

Introduction

Rhodon: “Maybe he will really do it!” Tryphon: “No, he won’t. He can’t. Nobody could ever do that. Look how far behind he is. He is still way behind.” Rhodon: “Yes, but he’s gaining on him fast. Look, he’s getting ready to pass him. He *is* passing him! Unbelievable!” Tryphon: “You were right. Look at that finish kick! He *is* going to do it. I don’t believe it! He won! He really did it.” Rhodon: “Well, he always was the only one who thought he could. By Zeus, what a runner!” Tryphon: “There has never been another like him. Never, *in all these centuries!* He is the greatest runner ever, in all history.”

That conversation itself is imaginary; for it is set in the summer of 69 AD. But it is not groundless. Some very similar conversation indeed took place among the spectators at the stadium track at Olympia that August day. And all the characters are real. “He” is a young runner named Polites, from Caria, a place now in southwestern Turkey. “It” is to win the long distance race at the Olympic Games that day. That victory in itself is hardly remarkable. Someone had won that race every four years for centuries. These two spectators are so astonished at Polites’ victory because he had already won the shortest sprint, the *stade*, about 200 meters, earlier that same day.¹ Tryphon and Rhodon knew something about running. They were the winners of the *stade* in the previous and the following Olympiads, respectively. Polites won that shortest race *and* the longest race. That feat no one – in more than 800 years of

Olympic competition – had ever achieved before – nor did anyone after him. And no modern Olympic athlete has ever won both a long distance race and a short sprint, to say nothing of winning both on the same day.

In the Atlanta Olympics of 1996 Michael Johnson became the first person ever to win both the 200 meter race and the 400. He himself proudly proclaimed he had “made history,” and his unique double Olympic victory was celebrated as one of the greatest athletic accomplishments of all time (*Runners World*, November 1996). It had never been done before – at least not in the modern Olympics. In antiquity, at least a dozen athletes had combined those two victories before Polites, who himself had already performed that 200 and 400 double earlier the same day. But the 400 has never been classed as a distance race. It is barely a “middle distance” event.

To win both the shortest sprint and such a distance race more than two miles long at the same Olympiad is a nearly incredible achievement. No modern runner has ever been so versatile. The long and short distances require, our coaches believe, very different kinds of runners and training. The proper type of muscle fibers, breathing, training, and technique for the two styles of running are wholly different. Polites’ diversity at running seemed truly exceptional in antiquity, too. Pausanias (second century AD) calls it “a great marvel,” and adds that Polites could switch from the distance style to sprinting in a very brief time. His “finishing kick” in the distance race must have been something special to see.

Appreciation of Polites’ deed increases all the more if we put it in its full context, “all those centuries.” The ancient Olympics spanned more than a millennium, from about 776 BC to approximately 400 AD. They were eight centuries old before any Polites emerged, and they continued for several more centuries without ever seeing another like him. He is truly unique. But the nature of Greek record keeping combined with those 800 years almost compelled him, if he wished to achieve anything remarkable, to try to do what he did (see chapter 3). The failure of any modern Olympian so far to equal Polites’ unique double is understandable, almost even inevitable. Our modern games are scarcely more than a century old. Perhaps in seven hundred or so more years, a runner like Polites will dazzle some distant future generation.

It is not irrelevant or even badly anachronistic to compare ancient runners to our own. There are no others to compare them with. In all of the world's history our athletic system is the only one at all similar to the Greeks'. The modern world seems almost sports-mad, with large portions of the media entirely devoted to sport. In financial terms, it is one of our biggest industries. No other culture has ever had nearly so strong an interest in so widespread an athletic system as ours. Because of modern communication and globalization, even ancient Greece is barely comparable. But in its attention to athletics and in the cultural role they played, by far the closest to us was ancient Greece, from which our own system of sport has, in fact, borrowed most heavily.

