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# On the politics of inclusion and exclusion in classical Greek sport (479–323 BC)<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Heine Nielsen (University of Copenhagen)

## Introduction

The following brief study aims to outline how ancient Greek sport contributed to the drawing of boundaries between groups and within groups. The first section discusses the distinctions between *polis* honoratiorees and the common crowds (section I.1); between the rich and the poor (I.2); between the coached and the uncoached (I.3); between equestrians and other competitors (I.4); and between the celebrated victors and the silent majority (I.5–6). The second section addresses the distinctions between Athenians and other *poleis* (II.1); between men and women (II.2); between free men and the enslaved (II.3); and, finally, between Greeks and non-Greeks (II.4). Most, though not *all*, of the evidence on which the study draws is Athenian, as is almost invariably the case in studies of ancient Greek history, but the main points made should be broadly valid for most Greek *poleis*.

## I. Distinctions within the group of adult free men

### I.1. Honoratiorees versus the common crowd

The function of competitive sport – that is, what sport *did* – in the ancient Greek world was to (re)create and reify distinctions within groups and between groups.<sup>2</sup> It was not, of course, the case that sport *created* the differences and distinctions to be discussed below in the hard sense of bringing them into existence in the first place. But since the distinctions discussed here provided the cultural bases on which the Greek way of sport rested, sport, by using these distinctions as basic organizing principles on numerous and recurrent occasions, helped maintain them and solidify them, and in this weaker sense we may say that sport contributed to the (re)creation of fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> A preliminary version of this paper was published in Danish in 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Christesen and MacLean 2021: 24.

differences and social principles of Greek culture, and this clarification should be kept firmly in mind throughout the following discussion.

This function of sport was a product of the various ways in which different groups and individuals were enabled to practice sport or, on the contrary, excluded from the practice of sport, by way of law or by way of inherited tradition. In this way, sport contributed to the (re)creation and reification of central differences and distinctions in ancient Greek culture. But, of course, sport also served other purposes, in particular in religious ceremonies which was practically the only context in which competitive contests took place in the classical period.<sup>3</sup> The most important public events of Greek *polis* religion<sup>4</sup> were the great *heortai* or *panegyreis* (festivals) celebrated in honour of the gods.<sup>5</sup> These festivals staged the central ritual of Greek religion: animal sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> Sacrifices were sometimes on a significant scale,<sup>7</sup> and they united humans and the god(s) they honoured through a central social ritual of a shared meal. Greek sacrifices were conducted by offering a few specially chosen pieces of sacrificial meat, that were then burnt for the gods on an altar,<sup>8</sup> while the rest was distributed amongst the worshippers, ideally the whole citizenry (not just the adult males). The sacrificial meat provided citizens with a feast,<sup>9</sup> and the sacrifice was not really completed until the sacrificers themselves had had their share.

In addition to sacrifices, festivals normally comprised of several other rituals and attractions such as prayers, choral songs, processions, recitations of epics, tragic and comic performances and, not least, competitive contests. In Greek antiquity, the great

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<sup>3</sup> Nielsen 2018: 22–30. For the close connection between sport (*agones*) and religion, see e.g. Thuc. 2.13.4, 2.38.1, 5.49.1; Isocr. *Paneg.* 4.43; Diod. Sic. 12.26.4.

<sup>4</sup> On *polis* religion, see the two influential essays by Sourvinou-Inwood (1988 and 1990), conveniently brought together in Buxton 2000.

<sup>5</sup> On Greek religious festivals, see the essays collected in Brandt and Iddeng 2012, and the Greek parts of *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum* VII; as well as Parker 2011: 171–223.

<sup>6</sup> On Greek animal sacrifice, see Bremmer 2007 and the essays collected in Hitch and Rutherford 2017.

<sup>7</sup> To give merely a single example, in 333 BC the Athenians sacrificed at least 261 oxen to Zeus Soter (Rosivach 1994: 63). See also *IG I<sup>3</sup>* 375.7; *I.Cret.* I.xxii.9; *ASAA* 39-40 (1961-62) 312-13 nos. 161-62; Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.29 and Isocr. 7.29.

<sup>8</sup> Hes. *Theog.* 535-560; Men. *Dysc.* 447-49.

<sup>9</sup> Hdt. 1.31.5; [Xen.] *Ath. pol.* 2.9; Isae. 9.21; Isocr. 7.29; Eur. fr. 282.

religious festivals served as occasions for recreation, relaxation and merriment.<sup>10</sup> Some of the major festivals lasted for quite a while – the Olympics for 5 days and the *Panathenaia* for perhaps 8 days<sup>11</sup> – and most of the time was devoted to events other than the sacrificial feast. A basic religious assumption of the Greeks was that the gods enjoyed ‘the same kinds of pleasures, such as wine, dancing, song, and even beauty contests, as their terrestrial counterparts.’<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, they could be honoured with activities such as Homeric recitations and athletic competitions.<sup>13</sup> Competitive contests, then, were staged both in honour of the gods and for human enjoyment and recreation. The Greeks were enthusiastic spectators at athletic competitions, as is clear from the Homeric description of the funeral games for Patroklos,<sup>14</sup> or Sophokles’ vision of Orestes’ performances at Delphi.<sup>15</sup> As incorporated into *heortai*, athletic competitions were both a religious ritual in honour of the gods and a spectator event of major recreational value.

