

Essay Reviews

Sansone, David. *Greek Athletics and the Genesis of Sport*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988. Pp. xv, 136. Illustrations, index. \$19.95 (cloth).

Regularly fascinating and sometimes frustrating, Sansone's two essays offer one of the most provocative interpretations of the origin and nature of early and all sport to appear in decades. Writing in an erudite if not always endearing manner, Sansone handles an impressive range of evidence and scholarship concerning man from his beginnings to the present day. Interspersing comments on football and the international arms race with words such as hypermetropia, Sansone is occasionally hesitant and self-effacing but he generally writes with the enthusiasm of a convert and the self-assurance of a prophet.

Sansone's work strongly rejects the approaches and ideas of numerous scholars. In the first thirty-seven pages, en route to explaining his own method and introducing his own definition of sport as the ritual sacrifice of physical energy, Sansone is not very patient or gracious toward those with whom he disagrees. Modern views, such as Carl Diem's interpretation of the origin of sport in cultic practice, tend to be presented as biased or misleading. Allen Guttmann's arguments about the distinctiveness of modern sport are brushed aside and later (p. 65) Guttmann is accused of "specious sophism." Ancient explanations of the origins of aspects of sport and sacrifice are dismissed as rationalizations. Sansone's own interpretation is a synthesis of ideas from scholars (especially Karl Meuli and W. Burkert) to whom he candidly and respectfully acknowledges his debts. Yet his is also a stimulating extension of those ideas to new lengths. Once the thesis is revealed, the book becomes more and more engrossing and more-if not fully-convincing. Even in his Prelude, however, Sansone shows rather too much confidence in his own interpretation: "[T]his is the most, indeed the only, satisfactory definition that has so far been advanced." (pp. xiv-xv) Sansone apparently has decided to test the scholarly waters with a brief, outspoken book rather than a voluminous study. This is a small book with potentially huge implications.

There are some big "ifs" here. Sansone's theory works if we accept the premise-more ethological than historical-that all sport has a singular, fundamental nature (p. 14), and therefore any explanation of sport must deal with the origins, diversity and persistence of sport. Next, we must agree with Sansone that ethology offers the only clear and satisfying definition of ritual. He quotes Konrad Lorenz' definition of ritualization as the process whereby

a behavior pattern by means of which a species [or] a cultured society deals with certain environmental conditions, acquires an entirely new function,

that of communication. The primary function may still be performed, but it often recedes more and more into the background and may disappear completely so that a typical change of function is achieved. (Lorenz, *On Aggression*, pp. 57-58)

Cultural ritualization (p. 31) often redirects aggression and helps form human bonds, and the ritual behavior is typically modified “by means of the exaggeration, stylization or repetition of the behavior.* In simple terms, ritual is a “pattern of behavior that has acquired a new, communicative function” (p. 43). Moving on to the meaning of “sacrifice,” and admitting (p. 37) that he is defining one problematic concept in terms of another, Sansone argues that it is correct to speak of the sacrifice of something as immaterial as energy. If the reader takes all of these steps without stumbling or balking, Sansone’s interpretation follows.

According to Sansone, man’s experience as a Stone Age hunter imprinted behavior patterns that have endured as rituals. When man became a food producer through agriculture the activities—no longer pragmatic but still believed to be efficacious—survived and were redirected to the new communicative or symbolic function of display. Things were done in a certain way because they had always been done so, although the expressed aims and explanations changed as man, misunderstanding his own actions, invented myths and aetiologies. Following Meuli and Burkert, Sansone argues that blood sacrifice persisted from the hunter’s reconstitution of victims, driven by the paradoxical conviction that man must give up or use up something in order to get something. The primitive hunter’s ritual of killing and revivifying animals persisted in the form of blood sacrifice of domesticated animals and in the hunting of wild animals for sport. The crucial and new step made by Sansone now (pp. 61-62) is the argument that the expenditure of incorporeal energy, the exertion that formerly went into the hunt and was now unnecessary in blood sacrifices with domesticated animals, persisted and was still sacrificed ritually in ways that came to be termed ‘sport’ in the modern era. In other words, sport developed as the ritual sacrifice of physical energy in addition to and generally (but not always) in relationship to blood sacrifice. “For only if sport is a form of sacrifice can we explain its ritual associations.” (p. 62) Sansone sees sacrifice and sport as predating the emergence of cults to the gods. “The first thing we must do is recognize that ritual is not always, or fundamentally, connected with religion.” (p. 24) “The idea of the sacred arose, and the gods sprang into being to serve, among other things, as the recipients of sacrificial offerings.” (p. 71) Things became more complicated as the gods, myths and other rituals became entangled; but, seeing sacrifice and sport as fundamental and other developments as epiphenomenal, Sansone rejects the previous standard interpretations of the origin of Greek athletics, for example, in vegetation magic, funeral games, initiatory rites, suitor contests, and trials for kingship. Incidentally, sport for Sansone need not be competitive: competition is epiphenomenal, merely a secondary component of sport (p. 64). Neither need sport be participatory; doing exercise and watching professional athletes both share the fundamental nature of sport as sacrificial ritual.

