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Book Review Essay

Aetiology and Iconography: Reinterpreting Greek Festival Rituals

Robertson, Noel. *Festivals and Legends: The Formation of Greek Cities in the Light of Public Ritual. Phoenix* Supplement 31. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992. Pp. xvi, 287. Notes, maps, indexes. $75.

Hamilton, Richard. *Choes and Anthesteria: Athenian Iconography and Ritual.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992, Pp. xiii, 250. Notes, plates, appendices, indexes. $37.50.

All sport historians confront the issues of sport and ritual: whether sport grows out of or into ritual, whether sport is essentially practical, autotelic, ludic or symbolic, and we often glance to the distant past seeking continuity or discontinuity. While not primarily works of sport history, and so refreshingly not preoccupied with Olympia and the Panhellenic Games, two recent studies by leading scholars and prestigious presses reject, identify, or reinterpret several local Greek agonistic festivals. Moreover, they demonstrate that the vitality of ancient studies of ritual and sport depends upon the innovative but disciplined and systematic use of literary and archaeological texts, and they remind us that we must avoid the unsystematic, arbitrary, or merely decorative use of literary texts, vase-paintings, or any ancient evidence.

It might be said in praise of Robertson, an internationally respected classicist, as it was of J. B. Bury, that his instrument is the scalpel and not the paintbrush. His impressive work has two related aims: to reconstruct the physical and social history of Greek communities (early and later stages. political organization, topography and urbanization) from their festival rituals as his source, and, distrusting the Greeks' aetiological explanations in myth and legend, to discount or re-evaluate various accounts in Greek narrative histories. Defiant and devastating, Robertson's work is unapologetically monographic and iconoclastic. He writes for a small audience of classicists familiar with *aitia, phylai,* Atthidography, *FGrHist,* the Scholia, and Greek topography, and again and again he challenges or discredits the ideas of a virtual *Who's Who* of prominent and even revered scholars of Greek religion. myth, festivals, and archaeology. (E. Simon makes "improbable assumptions," n. 98 on p. 116; W. R. Connor has read aetiology backwards, n. 41 on

p. 143; W. K. Pritchett has a "brisk way with the evidence," n. 71 on p. 108, and one of his interpretations "is not so much an argument as polemic, a genre in which Pritchett is well practised," n. 10 on pp. 185-186.) It will take years for the fallout from this controversial work to settle in the community of classical studies, but the shock waves ultimately will reach students of ancient sport.

Robertson's approach to festivals and legends is down to earth and decidedly critical and non-theoretical. For Robertson, all Greek festivals and their rituals are rooted in the practical needs (e.g. relating to weather, fire, fertility) and basic livelihoods (e.g. hunting, agriculture) of the practitioners and the community, not to abstract ideas, relationships, or archetypes. (See further in his "Myth, Ritual, and Livelihood in Early Greece," 3-34, in *Ancient Economy in Mythology: East and West,* ed. Morris Silver, 1991.) No structuralist and no post-modernist, he has little use for recently trendy approaches to Greek myth and religion. He offers no obeisance to Burkert, no paleolithic hypotheses, no festival sequences of dissolution and resolution, no tripartite rites of initiation, no bipolar systems of eternal, universal or cosmic symbols.

> Nowadays it is the fashion to interpret festivals and other ritual as a figurative language for expressing the more abstract values and attitudes of a given set of people. Every fashion has an element of truth, but in this one it is relatively small. Festivals are bound up with practical needs, and not only in Greece. (p. xiii)

(In his review articles on recent works on Greek religion and myth in *Echos du Monde Classique/Classical Views* 34 n.s. 9, 1990, pp. 419-442 and 35 n.s. 10, 1991, pp. 57-79, Robertson at one point, p. 430, comments: "All structural analysis, all notions of ritual or myth as a quasi-language, are nothing but allegory.") Robertson even dislikes the common use of the word "sacrifice." for there is no such general term in Greek, and prefers to speak of the "magic use of animals."

