

## Book Reviews

Olivová, Véra. *Sports and Games in the Ancient World*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984. Pp. 207. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95.

By a modern historian and ethnographer whose major work to date is *the Doomed Democracy* on twentieth-century Czechoslovakia, this impressive looking volume attempts to cover sports and games from the birth of man to Byzantium in just 200 pages, most of which are illustrated. "Starting from a study of the societies of the ancient world, it attempts to determine how people spent their leisure time, to explain why and how various physical activities evolved, to trace their formal refinement and clarify their changes." (p. 9) Throughout the work "sports" is used rather broadly "for those physical activities in which the agonal principle is evident." Despite a curious Forward by no less than W.G. Forrest, the work is hardly as "authoritative" as the book jacket claims.

This work is awkward to review because, while its content is interesting and readable, it says little that is new or profound. An early assertion that "the heritage of very diverse cultures and of man's ancient past is encoded in sport today" (p. 9) is soon replaced by the obvious thesis that ancient sport is related to its contemporary society. This leads to rather bland conclusions, as in the chapter on Egypt: "The wealth of art and literature surviving from the civilization of ancient Egypt, and the thousands of years of uninterrupted cultural evolution there, provide an unusually clear view of the complex process, in which a wide variety of physical activities were developed, and frequently altered to accord with social changes and political events." (p. 60) Olivová does not seem intimately familiar with the ancient evidence or with demythologizing trends in recent scholarship. The derivative nature of the text is suggested by the regular references in the Notes to standard or dated general works (Gardiner, Friedlaender, etc.) and even nineteenth-century handbooks. While there is a helpful Index, the Bibliography offers a curious mix of old and new works with European scholars predominating. D. Orpington has done a good job of translating, but the text still contains disjunctions, clichés and curious sentences such as the following on Greek physical education: "Training also included a number of preparatory exercises, such as forcing one's partner from his stance with the pressure of one hand or finger." (p. 125)

The *Prologue* is the most interesting section of the book because of some ethnographic insights on sacrifice, relaxation and competitiveness in early human society. Olivova tries to trace the history of the "elements" of sport (such as combative spirit and spectator involvement) before they crystallize into sport (cf. her work of 1979 on the historical genesis of sport). She suggests that

because early man used various physical activities (rituals and tests) during non-utilitarian times, and because later sport had similar activities, there was a developmental link. Many might challenge Olivova's approach and terminology. Do "elements" equal "origins" and do sporting "activities" equal "sport"? Terms like "progress" and "evolution" occur frequently and her use of "festival", "professional performer" and "temples" may not be acceptable to all. Theories and vague references, such as "It is clear from the ethnographic material" (p. 13), are used to assert the development of sports and games in the Paleolithic age with a continuous evolution with increasing leisure time. As Joan Chandler put it in *JSH* 12 (1985): 280: "Assertion is not evidence." The origin of sport remains a will-o'-the-wisp, and Olivová really establishes only that which was already known—that early man left behind scenes of hunting and communal dancing which can be interpreted according to differing theories.

Moving on to the ancient Near East we find familiar comments on theocracy and royal privilege (cf. her earlier work, "Games and Sports Elements in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *History of Physical Education and Sport 2* (Tokyo, 1974), pp. 47-70). The chapter ranges widely chronologically from the fourth millennium BC to the Persian Empire, and it includes curious jumps as from Xenophon on horse races to the relevance of "sacred marriage" festivals for sport. Although wrestling gets several illustrations, Olivova's main concerns are the socially exclusive royal hunts and the origins of charioteering. An interest in chariots continues through the work but it involves some curious arguments. Although Olivova admits that there is "not the slightest trace of evidence" (p. 33), she claims that the "technical conditions" (light-weight chariots and qualified training for horses) existed and that the hypothesis (that chariot races originated in aristocratic hunting parties in Asia Minor and Syria) is supported by "later developments." *Post hoc ergo propter hoc?*

After an unobjectionable survey of famous Egyptian materials including Beni Hasan and Tut's tomb, Olivová now follows the "focus of cultural evolution" (p. 63) to Crete and the Greek mainland, leaving one to wonder if evolution-and sport-ceased in the non-Western world. Sir Arthur Evans' beautiful Minoans, "remarkably unwarlike" and "free of social disruptions," frolic in an enchanting world of leisure. That Mycenae is depicted as "markedly military" will surprise few readers. After summarizing the Games of Patroclus for five pages (p. 83-88) Olivová comes to see in Homer a reflection of the reintroduction of chariot racing from the Near East. She now embarks on a laudatory treatment of Greek sport compounded with commonplaces on Greek freedom, individuality and democracy (cf. her "Kalokagathia—the Greek Ideal of the Harmonious Personality," in *CJHS* 14 no. 2 (1983):1-15). Ideologically she follows Jaeger; on the history of Greek sport she follows Gardiner's schema of a golden age and decline through professionalism. Her discussions of war and politics are rather superficial: Greek physical fitness wins out over despotism in the Persian Wars and the Greeks go on nationalistically to pursue the cult of the naked body. A section on Rome opens with a chapter on the

Etruscans, curiously entitled “The Roman Empire,” adds material familiar from Balsdon and others, and concludes that: “The forms of physical culture in imperial Rome reflected the standards, the nature and the needs of the state and the society at that time.” (p. 187) The work, with some use of Cameron’s excellent research, closes with the decline of chariot racing in later Byzantium, leaving the question of formative influences on modern sport up to the reader. To be fair, Olivova does point out issues such as social differentiation and ideological and utilitarian considerations, but often the material presented is not tied into any strong argumental line. The lack of a major new thesis or approach in the text reduces the reviewer to noting slips, including: military skirts were used as protection in Homeric boxing (p. 90); “while the Olympic Games were in progress special races for girls were held nearby as part of the festival of the goddess Hera” (pp. 117-118); there was a system of “universal education” in fifth-century Athens (p. 125); boxers wore “specially constructed helmets” (p. 140); and gouging was permitted in the pankration (p. 142).

The most attractive aspect of the book is the over 200 illustrations, and aesthetically these are splendid. Unfortunately, the sources of individual illustrations are not given and there are no cross-references between illustrations and the text. Often the topic of an illustration is not discussed until several pages later (wrestlers on pp. 22, 23 and p. 25 but text on p. 38; bird hunting on p. 50 but text on p. 57; the Minoan sports rhyton on p. 66 but text on p. 71). A chariot is illustrated on p. 17 even though the text (p. 15) admits that chariots did not exist within the time frame of the chapter. Although the book jacket claims that the illustrations were “carefully researched,” errors in captioning include: the frequent confusion of red and black figure vases (pp. 96, 100, 103, 116); a “Panhellenic amphora” (p. 122); the dating of Puteoli’s amphitheatre to the fifth century AD (p. 172); and the interpretation of the riots at Pompeii as gladiators fighting (p. 186).

Via its listing with the History Book Club this work may turn the attention of general readers to the fascinating world of ancient sport, but even a popularizing book should minimize errors. In sum, I might give this-as an attractive coffee table book-to my in-laws but not to my students.

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