As spectator events, competitive contests contributed to the (re)creation and reification of differences among individuals in *poleis*. As a general rule, Greek *poleis* were heavily dependent on the benevolence and altruism of their economic elites in order to have various public activities financed.<sup>16</sup> At Athens, for instance, private benevolence was even institutionalized by law in the form of *liturgies*, a special kind of tax by which the financing and administration of various public activities were imposed on wealthy individuals<sup>17</sup> and from which such central institutions as dramatic performances<sup>18</sup> and the navy<sup>19</sup> were funded.<sup>20</sup> Such contributions to public activities and

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<sup>10</sup> Thuc. 2.38.1; Pl. *Leg.* 653D.

<sup>11</sup> Olympics: Lee 2001; *Panathenaia*: Mikalson 1975: 34.

<sup>12</sup> Murray 2014: 312. See e.g. *Hom. Hym. Apoll.* 149–150, 169–170 where song is said to please Apollo as well as humans.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Lysias 2.80 for the statement that *agones* were put on to honour the gods.

<sup>14</sup> *Hom. Il.* 23.257–897.

<sup>15</sup> *Soph. El.* 680–763; see also Guttman 1986: 17.

<sup>16</sup> Gyax 2016: 5–6.

<sup>17</sup> Hansen 1999: 110–12; Gyax 2016: 199–207.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Gabrielsen 1994.

<sup>20</sup> Such liturgies were so expensive that they were incumbent on ‘a very small proportion of the Athenian citizenbody’ (Davies 1984: 9).

their funding did not come forward quite as reluctantly as citizens of modern liberal states might perhaps instinctly assume. The driving ambition of Greek elites was public respect and recognition, very often expressed in the form of certain social privileges such as, for example, the right to dine at the *prytaneion*, the ceremonial council hall (*sitesis*).<sup>21</sup> Such public recognition was proof that a man belonged in the uppermost echelons of society. The urge for public recognition was termed *philotimia* ('love of honour') and was a thoroughly respectable pursuit.<sup>22</sup> The concept of *philotimia* and the public need for benefactions made an almost perfect match. The *polis* would publicly acknowledge benefactions received, very often by awarding various privileges by means of honorary decrees issued by the assembly, itself the prime decision-making institution of Greek *poleis* admitting all adult male full-citizens, at least in democratic *poleis*. In order to win such public honour, the elites had to constantly provide benefactions in a continuous circle of reciprocity. One of the most prestigious privileges a *polis* had to award was *proedria*,<sup>23</sup> an honorary front-seat at various gatherings of mass audiences such as athletic competitions.<sup>24</sup> When the crowd entered the stadium to attend the competitions it was, accordingly, made clear in a most demonstrative way who the publicly favoured elites were: the dignitaries in the front row. On this point, athletic competitions resembled other mass gatherings such as concerts or dramatic performances where honorary front seats were also set aside for honoraries: it was the event as a mass turnout and not its quality as, say, a boxing match that the *polis* put to its own good use in such circumstances. The reciprocal system of benefactions and honorific awards was meritocratic and plutocratic in that elites had to supply generous benefactions in order to win public recognition.<sup>25</sup> As incorporated into the big religious festivals, then, sport created the great mass turnouts that *poleis* put to their advantage by using them as a stage on which to honour its benefactors publicly in front of the common crowd, and in this way sport contributed to visualizing and solidifying the distinctions between the economic elite and the ordinary population.

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<sup>21</sup> Dem. 20.120; *Der Neue Pauly* 11: 599 s.v. *Sitesis*.

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Dem. 18.257; *IG II<sup>2</sup>* 300, 373; *SEG* 32 794.11.

<sup>23</sup> *Der Neue Pauly* 10: 376.

<sup>24</sup> Such honorary seats have been identified archaeologically and epigraphically in ancient theatres: see Isler 2017 vol. 1: 122-29.

<sup>25</sup> Scanlon 2021: 654.

## I.2. The rich versus the poor

Turning now to the athletes and to sport as a competitive pursuit, we must keep in mind that Greek athletes, as I shall show below, comprised of only free, Greek men, and this group will have constituted a minority of the population in any Greek *polis*. But even within this tiny and exclusive group it was not all, but only *some*, who practised a lifestyle organized to meet the rather severe demands of competitive athletics. First of all, there were presumably uncodified but strict social rules for who could permit themselves to pass the day idly with training in the public fitness facilities, the *gymnasia*, literally 'places for being naked'.<sup>26</sup> To practise athletics as a lifestyle was to pose – in the manner of the earlier tradition when only leaders competed as athletes, as in Homer<sup>27</sup> – as one of the would-be leaders of the *polis* and so it was primarily the elites who did so.

Another circumstance which presumably prevented most free men from participating seriously in competitive athletics was the fact that competition at top-level was so keen that serious and systematic training was an absolute necessity for ambitious athletes with hopes of victory.<sup>28</sup> And in Greek sport, secondary placings counted for almost nothing as only victory was considered to be of any real value and prestige.<sup>29</sup> Nobody really cared who was second at the Olympics or elsewhere.<sup>30</sup> It was, accordingly, a precondition for serious athletic ambitions to have the leisure time available to be set aside for extensive training. This will have prevented most from becoming great athletes, since, as Aristotle remarked, everywhere few are prosperous, and many needy.<sup>31</sup>

For the actual competitions, too, leisure was essential since most Greek athletes had to travel to the sites of competitions which were only rarely located in their own *polis*.