Sansone's argument that sport is the ritual sacrifice of energy stands on firmer ground when applied to ancient Greece in Part Two rather than in Part One, which leans to overgeneralization. In Part Two Sansone is more at home as a classicist and the subject better suits his approach. Ancient Greece was chosen as a test case because of its relatively complete documentation on its sport, the extraordinary success of the Greeks in articulating the fundamental aspects of human experience, and because the Greeks display certain affinities with the "primitive." "Thus the Greeks are in a unique mediatory position; they were capable of experiencing what is at the root of human feeling and consciousness, and they communicated it to us in terms that are familiar to us (partly because we have inherited them from the Greeks)." (p. 76) In ritual, literature and art the Greeks reveal primitive aspects of sport which persist but become harder to recognize later. In Part Two the next steps in Sansone's argument become easier and quicker as he presents Greek sport as ritual sacrifice in which the athlete is both the dedicator and the dedication. This leads to his explanation for many curious features (both actions and myths) in Greek sport. In his words (p. 115): "Inasmuch as some of these features . . . have explicit connections with sacrifice, and inasmuch as sacrificial ritual itself is a survival of primitive hunting practice, we have a strong likelihood (although not, I will grant, conclusive proof) that the ritual of Greek sport was indeed a form of sacrifice, namely the sacrifice of human energy." Sansone's is the most inclusive explanation of numerous aspects of Greek sport (i.e., as ritual survivals) offered to date, and on some if not all of these issues Sansone very probably is correct. Like a Stone Age hunter in preparation for the hunt, the Greek athlete as sacrificer of energy, especially in that month of supervised training prior to the ancient Olympics, put on crowns or wreaths as vestigial camouflage; he washed his body, anointed himself with olive oil, powdered himself with sand or dust, and regulated his diet in order to mask his scent; and he avoided women to keep taboos and save his fluid (identified in primitive thought with life-force and strength). Some (but not all) publicly demonstrated their devotion and chastity via "infibulation" (symbolically precluding sex by binding of the foreskin) with the belief that this would enhance athletic performance. "(Of course a more radical means of preventing the loss of vital fluids is castration, and the operatic castrati of more recent times were clearly the descendants-figuratively speaking-of the ancient Italian *infibulati*.)" (p. 121) The athlete's prize was originally and often a tripod, a ritualized form of a *lebes* or sacrificial vessel. Sansone offers further explanations via the idea that at the same time by association the athlete as sacrificer is also a sacrificial victim. The two are closely identified as in the ancient dedication of a lock of one's hair. "Thus there can be no objection to our definition of sport on the grounds that it is impossible or irrational for sacrificer and victim to be one and the same." (p. 68) The strigil, which has defied explanation, is the smooth-edged survival of a denticulated sickle used as an instrument of scarification to let strengthening fluids into the body of the sacrificer-hunter, and it also recalls castration myths which derive from the hunter-athlete as victim (pp. 122 ff.). Races began as races to an

altar, competitions among willing victims to select the best offering for sacrifice. Slaves were banned as inferior victims. Sport was conducted like sacrifice to the music of the double pipe. The athlete was adorned like a victim with fillets of wool recalling sacrificial reconstitution as well as the donning of skins in a hunt. All of this is supported by illustrations and by ethnological parallels to Amerindians and aborigines, although this involves some redundancy and circularity in that Greek practices already had been paralleled (e.g. pp. 53, 55) to Cherokee rituals in Part One.

As sport sociology using the "science" of ethology, and as a theoretical work, this is an impressive effort, especially in Part Two. As a study in Classics or ancient religion it has considerable merit as an extension of Burkert's views on sacrifice to sport. This is in tune with the increasing openness of classical studies to the methods of anthropology, a tendency championed by several scholars including S. Humphrey (*Anthropology and the Greeks*, 1978). There has been a flurry of modern structuralist and sociological studies concerning sacrifice following Gernet, Burkert, Vernant and Girard, but there has also been resistance. For a recent example, in reviewing H. P. Foley, *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (1985), S. E. Scully (in *Phoenix* 41.3 (1987): 319) comments: "One does not need to be a positivist to wonder, for example, how an unverifiable modern theory about sacrifice in an early society can illuminate an ancient text." Sansone can expect similar mixed reviews from classicists.

