

# Politics, Society, and Greek Athletics: Views from the Twenty-first Century

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IN 1734, ANTONIO VIVALDI (1678-1741) COMPOSED AN OPERA called *L'Olimpiade* (*The Olympiad*), based on a libretto by the poet Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782).<sup>1</sup> The plot is as follows. At Elis on the morning of the Olympic games, Megakles, an Athenian youth, meets his friend Lycidas of Crete, who had once saved his life. Megakles agrees to compete in Olympia that afternoon under the name of Lycidas and so enable the latter to claim the prize. He subsequently learns that King Kleisthenes of Sikyon, accompanied by his daughter Aristeia, is in Olympia, having been chosen to preside over the games. The king has offered Aristeia, who is in love with Megakles, as the prize to the winner (no contest specified). Megakles, upon winning and yielding Aristeia to Lycidas, attempts to drown himself in the Alpheus River. Ultimately, however, love conquers all. Lycidas turns out to be Aristeia's long-lost brother, his old girlfriend also happens to be at Olympia, and Megakles and Aristeia are reunited.

Metastasio's idyllic romance was enormously popular in the eighteenth century, Vivaldi being only the second of fifty-seven composers who set it to music.<sup>2</sup> As history, of course, it has almost no value. Metastasio has freely, one might say recklessly, adapted a story from Herodotus in which King Kleisthenes, having won the chariot race at Olympia, there announced that he was inviting to Sikyon suitors for the hand of his daughter.<sup>3</sup> He had a track and a wrestling ring constructed for his guests. His daughter's name was Agariste, not Aristeia, but the winning suitor was in fact Megakles of Athens, scion of the prominent

Alcmæonid family. Elis, which supervised the games for most of their history, was approximately fifty-eight kilometers from Olympia, a two-day walk instead of a half-day's journey, and the Eleans presided over the festival themselves, rather than handing over the supervision to an outsider. Furthermore, at the time of Kleisthenes in the early sixth century B.C., the games consisted of more than one contest. Nor were women ever offered as prizes.

If, however, Metastasio had wanted to be historically accurate—and he was not obliged to do so any more than a Hollywood screenwriter of today has to be—he would have had little in the way of bibliographical help. The Italian Hieronymus Mercurialis' *De Arte Gymnastica*, first published in Latin in Venice in 1569, contained very little on the Olympic Games. Indeed, the author was hostile to the idea of competitive athletics. The Frenchman Petrus Faber's *Agonisticon* (1592), in its 360 pages of Latin text, brought together in one place many of the ancient texts concerning the Olympics but is disorganized, repetitive, and often unclear. Too late for Metastasio, the English poet Gilbert West published his coherent, comprehensive, and elegantly written *Dissertation on the Olympick Games* in 1749.<sup>4</sup>

In the twenty-first century, anyone interested in the Olympics possesses infinitely more resources: inscriptions, archaeological sites, and vase paintings not known to Mercurialis, Faber, and West, who concerned themselves primarily with compiling the literary evidence. Moreover, there are now many more scholars working on athletics than there were just a few decades ago, scholars who bring diverse viewpoints and new methodologies to their interpretations of the evidence and who may even challenge the authority of the ancient sources. The essays by Zinon Papakonstantinou, Donald Kyle, Winthrop Adams, and Stephen Brunet exemplify these trends.

In the first two papers, Megakles' descendent Alcibiades figures prominently.<sup>5</sup> Papakonstantinou's "Alcibiades in Olympia: Olympic Ideology, Sport and Social Conflict in Classical Athens" centers around perhaps the most spectacular chariot victory in Olympic history, one mentioned by both Faber and West.<sup>6</sup> In 416 B.C. Alcibiades not only had won the contest for the four-horse chariot but also placed second and fourth (or third). In fact he had entered seven chariots altogether.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Alcibiades could rightfully boast<sup>8</sup> of the honor he has brought to all Athenians. This sort of athletic victory with its unique power to unite a community is of course by no means unknown to us.

Papakonstantinou, however, takes the opposite tack, seeing complex and conflicting reactions to the victory. As the fourth century orator Isocrates reports,<sup>9</sup> Alcibiades, by competing in the costly equestrian events, thereby avoided mingling with the lower classes who participated in the track and field, and boxing and wrestling. Sport thus not only mirrors social conflict, it may even intensify it. It may be employed as a tool to further an aristocratic or democratic agenda. This essay is an extremely successful application of an approach relatively new to the study of Greek sport.<sup>10</sup> With a deft hand, Papakonstantinou guides us through the ancient sources, noting the varieties of their responses to sport as conditioned by the social and economic background of each author. He also reminds us that the same author like Euripides may express contradictory attitudes, composing a victory ode for Alcibiades but also denouncing athletes.<sup>11</sup> Papakonstantinou rightly cautions us that there is no monolithic Athenian attitude to sport in general or to specific athletic incidents.

