
Book Reviews

Decker, Wolfgang. *Sport in der griechischen Antike*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1995. Pp. 255. Illustrated.

Thuillier, Jean-Paul (Wolfgang Decker, trans.). *Sport im antiken Rom*. Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 1999. Pp. x + 241. Illustrated.

Although books and articles on the ancient Olympics and on the gladiatorial games seem to appear almost as often as issues of *Sports Illustrated*, there are relatively few scholarly monographs that attempt an overview of Greek or of Roman sports. Decker and Thuillier do for us what E. Norman Gardiner, H.A. Harris, and Roberto Patrucco did for earlier generations. They provide the nonspecialist reader with a clearly written up-to-date account of what we know and—just as importantly—what we don't know about Greek and Roman sports. Both authors have an enviable ability to bring their generalizations and their technical descriptions to life with lively anecdotes and well-chosen visual materials. In this regard, Decker's account of Pherenike, the only married woman to witness the Olympic Games, and Thuillier's commentary on the newly discovered athletics mosaic at Baten Zammour in Tunisia are exemplary. Both books—but especially Decker's own—are a pleasure to read and a pleasure simply to look through.

Decker, who is best known as the world's foremost authority on Egyptian sports, is the author of *Quellentexte zu Sport und Körperkultur im alten Aegypten* (1975); *Sport und Spiel im alten Aegypten* (1987; translated into English 1991); and *Bildatlas zum Sport im alten Aegypten* (1994; with Michael Herb). He is also the editor of *Nikephoros*, the annual multilingual publication specializing in the history of ancient sports.

Despite these impressive qualifications, Decker foregoes the opportunity to join the dicey debate about the alleged African origins of Greek culture. After his brief introduction, he surveys the sports of the Mycenaean age, including Minoan bull-leaping, and moves quickly to the more certain ground of Homeric sports. Chapter 3, "Die Agone," is devoted not just to the four great Panhellenic festivals (the Olympic, Pythian, Nemean, and Isthmian Game), but considers the Panathenaia and the Roman games founded in emulation of Greek sports (the Actia, Sebastia, and Capitolia). Decker discusses the origins of the various events, the value of the prizes, the sites, and the program. Chapter 4 is concerned with the individual disciplines and with the apparently insoluble problem of the pentathlon. How exactly was the winner of the pentathlon determined? Decker admits that Donald Kyle's 1990 solution (since revised) is attractively simple, but he seems to favor Joachim Ebert's suggestion. After a chapter on the organization of the games and the frequently misunderstood "Olympic truce," which might more accurately be called a "pass to and from the games," comes "Die

Athleten,” in which good stories abound (some of them repeated from earlier chapters). The book concludes with a chapter on sports facilities and one on sports in Greek art and literature. “Athletics and art,” writes Decker, “share a common interest in the physically perfect human body” (187). In this as in other matters, his judgement is sound.

Like Decker, Thuillier comes to his topic after writing authoritatively about the sports of an even earlier time. In 1985, he published a massive tome entitled *Les Jeux athlétiques dans la civilisation étrusque*. Unlike Decker, who sees very little connection between Egyptian and Greek sports, Thuillier can make good use of the results of his early work. His first chapter demonstrates that the Etruscans exerted a major influence on Roman sports. (Although Thuillier rules out an extended analysis of the gladiatorial games—too deadly in his opinion to be classified as sport—he points out that they were not of Etruscan origin.) Chapter 2 includes a difficult-to-follow account of the various *ludi* that constituted the heart of Roman sports. It is a pity that Thuillier did not include tables of the sort provided in Angela Teja’s *L’Esercizio fisico nell’antica Roma* (1988). The *circus maximus* and other Roman stadia are discussed in Chapter 3. That they were far more impressive than the Greeks’ rather primitive stadia is understandable; there is some truth to the cliché about Greek participation versus Roman spectatorship. After a brief discussion of recreational and paramilitary sports, Thuillier reaches the heart of his book, a chapter on chariot races and *jeux athlétiques* (i.e., the events contested at Greek-style athletic festivals). The discussion of technical matters requires close attention. Thuillier argues, for instance, that the *desultores* were equestrian acrobats who did not leap from chariots, and that *pedibus ad quadrigam* refers to a charioteers’ footrace to their chariots waiting at the starting line. Chapter 6, dealing with the athletes, has more distinctions, such as between the *Auriga* who drove a two-horse or three-horse chariot and the *agitator* who had graduated to the more prestigious four-horse chariot. In this chapter, as in the previous one, G. Ampules Diodes serves well as an example of the charioteer as sports hero. After chapters on the “circus factions” and the notoriously unruly chariot-race spectators, Thuillier concludes by suggesting that the circus was a symbolic world. The four factions symbolized the four seasons and the four elements, the twelve starting gates corresponded to the twelve months of the year, the seven lanes were an emblem of the solar system’s seven planets, etc.

On the whole, however, neither Decker nor Thuillier is especially venturesome when it comes to interpretations. Compared to Keith Hopkins, Carlin Barton, Paul Plans, and Donald Kyle, all of whom have composed imaginative variations on the theme of “death and the gladiator,” Thuillier is toe-in-the-water timid when he observes that hippodrome crowds were fascinated by the charioteers’ “dance with death” (135). There are good reasons for his caution, and for that exercised by Decker. Like every historian of ancient sports, they wrestled with the enormous difficulties posed by the paucity of evidence. Again and again, they had to draw conclusions on the shaky basis of a single literary text (often fragmentary) or a single visual image (often damaged). Having reconstructed as much of the original event as was humanly possible, they tend to shy away from further speculations about the cultural significance of the event. No one who appreciates the magnitude of their historiographical *tours de force* will fault them for their restraint.

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