

# Gymnike Paideia: Greek Athletics and the Construction of Culture

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What we call “sport” has had radically different social functions over the centuries, to the extent that it is difficult to speak of a “history of sport” as if the term gives unity to diverse phenomena. Yet one of the constants is that “sport” as currently defined both reflects and informs the culture of which it is a part. One primary function of “sport” in many cultures is that of a formal or informal medium of what Greeks referred to as Paideia, the Germans as Erziehung, namely “cultural upbringing.”

The agon or “contest” was fundamental to the structure of Greek society, since it was built upon a “contest-system” in which citizens vied with one another for a finite amount of honor. The actual athletic contest therefore mirrored the social realities, but it also helped to establish the hierarchy by public praise given to victors, and shame to the defeated.

I will focus here upon two interrelated manifestations of the contest system at work in actual athletic phenomena, namely the use of contests as ritual initiations, and the association of athletics and social notions of gender and sexuality. It has been argued that male contests arose from initiations to adulthood for youths. That case will be examined, and found to be in need of refinement: the “initiator” aspects such as age-classes and special dress are not universal or consistent in Greek culture. It is generally truer of the few examples we have of such female contest rituals than of males.

Recent scholarship has found possible links between homosexuality, initiation, and athletic contests. Some of these will be examined in light of the discussion of initiation above, and it will be argued that Paideia is the source of the similarities. A need to establish criteria for hierarchy in the contest system led independently to the phenomena of (male) homosexuality and to athletic activities serving similar functions as positive, collective activities.