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<sup>26</sup> Pritchard 2003: 322–23.

<sup>27</sup> Papakonstantinou 2019: 26–27.

<sup>28</sup> Ar. *Ran.* 1093–94; Aeschin. 3.179–80; Isocr. 15.183–85, 16.32–33; Pl. *Stat.* 294de, *Resp.* 422bc, *Leg.* 830ac; Xen. *Hier.* 4.6; see further Potter 2012: 137–60; Cebrián 2020: 89–92; Mann 2021: 74–79.

<sup>29</sup> Segal 1984: 26.

<sup>30</sup> For the few cases in which secondary or lower placings were remembered, see Matthews 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Arist. *Pol.* 1279b34.

An athlete of, say, Massalia in modern France or Sinope on the Black Sea, would have to travel far to cities such as Argos, Athens, Elis, Korinth or Thebes to enter prestigious competitions. Travel expenses had to be covered by the athlete himself (or his family), since there were no public institutions to subsidize such travels in the classical *polis*.<sup>32</sup> It was, moreover, a precondition for entering the Olympics, the most prestigious of all athletic festivals, that athletes trained at Elis – the *polis* which always arranged the Olympics<sup>33</sup> – for a whole month prior to the opening of the festival, supervised by the *Hellanodikai*, the Eleian umpires organising and presiding at the festival.<sup>34</sup> All in all, it seems a reasonable assumption that an Olympic athlete would have to set aside at least some five to six weeks to compete at Olympia. So, obviously, economic status played a decisive role and *de facto* determined who competed at top-level festivals.

### I.3. The coached versus the uncoached

But there were further ways in which economic status was a decisive factor. Skilled and professional trainers appeared already in the late archaic period,<sup>35</sup> and by the fifth century they seem to have been reasonably common and to have formed a well-recognized group of professionals.<sup>36</sup> Among them were several retired athletic stars such as Ikkos of Taras<sup>37</sup> and Melesias of Athens.<sup>38</sup> An athlete bettered his prospects of victory considerably by taking instruction from such a coach: Melesias of Athens led his charges, all from Aigina, it seems, to no less than thirty major victories.<sup>39</sup> But professional trainers, of course, asked for salaries, and here, then, is another socio-economic factor restricting access to top-level sports to the select few.<sup>40</sup> By competing at top-level, then, an athlete demonstrated that he belonged to that *leisure class*, which

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<sup>32</sup> The earliest known example of public subsidization is an *ad hoc*-grant by Ephesos ca. 300 BC (see Brunet 2003, Nielsen 2011 and Nielsen 2018: 211–13, discussing *I.Ephesos* 1415, 1416 and 2005).

<sup>33</sup> Crowther 2003; Nielsen 2007: 29–54.

<sup>34</sup> Crowther 1991. The stipulation is known only from the Roman period, but it, or something similar, presumably existed already in the classical period.

<sup>35</sup> Mann 2014: 279.

<sup>36</sup> Mann 2021: 74.

<sup>37</sup> Pl. *Prot.* 316d; *Leg.* 839f-840a; Paus. 6.10.5.

<sup>38</sup> Pind. *Oi.* 8.54-66; *Nem.* 4.93-96; *Nem.* 5.48-49; *Nem.* 6.64-66; Pl. *Meno* 94cd.

<sup>39</sup> Pind. *Oi.* 8.66.

<sup>40</sup> Mann 2021: 74.

was defined and described in a classic monograph by Thorstein Veblen as long ago as 1899.<sup>41</sup> That is, the class which had the resources and, accordingly, the leisure time to engage in extravagant consumption and unproductive waste of time – a lifestyle which was very much the ideal among Greek elites who despised productive labour and commerce.<sup>42</sup> This was particularly true of the absolute economic elite, who engaged in equestrian sports.

#### **I.4. Equestrians versus the rest**

In ancient Greek culture, the horse was the ultimate status symbol. In agriculture the horse was essentially parasitic and non-productive in terms of yielding raw products (cheese, meat etc.). Equestrian sports were, moreover, a particularly costly affair, which demanded considerable resources.<sup>43</sup> The horses had (preferably) to be bred or (if necessary) bought; and once bred or bought, they had to be fed and tended. Moreover, one needed a stable and competent staff, as well as equestrian equipment and the leisure time and skills to train the animals or the financial resources to hire a professional to do the job. Race horses, especially chariot-teams, had to be trained meticulously in order to compete; and, as I shall elaborate below, skilled charioteers were likewise a necessity in order to spare the horseowners themselves the acute dangers of actual racing.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, only the super rich members of the elite competed in equestrian contests, and the purpose (or one of the purposes, at least) was, quite simply, to demonstrate membership of the uppermost elite among the leisure class.

But equestrian sports offered an additional attraction which was that age did not really matter. This meant that slightly or considerably elderly members of the elite who could no longer compete in foot-races or combat sports but had inherited the family fortune did not have to withdraw completely from competitive sports, but could change to

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<sup>41</sup> Veblen 1994 [1899].