Why was competitive sport in antiquity found in Greece, and not elsewhere? Early in the last century the noted scholar Jakob Burckhardt argued that there was something special in the Greek national character that drove them to a unique competitive spirit. It is true that Attic dramas, both tragedy and comedy, were parts of prize competitions. Musicians, too, often competed for prizes, sometimes in the same festivals as the athletes. Plato even calls musicians in such contexts "athletes"; for that word merely means "competitor for a prize" (*Laws* 764D).

For nearly a century Burckhardt's argument that the Greeks were uniquely competitive received wide acceptance (Gardiner 1930: 1–2). Recently, however, some of the best scholars have disagreed. They argue that the earlier cultures of the ancient Near East and Egypt had sport as well, and stress their strong and sweeping influence on Greece in other matters.

Yet depictions of wrestling bouts or other combative contests in these other cultures offer no proof that these activities were part of a larger or formal competition. And they do not tell us who the competitors were or why they are competing. They are merely pictures of men wrestling or fighting. In Egypt and elsewhere the rulers (or others in honor of the rulers) indeed hunted animals and engaged in other physical activities. But none of these things anywhere seems to have influenced or resembled the Greek athletic meeting. I join many others who think that Burckhardt's thesis still survives a thorough examination rather well (Golden 1998: 30–3; Poliakoff 1987: 104–11; Scanlon 2002: 9–10).

In speaking of Greek athletics we should avoid the word “sports.” Greek athletics have little or nothing to do with sport or games. While some of the events were sometimes practiced for recreation, the festivals, at least, were far from being a diversion. No word ever associated with them could translate as anything like “sport.” And there were no contests at all for teams, not even a relay race. The only events were for individuals. The Greeks had team games, even team ball games, but they played no part in athletic festivals such as the Olympics.

The term “Olympic Games” is itself a bad mistranslation of Greek *Olympiakoi agones*. That error results from the intervening Latin words, *ludus*, *ludi*, and *ludicrum*, which *do*, in fact, connote sport and games. Our word “ludicrous” comes from there.² The Romans did not take Greek athletics seriously. But the Greek word *agones* can never refer to “games.” Rather, it means “struggles” or “contests”; or even “pains.” Our word “agony” derives from it. The word “play,” as well, has no application at all to Greek athletics. The Greek word for “play,” *paizein*, comes from the word *pais*, “child.” It can be used when adults play music, board games and even ball games, but never for any event in Greek athletics.

Our own athletic sports, in the main, developed from children’s games, play, passed on to adults through the schools. Few people realize that athletics, as we know them, are a rather recent addition to our own culture. Even 150 years ago, other than some rowing and cricket contests restricted to England, there were practically no athletic sports anywhere in the world. By the middle of the nineteenth century, English schoolboys were developing some ball games and other contests. The schoolboys eventually took these activities with them into the colleges and universities, where more formal rules and procedures were established. The original nucleus and still the mainstay of our Olympics, the track and field sports (called simply “athletics” outside of America), arose mainly from a conscious imitation of ancient Greek practices. Some early Olympic revivals in Britain and modern Greece, as well as the activities of English students, contributed to this imitation and the promotion of these contests (see chapter 13). From England, track and field athletics and many other sports spread first to nineteenth-century America, then to Europe, and eventually to all corners of the world (Guttman 1978: 57).

With a few obvious exceptions such as golf, tennis, and baseball, it is readily apparent that even professional sports in America descended from college activities: the professional offspring has never fully separated from the collegiate sire. Generally, then, in our society most sports find their eventual ancestry in children's games. And baseball's origin in child's play is especially obvious when we say "play ball" where the phrase is historically most apt.

