

# Dissent and Decline in Greek Sport

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Despite increasing evidence the conventional picture of the history of Greek sport has changed little since early in this century. After an early and brief period of glory, athletics supposedly declined and degenerated as training and rewards produced professionalism. This conventional picture is methodologically flawed in terms of approach and evidence. It has been influenced by fears about trends in modern sport, and it is based partly on critical comments by ancient authors. The body of critical testimonia is significant, but it must be examined carefully both internally and against independent evidence. This paper evaluates the reality of some of the ancient critical sources, and it questions the value of the concept of 'decline' for the history of Greek sport.

In the history of Greek athletics the dissenting voice appeared in literature even before Pindar's glowing praise of athletic *arete*. Early criticisms by Tyrtaeus and Xenophanes seem to have established conventional literary elements (*topoi*): the limited value of the athlete as soldier and citizen, and the inappropriateness of honours for athletes rather than intellectuals. By the late fifth century, probably in response to developments in sport, Euripides, Eupolis and others expanded the critical themes to include references to the physical appearance, training and over-specialization of athletes. Aristophanes is significant for adding a chronological framework when he laments the decline of athletics and physical education from the standards of the 'good old days'. Such literary complaints were followed in the fourth century by philosophical references and oratorical statements; but, even with Juvenal, Martial and Roman critics of Greek sport, there was surprisingly little variation on the earlier critical themes.

This discussion examines the critical passages and their critical motifs (what they subjectively or ideologically opposed and why) as evidence for attitudes to and developments in sport. It is argued that the criticisms were influenced by literary conventions, exaggeration, ulterior motives and ideologies. Various authors or genres were inconsistent and used positive or negative motifs about sport depending on the circumstances. The critics of Greek sport reflect understandable and ineffectual minority viewpoints; they became historical factors only in the Roman era when in support of native traditions or when backed by religious enthusiasm. Furthermore, the concept of 'decline' in Greek sport can be challenged in terms of the spread of athletic facilities and festivals, the technical improvement of performance, and even the morality and sociology of sport. The evidence overall, including the critics themselves, suggests that Greek sport was neither diminishing nor popularly disliked. The conventional picture requires modification: there was change in sport but we should dispense with the value-laden concept of 'decline'.