For Robertson, "ritual precedes and begets belief' (p. 248). First, early communities used magic to attempt to influence natural forces to help their needs. Later, gods were created with the attributes of their worshippers to witness their magic. When repeated magical acts became rituals in a seasonal sequence, the calendar of festivals of a given community emerged, and rituals from of old—their settings, facilities, officiants and activities—persisted. In other words, the calendar preserves concerns of the original community with the worldly seasonal routine of agriculture, navigation, and war. However, the calendar and programs of festivals do change with the development of the community: original rites are preserved even if superseded, but new or expanded rituals arise out of community history as additions to, not replacements of, earlier rites.

Robertson repeatedly emphasizes the Greeks' inclination to invent aetiologies. 'Scholars are furtively aware of aetiology as an enormous shadow that falls across all their efforts: but they dare not confront the giant" (n. 107 on p. 62). When faced with the problem of explaining their own ritual actions. Greeks had "the habit of explaining present customs from past events": they saw their rituals as reenactments of important actions of heroes and founders on one memorable occasion (e.g. Theseus' Cretan adventure or his unification of Attica). The Greeks themselves misinterpreted their own rituals, in actuality rooted in practical communal needs, as commemorating age-old events, they developed myths and legends of adventures and battles to explain the imagined actions, and when narrative history arose it incorporated these fabricated but revealing aetiologies. However reluctantly, sport historians must realize that Greek narrative history (e.g. in Herodotus and ultimately in Pausanias) succeeded and perpetuated myth and legend deduced from rituals: it cannot always be taken as literally true. While Mycenaean Athens did have kings, the kings of legend, such as Cecrops and Theseus, are personifications of rituals on the Acropolis. Not only was there no Theseus. there was no Cretan adventure and no early distinct unification (synoecism) in the sense of a shift of people to the city of Athens—merely antiquarian reconstructions from festivals of seafaring or military enrollment. Episodes in Peisistratus' career (e.g. his famous ruses) are legends fabricated from rites deduced from his changes of festival programs, and Herodotus' glorious charge at Marathon was derived more from festivals of Enyalius, the personified war whoop, or Artemis' Boedromia. "rites of running with a shout" (p. 23) than from historical events. As Robertson says, "as history loses, historiography gains" (p. xiv).

Rather than surveying all the festivals of one state or festivals in general throughout Greece, this study selects and examines 10 festivals (and the Spartan battlefield burial custom, *polyandrion),* five from Athens and the rest from Sparta and the Peloponnese. The festivals were selected to demonstrate Robertson's approach and because of their associations with Apollo. Athena and Zeus as deities who preside over political organization and warfare—the traditional "stuff' of history. Robertson proceeds by detailed analyses of the written and archaeological evidence for the festivals. he perceives aetiologies of rites in myths and legends and the survival of such notions in later narrative histories, he sees concrete references to actions or functions in the etymology of the names of festivals, officials and rituals, he notes parallels between festivals in different states, and he especially stresses the location of shrines and altars as indications of the antiquity of rites and the development of cities. In effect, he outdoes the ancient Greeks at their own history.

After a brief (4 pp.) Introduction, the work has 11 chapters in four Parts. There is no Conclusion, but each chapter begins with a valuable synopsis. The footnotes are numerous and detailed but there is no Bibliography. Six maps and four excellent indexes complete the work. In the finest traditions of

classical scholarship, the erudite exegesis of the primary evidence, including recent epigraphical discoveries, and mastery of the secondary scholarship are characteristic of all of Robertson's work.

Part One on Athens, with five chapters on five festivals (Hecatombaea, Synoecia, Panathenaea, Oschophoria, Olympieia), forms over half the book. All in the first month of the year, the first three festivals share the notion of summoning the citizen body together; each in turn was the chief new year's festival at a different stage in the development of Athens. The earliest rite of enrollment, the *Hecatombaea* derives from an enrollment of youths as citizens and soldiers when Athens was a small community southeast of the Acropolis. The Synoecia arose when Attica first became organized in phratries (originally local military associations) and derives from an annual gathering of the community at a new area east of the Acropolis to recognize new officials. The Panathenaea, originally a new year's festival of the Mycenaean Acropolis, was expanded by the tyrants as a festival of annual assembly as they changed the city and its center. The facilities and officiants of these festivals thus reflect the development of the citizen body from a small Dark Age community to phratry lodges throughout Attica to the more centralized and urban arrangements of the later city. Furthermore, the sites of the festivals reveal the growth of the city and the shift of its original center from southeast of the Acropolis (an area of venerable shrines) in the Dark Age, to the "old agora" (the area of the sanctuary of Aglaurus, the Prytaneium, and later Cimon's Theseium) to the east of the Acropolis to the "Agora" northwest of the Acropolis in the sixth century.

