

BODY CULTURE AND GENDER

The Iconography of Greek Female Athletes

Nancy Serwint

Arizona State University

Unlike their male counterparts, female participation in athletic competition in antiquity was limited, and aside from very few local contests, the quadrennial festival of the Heraea at Olympia provided the only opportunity for females to compete in non-equestrian events before the first century A.D. The competition at the Heraea was restricted to foot races for girls, and Pausanias (6.16.2-3) is explicit in his description of the costume worn by the competitors: a short chiton pinned on the left shoulder exposing the right breast.

Two bronze statuettes which date to the sixth century B.C. and the well-known Roman copy of the female athlete in the Vatican (Inv. 2784) have been identified as runners based upon their pose and the close correspondence of their dress to Pausanias' description. The identification of the figures as athletes is not doubted (Helbig⁴ 558 and E. Langlotz, *Fruehgriechische Bildhauerschulen* (Nuernberg 1927) 92-93. The source of the iconography of the costume, however, has never been discussed.

I propose the following, based on an analysis of vase painting and sculptural representations: Analogies with the dress worn by female mythological figures who have associations with athletics offer no parallels. Artemis and Atalanta typically wear different types of dress and the Amazon costume which becomes established in the classical period postdates the appearance of the female athletic dress. A probable source of influence is a variation of the short chiton worn by men called the *exomis* which was fastened on the left shoulder leaving the right shoulder uncovered which freed the arm for ease of action. It was the dress for workers, the characteristic costume of Hephaistos, and was worn by slaves, soldiers, sailors and artisans.

Given the fact that this garment was readily visible, was worn extensively, and was, above all, functional, combined with the fact that female athletes were thought to be engaging in male pursuits, it seems plausible that female athletes should adopt for their dress a garment which was worn by men.