it was a social institution in the hands of the State, a basic means for education and learning. Thanks to this educational system, the sacred games shone for 1,200 years, beautiful works of art and the mind were created, and a whole civilisation flourished.

I think that today with sport we can create or bring back to the surface a strong, international social trend where educational needs and ideas will influence sport and where sport in turn will serve, strengthen and support the efforts of education, thus becoming a decisive, effective and creative social factor.

C. P.