In ancient Greece, however, athletics were first and foremost an activity for grown men. The events themselves might have had a prehistoric origin in ordinary play among boys. In any culture and time a group of boys with leisure will naturally test such questions as who can jump or throw a stone the farthest. Who can wrestle another to the ground? Who can run to the end of the field first? But the Greeks differed from other ancient and more recent cultures in making resolutions to these questions a serious activity for grown men. Even at the beginning they did not, as other peoples have done, relegate them to the inconsequential world of children. Formal competitions for adult men existed for many years before there were any formal competitions for boys. *When Greek boys competed in athletics, they were acting like men, not the reverse, as in other cultures.*

Romans, even when they sponsored Greek-style athletic festivals, never themselves participated in them. And when we read of grown men in Persia contesting for prizes (*athla*), the prizes were set for whatever company of soldiers could best perform military drills in perfect unison, "like a chorus," so that no individual would stand out (Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 1.2.12; 1.6.18). The Greek goal was the opposite; namely, to be the one who stands out, to be, as Pindar puts it, the one who is "separated out from the other athletes," literally "distinguished," to be the best of all (*Nemean* 7.7–8). Greek athletics were always, in principle, the pursuit of individual excellence.

Athletics in Homer

In general, the principle which Pindar expresses was true from the outset of recorded Greek thought, even in Homer, where study of Greek thought must begin. In the *Iliad* the explicit driving force behind Homer's hero, Achilles, is to be – and to be known as –

“the best of the Achaeans” (“Achaeans” is Homer’s word for the Greeks). It is not surprising that the grown men in such a culture participate in athletic competitions, seize an occasion to stand out from the rest of the crowd.

Homer does not mention Olympic Games, a sure anachronism; but he is certainly familiar with athletic contests. Already in his day the Olympics may well have been the most prominent among them. Homer’s heroes of the Trojan War indeed participate in athletics. As his best friend Patroclus lies dead and unburied, Achilles decides that the most appropriate way to honor him would be to hold an athletic meeting and distribution of *athla*, prizes (*Iliad* 23.256–897). He sets up the most valuable prizes for the chariot race, which takes place first on the program. In a unique passage, Idomeneus offers to make a bet with Ajax on the outcome of the race. As the two argue, Achilles stops their wrangling and never again in Greek literature does anyone allude to the subject of athletic betting. Diomedes, known for his ability with horses, wins.

The second event is boxing. Although he himself admits that he is a poor warrior and of little use on the battlefield, Epeios claims he is the best boxer. So he is, as he readily knocks out the only contender. A common theory about Greek athletics finds their origin and purpose in military training. Yet in Homer the best boxer is a poor soldier. Moreover, some highly successful generals of the Classical period thought athletics were detrimental to military training. The fourth century BC general Epaminondas of Thebes discouraged his men from athletics. In the next century, the military mastermind Philopoemen actually forbade his troops to do any athletics at all (Plutarch, *Moralia* 192c–d, 788a; *Philopoemen* 3.2–4). The military theory has little to commend it.

Next is the wrestling match. Ajax and Odysseus, major figures in the *Iliad*, square off upright in a preliminary hold. They are evenly matched. Each has gained one throw when Achilles calls the bout a draw. The only foot race at these games is the *diaulos*, down the course once and back. Later, at least, the *diaulos* was about 400 meters. Here Odysseus need not share first place, because Athena – who always seems there to give Odysseus special protection and help – trips the only man running in front of her favorite before they reach the finish line.

There are four more events on Achilles' program: (1) a kind of fencing with swords; (2) a weight throw; (3) archery; and (4) a spear throw. Neither archery nor fencing was ever on the Olympic program. The weight thrown in the *Iliad*, called a *solos*, seems to be a very large, perhaps shapeless chunk of iron, nothing like a discus. The spear throw event is not actually held, since when it is announced, everyone defers to Agamemnon's known ability there. But the javelin throw was a regular part of Olympic competition.

