

# The Origin of Women's Athletics in Greece

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The role of women in Greek athletics has been given little notice by writers on the history of ancient athletics due to the scantiness of evidence. But that lack of evidence is a greater indication of the bias of preservation by the male-oriented Greek society than a true reflection of the probably widespread participation of women in ancient sports. The tantalizing bits of evidence which we do have suggest that women's involvement was as early as 1600 B.C. on Crete, as serious as the sacred public contests at Sparta and Olympia in historical times, and as widespread as Asia Minor in Hellenistic and Roman times.

It is the aim of this paper to investigate the earliest instances of women's involvement in Greek Athletics, namely at Crete, Sparta, Olympia, and Brauron, and to suggest that these apparently diverse occurrences may have had a common origin.

Women are depicted as participants in the bull-games of Minoan Crete according to various artistic representatives dated ca. 1600 B.C. These games, which in-

volved a dangerous leap over the back of the animal by young male and female 'taureodors', may have been part of ritual associated with bull-worship and worship of the Cretan 'Mistress of the Beasts'. The ritual may also have been part of an initiation practice for youths who were coming of age for marriage. There is some indication that during later historical times on Crete a race served the same function (7th-6th c. B.C. Gortyn). Another Cretan initiation festival, that of Lato Phytia, although itself not associated with any games, does have closely analogous festivals at Sparta (Orthia) and Olympia (Physkoa).

Under the plan of Lycurgus, women were active in the athletic education program at Sparta so that they may attract husbands and bear children well. Women's public competition or dance also had fertility associations. Lycurgus' program is supposed to have been influenced by Cretan customs according to legend, and it may be that women's public athletics followed an ancient tradition descended from the Minoans, both in spirit and in ritual connections. We know that women participated in a procession to honor Artemis Orthia, a fertility goddess similar to the Cretan Goddess, as early as the 7th c. B.C. (Alcman). Orthia was also a region of Elis where a temple to the goddess may have been located and where some of the organizers of the women's games to Hera resided. Finally, at Sparta there is a notice in Pausanias of a women's footrace held regularly in honor of Dionysus Kolonas and organized by the Dionysiades ("Daughters of Dionysus") and the Leucippides ("Daughters of Leucippus"). The latter may be associated with the cult of Lato Phytia on Crete and the former with Physkoa and the women's games to Hera at Olympia.

The Heraia at Olympia included a footrace of young maidens and was held every four years within a month of the Festival to Zeus. Pausanias relates that the heraia was organized by followers of Physkoa, bride of Dionysus, and those of hippidameia. Physkoa is a close counterpart to Artemis Orthia at Sparta and Lato Phytia at Phaistos, Crete; fertility, initiation and marriage played a part in all three. The games to Hera have an origin independent of those to Zeus and may even predate that festival.

The festival of the Arkteia held in honor of Artemis Brauronia at Brauron in Attica is known mainly from late sixth and early fifth century vases found at Brauron and elsewhere in Attica. At this festival maidens apparently held footraces in honor of Artemis as part of a pre-nuptial initiation ritual. Participants wore either short chitons or ran completely naked, and sometimes carried torches or wreathes. The dress or lack of it corresponds to the customs of similar ritual races at Olympia and Sparta. The patronage of Artemis suggests a link with Sparta and perhaps ultimately with Crete.

The evidence of cult ritual connected with the earliest instances of women's games on Crete suggests that in Greece the practice of female competition began on Crete, then spread to Sparta under the influence of educational and cultic customs. The association of games with the worship of Hera at Olympia may also have derived, directly or indirectly, from the tradition first seen on Crete. Artemis' festival at Brauron may be a later extension of such female games in historical times, originating in the worship of a "Mistress of the Beasts." The custom may have come to Attica from any of a number of routes, but is most probably ultimately traceable to the customs which began in Crete. Exactly how widespread such women's ritual races were by historical times cannot be known. The surprising recent discoveries at Brauron suggests they may have been much more widely practiced than was previously suspected. We await the light of further archaeological discoveries of early women's races to see whether they fit the ritual pattern observed elsewhere.