In a revision sure to have impact, Robertson dismantles the conventional notion, based on arguments about burials, funeral games, and hero cults and games as precursors to the Panathenaic games, that funeral or festival games were native to the area known today as "the Agora." He feels the hypothesis cannot be tested by direct evidence and depends entirely on a chain of inferences: "Every link is frail" (p. 95). In fact, the site traditionally was an area of roads, cemeteries, potters and craftsmen; it had no public use until the early sixth century. It was Peisistratus who developed the site and expanded festivals to incorporate activities (e.g. the Panathenaic procession) in the area. Peisistratus did not introduce the Panathenaic games, which arose naturally as games became the fashion elsewhere, but he added the procession at arms through the Agora and influenced the torch-race and the *apobates,* an early military display that became a contest. While the main program of Panathenaic events continued to be held at the traditional sites, the stadium to the southeast beside the hill Ardettos and the hippodrome at Phalerum, agonistic use of the Agora was late and limited: it first became the place to watch the Panathenaic procession and then some suitable events were held there. Before there was a torch-race, the original rite, one of potters and smiths, was the bringing of new fire from altar of Prometheus within the Academy to the shrine of Athena on Acropolis. At some point the cult of the foreign fire god

Hephaestus was introduced from abroad to adorn the Panathenaic festival. and the rite of fire-bringing became a torch-race from the Academy through the Agora to the Acropolis (see further in his "The Origin of the Panathenaea," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* n.s. 128, 1985, 231-295). The Peisistratid tyrants perhaps instituted the torch-race and they definitely changed its facilities: the termini became an altar of Eros at the edge of the Academy near a gate in the Wall of Hipparchus and another altar of Eros at the Acropolis. The tyrants also shifted the *apobates* from an earlier location to the Agora to draw attention to the area.

Sometimes rites became contests and sometimes contests were added to rites. The *anthippasia,* a mock combat or cavalry tatoo in the hippodrome during the Olympieia. eventually became a contest for the cavalry, but it began as magic directed to Zeus *olympios* as a weather god as worshippers tried to influence clear skies to allow the grain to ripen. The weather magic called for a rite entailing a noisy, tumultuous display, and this was provided by trumpets and a cavalry performance: "Good entertainment, but also powerful magic" (p. 139). In another ritual, a race by youths bearing bunches of grapes (a seasonal emblem) from Athens to a shrine of Athena Scira at Phalerum, with the winner getting a cup of punch, "an old-fashioned prize" (p. 120), previously was seen as part of the Oschophoria; but Robertson separates it out. While the Oschophoria preserved rites (e.g. a procession) associated with seasonal concerns about seafaring, rites that gave rise to the tale of Theseus' Cretan adventure, the race developed independently later to honor Theseus and was an antecedent of the civic Theseia festival (pp. 128-130).

Why does every Greek athletic festival have a hero, and why were agonistic festivals traced back to mythical combats, deaths, and burials? Robertson sees no need for elaborate theories relating the rise of games to hero cults. It was simply natural to have games at the festivals of gods and the funerals of men. "What is distinctive about the Greeks is their penchant for aetiology, which led them to assimilate the one kind of games to the other. and to evolve a class of 'heroes' as the common ground" (p. 205). Greeks believed that athletic festivals had originated in the death and often the burial of a hero—"a person of long ago who is still held in honor." Panhellenic and obscure local games alike were said to begin as funeral games, or as expiations, for the death of heroes. Although the festival sites came to acquire memorials to them, often putative graves and sometimes altars and sacrifices, the heroes were merely diverse projections of rituals or figures of local legend. In other words, games did not develop from hero cult but rather heroes developed from athletic rites. Accordingly, Robertson distrusts chronological sequences of the origins of festivals devised by the Greeks; he throws out some supposedly athletic festivals and their dates, but he finds or highlights more obscure ones.

