

# LUCIUS MINICIUS NATALIS, FIRST SPANISH OLYMPIC CHAMPION

After our brief historical survey of how the ancient Olympic Games (see O.R. No. 255/56) were shaped, we must pause at the year 129 A.D. when the 227th Games were held at Olympia. There is nothing to indicate that anything untoward happened at the Games but our reason for closer scrutiny lies in the personality of one of the four participants whom history has recorded as winners.

*By Conrado Durántez*



It is already strange that historical research has revealed a list of only four entrants and winners; the programme of events at Olympia sometimes covered as many as 19 fields but for the Olympiad in question only four winners are known, one of them in an unspecified event.

Basically, the catalogue of Olympic winners was handed down to posterity by Sixtus Julius Africanus who in the third century published a summary of the chronicles of Eusebius Pamphili, Bishop of Caesarea, containing a list of Olympic winners. Even before the fifth century B.C., the sophist and mathematician Hippias had published a list which was subsequently revised and amended by Eratosthenes, Timaeus, Philochorus, Phlegon and Africanus himself. In the tenth century the Byzantine writer Phocas included in his works a sizeable extract from Phlegon which, combined with the fortunate discovery of the Oxyrynchus papyri and supplemented by a long series of data and notices scattered throughout Greek literature, not to mention the study of archeological finds and inscriptions excavated at Olympia itself, provided the material for Hugo Forster's List of Olympic Winners, published in 1881-1882 as the first modern listing of *olympiónikoi*; it gives a total of 634 winners. On the basis of the foregoing and his own commendable private research, Italy's Professor Luigi Moretti compiled his own list of ancient Olympic Games winners, raising the number to 1029.

Having completed our brief digression into the sources of information in this field, let us now turn to the four champions who won at the 227th Olympiad in 129 A.D.

**Dionysios Sameumis of Alexandra.** Winner of the sprint race or stade (192.27 m), thus confirming his triumph at the previous Olympics held in the year 125.

**M. Vulpius Domesticus of Ephesus.** Winner of the pancratium, a dangerous form of all-out wrestling introduced at Olympia in 648 B.C. During the last three centuries of the pre-Christian era and in the days when Domesticus won, the pan-

cratium enjoyed more popularity than any other event. Domesticus' victory earned him the title of *periodonikes*, equivalent in the remoteness of time to our present-day world champion and signifying that he had won the same contest while doing the rounds of all four major Pan-Hellenic Games. As a result, he received maximum honours from Hadrian and his successor Antoninus Pius and, besides being made an honorary citizen of Athens, became life chairman of the General Association of Athletes and superintendent of the Imperial Baths.

**Deiphilos of Aigai (Aeolian islands).** We know of his triumph at the Games of this Olympiad but not in the event for which he entered, to which testimony has been discovered in the form of a coin minted in the last years of Hadrian's term of office.

**Lucius Minicius Natalis of Rome.** Winner of the chariot race.

The Greeks were particularly fond of equestrian sports. As in the other forms of contest at the ancient Games, the general interest aroused by certain competitions among the citizens of ancient Greece was manifest before they were included in the Olympic programme. The Athenian nobility regarded horsemanship as an essential discipline without which the education of youth was incomplete, so it gained greatest predilection among the upper social classes.

Conversely, exercises such as wrestling and the pentathlon, which required no special equipment (horses or chariots) and were therefore more readily accessible, were gradually relegated to the lowlier classes.

The passion for horses and equestrian events reached such a pitch that, as Poppo mentions, many nobles gave their sons names compounded of *Hippo* or *Hippo* (hippos — horse).

Even in the sixth century, Xenophon wrote a series of handbooks on hunting and riding, primarily for the noble classes

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to whom these extensions of equestrian activity were reserved almost as a caste privilege.

## EQUESTRIAN EVENTS

While various forms of hippic contest were known, the thirty with which Veschi attempts to round off the possibly numerous variants does seem somewhat excessive.

The events were divided into two basic groups : horse races in the true sense (hippism) and chariot races.

The competition vehicle used was the *arma*, the ancient war chariot of Homer's day. Low and light, it consisted solely of a small simple platform inclined to the rear and resting on two four-spoked wheels. The *auriga* kept his balance at the centre by slightly bending and bowing his legs ; he held the reins in one hand and a whip or goad in the other to encourage the horse. There were either two or four horses per chariot which were known as *biga* or *chariot* depending on their number. One or two were attached to either side of the shaft and each was given a name.

