
Book Reviews

Das Gymnasion von Olympia: Geschichte und Funktion [The Gymnasium of Olympia: History and Function] by Christian Wacker (Würzburger Forschungen zur Altertumskunde 2 - Würzburg, 1996). Reviewed by Wolfgang Decker, Deutsche Sporthochschule, Köln, Germany.

It takes a fair amount of courage and convincing arguments to subject the function and history of the Gymnasium of Olympia, one of the best explored and most prominent gymnasiums in Greece, to a revision and reassessment as does Christian Wacker in his first monograph, his Würzburg doctoral thesis of the year 1995.



The Gymnasium at Olympia

To begin, Wacker brings to mind Pausanias' reflections after a visit to Olympia sometime in the 2nd Century A.D. There are two references where Pausanias provides clear data on the Gymnasium: "The Prytaneion of the Eleans is situated within the Altis next to the exit, which lies opposite the Gymnasium. In this Gymnasium are the running tracks and wrestling rings for the competitors." (V 15,8; translated by E. Meyer/P. Eckstein 1986/87). "The exercises for pentathlon and running take place at the Gymnasium of Olympia, and there was a terrace of stone built in the open; originally there used to be a victory memorial over the Arcadians on the terrace. Another little enclosure can also be found there, left of the entrance to the Gymnasium, and

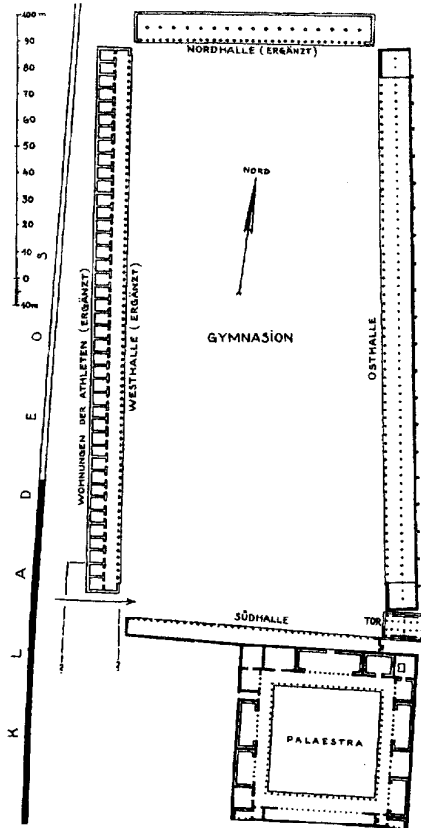
here the wrestling rings for the athletes are. Built against the wall of the columned hall directed towards the rising sun are the athletes' accommodations, directed towards the west and the sunset" (VI 21,2; translated by E. Meyer/F. Eckstein 1986/87).

In the course of the excavations of Olympia the extensive site on which the Gymnasium was built was carefully cleared, and the remains of what was called the Palaestra were elaborately restored (Bibliography of the Excavation Publications in *W. Zschietzschmann, Wettkampf - und übnungsstätten in Griechenland II. Palaestra - Gymnasium (Beiträge zur Lehre und Forschung der Leibeserziehung 8)* Schorndorf 1961, 40 n. (5)). The western wing of the Gymnasium, the athletes' accommodations, was washed off completely by the floods of the Cladeus. The eastern part has only been partly excavated, although its length has been precisely ascertained; today, the road to Tripolis runs above the part still covered, and a modern car park stretches on top of a small part of it.

As set out in the sub-title of Wacker's book, the extensive material has been subdivided into "History of Construction" (chapter III), "Function" (chapter IV), and a chapter on "Gymnasiums of the Classical and Hellenistic Age" (chapter V) discussing material in comparison with the hypothesis developed in chapters III and IV. A brief summary written in English is followed by an extensive bibliography, ordered by sections, (p. 231-246), which is very handy due to its thematic systematisation. Amazingly, it does not contain the above-cited general work by W. Zschietzschmann on the Gymnasium, which gives a detailed account of Olympia. Also the concise encyclopaedia article by J. Delorme and W. Speyer on the Gymnasium deserves to be mentioned (*Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum XIII* (1986) 155-175), which, after all, was published 26 years later than the standard work on the Greek institution by the French archeologist. The description of the Gymnasium of Olympia is followed by an attempt to present a more refined version of the history of construction and to state more precisely the period of construction (*terminus post quem*: discovery of an Elean coin of approx. 400 B.C., *terminus ante quem* (Paus. VI 6,3): champions' list in the Gymnasium drawn up by the winner of the diaulos in the year 280 B.C., Parabolon). To this end the capitals of the Palaestra are systematically compared with Ionic capitals in other places on the mainland, leading to the conclusion that its erection dates from the first half of the 3rd Century B.C. When discussing later rebuilding and extension works the author also looks at the brick paving of the northern Palaestra yard; whereas the latter was, in my own opinion, related to technical sport matters as yet only unconvincing or inconsistently argued by sport historians (W. Zschietzschmann, o.c. p. 56, quotes C. Diem's unacceptable view that it had to be identified as a jumping track for the pentathlon event). Christian Wacker explains its existence by ascribing its function as a base for roof tiles that needed to dry before being fired in the kiln of late antiquity, which is located near Room XIV.

