

RUNNING FOR REMEMBRANCE: THE *ELEUTHERIA* OF PLATAIAI*

By Christian Mann

Summary: Plataiai is a lieu de mémoire, and the *Eleutheria*, an athletic agon held every fourth year, played an important part in activating and reshaping the memory of the battle of 479 BC. According to Strabo, Plutarch and others, the *agon* had been founded directly after the battle, but this is an invention; the earliest reliable evidence dates back to the third century BC. From this time onwards, the *Eleutheria* formed an important event in the Greek agonistic system, the festival being attested in numerous agonistic inscriptions. In addition to the usual gymnastic disciplines, a race *apo tou tropaiou* was held, in which the contestants had to run a long distance of 15 stadia with heavy armour. Such a race was unique in Greek athletics, and Philostratos writes about a very peculiar rule: athletes who had won this race and tried to repeat their victory were killed if they failed. The *Eleutheria* refer both to the battle of Plataiai and to the unity of the Greeks and are thus of crucial importance for the topic of this volume. This contribution collects the scattered evidence and discusses, first, the position of the *Eleutheria* in the system of Greek athletics and, second, the symbolic power of the peculiar hoplite race mentioned by Philostratos.

Introduction: A peculiar race and a strange rule

In his work *De Gymnastica*, Philostratos includes a brief discussion of every athletic discipline and its history. When he comes to the hoplite race (ὀπλίτης), he refers to an *agon* in Plataiai:

The best of the hoplite races was thought to be the one in Plataiai in Boeotia because of the length of the race and because of the armour, which stretches down to the feet covering the athlete completely, as if he were actually fighting; also because it was founded to celebrate a distinguished deed, their victory against the Persians, and because the

* Earlier versions of this article have been read by Christel Müller and Janric van Rookhuijzen, to whom I am very grateful for their remarks and suggestions.

Greeks devised it as a slight against the barbarians; and especially because of the rule concerning competitors that Plataiai long ago enacted: that any competitor who had already won victory there, if he competed again, had to provide guarantors for his body; for death had been decreed for anyone defeated in that circumstance.¹

According to Philostratos, the special reputation of the Plataean hoplite race was based on four reasons: First, the course was longer than usual; second, the runners wore a special armour that reached down to the ground² and gave the athlete the appearance of a fighting soldier. Third, the race referred to the victory over the Persians, and fourth, there was a specific rule that imposed significant risk on winners who tried to repeat their triumph. Later in his work he returns to this rule by giving an example of an exemplary trainer who had complete confidence in the abilities of his protégé:

Optatos (?) the Egyptian won the running race in Plataiai. Since there was a law among the Plataeans, as I said before, that anyone who was defeated, having previously won, should be publicly executed, and that a previous winner should not be allowed to train before providing guarantors for his body, and since no one was willing to provide a guarantee for something so serious, his trainer subjected himself to the law and thus gave his athlete the strength for a second victory.

¹ Philostr. *Gymn.* 8: ἄριστος δὲ ὁ κατὰ Βοιωτίαν καὶ Πλάταιαν ὀπλίτης ἐνομιζέτο διὰ τε τὸ μῆκος τοῦ δρόμου διὰ τε τὴν ὄπλισιν ποδῆρη οὔσαν καὶ σκεπάζουσαν τὸν ἀθλητήν, ὡς ἂν εἰ καὶ μάχοιτο, διὰ τε τὸ ἐπ' ἔργῳ λαμπρῷ κεῖσθαι τῷ Μηδικῷ, διὰ τε τὸ νομίσει ταῦτα Ἑλλήνας κατὰ βαρβάρων, καὶ μὴν καὶ διὰ τὸν νόμον τὸν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἀγωνιουμένοις κείμενον, ὡς νενόμικεν ἡ Πλάταια τὸν γὰρ ἤδη παρ' αὐτοῖς ἐστεφανωμένον, εἰ ἀγωνίζοιτο αὐθις, ἐγγυητὰς ἔδει καταστήσαι τοῦ σώματος, θάνατος γὰρ ἡττωμένῳ προσετέτακτο. (transl. J. König). For a commentary see Jüthner 1909: 200-1.

² The adjective ποδῆρης is usually used for garments such as the *peplos* or the *chiton*, but also for shields (e.g. Xen. *An.* 1.8.9: ποδῆρσι ξυλίναις ἀσπίσιν). Philostratos refers here either to the shield or to the greaves of the runners (Jüthner 1909: 201).

