
Book Reviews

DECKER, WOLFGANG. *Sport in der griechischen Antike, Vom minoische Wettkampf bis zu den Olympischen Spielen*. Munchen: C. H. Beck, 1995. Pp. viii, 255. Notes, photographs, bibliography, index. \$55.00.

Wolfgang Decker, professor at the Deutsche Sporthochschule in Cologne and an eminent expert on Egyptian sports, has turned his attention to the neighboring field of Greek sports. With his first major work in this area, Decker has supplied us with a monograph that will certainly be named alongside those from Gardiner, Harris, and Patrucco.

After an introduction containing definitions and references to the importance of sports in Greek life, as well as an outline of the individual chapters, Decker starts with the origins and beginnings of sports in pre-Olympian times. Information about sports on Minoan Crete through the Mycenaean period is gathered predominately through pictorial representations. Boxing and bull games dominated. For the Mycenaean period, Homer's epic supplies an extra source of information. Wherever appropriate, Decker shows parallels to Egyptian and Roman sports; mythology also finds consideration.

The competitions are divided into the Panhellenic games and local festivities. The four Peridios games are each given their own section containing a history of their development, the competitions held there, and a sketch of the competition sites. At the local competitions—where social and cultic—ritual aspects played a special role—there were stately prizes to be won, and the competitions in music and acting were held in high regard.

The description of the disciplines is subject to the usual classification. Decker describes the numerous variations of races; the popular sports of boxing, wrestling, and Pankration; the Pentathlon; and the hippic competitions, including an interesting listing of the costly expenses for these horse races. In the chapter on organization, the Holy Truce, preparation of the sport sights, and referees and spectators are discussed. Surprisingly, Decker fails to mention in this section that it was forbidden to bring alcohol into the stadiums. Chapter 7 is devoted to the archaeological description of the sport sites; the terms *stadium*, *gymnasium* and *hippodrome* are described with numerous photographs and sketches.

The section about athletes appears possibly too detailed. Lengthy passages about specific top athletes—many who have been mentioned earlier in the text—are presented. Training (principally based on Philostratos's "On Gymnastics") is

described in great detail. The translation of some inscriptions might have been better served by more concise passages.

But classic sport had its dark side, as reports of bribery, documented by the Zanes, show us. We also learn that many athletes were highly superstitious, and the description of dream interpretation makes interesting reading.

Sport and the arts build the conclusion of Decker's work. A skillful choice of examples documents how helpful Greek art has been in the illumination and interpretation of classic sports. Decker will assuredly bring smiles to the faces of some readers with his examples of satire from Lucillius.

This book is a welcome supplement to, and enlargement of, the sport-historical spectrum. It impresses with its sober and objective style. Decker writes well and with scientific precision. The author has clearly made good use of the sources. When the sources are controversial, an examining analysis is done and the most logical conclusion is judiciously given. Occasionally, though, the prosographic-geographical descriptions, combined as they are with numerical data, make for difficult reading.

Decker's statement (p. 60) that, in Greek sports, certain games and swimming were not held competitively is incorrect. The ball games of Spartan youths, which had annual championships with coaches and team captains, rules and referees, are more than equivalent to modern, competitively held ball games. Swimming and rowing also existed competitively in Greek sports.

The terminological comparisons with modern sports make rather relaxing reading in a book otherwise so restrained and careful in its character. Here we find the *Periodonika* compared to the Grand Slam tournament of today; victory without touching the ground equals a triumph in tennis without losing a set during the tournament. A baker who visited the Olympic Games twelve times is, in Decker's view, the "sport tourist" of classic Greece. He also compares the funeral games for Patroclus in Homer with modern sport reporting and sees in the English sport club a parallel to the classic gymnasium.

This book does not offer anything sensationally new; the author based it on the proven and tested, but offers at the same time up-to-date, current research. The numerous photographs and sketches supply a clear supplement to the text. The extensive use of sources (thirty-five pages of footnotes) and a well-balanced bibliography make this book a treasure chest of information for everyone, but especially for students and postgraduates.

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