<sup>42</sup> Hdt. 2.165–67; Pl. *Resp.*590c; Xen. *Oec.* 4.2-3; Arist. *Pol.* 1291a1-4; Austin & Vidal-Naquet 1977: 11, 17, 169–71, 379; Whitehead 1977: 116–21; Hansen 1999: 120.

<sup>43</sup> Davies 1971: xxv–xxvi; Hodkinson 2000: 312–17; Scott 2005: 513–21; Golden 2014: 254, 262.

<sup>44</sup> See Pind. *Pyth.* 5.49–54, Dem. 61.29, Diod. Sic. 14.109,4 with Crowther 1994: 121.

equestrian sports.<sup>45</sup> Age was another phenomenon reified by sport. At the competitions at the Greek religious festivals with *agones gymnikoi* on their program competitors were divided into age-classes.<sup>46</sup> The important dividing line was between adults and non-adults. The latter were sometimes subdivided further into e.g. 'beardless' and 'boys', as was the case at the *Panathenaia* at Athens; at Olympia, however, the dividing line was simply between 'men' and 'boys', with the former as the important group.<sup>47</sup> By competing in equestrian races, then, members of the upper economic elite could remain 'men' in public eyes for as long as they wanted, even if the equestrian competitors were not divided into age-classes.

### **I.5. The victors versus the unvictorious**

For the select few who did compete at top-level, the goal was victory, at almost any price, and victory and its meaning became an ideological battleground.<sup>48</sup> Athletic victory was a source of honour,<sup>49</sup> and honour was, as already mentioned, a pervasive driving force of Greek elites, in all spheres of life. Since victories were won at contests incorporated into festivals of the gods, victory could also be interpreted as proof that the victor was a favourite of the patron divinity, since, according to Greek religious ideas, nothing happened except through divine agency: a victory, then, could be construed as a gift from the god.<sup>50</sup> Victories could also, and Greek elites did so demonstratively, be interpreted as proof of inherited prowess,<sup>51</sup> and used to justify aspirations to political leadership, another central ambition of Greek elites.<sup>52</sup> In this way, the meaning of victory became an ideological battleground, as already stated. The *poleis* as collectives of citizens attempted to secure for itself a part of the honour and prestige

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<sup>45</sup> Golden 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Petermandl 1997.

<sup>47</sup> Golden 2004: s.v. age-class.

<sup>48</sup> Nicholson 2005: 15; see also Espy 1979: 4–8 for the point that by itself sport has no fixed meaning and has only the meaning assigned to it.

<sup>49</sup> Hom *Od.* 8.147–48; Xenoph. fr. 2.6 (West); Pind. *Ol.* 1.23–24; *Ol.* 8.10–11; *Isthm.* 5.7–10; Ebert 1972: no. 46.1–2; no. 48.7; no. 49.5–6; see further Mann 2001: 19; Nielsen 2014: 25–26.

<sup>50</sup> See e.g. *IvO* 166; Pind. *Isthm.* 2.12–16, 18; see further Mikalson 2007; Nielsen 2012; and Keesling 2017: 29.

<sup>51</sup> Nicholson 2005: 2; Cebrián 2020: 82–83.

<sup>52</sup> Mann 2001: 36.

which fell to the victories of ‘their’ athletes.<sup>53</sup> To a great extent, they did so by identifying athletes very closely with their *poleis* of origin.<sup>54</sup> Formally, Greek athletes were not official representatives of their *poleis*, in the way that modern Olympic athletes are representatives of their nations, and there were no such things as city-state uniforms or city-state teams in ancient Greek sport. But the close identification of athletes with their *poleis* turned them into *de facto* representatives of their *poleis* and in this way the *poleis* appropriated for themselves part of the glory of their athletic victors.

## **I.6. The celebrated versus the silent majority**

On their side, Greek upper-class victors developed two exquisite art forms which served to immortalise the memory of the victor and allow him to retain for himself the better part of the honour and prestige of his victory: the nude athletic statue and the so-called epinician ode. During the sixth century, Greek elite victors began erecting costly statues depicting themselves to celebrate and immortalise their feats,<sup>55</sup> and such monuments were erected either at the site of victory – e.g. Olympia or Delphi – or at a major sanctuary in the athlete’s hometown, in Athens on the Akropolis,<sup>56</sup> and they were formally dedicatory offerings to the god considered to have brought victory.<sup>57</sup> In addition to demonstrating and emphasising the divine favour bestowed on the victor, the purpose of such victor statues was, of course, to perpetuate the memory of the splendid victory, which might otherwise be deplorably transient. Accordingly, the statues depicted the victor in the nude, the Greek athletic costume, as it were.<sup>58</sup> Famous

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<sup>53</sup> Thus, *poleis* would occasionally finance victory statues for victorious citizens, presumably to ensure their own shares of the glory of victory: see e.g. *IvO* 186; *SEG* 35.1125: Paus. 6.13.11, 6.15.6 and 6.17.4.

<sup>54</sup> See e.g. Isocr. 16.33 (with Nielsen 2002: 205); Lycurg. *Leoc.* 51; and *I.Ephesos* 1415 (with Nielsen 2018: 210); see further Mann 2001: 34; Nielsen 2002: 207–9; Nielsen 2007: 86–98.

<sup>55</sup> At Olympia, victory statues may have been erected already in the seventh century: see Paus. 6.1.8 with Herrmann 1988: 120.