In Part Two, on Sparta, Robertson rejects the conventional notion that

the Gymnopaediae was an agonistic festival established in 668 as an element of Spartan discipline after their defeat at the Battle of Hysiae. Instead he sees a new year's festival of a common type to Apollo with a general reunion of citizens at which young men are enrolled as adults in the warrior class. In the Spartan version, young men dance in the agora for Apollo and there are competitions in choral dancing for three age groups in the theater. The name of the festival, "naked sports," does not refer to athletic contests but to the unusual Spartan custom of having the youths dance naked in a forthright demonstration of their physical maturity. Although most authorities commonly accept the Battle of Hysiae as a famous and the first dated battle in Greek history, Robertson dismisses it as an aetiology from a rite, and Eusebius' foundation date of 668 is said simply to be false ("a *datum* of an especially worthless kind" p. 149).

Parts Three and Four discuss festivals of Argos, Messenia, and Arcadia. Three agonistic festivals (Parparonia of the Thyreatis, a festival of Cenchreae of unknown name, and the Ithomaea) and a fourth festival, a blood-offering at Phigaleia, have aetiologies concerning fighting with Sparta. Wars and battles commonly accepted as having historicity, including supposed events in the era of the Messenian Wars, are interpreted here as local legends of independent origin—behind each is a local festival rather than a distinct historical event. Robertson accepts the Parparonia as an early festival of Zeus, complete with horse and foot races, conducted beside a mountain. However, he rejects the related aetiology of a tomb and a dead hero; the Argive champion is merely an embodiment of the ideal victor in wrestling and battle. Concerning Cenchreae in Argos, Robertson discerns an athletic festival behind a reference to a "racecourse" *(troxos* as the Argive equivalent of *dromos).* (Cf. his reading, n. 169 on p, 108, of the *dromos* inscriptions from the Athenian Acropolis, *DAA* nos. 326-328, as referring not to a racecourse or to the whole Panathenaic program but simply to the torch-race.) The Ithomaea of Messenia are seen as a festival to Zeus with a sacrifice on Mount Ithome and musical and athletic games on the level ground below near Messene; its focus did shift from the early subsistence hunting of the area to warfare later, but legends of a Spartan invasion arose from the cult, not from history. Similarly, a festival, probably to Apollo, at the small town of Phigaleia in Arcadia had an armed procession which influenced tales of another Spartan attack and a band of champions. (In passing [notes 27-28 on p. 229], Robertson explains that tripods can symbolize victory but they are also common sacrificial emblems in cults of Zeus: the prominence of tripod-cauldrons at Olympia, as in stories about the Ithomaea, is due to their use to boil great amounts of meat from a sacrifice and then to hold and reheat the meat as it was served to victors and officials for days afterward at the Prytaneium, and that the hero Pelops, "Dark Face," was an eponym from the sacrifice of a black ram.)

Although its format makes it inaccessible to many sport historians, this

challenging and humbling work is of great significance for the study of ancient sport for its approach to festivals in general and for several specific challenges to perceived knowledge about the origins, location and history of various contests. Anyone contemplating working on rituals in city states in general, or festivals and games at Athens, must confront this work.

In his most recent work, Richard Hamilton, Paul Shorey Professor of Greek at Bryn Mawr College, shows that agonistic elements and rituals of Greek festivals have often been misread by moderns. Paul Shorey Professor of Greek at Bryn Mawr College, Richard Hamilton tackles and dramatically reinterprets the Anthesteria (comprised of the Pithoigia [Jar-opening], the Choes [Wine Jugs], and the Chrytoi [Pots]), a famous and much debated festival held to Dionysus each spring: "arguably the most complicated set of rituals recorded for classical Athens" (p. 1). Focusing on the Choes, the second and best attested part of the festival, he offers the first systematic collection and analysis of both the literary testimonia and the over 1.000 choes—" potbellied, low-footed, trefoil-lipped, one-piece oinochoai" (p. 63) (i.e. distinctively shaped small wine jugs, whence the name of the festival)—a "contemporary, substantial, and uniquely informative" body of evidence (p. 3). Charging that earlier studies treated the literary sources unsystematically and the jugs arbitrarily, Hamilton takes a critical approach to the literary testimonia and an innovative approach to the ceramic evidence for this festival. He draws conclusions about the perspective and value of literary versus visual or plastic evidence, and goes on to apply his approach to other festivals. With 18 black-and-white illustrations (mostly of pots), seven appendices (mostly corpora of testimonia and vases, and tables of data), and three indexes, but no Conclusion or Bibliography, the work addresses an audience of students of Athenian festivals, vase-painting and social history.

