

Greek Athletics and Initiation

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The purpose of this paper is to investigate the athletic elements of Greek initiation rites and to suggest that competitions in certain have at least partly derived from initiation ceremonies. The primary function of tribal initiation is to effect the transition from adolescence to adulthood by a series of ritual stages including most generally separation, isolation and reintegration into society. Some characteristics of these initiations which are shared with athletic festivals are a test of strength, regulation of dress and diet, prenuptial age-grouping, and regular periods of celebration.

In Greek society, the Cretan and Spartan arrangement of youths into "herds" (*agelai*) most clearly indicates an initiatory function. The Cretan initiate was called "runner" (*dromeus*), who was obliged to marry upon entrance to the *agele*. Spartan youths generally practiced running as a part of their education (*agoge*), but the footrace had a special sacred importance as the central contest of the *Sraphylodromia*. There the youths, called "Runners with Grapes" (*Staphylodromoi*), ran to catch another runner and to thereby bring prosperity to the state.

In a similar way the Athenian *Oschophoria* ("Carrying of Vine-Branches") included a ritual footrace of unmarried boys, presumably carrying vine-branches, to celebrate the harvest. Like most initiations, the *Oschophoria* included intertribal rivalry, a test of strength, and dress-regulations.

The Olympics are of complex and perhaps undeterminable origin, but they show at least three traditions in their formation: the aristocratic love of competition for fun or for funeral games, the religious festival of Olympian Zeus, and certain unique characteristics of initiation. Most notably the initiatory details include separation of the sexes, the calling of a sacred truce, codes of dress and diet, supervision by whip-bearers, and a footrace as the central and original contest. Furthermore the function of initiation, to promote the adolescent to marriage, may be preserved in the myth of Pelops winning of Hippodameia. The girls' footrace of the Heraia, which may be as old as that of the boys' in the Olympics, most clearly demonstrates the prenuptial function of the footrace. Thus the Olympics may have arisen from local, intertribal contests of initiation, perhaps between the villages of Elis and Pisa.