<sup>56</sup> On such victor statues, see Hyde 1921; Raschke 1987; Herrmann 1988; Lattimore 1988; Rausa 1994; Peim 2000; Smith 2007; Nielsen 2018: 177.

<sup>57</sup> Hyde 1921: 37–40; Herrmann 1988: 134; Smith 2007: 97; Keesling 2017: 29, 47–48.

<sup>58</sup> Hyde 1921: 47; Smith 2007: 107.

sculptors such as Myron,<sup>59</sup> Polykleitos<sup>60</sup> and even Pheidias<sup>61</sup> produced statues such as the *Diskobolos* and the *Diadoumenos*. Its ideological function was to depict the victor as a superior being in a form resembling that of gods and mythological heroes, who were standardly depicted in the nude and who were also thought of as athletes: Apollo, for instance, was a boxer.<sup>62</sup> Alongside gods, heroes and the dead, athletes were, in fact, the only subjects of portraits in early Greek sculpture.<sup>63</sup> Such portraits were not realistic portraits but idealistic and ideological interpretations of the feats and stature of the depicted victor.

The second art form that developed to glorify and exalt victory was the epinician ode, great choral odes performed by dancing male choirs to musical accompaniment. Such odes were produced by professional poets such as Bacchylides (ca. 520–ca. 450 BC) and Pindar (ca. 518–ca. 445 BC), the latter the most famous lyric poet of Greek antiquity.<sup>64</sup> Music and choreography have, unfortunately, been lost in transmission and what does survive is the naked text of some sixty odes, some in a fragmentary state. But these naked texts suffice to demonstrate a few important points. In these great triumphant odes, it is victory and its splendour which is the central focus, alongside the glorification of the victor's social and familial background. There is rarely any description of the athletic event itself. It is not the throwing of the discus or the act of jumping which is at issue, but rather the interpretation of victory as proof of the great personal and inherited qualities of the honorand which absorbs all interest. An almost obligatory constituent of epinician odes was one or more mythological narratives, which

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<sup>59</sup> Paus. 6.2.1, 6.8.4, 8.8.5, 6.13.2.

<sup>60</sup> Paus. 6.4.10, 6.4.11.

<sup>61</sup> Paus. 6.4.5.

<sup>62</sup> Paus. 5.7.10.

<sup>63</sup> Keesling 2017: 10–13, 28–32.

<sup>64</sup> An introduction to the epinician poetry of Pindar is provided by Carne-Ross 1985; Mackie 2003, though not an introduction, is also accessible; the collection of articles edited by Hornblower and Morgan 2007 considers Pindar from a wide variety of angles and provides a rich bibliography. Translations are provided by e.g. Nisetich 1980; translations of the epinician odes of Bacchylides are found in McDevitt 2009. The poet Simonides, who was an elder contemporary of the two preserved epinician poets, is also known to have composed epinician poems, but these survive in meagre fragments only (see Mann 2001: 299–311). On epinician poetry, see also Saïd and Trédé-Boulmer 1984; Golden 1998: 76–88; and Kantzios 2004.

are often somewhat loosely attached to the rest of the ode. Many elite families claimed to descend from mythical heroes or even gods.<sup>65</sup> The mythological narratives incorporated into the epinician odes suggest close relations between the honorand and his family, the heroes and the gods, even where such relations did not exist by tradition: victor, heroes and gods are mentioned alongside one another, in the same breath, as if that was the most natural thing on earth. Like the sculptural monuments, then, epinician odes elevate the honorands above ordinary life and into the sphere of gods and heroes. This strategy, of course, is heavily ideological. Such victors were the top of that exclusive group of adult, free Greek men who competed in sports in order to demonstrate who they were and the stuff of which they were made. This was clearly one of the objectives of the Athenian equestrian victor Alkibiades, who pointed to his Olympic victory in 416 BC as an argument in favour of his appointment as leader of the Athenian expedition against Sicily in 415 BC.<sup>66</sup> Such men had an almost self-evident claim to leadership in their *polis*, a point of view which had been standard in the earlier periods of Greek history and had not yet been quite abandoned by the classical period.

## II. Distinctions between the group of adult free men and other groups

### II.1. Athens versus other *poleis*

The great religious festivals were, as we have seen, almost the sole occasions for sport competitions, and these great festivals were excellent opportunities for a *polis* to project that image of itself which it hoped to impress on the rest of the Greek world, particularly through the prizes it set out for victors. It was only at the great Panhellenic festivals like the Olympics and a very few others that the prize was simply a symbolical wreath of leaves from plants characteristic of the sanctuary at which the competitions

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<sup>65</sup> To give just a few examples, the Spartan kings were held to descend from Herakles and thus Zeus (Hdt. 6.52, 7.204, 8.131) and so were the Aleuads of Thessaly (Pind. *Pyth.* 10.2–3); the family of Andokides of Athens was traced back to Hermes and Odysseus (Hellanikos (*FGrHist* 4) fr. 4); see further Duplouy 2015: 64 and Graf 1996: 125–31.