Chariot races and horse racing were first established at Olympia in 680 and 648 B.C., respectively. Later, races between horse-drawn bigas, colt-drawn chariots and bigas and eventually apine or mule-drawn chariot races were introduced. Lastly, the *kalpe* was featured as a strange competition half-way between horse and pedestrian racing : the competitors had to leap to the ground on the final lap and complete the remaining distance so as to arrive at the finishing line behind their mounts which they nonetheless had to steer by the reins which, naturally, were much longer than usual.

The fact that hippism had a markedly noble flavour meant that competition was not confined simply to the stadium but also gave rise to sharp rivalry and gradual emulation based on the entry of more artistic and luxurious chariots and horses of better breed and stamp. The nobility and the wealthy rivalled one another in their quest

for magnificence. The towns themselves often cooperated collectively so that horses and chariots representing them should be present at the Games.

Famous winners at Olympia included kings and leading politicians seeking the ultimate confirmation of their popularity and fame through a triumph there, e.g. Princess Kyniska of Sparta, daughter of King Archidemos II ; the tyrant Hieron of Syracuse; the famous but contradictory Athenian politician Alcibiades who at the 91st Olympiad presented seven teams of horses which took first, second and fourth places, and King Philip II of Macedonia, not to mention the Roman Emperor Nero.

## WHO WAS LUCIUS MINICIUS ?

Focusing once more on Lucius Minicius Natalis, he was the first known Olympic champion to have been born in the Iberian Peninsula according to an inscription engraved on the baseplate of a monument dedicated to Minicius by the Sevirii Augustales and preserved in the Archaeological Museum at Barcelona. The inscription contains a part of Minicius' will in which he states that he was born at Barcino (Barcelona) on a day in the Ides (6th-11th) of February, probably in 97 A.D.

L. Minicius was a great fancier and breeder of horses and later added to his family name, possibly to distinguish himself from his father of the same name, that of Quadronius Verus. He held important political and military posts under Trajan, Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, including those of Praetor (127-128 A.D.), Consul (130-134) and Proconsul in Africa (149-150).

In the then prosperous Barcelona, the Minicius family was presumably noted for its economic and political power since both father and son ordered and paid for the construction of vast baths with porticos and an aqueduct; these must have been built in about 125, i.e. four years prior to the son's Olympic victory. Titus Minicius' will refers to the building, which was discovered during the excavation of the Plaza San Miguel. On the other hand there has as

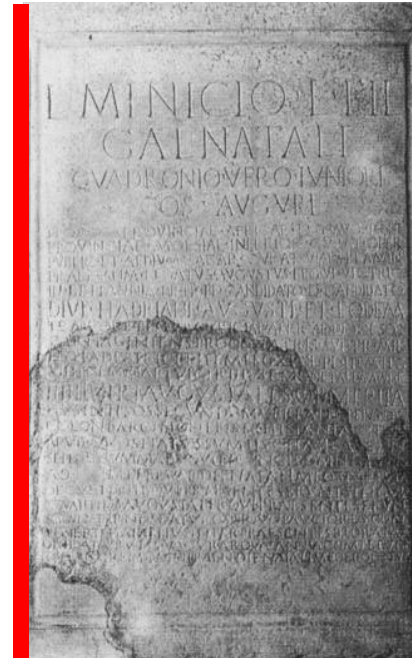
yet been no evidence to support the existence in Barcelona of a circus which would explain Lucius' famous hippic prowess, although a mosaic of over 8 metres in length and depicting four chariots vying flat-out as they approach the finishing line has been unearthed in Barcelona.

As a souvenir of his Olympic triumph, Lucius Minicius made a votive offering of the chariot in which he won the race and had it mounted near the Hippodrome on a base subsequently engraved with the following inscription : "General Lucius Minicius natalis, who won the chariot race at the 227th Olympiad, donated the winning

chariot to the Sanctuary. He was Praetor and Proconsul of Libya". It is certainly to the erection of this monument that Pausanias was referring when he stated that he was present at the excavations near the column of Oenomaus, which unearthed "pieces of weapons, bridles and bits".

This brings us to the end of our story. In the year 129 a Hispano-Roman from Barcelona won an Olympic victory while the destiny of Rome lay in the hands of Hadrian, another Hispano-Roman born at Italica, now Santiponce in the Andalusian province of Seville.

C. D.



**Stone base and mosaic discovered in Barcelona recounting the exploits of Lucius Minicius.**

