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***Mens sana in corpore sano?* Body and Mind in Greek Literature**

This paper studies the notions of body and mind in Greek literature. It concludes that the modern image of the well-rounded ancient Olympic athlete as a harmonious development of body and mind is false: there is no evidence for this in ancient texts, and Greek authors' ideas about body and mind changed greatly over the centuries after Homer. These ideas influenced medieval Christian and modern views.

Historians of ancient sport and proponents for the modern Olympics idealize ancient Greece, claiming that champion athletes cultivated mental, intellectual, and moral qualities as much as their bodies, and were far more “well-rounded” than ours. Yet there are no grounds for this thesis. Of the hundreds of known Olympic victors, none was ever noted for his intellect. Medieval and modern claims that Plato was an Olympian (or Isthmian) victor are patently false. No Greek prominent in any ancient literary or artistic field ever won a major athletic victory; conversely, no champion athlete ever distinguished himself in the intellectual world. And no ancient source suggests this supposed Greek ideal. But if the image of the Greek intellectual athlete proves to be modern fancy, the Greeks indeed highly prized both mental and physical excellence, and there is still much to learn about the Greek attitudes toward “body and mind.”

In Homer, body and mind are not clearly assessed; perhaps the physical side even outranks the mental. Pindar expresses the mainstream of early attitudes, ranking athletic and intellectual excellence all on the very same high plane. Since human excellence of any kind approaches that of the gods, no human excellence can be thought inferior to another; but Pindar does not expect both types of excellence in any one man. The philosopher Xenophanes began a new tack, claiming that his intellectual achievements should outrank those of Olympic victors. Plato's Socrates and the orator Isocrates echo that same judgment.

Plato was the first to divide man clearly into body and mind (sometimes “soul”). He comes close to *mens sana* — “Body and mind should be cultivated together” (*Republic*

3.410-412) – but merely in reference to educating schoolboys, not to Olympic athletes. On the contrary, he himself says that an “athlete aiming at Olympic victory must train full time; he has no time for anything else” (Laws 7.807c). Aristotle is the first to make physical and mental training actual enemies of one another, insisting that exercise of the body and that of the mind are antithetical to one another. This influenced later authors and contributed to a severe downgrading of athletes in later literature. Dio Chrysostom: “athletes have less intelligence than swine (Oration 7.11); Galen: “All natural blessings are either mental or physical....Athletes don’t even know if they have a brain” (*Exhortation to Medicine* 10-12).

Christianity found these later authors highly useful, linking athletics to other “bodily” activities, such as sex, that were antithetical to the “soul” (which replaced the philosophers’ “mind” in Christian tradition). This medieval antipathy to the flesh reached into the nineteenth century; and into the twentieth when the partisans of amateurism and scholars such as Harris and E.N. Gardiner insisted that there were more important things than athletics.

Whence, then, came our notion that *mens sana in corpore sano* states the ancient Olympic athletes’ attitude? First applied to athletics by muscular Christians in 1862, *mens sana* grew as a catchword among the partisans of amateurism, including the founders of the modern Olympics. Since there was nothing in Greek literature about ancient Olympic athletes cultivating their intellects, they pounced upon this Latin adage, a phrase that actually comes from a passage in Juvenal, the first century A.D. writer of satires. But in Juvenal’s context, it has nothing to do with Olympics or athletes. Juvenal is merely advising the ordinary person on the content of his prayers: “*Mens sana in corpore sano*,” good health, “a sound mind in a sound body” (‘pray not to get sick or go crazy’). That is all the passage is about, nothing more. Nor is it remotely close to any Greek phrase or concept associated with the ancient Olympics. It is a nice old adage, but ill-suited for the purpose for which we use it.