

Finley, M. J. and Pleket, H. W., *The Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years*, (Clarke, Irwin and Co. Ltd. Toronto, 1976)  
138 pages, illustrated.

To anyone seeking the historical truth concerning the Ancient Olympic Games this product of a combined authorship of the Professor of Ancient History in the University of Cambridge (Finley) and the University of Leiden's Reader in Greek and Latin Epigraphy (Pleket) — makes fascinating and authoritative reading.

Yet, for those of us, from time to time, who pontificate on this intriguing subject, the book cannot, in itself, be regarded as a complete reference. Rather should it be used, I suggest, to augment and, sometimes, correct what we have already learned from Carl Diem, E.N. Gardiner, H. A. Harris, Cleanthis Palaeologos and Ludwig Drees — to name some of the most expert on what took place at Olympia in those distant days.

In particular, this new, scholarly yet highly readable contribution to our knowledge takes a much more realistic view, than hitherto, of the Ancient Greek attitude toward athletic competition.

The authors tell us, for example, that a 'professional' to a Greek, as to us, meant an athlete who devoted himself more or less full-time to an activity — but that all the athletes of those days, professional or *Idiotai* (i.e. non-professional), accepted material rewards for victory, regardless of class or personal fortune; and this from about 700 B.C. — the time that the Olympic programme became diversified, attracting competitors from Asia Minor, Sicily and Southern Italy. "The 'true amateur' never existed in antiquity".

Nor did the Ancient Greek draw clear distinction between sacred and secular. His was a highly competitive society; success in life was to be gained through hard work and self reliance, possibly assisted by divine favour of the gods whom he acknowledged, respected and feared and to whom he was grateful. But this in no way detracted from nor humbled his

personal talents, efforts or virtues. The Greek gods, then, were patrons of success rather than its creators.

As for sport; sport for sport's sake was then unknown; victory alone brought glory, defeat its undying shame. "Always to be first and to surpass others" — from early times that was the philosophy! (Can we claim to have made much progress?)

We are reminded of the two-fold criticisms of the Games then — criticisms which never harmed their popularity with the masses, however. First, that the glorification of athletes ignored the importance of human intellectual and spiritual values. Second, that the Games enjoyed an exaggerated importance above that of the greater needs of the community; i.e. they were not given their proper place in the scale of human values.

And to these criticisms Aristotle (who was otherwise keenly interested in athletics) added that "the athletes' habit of body neither produces a good condition for the general purposes of civic life, nor does it encourage ordinary health and the procreation of children"! A few years before, Euripedes, the Athenian tragic poet, had referred to wrestlers in particular as being "slaves to their jaws, obedient to their bellies".

As I have said, Finley and Pleket take a more realistic, less eulogistic, view of what took place at Olympia two thousand and more years ago. And in relating this to the contemporary Olympic scene, their final paragraph includes the following:

'What we choose to think about sport in the modern world, in sum, has to be worked out and defended from modern values and modern conditions. Harking back to the ancient Greek Olympics has produced both bad history and bad arguments. It may be right or it may be wrong to forbid Olympic athletes to profit financially from their medals, but the answer will not be found in the northwestern corner of the Peloponnese, and surely not when what happened there two thousand years ago is distorted and perverted to fit one or another modern ideology".

Amen to that!

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