In his Introduction, Hamilton presents an influential interpretation of the Choes within the Anthesteria (by W. Burkert, *Greek Religion,* 1985, pp. 237-41, leaning to Euripides' *Bacchae)* as having two dimensions: it was a day of homely merriment with a drinking contest but also a "day of defilement," a day of closed temples, masked mummers, ghostly spirits, and general drunkenness as men sat and drank at individual tables like persons defiled by murder. Late in the day, the revellers celebrated a sacred marriage *(hieros gamos),* and the next day saw a return from death to life, and a restoration of communal order. Rejecting about half of the elements attributed by Burkert to the festival, Hamilton favors a happy, comic Aristophanic Choes to Euripides' gloomy, ghostly version.

In Chapter 2, "The Literary Tradition," Hamilton discusses the literary testimonia (collected in his first appendix), offering his own translations and philological analysis. Like Robertson, he is judiciously cautious about using literary evidence to interpret cult and ritual. Distrustful of Scholiasts and ancient encyclopedias, he rejects almost half of the testimonia as irrelevant or unreliable. He prefers the contemporary poetry and drama of classical

Athens, however difficult, as his best literary sources. From this literature, especially Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (line 1000 ff) of 415 BC, Hamilton reconstructs the Choes as a local festival confined to Athens but involving all citizens and both private and public facilities. According to the official custom, a herald announced a public and centralized drinking contest. The victor in the competition went (staggered?) to the judges for official recognition and then to a magistrate (the king archon) to receive a crown and his symbolic, if redundant, prize: a sack of wine. This "chugging contest" was only part of the Choes festival but it was "the main event probably because it was the only public event—one managed by the city at a fixed time under fixed rules" (p. 14).

In Chapters 3-5, "Scholarship on the Iconography of the Choes," "Iconographic Analysis," and "The Meaning of the Choes," Hamilton turns to the choes vases to demonstrate a revolutionary approach. As appropriate to a reconstruction of the inherently repetitious and persistent rituals of a festival, Hamilton examines general patterns, not unique individual details, whole classes of pots, not a few selected pots. He challenges the traditional method of reading each vase individually as iconographically unique. Instead he studies the entire group, using statistics to seek recurring iconographical elements tied specificially to the Choes. (Appendix 3 presents 33 pages of charts of repeated elements.) A chi-square test was used to detect the existence or absence of statistically very probable systematic relationships of elements (e.g. naked boy, wine jug, cakes. table, grapes). Choes of less than 15 cm in height were found to be iconographically repetitious and consistent in reflecting informal, interior settings where the choes were used. "We see these contests only glancingly, from a child's perspective [although children played no part in the activity], as is appropriate for a small vase, and so we may conclude that while they are not ritual vases, the choes do reflect, indirectly, the ritual to which their shape attaches them" (p. 63).

While traditional scholarship has incorrectly tied the choes to other elements of the Anthesteria beyond the Choes, Hamilton returns the choes to the Choes contest, probably not the official contest sponsored by Athens but the local, private Choes contests held all over Attica by the extended family or social group. The central agonistic element of Hamilton's Choes, then, concerned drinking, not athletics. Earlier studies (e.g. G. Van Hoorn, *Choes and Anthesteria.* 1951) had argued from certain choes of larger size (over 15 cm high) for a program of athletic events at the Anthesteria but Hamilton feels these vases with athletic scenes (e.g. torch-races, javelin on horseback, pyrrhic dancers) probably refer to the Panathenaea rather than the Anthesteria.

