

FILM REVIEW

The Ancient Olympics: Athletes, Games and Heroes narrated by David Gilman Romano (The Institute for Mediterranean Studies Video Lecture Series, Volume II, 1996). Reviewed by Nigel B. Crowther, The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada.

It is difficult to produce a video on the ancient Olympics that is historically accurate, of interest to the scholar, entertaining and saleable at the same time. One expects the worst when the video arrives, as the cover advertisement states, “just in time for the Summer Olympics to be held in Atlanta.” Yet David Romano and the Institute for Mediterranean Studies have succeeded to a considerable extent.

David Romano is no Michael Wood of BBC fame, flitting from one ancient Greek site to another; nor is he a Kenneth Clarke, enthusiastically expostulating on the beauties of the male nude. Rather, he presents the image of a no-nonsense professor, as he remains seated in his office throughout the presentation. The video is accurately called a lecture, for a lecture it is. No doubt the budget of the Mediterranean Institute, a non-profit educational foundation, did not allow him to speak from the site. This is a pity since obviously he knows this region of Greece well, and this would have added to the viewing impact of the video.

Romano is well-versed in his field. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1981; he wrote his dissertation on “Stadia of the Peloponnesos,” an architectural study from the sixth century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. He has often been on-site in Greece doing field work, particularly at Nemea and Corinth where he was associated with the Corinth Archaeological Project. His best known work is *Athletics and Mathematics in Archaic Corinth: The Origins of the Greek Stadion* (Philadelphia 1993), an archaeological examination of various stadia in the Greek world. He is now the Keeper of the Collections of the Mediterranean Section at the University of Pennsylvania Museum.

In less than an hour Romano attempts to present a history of the Olympic games from Prehistoric times to the age of Coubertin, by “adopting an interdisciplinary approach, presenting material important to ancient history, ancient religion, classical archaeology and athletics (both ancient and modern).” This is exactly the approach one would expect. The lecture is largely factual, with little philosophizing; perhaps this is inevitable, since he is covering so much material in so short a time span. It is crammed with information for the discerning viewer. Romano also includes useful maps and diagrams and a hard-copy glossary of about forty technical and other pertinent terms.

Romano begins his presentation with a general introduction on sport and the modern Olympics. He explains well the Greek derivation of some English words of a sporting nature, such as “stadium,” “discus” and “pentathlon.” He also comments on various definitions of the Greek words *athlos* and *athlon*, which gave rise to the

English word “athlete.” Romano enunciated these terms both in English and ancient Greek, giving a touch of authenticity for the interested student.

There follows a section of *The Rituals and Rules*, an attempt to explain the origins of the Olympic games in terms of agriculture and fertility. Romano suggests that the games were held in mid-summer at a particularly uncomfortable time of year, because of the heat and flies, since this was a time when the Greeks had leisure after the gathering in of the crops. He also suggests that this time of year must also have been chosen for religious reasons, the connection with fertility and the goddess Ge / Gaia. Here, he perhaps underestimates the role of Demeter at Olympia, whose altar was found in the stadium. He mentions the traditional founding myths of Olympia, those pertaining to Herakles and Pelops. He believes that the contests at Olympia began at the time of the second or third full moon after the summer solstice. We may note that it has been well established that they began at the time of the first full moon. He uses the analogy of the isolympic Sebestan games in Naples to deduce otherwise unknown details about Olympia, but we need caution here, for an isolympic festival despite its name is by no means identical to the Olympic festival in *all* respects. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that some events were held at Naples that were not held at Olympia. We should also observe that the famous inscription on these games in Naples (IvO 56) which Romano shows in the video, is not completely authentic, but based in part on the views of the German scholar Dittenberger from the last century, who filled numerous lacunae.¹ Is there really evidence that Olympic athletes were subsidized by Olympia during the training period, as at Naples? I think not.

Romano comments on *The Five-Day Program* at Olympia, trying to recreate the sequence of events after the program became established from the fifth century on. At this point some viewers may be unaware that Romano is giving us a somewhat controversial view of what events were held on a given day. Romano follows Finley (in general he follows the views of Finley too closely) in believing that the chariot-races were the first events at Olympia.² The latest scholarship suggests that the festival was held over six days, not five, and that the equestrian events came on day three, preceded by the contests for trumpeters and heralds and those for boys.³ Romano also misleads us slightly when he uses the description of Orestes' chariot race from Sophocles' *Electra* as an illustration from Olympia. His viewers should be told that this literary description is set at the Pythian games at Delphi, not at Olympia; it does, however, give a good idea of the dangers involved in Greek equestrian events. Romano believes that in the pentathlon five throws were allowed for each athlete in the discus and javelin. A fragmentary inscription from Rhodes *may* be used to support this claim for the event at a minor festival, but we are unaware of the procedure at Olympia. To use Myron's *Discobolus*, or rather copies of his works, in an attempt to interpret the technique of discus throwing is more controversial than Romano would have us believe. Romano comments authoritatively on the foot-races, as befits a practising long-distance runner, former physical education instructor and track coach, but makes no discussion of turning posts and little of the *hysplex*. He points out that draws were rare in foot-races, despite the difficulties officials experienced in judging races. He suggests that a fall in wrestling was when the hip, back or shoulder touched the ground and that leg holds were allowed, both debatable points. For the uninitiated

he passes too quickly from boxing to the pancration, which might cause some confusion. To his credit he follows the views of this reviewer, among others, that boys at Olympia were not aged 17 to 20, but under 18.