<sup>66</sup> Thuc. 6.16.2. On Alkibiades' appearance at Olympia in 416, see Bowra 1960; Mann 2001: 102–13; Papakonstantinou 2003; and Gribble 2012. On Alkibiades in general, see Rhodes 2011.

were staged, such as olives at Olympia and laurels at Delphi.<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere, valuable prizes awaited the victors, often in the form of local products characteristic of the city-state staging the games.<sup>68</sup> Thus, at Pellene, in Achaia, the prizes were famous local textiles.<sup>69</sup> At Athens it was likewise a distinguished local product – the finest olive oil – that was awarded to the victors at the *Panathenaia* in honour of the patron divinity Athena Polias, but it was awarded in such extravagant quantity<sup>70</sup> that the value of a Panathenaic prize probably exceeded that of any other prizes given in the Greek world. Thus, the victor in the short sprint (the *stadion*) for men received around 100 Panathenaic amphoras filled with oil from trees in the groves sacred to Athena.<sup>71</sup> These were rather large amphoras, some 60–80 cm in height and with a capacity of ca. 38.9 l (a *metretes*).<sup>72</sup> Panathenaic prizes, then, were considerable amounts of olive oil; it could be exported by the victors from Attica free of duty,<sup>73</sup> and perhaps some of the amphoras were then sold on as they are found all over the Mediterranean.<sup>74</sup> These amphoras were embellished in black-figure style with depictions of, on the backside, the discipline in which they served as prizes, and, on the frontside, with an awe-inspiring portrait of Athena fully armed (fig.1).<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> On the symbolic value of such crowns, see e.g. Hdt. 8.26 where it is treated as a sign of *arete*; see also Aeschin. 3.179. – See further Remijsen 2011.

<sup>68</sup> Kyle 2007: 91–92.

<sup>69</sup> Pind. *Oi.* 9.146ff and *Nem.* 10.82 with scholia; Strabo 8.7.5; see Frazer 1898: 184.

<sup>70</sup> See e.g. Simonides, *Epigram* 29.4 (Sider) = Page, *FGE* 43; *IG* II<sup>2</sup> 2311.

<sup>71</sup> Young 1984: 119 (cf. Shear 2003: 95).

<sup>72</sup> On these amphoras, Bentz 1998 is fundamental. A basic introduction is provided by Frel 1973. See also Johnston 1987; Pinney 1988; Boardman 1991: 167–77; Neils 1992; Hamilton 1996; Miller 2004: 132–45; Tyrrell 2004: 144–56; and Tiverios 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Young 1984: 126.

<sup>74</sup> Neils 1992: 49.

<sup>75</sup> Neils 1992: 29; Mann 2021: 89.



Figure 1: A panathenaic amphora of ca. 530 BC with the traditional depiction of Athena, the patron divinity of Athens ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Terra-cotta\\_Panathenaic\\_prize\\_amphora\\_MET\\_DT5492.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Terra-cotta_Panathenaic_prize_amphora_MET_DT5492.jpg))

This goddess was the patron divinity of Athens from whom the *polis* and its citizens took their name.<sup>76</sup> By their numbers and decoration, these amphoras projected an image of Athens as a great, generous and powerful *polis* with a mighty goddess on its side, arguably as the leading *polis* of Hellas.<sup>77</sup> To hammer home the message and eliminate even the slightest of doubt, the amphoras were inscribed “I am one of the

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<sup>76</sup> Parker 2005: 395–97.

<sup>77</sup> Mann 2021: 89.

prizes from Athens” beside the depiction of Athena the goddess.<sup>78</sup> Clearly, *poleis* individualized themselves and distinguished themselves from other *poleis* by means of their competitive festivals. Very few other *poleis* commanded the resources that classical Athens did, and the splendour of the *Panathenaia* was clearly designed to emphasize that point, and in this way the difference between Athens and other *poleis* were reified, literally so in the shape of the Panathenaic amphoras.

## II.2. Men versus women

The role played by sport in the creation of social distinctions is, then, rather obvious in relation to the topics already discussed here. But when we look at the sportsmen themselves, this role becomes even more visible as it is primarily *men* who feature here. Women were not completely excluded from sport<sup>79</sup> but, in comparison with the physical activities of men, those of women appear to have been considered to be of decidedly marginal importance except from in certain cults<sup>80</sup> and at Sparta. At Sparta, women exercised and competed publicly,<sup>81</sup> something no other *polis* encouraged.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, the sportive activities of women in cults seem not to have been of particular interest to our sources which rarely refer to them. Only a single and very late source – Pausanias (5.16.2-4) – reports on the *Heraia*, a festival at Olympia which included competitions for women, celebrated in honour of Hera, the spouse of Zeus,<sup>83</sup> and thus contested at an occasion separate from the famous competitions for boys and men.<sup>84</sup> Whether men were allowed to attend the *Heraia* is unknown, but married women were not allowed at the Olympics.<sup>85</sup> Women, then, were *de facto* barred from the world of sport in its most intense and prestigious manifestation and here sport served to reify

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<sup>78</sup> On these inscriptions, see Bentz 1998: 57–59.

<sup>79</sup> Guttman 1991: 17–32; Kyle 2014; Miller 2021: 151–53.

<sup>80</sup> Murray 2021: 105.

<sup>81</sup> Xen. *Lac. pol.* 1.4; Murray 2021: 105.

<sup>82</sup> The equestrian entries at Olympia by Kyniska, sister of King Agesilaos of Sparta, are however rather exceptional and possibly prompted by her brother, the king. For discussion, see Pomeroy 2002: 21–24 and, in particular, Kyle 2003.