In Chapter 6, "Icon and Text," Hamilton continues the question of the identification of groups of vases, and puts his study in the larger context of Attic religious iconography. He discusses other vases associated with cults in terms of the distinctiveness of each group, their meaning from internal analysis of the iconography, and the relationship between iconography and

testimonia. In his view, vases generally prefer the human to the divine, the generic to the specific, and the personal to the public (p. 140). For example, the Krateriskoi, a group of vases of unique shape (high-footed small bowls) and local Attic fabric, found dedicated in sanctuaries of Artemis at Brauron and Mounichia, iconographically depict females and palms and reveal three moments in the ritual: a procession, race and dance. While literary testimonia point out distinctive or characteristic aspects of the cult, the vases show typical, universal activities of women's cult, dances, processions and races, as at the Heraia at Olympia.

Finally, Hamilton (pp. 127-134 and Appendix 7, 231-140) enters the frey concerning Panathenaic amphoras as a group. Scholars have long disagreed on the criteria for identifying individual Panathenaics as official prize vases, "Pseudo-Panathenaics," or "amphoras of Panathenaic shape." Debate continues on the significance of the decoration (e.g. the Athenas, columns, cocks) and the prize inscriptions ("from the games at Athens") on the front of the vases, and the (predominantly) athletic scenes on the reverse. (For a balanced and well illustrated overview, see Jenifer Neils. "Panathenaic Amphoras: Their Meaning. Makers, and Markets," in J. Neils. ed., *Goddess and Polis: The Panathenaic Festival in Ancient Athens,* 1992. 29-51.) Hamilton finds the Panathenaics the most homogeneous, fixed and functional of the groups of vases, but he investigates the extent of their standardization by applying his analytical method to the criteria of iconography, shape, size and inscription. He also applies the variable of chronology and concludes that early examples seem to be inscribed about half the time (45 percent of 62 sixth-century Panathenaics), while the later examples are almost always inscribed (only 4 percent or five of 118 later vases are uninscribed). Hamilton argues that prize inscriptions should not be used as *the* criterion for marking prize Panathenaics, arguing that size is more important. "as we should expect for prizes of a standard quantity of oil" (n. 36 on p. 139). He concludes that three variables (size, inscription, and date) account for all but five Panathenaics, that large Panathenaics (over 60 cm high) are inscribed, and that late Panathenaics (after the sixth century) are inscribed.

On the testimony of Panathenaics for the Panathenaic athletic program of events Hamilton is skeptical. As with other vases, he feels Panathenaics depict events generically, showing the typical elements of a ritual and not specific events. He argues that we cannot tell different races from each other, nor youths from boys, nor colts from horses. Moreover, while it is a common assumption, Hamilton properly reminds us that it is not certain that a victor received prize amphoras depicting the specific event in which he was victorious. Rather, Hamilton suggests, athletic victors got a mixture of vases depicting various scenes. Clearly the athletic scenes on Panathenaics should not be read in a superficial, literalist fashion. While the exact historicity of every specific detail (e.g. of athletic technique, stage of proceedings, depiction of participants) can be questioned, since the scenes correspond, however

generically, to events of the games, the depictions of contests on official, inscribed vases—of course to be checked whenever possible with other sources—provide valuable evidence about the program of Panathenaic events.

Hamilton's meticulous systematic and statistical approach to vases associated with rituals is very promising, and his reinterpretation of the Choes within the Anthesteria is convincing. However, his methodology may be better suited to the larger group of private choes *(ca* 1000 known vases) than to the fewer known examples *(ca* 300) of Panathenaics. As he says, the choes played no official function in the festival, they were not standardized in size, they fall in a narrow chronological range in the last quarter of the fifth century, and they were seldom found outside Attica. Spanning several centuries, official and more standardized Panathenaic prize amphoras were widely dispersed as prizes. Like Neils, I still see the prize inscription as the most crucial element in the identification of official prize vases. In my estimation, Athens wanted an explicit ethnic reference on its prize vases, a soon canonical official inscription to clarify the origin and function of the vases and furthermore to promote Athens' games and products. Like sports, pots could serve political as well as ritual ends.

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