Taking into consideration the general historical situation in Greek history during the first half of the 3rd Century B.C., the author tries to connect the hitherto unsolved question of the donator with Ptolemaios II Philadelphos residing in Egypt who, for two decades, exerted a strong influence on Greek politics up to the year 262 B.C. The only donation credited to him at Olympia is the nauarch's Kallikrates consecration gift placed in front of the Echo Colonnade; however, in other Greek cities (Athens, Cyrene, Rhodes, Eresos, for instance) several gymnasiums are known to have been

marks of his euergetism, some of which were sites of *Ptolemaia*, a festival celebrated in many places (e.g. in Alexandria, Delphi, Delos) with a sports programme (agon) used as propaganda for Ptolemaian policy. Even if neither literary nor epigraphic pieces of evidence assure that the Gymnasium of Olympia was established by Ptolemaios, there is nevertheless a ring of truth in the well-founded argument.



Schema diagram of Gymnasium at Ancient Olympia

What is completely new in Wackers' work is the idea expressed and substantiated by arguments in chapter IV relating to the Heroon of the 5th Century B.C., located south of the Palaestra to the Gymnasium. Because of the circular built-in construction in the Heroon, the function of which was hypothesized incorrectly as a steambath, Wacker attends to the history of the construction and function of the tholos (round building) in detail and explains that the building served as a ritual gathering place where Iamos, progenitor of an Olympian line of prophets from the sanctuary's early days when its function as an oracle place still outshone its agnostic significance, or Pelops, the well-known local hero from the Mycenaen epoch, were worshipped. For the alternative view, however, the presence of the Pelopion would

cause a problem although Pelop's importance for Olympia would have allowed more than one building erected as homage to him. A vast amount of comparative material entwined around the heroes' cult at the Gymnasium is very convincingly presented. Individual references are given in chapter V. The fact that a gymnasium was incorporated into the public ownership of the old Heroon at Olympia is interesting, as this is known to have been common practice in other places too.



A model of Olympia's ancient Gymnasium and adjoining Palaestra

In the course of defining the function of the Gymnasium of Olympia, a problem arises: Wacker disputes the characteristics of this specific gymnasium - that of the vestibule of Greek agonistics - that it was used as sports field or, more precisely, as a training facility since Olympia was not a settlement, and so there was no need for daily usage. Olympia belonged to the polis Elis, approximately 60 kilometres away, which had its own gymnasium within its walls and did not depend on a sport training facility that could not be reached every day. However, since the athletes had to go through a 30-day training period at the Gymnasium of Elis before making an appearance at Olympia, its function as training facility ceases to apply, and another function must take place (p. 121f). But, where else would the athletes have trained or even warmed up at Olympia? The prevailing training method, of the time, the tetrad cycle, at least for the time of the Empire (Philostratos, *Gymnastikos* 47, 54) would require the athletes to continue their training at Olympia. It is hardly conceivable that the epitome of training quarters at Olympia, i.e. the Gymnasium, was not used to serve sporting interests. Why should itinerant teachers, scholars, artists and other public personalities (Wacker p. 122) have needed the ancient "cultural centre" in Olympia at all when they only went there for a few days every four years? Either, or both interpretations (which I plead for) are possible, or both cease to apply. It is also a bit of a *coup de force* to consider the Olympian gymnasium as the "stage of rhetorics" as does the author on pages 131-133. It simply cannot be ignored that according to ancient

tradition Herodotus read from his histories sitting in the opisthodomos of the Temple of Zeus in the year 444 B.C., and also Apollonius of Tyana delivered his speech standing on the stylobat of this sanctuary, but not in the gymnasium.

With constant reference to his subject, the nature of the Greek gymnasium is otherwise interpreted by the author as a multifunctional institution for public self-assurance and education, for the worship of exemplary members of society and the cultivation of the ideal, of arete as a place for indulgence and academic disputes, as a sports and military venue, as library and communication centre - in short, as an "ancient cultural centre."

Wacker's treatment of the archont's Dion calculation of the year 247/246 B.C. (P. 200ff), where he also looks at the Gymnasium of Delphi, must be contradicted. Following J. Delorme, I do not take the sphairisterion mentioned here to have been an area for ball-games, but rather a boxing room, although it takes a considerable amount of sand in the context addressed. But ball games are only of peripheral importance in Greek sports and did not require their own site within the gymnasium. One must, however, agree with Wacker on his excursion to the damatiron, where he relates the building to the area of the Castalian spring, not to the cults of Ge and Themis located further away.

From the point of view of sport history it should be emphasized that the question posed on p. 223 - whether the Gymnasium of Sikyon was the training quarters for the athletes taking part (like that of Elis) during the time after 146 B.C. when, instead of destroyed Corinth, this polis held the Isthmian Games - seems to be justified and calls for closer examination.

It speaks well for the author that he made extensive use of the archeological literature written in modern Greek. Unfortunately, there are several inconsistencies in the corresponding bibliographic details given (especially on pages 141-144) which could have been avoided by a thorough final proof-reading. Corrections of passages in classical Greek are:

p. 79 γυμνασιάρχῃσάγῆτα; p. 107 ἐπὶ ξεστοῖσι λίθοις; p. 115 n. 185 ἀρετή;
p. 119 n. 204 αὐτῶ; p. 121 n. 5 τοὺς; p. 132 n. 73 ὁπόσαι.

In the reviewer's copy the print is blurred or non-apparent in some passages on pages 99, 103 and 185; otherwise the script is very attractive, as is the quality of the illustrations.

The study of the Gymnasium of Olympia is an important contribution to the research on that site of ancient cult and contests and was carried out using a wide range of material and with full mastery of the literature. The comparative material is manifold and has been consulted with impressive expenditure and time. Especially with regard to the dating and the donator, as well as the interpretations of the Heroon and its tie with the Olympic gymnasium, convincing results have been achieved that also support scholarship presented on the ancient gymnasium in general. On its use for sporting events, however, the final word has yet to be spoken.