<sup>83</sup> On the *Heraia*, see Scanlon 2008 and 2014.

<sup>84</sup> Dillon 2000: 457–59; Scanlon 2021: 662; Barringer 2021: 61.

<sup>85</sup> Kyle 2014: 266–67; Dillon 2021: 583–84; Remijsen 2021: 63.

and strengthen one of the most basic distinctions of ancient Greek culture: that between men and women.<sup>86</sup> As a consequence of this exclusion of women from sport, sport did not play any particular role in the discourse about what an ideal woman was, whereas agonistic prowess was fundamental for the conception of ‘a real man’.<sup>87</sup>

### II.3. Free versus unfree

It was, then, generally only men who actively practised Greek sport. But it was not all men who did so, as only *free* men could practise sport.<sup>88</sup> Slaves could not do so. Since slaves had no control over their own bodies and no freedom of movement, they were in practice debarred from training and from traveling to athletic festivals at, for instance, Olympia and Delphi. But slaves were also normally precluded *de jure* from using training facilities, e.g. at democratic Athens,<sup>89</sup> and thus from entering competitions. In this way, sport made tangible another fundamental difference in ancient Greek culture: the distinction between free and unfree.<sup>90</sup>

Slaves, then, could not act as individuals in Greek sport, but as owned by and thus the possessions of wealthy men, slaves could be even great and important performers, as modern eyes would see it, though they did not count as individual competitors in ancient Greek eyes.<sup>91</sup> The most prestigious of all Greek sports were the equestrian races, particularly the races for two- and four-horse chariots. These were the events

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<sup>86</sup> As spectators women were presumably not excluded from athletic events (*pace* Guttman 1986: 15). It is clear from Pindar (*Pyth.* 9.97–100) that at the great *polis* of Kyrene women could attend sport competitions. At Olympia, unmarried young women could attend, but married women (*gynaikes*) were excluded as spectators. The anecdote about the attendance of the widowed Kallipateira at Pausanias 5.6.7–8 is in all probability an etiological myth explaining the nudity of trainers as well as of athletes at Olympia (Dillon 2000: 459–60).

<sup>87</sup> Mann 2021: 72. – It is quite clear *e contrario* from Tyrtaios fr. 12.1–4 that athletic prowess was a standard component of ‘real masculinity’; Cebrián 2020: 159 notes that the Homeric poems made ‘no distinction between the best athletes and the best warriors’.

<sup>88</sup> Murray 2021: 105–6.

<sup>89</sup> Golden 1998: 3–4; Golden 2008: 40–66; Golden 2014: 252; Fisher 2001: 283–84; Christesen and MacLean 2021: 25; Scanlon 2021: 660.

<sup>90</sup> On this distinction, see Cartledge 1993: 118–51.

<sup>91</sup> Cebrián 2020: 5.

on which the most exclusive elites staked massive investments.<sup>92</sup> The actual driving of the chariots at competitions was, however, not only technically demanding<sup>93</sup> but also quite dangerous.<sup>94</sup> At a race in Delphi in 462 BC, forty of forty-one chariots are reported to have crashed,<sup>95</sup> and accidents meant serious injuries or even death.<sup>96</sup> It is, accordingly, only in poetry and mythology that the elite and heroes perform as drivers of their own chariots.<sup>97</sup> In reality, the normal state of affairs was that horseowners hired professional charioteers or used especially trained slaves to drive their precious teams.<sup>98</sup> Victory, however, fell to the *owner* of the teams, not the drivers,<sup>99</sup> who were as a rule excluded from the discourse of victory and did not count as competitors. They are, as one modern scholar has memorably phrased it, the ‘missing persons’ of equestrian sport.<sup>100</sup> Thus, the charioteers and the jockeys – who actually did the driving and the riding – were not considered individual competitors in Greek sport. The equestrian line of demarcation, then, was between those who did not have to do physical work – that is, actually drive or ride the horses, or any labour at all – but commanded great financial resources, and those who did not command such resources and did need to do physical labour. This was, especially from the point of view of the traditional elites, another fundamental distinction of ancient Greek culture.

#### **II.4. Greeks versus non-Greeks**

Sport, then, was an activity characterising free men, in particular of the elite. But free Greeks competed only against other Greeks of their own walk of life.<sup>101</sup> In other words,

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<sup>92</sup> On equestrian sport, see: Harris 1972: 151–83; Miller 2004: 75–82; Nicholson 2005; De Rossi 2011; Golden 2014.

<sup>93</sup> Miller 2004: 76.

<sup>94</sup> Golden 2008: 13.

<sup>95</sup> Pind. *Pyth.* 5.49–54; cf. Dem. 61.29, Diod. Sic. 14.109,4; see further Crowther 1994: 121.

<sup>96</sup> See Soph. *El.* 698–756 with Crowther 1994: 121–22.

<sup>97</sup> In Hom. *Il.* 23.287ff such major figures as Diomedes and Menelaos act as their own drivers; in Soph. *El.* 698–756 Orestes drives his own chariot.

<sup>98</sup> Miller 2004: 76; Golden 2008: 13.

<sup>99</sup> Miller 2004: 77; Kyle 2007: 127.

<sup>100</sup> Nicholson 2003; Nicholson 2005: 1–95.