For those who intend to undertake a great deed, I believe, not being mistrusted is a source of optimism.³

It is questionable whether a rule like that ever existed, for it appears extremely brutal and no other source mentions it. The *agon* itself, however, is documented many times in the literary and epigraphic tradition: The *Eleutheria* refer both to the battle of Plataiai and to the unity of the Greeks and are thus of crucial importance for the topic of this volume. This contribution collects the scattered evidence and discusses, first, the position of the *Eleutheria* in the system of Greek athletics and, second, the symbolic power of the peculiar hoplite race mentioned by Philostratos.

The foundation of the *Eleutheria* and their place in the Greek agonistic system

Authors of the classical period mention various measures taken by the Greeks before and after the battle of Plataiai,⁴ but the foundation of an *agon* is not among them. The earliest evidence for the festival comes from the third-century BC comedy-writer Poseidippos of Kassandreia, who makes fun of Plataiai: this place, he says, was not more than an elevation in the landscape, only during the *Eleutheria* could one speak of a *polis*.⁵ This fragment proves not only the existence of the festival, but also its importance, as it obviously filled the sleepy provincial town with life. Later sources report on the founding of the *agon* and relate it directly to the great battle of 479 BC: according to Diodoros, the Greeks swore an oath before the battle, which included the establishment of an *agon*.⁶

³ Philostr. *Gymn.* 24: Ὅπιατος δὲ ὁ Αἰγύπτιος ἐνίκησεν ἐν Πλαταιαῖς ἐς δευτέρον ἄθλον τοῦ γυμναστοῦ ἐπιρρώσαντος, κειμένου παρ' αὐτοῖς νόμου δημοσίᾳ ἀποθνήσκειν τὸν μετὰ νίκην ἡττώμενον ἔκκριτόν τε νομίζεσθαι πρότερον ἢ ἐγγυητὰς καταστήσαι τοῦ σώματος. οὐδενὸς δὲ ἐγγυωμένου τὸ οὕτω μέγα ὑπέθηκεν ἑαυτὸν ὁ γυμναστής τῷ νόμῳ καὶ τὸν ἀθλητὴν ἐπέρρωσεν ἐς νίκην δευτέραν· τοῖς γὰρ ἄπτεσθαι διανοοῦμενοις ἔργου μείζονος εὐελπί, οἶμαι, τὸ μὴ ἀπιστεῖσθαι. (transl. J. König).

⁴ For a recent discussion see Patay-Horváth 2022.

⁵ Fr. 31 (Kassel): τοῖς δ' Ἐλευθερίοις πόλις. Poseidippos began writing comedies around 290 BC (Suda s.v. Ποσίδιππος).

⁶ Diod. 11.29.1: καὶ τὸν ἔλευθέριον ἀγῶνα συντελεῖν ταῖς Πλαταιαῖς.

Strabo gives more nuances, speaking of the establishment of a gymnastic and crown-bringing festival called *Eleutheria* after the victory.⁷ Plutarch, in contrast to Diodoros, attributes the initiative in founding the *agon* to Aristeides and the Athenians,⁸ calling the *Eleutheria* a penteteric festival. And finally, Pausanias, in his description of Plataiai, mentions the *Eleutheria* in general and the hoplite race in particular:

Not far from the common tomb of the Greeks is an altar of Zeus, God of Freedom. (...) Even at the present day they hold every four years games called *Eleutheria*, in which great prizes are offered for running. The competitors run in armour in the direction of the altar. The trophy which the Greeks set up for the battle at Plataiai stands about fifteen stades from the city.⁹

The later literary tradition, thus, unanimously assumes an installation of the *Eleutheria* immediately after the battle, but this seems to be a founding legend that was invented later. There is no reference to the festival in Herodotos, no reference in Thucydides, in whose defence speech of the Plataeans to the Spartans¹⁰ a Panhellenic contest would have formed a good argument, and no reference in Pindar, who mentions numerous other *agones* in his epinician odes. The *argumentum e silentio* is, in this case, a strong one. And since none of the numerous epigraphic testimonies can be dated to the pre-Hellenistic period, a foundation of the *Eleutheria* immediately after the battle of 479 BC cannot be completely ruled

⁷ Strab. 9.2.31: καὶ ἀγῶνα γυμνικὸν στεφανίτην ἀπέδειξαν, Ἐλευθέρια προσαγορεύσαντες.

⁸ Plut. *Arist.* 21.1: ἄγεσθαι δὲ πενταετηρικὸν ἀγῶνα τῶν Ἐλευθερίων. On the difference between Diodorus' and Plutarch's versions, see Piérart & Étienne 1975: 65-66; Jung 2006: 332- 33 n. 122.