Alcibiades is also a key figure in Donald Kyle's essay, "'The Only Woman in All Greece': Kyniska, Agesilaus, Alcibiades and Olympia," this time in connection with the Spartan royal family. Here the underlying theme is the role of women in Greek society and sport. Kyniska's importance lies in the fact that she is the first female victor in Olympic history, a feat made possible because women, although banned from Olympia during the games, were nonetheless allowed to submit entries in the equestrian events. The base for her victor statue is still visible today in the museum at Olympia. The inscription on it states, "I am the only woman in all Greece who won this crown."

Both Faber and West had also mentioned Kyniska in their treatises, and her story is well known. What is there new to say? Feminist studies of the past few decades have enriched our understanding in many academic fields, and ancient Greek civilization is no exception. Given the male-dominant world of Greek society and sport, Kyniska is an obvious cynosure. But how do we interpret the evidence? Was she a proto-feminist rising above gender and social constraints to fulfill her athletic ambitions? Or is she just another example of the subordinate status of Greek women, having been manipulated to compete by her brother, King Agesilaus, to serve his own goals? Kyle, positioning himself in the latter camp, suggests that Agesilaus was motivated by a desire to take revenge for Alcibiades' earlier scandalous behavior in Sparta. Vengeance took the form of denigrating the Athenian's famous chariot victory. How great could it have been if a mere woman could accomplish the same feat? Those who find Kyle's reading of the texts convincing will see here a *caveat* against the anachronistic application of feminist ideals to ancient society. This is a doubly provocative essay, both stimulating and sure to be controversial.

In the study of Greek civilization, Athens and Sparta have received the lion's share of attention. Similarly, in the realm of Greek athletics, the spotlight tends to focus on Olympia. Yet our understanding of Greek civilization and athletics would be woefully incomplete if we never ventured forth from these centers. In the next two essays, we journey north to Macedon and eastward across the Aegean to Ephesos.

Winthrop Adams' contribution, "Other People's Games: The Olympics, Macedonia and Greek Athletics" offers a convenient summary of Macedonian interest and participation in Olympic sports. First, he discusses two often-cited anecdotes concerning the participation of Macedonian royalty in the games. The first, found in Plutarch, reveals in Alexander the Great the same snobbish attitude that Alcibiades displayed towards non-aristocratic athletes.<sup>12</sup> When asked to compete in the 200-meter sprint at Olympia, Alexander allegedly replied that he would do so only if his competitors were kings. Although many since Gilbert West have accepted the veracity of the story,<sup>13</sup> Adams is inclined to reject it. The other anecdote, found in Herodotus, raises the matter of ethnicity germane to the Olympic games.<sup>14</sup> The protagonist is an earlier Macedonian king, Alexander I, whose eligibility was challenged by the other contestants on the grounds that he was not Greek. This Alexander allegedly proved to the satisfaction of the officials that he was of Argive descent. Here, too, the ancient source has been challenged. Adams suggests that it was probably not Alexander I but yet another king, Archelaus I, who late in the fifth century became the first Macedonian monarch to be accepted as a Greek and allowed to compete in Olympia. Whatever problems they experienced in gaining acceptance at Olympia, the Macedonians had a strong interest in Greek athletics, as Adams' survey of the relevant literary, epigraphical, and archaeological sources make clear.

Unlike the three previous essays, which included famous Olympic anecdotes from the literary sources, Stephen Brunet, in his essay, "Olympic Hopefuls from Ephesos," deals with relatively new evidence, namely the inscriptions from Ephesos in which the athletes mentioned are otherwise unknown. Certainly they are not personalities of the magnitude of Alcibiades, Kyniska, or the Macedonian kings. Working with the dry data found in the inscriptions, Brunet weaves together coherent narratives to fill in more mundane, yet important, details about the careers of the athletes. Specifically, he discusses the choice of festivals that an aspiring athlete might choose, the athlete's relationship to his coaches, and the financial help available to fund an athlete who was not from the elite economic classes.