Another athletic contest takes place in Homer's *Odyssey* (8.100–214). The account here is shorter, but contains much of interest. In the course of his long odyssey seeking to return home after the Trojan War, Odysseus suffers many mishaps. Once he is shipwrecked and washes up on the shore of a strange and unknown island inhabited by very hospitable people called Phaeacians. They are a peaceful, seafaring people who do a good deal of feasting, singing, and dancing. They treat the marooned Greek sailor with every kindness, and even hold a feast in his honor. After a bard has entertained everyone, the king suggests that they hold a set of athletic contests (*athla*).

The young men of Phaeacia compete in boxing, wrestling, a foot race, long jump, and discus throw. The weight thrown here is explicitly a real athletic discus, not a lump of iron. At that point, Laodamas, son of the Phaeacian king, asks Odysseus if he wishes to compete in any of the contests. His invitation ends with some memorable words:

So long as a man lives, he has no greater glory
than what he wins with his feet or his hands in the games.

At first Odysseus declines to compete. But then a brash youth starts to taunt him, suggesting that Odysseus probably does not know the "many athletic events that men have." He points to Odysseus' sea-beaten body and suggests that he looks like a merchant. "You don't look like any athlete." More than a little miffed, Odysseus takes up the challenge and the largest discus in the heap. He then lets fly what seems to be a new Phaeacian discus record, far surpassing all earlier marks. He then offers to fight any of them in boxing. No one accepts the challenge

Thus as our Western literary tradition starts with Homer, so does the study of Greek athletics, with these two extensive narratives of athletic contests, one in each poem. The characters and events in Homer obviously fall into the realm of myth rather than history. But Heinrich Schliemann (1822–90) did not believe that. He thought Homer's tale of a Trojan War was true. In the latter nineteenth century he found and excavated first Troy, in north-western Turkey, then Mycenae in southern Greece. In Homer, Agamemnon, who organized and led the Greek army against Troy, was the king of Mycenae. Schliemann's excavations uncovered a surprisingly sophisticated late Bronze Age civilization which archaeologists still mine all around the Greek world. He called it "Mycenaean," sure that he had unearthed the remains of the civilization which Homer describes in his stories about the Trojan War. We now know that many of Schliemann's claims were false and too grandiose. Yet no one doubts the reality of Mycenaean civilization, or its relevance to the interpretation of Homer.

The difficult question is how much in Homer is an authentic memory of Mycenaean times, and how much comes from life in eighth-century Greece. That is the period in which scholars agree that the two poems, in the main, were composed. Do the athletic scenes in Homer tell us that such contests existed in Mycenaean times? Those very events? Wrestling and boxing are well attested in both the Mycenaean period and the historical Olympics, but they have no doubt existed in some form in most civilizations. The archery and fencing which occur in the *Iliad* were never held in the Olympics, but Homer may well have thought that they seemed appropriate in the military context of the Trojan War and those earlier days. Otherwise, every event listed in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* was actually part of the regular Olympic program. There is, I think, cogent evidence that Homer, rather than preserving a memory of athletics centuries earlier, represents athletics in his own time. No discuses have turned up at Mycenae, and I am confident that they never will.

Scattered throughout the Homeric poems are recurrent references to athletic competition, enough of them to leave no doubt but that various kinds of athletic contests were a regular part of Homer's world. Homer is known for his many similes. In these

similes, he uses the present tense and unquestionably refers to matters of his own day. When Achilles pursues Hector around the city of Troy, Homer says that they ran very fast: “For they were not competing for a sacrificial animal or an ox-hide, such as are the prizes in foot races. Hector’s life was the stake. As prize-winning horses quickly make the turns, when a large prize is set, such as a tripod or a woman, when a man has died, so they ran around the city” (*Iliad* 22.159–66). Here is evidence for two distinct types of contests in the poet’s own culture. First, Homer knows funeral games like the games for Patroclus recounted above. Athletic contests associated with funerals appear a number of times in early texts. Hesiod, probably Homer’s younger contemporary, speaks of games he attended at the funeral of a man named Amphidamas, whose sons offered “many prizes” (*Works and Days* 631–40). Homer’s heroes sometimes mention funeral games. Nestor, the old man of the Greek army, boasts about his success at funeral games for a man named Amarynkeas (*Iliad* 23.60–1). Funeral games continued in historical and Classical times (Roller 1981: 1–18).

