

Syll. ² 802: Did Women Compete Against Men in Greek Athletic Festivals?

HUGH M. LEE

University of Maryland

From Delphi comes an inscription, dated to A.D. 45, which records that the daughters of one Hermesianax of Tralles had won victories in the Pythian, Isthmian, and Nemean Games, contests second in prestige only to the Olympic Games. All three girls, Tryphosa, Hedea, and Dionysia, ran in the stade (the 200-meter

sprint), and Hedeia also won an armed chariot contest and a kithara-singing competition.

The central question raised by this inscription is, “Did women compete against men, or were these victories achieved in all-female contests?” Scholars have proposed both views, with the preponderance of the discussion focusing on the stade.

I contend that the stade was indeed all-female, that the armed chariot race may have been co-ed but was probably all-female, and that the kithara-singing contest was mixed.

Reasons alleged in support of mixed competition in the stade are that no evidence exists for all-female contests at the sites mentioned in the inscription, and that literary sources tell us of male-female contests. Against the first reason we can now point to an inscription from the Corinth excavations which tells that a “contest for girls” was instituted at the Isthmian festival in the late first century B.C. or early first century A.D. As for the literary sources, they are either ambiguous or do not pertain to formal athletic competition.

Against the idea that the girls could have defeated men at the highest championship level, G. E. Bean (*American Journal of Archaeology* vol. 60, 1956, p. 198) points out that based on modern performances in the sprints, women’s performances lag considerably behind the men’s. To update this argument, we see that the present world record in the 200 meters for men is 19.72 second, 21.71 for women.

The probable ages of the girls also present serious obstacles to the possibility of mixed competition in the footrace. (a) Girls in the ancient world married at the age of thirteen or fourteen on the average, and marriage seems to have been incompatible with an athletic career. If we assume mixed competitions, then we must also assume that girls in their early or mid-teens could defeat the best mature male sprinters in the world. (b) Girls so young would most likely have been disqualified by the officials, whose responsibility it was to place contestants in the proper age groups. (c) If we assume that the girls married late, perhaps even in their twenties, we are led into further improbabilities. We must assume that in a society favoring early marriage and generally restrictive of women’s activities outside the home, Hermesianax pursues the training of his daughters in athletics throughout their teens and postpones their marriages, even though they evince no early signs of athletic prowess. If they had won earlier victories the inscription would have listed them.

At first glance the armed chariot races does not seem a like area for female competition, much less an all-female event. Yet vase paintings from Athens show girls performing an armed event called pyrrhic dancing. Furthermore, in the armed chariot race, the contestant was dependent not only on his/her own strength and speed, but also on that of the animals drawing the chariot and perhaps too the skills of a charioteer. In addition, the contest may also have involved grace and acrobatic talent. Since the armed chariot race may not have put a premium on individual speed or strength, women could have competed against men. A chronological problem arises, however, in Hedeia’s sequence of victories. Her Athenian victory against *thepuides*, “boys,” was two years before her Isthmian triumph against the men. Yet she may well have been only sixteen at most for her earlier win, and she would have had to be twenty to compete against the Isthmian men.

In the kithara-singing contest, which involves accompanying oneself with a large, harp-like instrument, once again no advantage accrues to males over females. Since girls had been educated in the arts and even competed from the third century B.C., and since the word *paides* usually refers to boys, it seems most likely that Hedeia won the kithara-singing in mixed competition.



Floris Van Der Merwe Alan Metcalfe