<sup>101</sup> Slave jockeys and charioteers were considered not individuals but pieces of equipment (see above).

sport was also an ethnic boundary marker.<sup>102</sup> During the classical period (479–323 BC), the Greeks had a fundamentally simple world-view in which mankind was subdivided into, on the one hand, Greeks, and, on the other, all others who were subsumed under the collective label *barbaroi*, that is, speakers of non-Greek languages.<sup>103</sup> It was not that non-Greeks were excluded by law from participating in competitions at Greek festivals.<sup>104</sup> Rather, it was a deeply-rooted cultural expectation in the classical Greek world that athletic contests were fought between free Greeks. In the classical period, few if any non-Greeks actually wished to compete at Olympia or any other Greek athletic festival, but even so (Olympic) sport was discursively construed as an activity of, exclusively and distinctively, free Greek men. The main reason was, this discourse held, that only self-reliant free Greek men were so beautifully fit that they dared appear in the nude before the discriminating eyes of their peers.<sup>105</sup> For Greek athletes, as is well known, trained and competed in the nude.<sup>106</sup> The origins and early meaning of this custom are unknown and the classical Greeks were at a loss to provide a satisfactory explanation for it. But it was ideologically construed as the difference between real, free Greek men and weak, fat, pale, effeminate and unfree barbarians.

## Conclusion

Competitive sports were, from the sixth century onwards, perhaps the most popular spectacle of the great religious festivals staged by the Greek *poleis*, and as such they must have occurred rather frequently. This frequency, of course, adds significantly to their importance. A considerable part of their importance was that the way in which both daily sport life and festival competitions were arranged and conducted contributed

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<sup>102</sup> Nielsen 2007: 18–28.

<sup>103</sup> On this world-view, see the essays collected in Harrison 2002.

<sup>104</sup> See Remijsen 2019 and Roy 2020.

<sup>105</sup> See e.g. such passages as Hdt. 1.10.3, Xen. *Hell.* 3.4.19, and Pl. *Resp.* 452c with Nielsen 2007: 18–28.

<sup>106</sup> On Greek athletic nudity, see: Arieti 1975; Crowther 1982; Mouratidis 1985; Sweet 1985; Sansone 1988: 107–15; Bonfante 1989; McDonnell 1991; Golden 1998: 65–69; Miller 2000; Miller 2004: 11–14, 227–28; Christesen 2002; Christesen 2014: 226–29; Spivey 2004: 121–24; Kyle 2007: 85–90; Nielsen 2007: 22–28; Potter 2012: 76–78; Petermandl 2013; Scanlon 2021: 657–59.

to the continuous (re)construction and maintenance of important cultural, social, economic and political distinctions. The distinction between generous and benevolent dignitaries and the common crowd was vividly illustrated at mass gatherings, where benefactors were often honoured by *proedria*, an honorary seat in the front row, by which the benefactions of the honorands were broadcasted on what was in a Greek city-state a massive scale. Also, *poleis* projected images of themselves to the rest of the Greek world that they themselves cherished, as Athens clearly did by means of the great Panathenaic festival, and in this way differences between the *poleis* were made clear.

Other important cultural distinctions and differences consolidated by sport were those between men and women and those between the free and the unfree. Women and slaves were, for all intents and purposes, excluded from sport, except as pieces of equipment as it were, in the case of slaves, or, in the case of women, permitted only very restricted access to sport in cultic settings which did not attract much male interest or attention, at least not from the surviving classical Athenian authors.

Greek sport did not, at least in the archaic and classical periods, attract much attention from athletes of non-Greek origins. Even so, sport was discursively constructed as a boundary marker between Greeks and 'barbarians'.

So, Greek athletes were free Greek men, a clear minority in any *polis*. But inside this exclusive group there were, of course, differences and distinctions. Not every free Greek had the means to live a life of leisure which allowed him to set aside time for training in the gymnasia and for travels to major athletic destinations such as Olympia or Delphi, or the means to finance lessons with an expert coach. Another important distinction produced by economy was between equestrian sportsmen and the rest. Equestrian sport was so expensive that only the uppermost economic elite participated in it, and one of the purposes of doing so was presumably to broadcast that one could afford it. In addition, equestrian sport had the attraction that it allowed its practitioners to go on competing beyond their physical acme, since tradition sanctioned the use of professional charioteers and jockeys.

Finally, sport produced, as it had to, a distinction between the victors and the unvictorious, and this difference was presumably of central importance for Greek sportsmen themselves. So essential was it that two sophisticated forms of art were developed to perpetuate the memory and glory of victory, which could otherwise be rather transient. This was the nude male athletic victory statue and the epinician ode, two of the most refined and admired forms of Greek art and literature. And, finally, competitive victory could be deployed as an argument in favour of personal claims on public offices like generalships, as Alkibiades of Athens did in 415 BC.

The study of Greek sport, then, is in reality a part of the study of Greek social, cultural and economic history. And to repeat an essential point, it would not, of course, make any sense to claim that sport created the differences and distinctions discussed above in the sense of bringing them into existence in the first place. But since these distinctions provided the cultural bases on which the Greek way of sport rested, sport, by using these distinctions as basic principles on numerous and recurrent occasions, helped maintain them and solidify them, and in this weaker sense we may say that sport contributed to the (re)creation of these fundamental differences and social principles of Greek culture.

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