The inscriptions, which are the subject of the first two topics, are dated to the second and third centuries A.D. They help to fill a gap, inasmuch as Greek athletics in the Roman period still receives less attention than it deserves. Scholars have tended to view the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. as the Golden Age of Greek Athletics, with a decline and fall thereafter, yet it could be argued that the mid second century A.D., when Pausanias visited Olympia, was the real Golden Age.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, the site was much more impressive than it had been seven hundred years before.

The last topic discussed by Brunet, concerning the financing of athletes, focuses on inscriptions dated much earlier to the fourth century B.C. and touches on a highly contentious question, namely the social background of the athletes. Were athletics, especially in the first few centuries of the Olympics, principally or exclusively the province of the social elite, who had the time and money to train? Or were members of the non-elite classes also able to compete by financing their careers with prizes won in athletic festivals?<sup>16</sup> Brunet makes an important contribution to the debate by pointing out that the Ephesians provided financial help to athletes of modest means, thus supplementing both their prize money and the limited familial resources. If at Ephesos, we may well ask, then why not elsewhere? If in the fourth century B.C. then why not earlier?

Seen from the twenty-first century, *L'Olimpiade* exudes a naïve charm and quaintness, as if somehow a painting by Fragonard had been transferred to the stage.<sup>17</sup> We have come a long way since then, a long way too from the pioneer students of Greek athletics like Mercurialis, Faber, and West, both in terms of the evidence now available to us and in how we interpret that evidence. We know much more about the lives of the athletes, and we are aware of political tensions and social conflicts lying beneath the surface. Indeed, given our deeper and wider understanding, the ancient Olympic games have become a drama even more compelling.



<sup>1</sup>*L'Olimpiade*, directed by Rinaldo Alessandrini, is available with libretto and notes on compact disc on the Opus 111 label and was released in 2002.

<sup>2</sup>For Vivaldi and Metastasio, see the entries in Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (New York: Grove, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>Herodotus 6.126-131.

<sup>4</sup>Petrus Faber, *Agonisticon* (Lyon: Franciscus Faber, 1592); Gilbert West, *Dissertation on the Olympick Games* (R. Dodsley, 1749).

<sup>5</sup>Megakles' grandson, also named Megakles, was the father of Alcibiades' mother. Yet another Megakles was celebrated by Pindar in *Pythian 7* for his victory in the four-horse chariot of 486 B.C.

<sup>6</sup>Faber, *Agonisticon*, 90, 167; West, *Dissertation*, 79-81.

<sup>7</sup>For third place, Thucydides 6.16.2; for fourth place, Isocrates 16.34 and Plutarch, *Alcibiades*, 12.

<sup>8</sup>Thucydides 6.16.1-3.

<sup>9</sup>Isocrates 16.32-33.

<sup>10</sup>See Mark Golden, *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup>Euripides, *Autolykos*, frag. 232.

<sup>12</sup>Plutarch *Alex. 4, De Fort. Alex. 9/Mor. 331B*.

<sup>13</sup>West, *Dissertation*, 79; E. Norman Gardiner, *Olympia: Its History and Remains* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1925), 130; H.A. Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics* (London: Hutchinson, 1964) 160.

<sup>14</sup>Herodotus 5.22.

<sup>15</sup>For a good overview of the question, see Donald G. Kyle, "The First Hundred Olympiads: A Process of Decline or Democratization?" *Nikephoros* 10 (1997): 53-75. One scholar who does not present the Roman period of Greek athletics as one of decline is Thomas F. Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 40-63, in a chapter entitled "The Ecumenical Olympics," an updated version of his "The Ecumenical Olympics: The Games in the Roman Era," in *The Olympic Games in Transition*, eds. Jeffrey Seagrave and Donald Chu (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 1988), 37-64.

<sup>16</sup>For athletics as the preserve of the elite, see Henri W. Pleket, "Zur Soziologie des antiken Sports," *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome*, n.s. 36 (1974): 56-87, reprinted with introduction, revisions, and bibliographical updating in *Nikephoros* 14 (2001): 157-212; and idem, "Games, Prizes, Athletes and Ideology," *Arena* (now *Stadion*) 1 (1976): 49-89. Arguing for participation by the lower classes is David C. Young, *The Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics* (Chicago: Ares Publisher 1984), 89-103. Pleket's reply is to be found in "The Participants in the Ancient Olympic Games: Social Background and Mentality," in *Proceedings of an International Symposium on the Olympic Games* [5-9 September 1988], eds. William Coulson and Helmut Kyrieleis (Athens: Lucy Braggiotti Publications, 1992), 147-152.

<sup>17</sup>For athletics as pastoral, see Maurizio Zerbini, *Alle Fonti del Doping* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2001), 69-94. The title belies the subject matter.