

Donald G. Kyle, *Athletics in Ancient Athens*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987. Pp. xvi, 240. Illustrations, maps, index, notes.

Donald Kyle concludes this fine book by stating that “it should now be clear that the interrelationship between the histories of Athens and its athletics is significant and continuous . . . Athletics were a public, integral, and potentially unifying or disruptive element in the civic experience of the Athenians” (p. 177). Among the many strong points of this study is its steady focus on the historical and cultural significance of athletics: this book is no mere exercise in antiquarianism, but a carefully documented analysis of the prosopography and politics of athletics in Athens.

At the core of the book is a catalogue of known and possible Athenian athletes. Each athlete receives a separate biographical entry in Appendix II with the relevant ancient testimonia and bibliographical notes: classicists and ancient historians will find this sober and detailed catalogue a valuable research tool. The background of Lysis, known to us from Plato’s dialogue, is nicely illuminated, as is that of the charismatic Autolykos, whom Xenophon, among others, described. Taking to heart the importance of the work of H. W. Pleket and David C. Young, Kyle uses his catalogue to address in chapter 4 the question of the athletes’ socio-economic background: who are the participants? Does the personnel change over the centuries of Athenian history? Kyle correctly distinguishes between “elitism of birth” and the “elitism of wealth” to which it increasingly yielded in the fifth century BC. What is problematic is the difficulty in determining whether the socio-economic status of a given athlete was the result of athletic achievement or the prerequisite for it, and there are few cases where the hereditary nobility of the athletes, or its absence can be proven. It is daunting to consider how few of Athens’ archons, strategoi, choregoi and other notables are known to us at all, to say nothing of their interests (or lack thereof) in athletics. Kyle is careful to warn the reader repeatedly that the trends he points out are based on very fragmentary evidence, and he wisely refrains from computing percentages or otherwise giving a misleading positivism; the trends he does point out are sensible and sound deductions from the evidence that has come down to us.

Having shown in chapter 4 “historical developments more in line with changes in Greek society than with the oft lamented ‘decline of Greek athletics’ ” (p. 121), Kyle examines in chapter 5 the testimony of ancient critics of

athletics, whose polemics have supported the modern “rise and fall” view of Greek sport. His insights into the philosophical and literary traditions behind Xenophanes, Euripides, Isocrates, Plato, and other critics of sport are penetrating and correct. Kyle also stresses the often overlooked point that the criticisms “suggest that athletics and physical education were not as unpopular nor in such a state of decay as Aristophanes and the Old Oligarch claim” (p. 140).

Kyle gives a full account of the Athenian athletic festivals (ch. 2), including the minor ones, and also examines the major athletic facilities (ch. 3). This latter chapter contains a critical discussion of Delorme’s theory that the rise of the gymnasium was the result of a need for military training and some useful insights into the less prestigious site of the Kynosarges and why it served the rising Themistokles so well. Since Kyle’s focus is on political and social history, he devotes little space to the techniques of the ancient events. He does, however, make the astute observation that the order of the introduction of the events at the Great Panathenaea suggests that military interests are late (4th century) rather than early, thus challenging the conventional wisdom that Greek sport was primarily guided by military needs. Kyle also observes that the showy team races and some of the spectacular single events, like the *apobates* have more to do with entertainment than athletics. In addition to the arguments he gives, it is noteworthy that the prizes recorded on IG II 2311 for team events are substantially smaller than those for traditional individual gymnastic events.

To sum up, this is a book full of important insights and information. It is readable and clear, but at the same time will serve to aid and stimulate further research through its meticulous documentation and methodology.

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