Romano is particularly good in his section of *Athletes and Heroes*. Here he shows us Olympia, warts and all, with references to bribery, scandals, amateurism and professionalism, rival cities, floggings and fines for athletes who broke rules. He speaks of some of the darker sides of Greek sport as well as the well-known romantic side. The Zanes, the statues erected at Olympia by bribery-corrupted athletes, bore the inscription that one should win through strength or speed, not through money. Of interest is his comment that not only were those athletes who received bribes at Olympia punished, but also those who gave bribes. Critics of the modern Olympic movement may note that corruption was not absent, even from ancient Olympia. Also noteworthy is that athletes who were found guilty of receiving bribes were not stripped of their victory. Romano emphasizes the commercial aspect of the games with reference to the payments and material rewards given to victorious athletes by the home city. He comments that females had their own festival at Olympia in honour of Hera at a time separate from that of the men. Yet a woman could officially be declared the winner at Olympia by being the owner of the winning chariot, although she would never be allowed actually to participate.

Romano concludes his narrative with comments on the Roman emperors Theodosius I and II and their roles in closing the Olympic games, on the changing course of the Alpheus river, on the discovery of the site by Richard Chandler, and on Coubertin's revival of the games in 1896. Do we really need a reference to Chandler in a video of this kind, when time is at a premium? On a more serious note, there is no mention of the recent discoveries at Olympia by the German School of Archaeologists, noteworthy finds which date the closing of the ancient games not to A.D. 393, but to at least a century later and perhaps more. Romano rightly concludes that the ancient games had no controversy over the amateurism/professionalism dichotomy, but that they did have political, nationalistic and commercial overtones. He believes that religion was the reason for both the success of the games as well as for their demise. The latest scholarship, however, suggests that Christianity did not destroy pagan cults at Olympia, but that they existed side-by-side.

Lengthy credits are appended to the lecture, with a bibliography of eight works, a mixture of books of a scholarly and general nature, inviting the viewer to delve further into the history of the ancient games. These include some traditional works, but also Romano's article on "Boycotts" that he follows to some extent in the video and in the glossary.⁴

To present all the above information in so short a time span is difficult. This reviewer would have preferred fewer facts and more reflection. What Romano does say, however, is largely accurate. The illustrations are also good: these are mainly vase paintings, sculptures and interesting views of the Olympia site, traditional images with which teachers of ancient sport will be familiar. Sometimes, however, the visuals that illustrate the text are inappropriate, which may not be the fault of Romano, but perhaps his two editors. I noted the following: as Romano talks about equestrian events at Olympia, the viewer sees a vase painting representing the race in Homer's *Iliad* 23. This, at first sight, is not a major problem perhaps, but spectators

are shown in the painting seated on “modern-style” bleachers, while we are told elsewhere in the video (correctly) that at Olympia only a few special spectators had seats. Some illustrations which are presented while Romano talks about ancient running show modern runners (college athletes from Villanova) running round an oval track. Romano of course is fully conversant with how ancient Greek runners turned in the stadium, but uninformed viewers may get the wrong impression. When Romano speaks of the comments of Philostratus on long-distance runners, the illustrations appear to show sprinters. When Diagoras of Rhodes is mentioned the famous “Seated Boxer” statue is shown: a good illustration, but not the aristocratic Diagoras, said to be the tallest man in the world. When Romano comments on Olympic wrestlers, a vase painting featuring Atlanta, a mythological female wrestler, is twice shown. Yet we all know, as does Romano, that there were no female wrestlers at Olympia. Romano mentions elsewhere that married women were banned from the games, but unmarried women were allowed to be present. Some viewers may find confusing the interspersing of Minoan and Homeric elements with the historic periods in the video. It is, after all, a lecture on the Olympic games, not one on Greek sport in general.

The criticisms I have made above are mostly of a minor nature. This is a good and useful video, although now somewhat outdated. At whom is the video aimed? It is said to be “appropriate for home viewing or for use in educational settings.” I would agree. It is not for the scholar or specialist in ancient Olympia, and cannot offer much in the way of fresh insights into the games. Nor is it really for those teaching a course on the ancient Olympics except perhaps as a useful introduction to the subject. It would be very useful for those teaching a general course on the Olympics who wanted a short insight into the ancient games, and for those teaching general courses in ancient civilization of which the ancient Olympics were a part. The 55 minute length of the video makes it ideal for a class of one hour, but it may be noted that it is difficult, as I discovered, to show in a class lasting fifty minutes. The price of \$21.95 U.S. is reasonable, a credit to this non-profit organization.

Romano’s is not the only video on the market on the ancient games which was produced in the last Olympiad. One rival is the A&E video presented by Leonard Nimoy (Mr. Spock of “Star Trek” fame), which has interviews with several well-known scholars in the field, including Thomas Scanlon of the University of California at Riverside, and Ulrich Sinn of Wurzburg, Germany, the current excavator at Olympia. It may be noted that in this video (which has several controversial features of its own) Sinn is shown on site at Olympia discussing the latest archaeological finds.

Notes

1. A translation of this inscription, following Dittenberger, can be found in S. Miller, *Arete. Greek Sports from Ancient Sources*, Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 156-57.

2. M.I. Finley and H.W. Pleket, *The Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years*, London: Chatto and Windus Press, 1976.

3. See W. Decker, *Sport in der griechischen Antike*, Munich, 1995.

4. "Boycotts, Bribes and Fines: The Ancient Olympic Games," *Expedition*, Volume 27.2, 1985, pp. 10-21.