As sport history-or just history-there are some problems here concerning Sansone's method, scope, and treatment of diachronic change. Does sport, or any universal human phenomenon, such as war, politics or religion, have a single essence or fundamental nature so that we can use a single definition, regard all inconsistencies as epiphenomenal, and declare that "there is no essential difference between modern sport and the sport of other and earlier societies" (p. 6)? If finding such a single nature entails going back so far, beyond adequate sources or hopes of verification, and if finding such a nature leads to overgeneralization, then how historical is the endeavor? When is change really change? Admitting that we did some activity in the past, when we do more and different acts in new ways with different intentions while retaining characteristic and curious but increasingly incidental "rituals," at what point are we doing something new? Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose? Man has hunted out of necessity for 95% of his history and that has had profound effects, but the pace of change in the last 5% of our time has accelerated phenomenally.

Sansone at times wants it both ways. As *ritual* sport does not have to be competitive, but as *sacrifice* athletics are competitive to select the best victims. Strigils persisted for ritual scarification but their use became stylized and less intense, while nudity, it is suggested (p. 114), is an intensification of the limited clothing the primitive hunter wore to reduce his scent. On the race in armor at Plataea, Sansone (pp. 115-116) suggests that an original sacrifice of energy occasionally intensified into actual human sacrifice, but by 479 B.C. it had become stylized back into a ritual sacrifice of energy. As victims athletes should

be unblemished but few boxers or pancratiasts stayed unblemished for long in antiquity. Not all the problems here exist just because we lack vision or are mired in our cultures and disciplines. Sansone overstates the difficulty of the readers of a prestigious university press in an age of demythologizing sport studies to handle the notion that, "We must be prepared to accept the fact that there are, and have been, societies of people who regard the standards that we consider to be decisive in connection with sport of little or no importance." (p. 13)

Sansone has no shortage of appropriate examples from ancient literature, myth and art but some further items might be discussed or given more treatment. Minoan bull sports need a full discussion. In Euripides' *Hippolytus* the young prince scorns Aphrodite and love and devotes himself to chastity and the hunt. The notion of selecting the best victim may explain the curious Euandria contest at Athens. The whip bearers at Olympia and the forked rods of Greek athletic trainers invite comment. While Atalanta and Nausicaa are mentioned (pp. 33, 35, 55), the whole issue of female sport, ranging from the games to Hera to the rituals of the Brauronia, deserves discussion. Sansone sees sport and initiation as collateral descendants of hunting ritual (p. 112), but he also notes that hunting was "men's work par excellence" (p. 104). Female rituals seem better explained as paraphenomenal initiatory or prenuptial rites.

Students of sport should read this book but they should also continue to read more "traditional" studies. For example, Wendy J. Raschke's edition of papers (*The Archaeology of the Olympics*, 1988) offers studies more traditional in approach if not in conclusions (including Thomas Scanlon's piece on athletics, females and initiation). Sansone underrepresents the amount of serious study of ancient sport of late; his Bibliography is very brief and Part Two's notes tend to concentrate on ancient testimonia and ethnological studies. On *origins*, beyond a suggestion (p. 40) that Mesolithic hunting practice "was taken over by Asiatic huntsmen and subsequently by the Greeks of the historical period," Sansone skims over the historical question of the possible transmission of sport and ritual to Greece from some origin elsewhere (cf. in Raschke: Colin Renfrew, "The Minoan-Mycenaean Origins of the Panhellenic Games," and Jaan Puhvel, "Hittite Athletics as Prefigurations of Ancient Greek Games,"—the latter being what I regard as the most promising line of inquiry on the question). On *persistence*, Sansone's thesis becomes attenuated in dealing with post-classical history and the new factors of secularism, industrialism, etc. Guttmann can address this with the authority I lack but even I find some of Sansone's overgeneralizations and equations of primitive and modern practices to be flirting with reductionism. Sansone is a talented and serious interdisciplinary scholar, but he is not above some sophistry himself when he disclaims authority and rationalizes not doing an extensive treatment of modern sport and yet makes comments and assertions such as those on the Stanley Cup and the Holy Grail (items admittedly confused at times by my fellow Canadians).

This is an important and exciting book that we should all read and ponder. While not the "crock of self-evident nonsense" (p. 6) Sansone fears it may be

seen as, it may not be the only answer. Both truth and sophistry delight in the paradoxical.

University of Texas at Arlington

Donald G. Kyle