Second, the mythical games at Phaeacia suggest that actual athletic contests were not limited to funerals even in Homer’s society. There were other kinds. The prize of a sacrificial victim or hide almost certainly implies contests held in conjunction with a religious festival or rite, such as occurred on a much grander scale at Olympia (*Iliad* 22.159–66, above). Hesiod says that the goddess Hekate gives help “when men are competing for prizes at a contest. And when someone gains victory with his mighty strength he happily carries his fine prize home, and brings glory to his parents” (*Theogony* 435–8).

The spirit of athletic competition, then, and athletic contests themselves, were ingrained in the fabric of the Greek society which Homer himself knew. But when, we must ask, precisely did “Homer himself” live? Even here, howsoever briefly, we must broach what for centuries is the knottiest problem in Classical studies, called “the Homeric problem”; namely, whether the *Iliad* is the work of a single man, a kind of committee, or somewhere in between. “How do we get a text of Homer,” we must ask, “when it seems that writing was at best embryonic when the poems were composed?” I summarize what most classicists generally believe.

Homer did not write down his poems; rather, he composed them orally. The approximate date most likely is about 725 BC. It is likely that the general product which we call the *Iliad* is the work of one man. That man, probably named Homer, combined as he wished a vast repertoire of oral poetry which had been developed and passed down by generations of poets before him. It is about this time, too, 725 BC, that we find the earliest evidence for writing in what later became the standard Greek alphabet. That writing system imported Semitic writing characters and changed them to render Greek sound values. The Olympic Games almost certainly began *before* that 725 date, and I think the athletics which Homer represents give us a good notion of what the early Olympics probably were like.

The painter of a well-known ancient vase, Sophilos, saw such a connection, too, it seems. He paints a scene labeled “Funeral games of Patroclus,” which shows a hippodrome and stadium (figure 1.1). In the hippodrome a chariot race is taking place. Both it and the stadium are replete with ascending rows of seats, which look like some kind of bleachers and are occupied by cheering spectators, presumably the Greek army. The part of the vase showing the action in the stadium is broken off, but surely depicted some combative, athletic, or running event. The spectators on the right-hand seats could not be watching anything else.

One cannot imagine, even as mythology, such an athletic facility suddenly sprouting up, fully built, bleachers and all, near the Greeks’ ships on the Trojan plain – just waiting there for the Greeks to have an athletic meeting. There is no hint of a stadium or hippodrome at the games in the *Iliad*. The artist cannot be portraying what Homer describes. Rather, he must depict what he himself knows.

Experts date the vase very early, about 580 BC or slightly later. At so early a date, only one site is possible to be known, and that is Olympia.³ Sophilos’ picture shows the stadium and hippodrome side by side, separated only by a tall embankment. That is how they were positioned at Olympia. Historians sometimes remark on Olympia’s lack of seating, even after seating had been installed at other venues, almost as if the want of seating fits Olympia’s reputation for conservatism and austerity (Sinn 2000: 73; Gardiner 1930: 252; Harris 1972: 57).



Figure 1.1 Funeral games of Patroclus, National Museum, Athens 15499, fragment of b.f. Attic mixing vessel painted by Sophilos, about 580 BC or soon thereafter

The unmistakable seating on the vase by Sophilos might appear to be an obstacle in seeing a reflection of Olympia there. But if rows of seats were merely cut into the terrain in a kind of terrace formation, there would of course be no trace remaining. Even wooden bleachers might leave nothing identifiable now. If not Olympia, the scene on the vase is enigmatic almost beyond belief. Surely no one will argue that the actual scene is on the plain of Troy; or that Sophilos was able to foretell what the setting of a future athletic festival would look like without ever knowing one.