

Agonism and Non-Competition In Homer

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Scholars of Greek society and literature regularly use Homeric passages (such as II.6,208 = 11.784 and Od.8,147- 148) to demonstrate agonism as fundamental to early Greek thought. Although scholars no longer see agonism (as J. Burckhardt suggested) as aboriginally or uniquely Greek, clearly it was a distinctive trait in Greek literature and mythology. The early Greeks expected their leaders to be competitors rather than passive spectators in games (as in war and politics). With the advance of studies in ancient sport, the techniques, depiction and social background of competitors are receiving increasing attention. This paper looks at a related but less studied situation - the non-competition in sport of heroes in the Homeric poems. Instances of non-agonism in Homer are few but informative; they indicate criteria for competition and non-competition, acceptable behavior of a challenger or decliner, and implications for **arete** and status. Homer's influence on later descriptions of sport and on later value systems make the relevant passages worthy of more attention than they have received from commentators (such as Leaf and Stanford) and scholars (such as E.N. Gardiner, W.H. Willis, M.M. Willcock and others). As well as providing the earliest and greatest descriptions of sport in Greek literature, Homer also reveals the earliest ideology and etiquette of sport in Western Civilization.

Through a discussion of four incidents in Homer (Achilles) in 11.23; Nestor in IL.23; Odysseus in Od.8; and Odysseus in Od. 18) this paper demonstrates the etiquette and proper criteria for competition and non-competition within the early and enduring aristocratic ideology of Greek sport. In funerary or social **agones** certain individuals are invited or expected to participate. Boasts and challenges often claim that individuals had won, could win, or will win different events. Not to compete or fight - not to accept an invitation to show one's **arete** - had to be suspect and might be seen as tantamount to renouncing one's claim to status. Yet in the instances discussed heroes decline to or **excused** from participation, hence becoming non-competitors. Since it is assumed that heroes will want to compete, non-agonism demands comment and acceptable justifications for non-competition are required. Explanations offered include factors such as age, physique, specific skills, and personal circumstances. In effect, the justifications for non-competition also constitute the qualifications for entry into competition, with one significant distinction. If a man claims to be **agathos**, absence of the skill required to enter **some** event is no excuse for non-competition: having **arete** is his duty-his identity. Homeric etiquette is clearly in operation.

In Homer a hero is a victor and leader who should compete and demonstrate **arete**. Like battles, games are for **agathoi** and competition entails the establishment of one's worth or the revelation of one's true character. However, a man can be excused temporarily for proper reasons, or permanently if truly old. In these cases the hero must have a proven record of demonstration in the past and, if he is **young** enough, it is understood that he will return to future competition. Furthermore, even in cases of non-competition, the hero normally makes a claim to **arete** and has his merit and status acknowledged. Recurrent motifs involve the acknowledged but uncontenting champion and the reluctant **but** ultimately triumphant

champion; the former becomes the latter when his identity and status are concealed and his heart is stirred. The agonistic ethic and Homer's characters are consistent throughout.

The paper concludes that the suggested patterns and relationships in instances of non-competition in Homer afford insights into both Greek sport and literature; it further suggests that the Homeric paradigms for agonism are not without significance for later treatments of non-competition by authors such as Isocrates, Virgil and Plutarch.