⁹ Paus. 9.2.5-6: οὐ πόρρω δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ κοινοῦ τῶν Ἑλλήνων Διὸς ἐστὶν Ἐλευθερίου βωμὸς (...) ἄγουσι δὲ καὶ νῦν ἔτι ἀγῶνα διὰ ἔτους πέμπτου τὰ δὲ Ἐλευθέρια, ἐν ᾧ μέγιστα γέρα πρόκειται δρόμου· θέουσι δὲ ὀπλισμένοι πρὸς τὸν βωμόν. τρόπαιον δέ, ὃ τῆς μάχης Πλαταιᾶσιν ἀνέθεσαν οἱ Ἕλληνες, πεντεκαίδεκα σταδίοις μάλιστα ἔστηκεν ἀπωτέρω τῆς πόλεως. (transl. W.H.S. Jones, but adapted according to the emendation πρὸς τὸν βωμόν instead of πρὸ τοῦ βωμοῦ: Knoepfler 2006: 612).

¹⁰ Thuc. 3.53-59.

out, but is, for good reason, hardly to be advocated.¹¹ The majority of scholars assume a later foundation, but disagree about the exact chronology: various proposals have been made, all with regard to the political developments in Greek politics and the eventful history of Plataiai.

If one assumes that Diodoros relied solely on Ephoros in his account of the battle of Plataiai, the *Eleutheria* must have already existed in the middle of the fourth century BC, an approach taken by Luisa Prandi. Michael Jung also searched for a plausible context on this basis and found it in the destruction of Plataiai by the Spartans in 427 BC: The Spartans, he suggests, established the *Eleutheria* in order to reshape the memory of the victory against the Persians. However, these considerations are formulated very cautiously, for they cannot be proven.¹² Most scholars do not regard Diodoros' testimony a powerful argument for the mid-fourth century existence of the *agon* and argue for a later foundation.¹³

The decree for Glaukon is the earliest epigraphic testimony for the *Eleutheria* and therefore of central importance in the debate about the foundation. The inscription, which can be dated to the period 262-246 BC,¹⁴ lists services of, and honours for, the Athenian Glaukon, son of Eteokles, who is well known from other texts: one of the merits mentioned in the inscription is the care Glaukon had taken of the sacrifice to Zeus Eleutherios and *Homonoia*, and also of the competition the Greeks had established in honour of the Greek freedom fighters against the Persians.¹⁵ Among the honours determined by the *koinon synedrion* of the Greeks, we find the *prohedria* for Glaukon and his descendants at the *gymnikos agon*

¹¹ Larmour 1999: 187: The *Eleutheria* "may have been in existence in Pindar's time". Amandry 1971: 621, discusses the possibility that some fifth-century vessels may have been victory prizes at the *Eleutheria*, but is aware that there is no clear evidence for this. Sansone 1988: 115-17 places the hoplite race mentioned by Philostratos into a tradition that goes back even before 479 BC. He sees in the threat of death a manifestation of a general intertwining of Greek athletics and human sacrifice.

¹² Prandi 1988: 162; Jung 2006: 332-34, 340.

¹³ For an overview see Schachter 1994: 138-43; Konecny & Marchese 2013: 37 note 172; Nielsen 2018: 33.

¹⁴ Authoritative edition: Piérart & Étienne 1975. On content and dating see Buraselis 1982; Prandi 1988: 164-68; Jung 2006: 299-320.

¹⁵ Ll. 20-24: καὶ τὸν | ἀγῶνα ὃ τιθέασιν οἱ Ἕλληνες ἐπὶ | τοῖς ἀνδράσιν τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς καὶ ἀγωνισαμένοις πρὸς τοὺς βαρβάρους | ὑπὲρ τῆς τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἐλευθερίας, ...

in Plataiai.¹⁶ The inscription confirms the literary tradition that the *agon* was held in memory of the battle of Plataiai and that it had a strong Panhellenic impact. An honorary decree from Megalopolis from the beginning of the second century BC mentions an “*agon* hosted by the Greeks”; the editor of the inscription has shown that this is a reference to the *Eleutheria* of Plataiai.¹⁷ From the reference to King Ptolemy in the Glaukon decree, we can deduce a pro-Ptolemaic and plausibly anti-Antigonid thrust of the *Eleutheria* in the period in question.

The background of the foundation, however, might have been different. Usually, scholars connect the establishment of the festival to Macedonian kings: After the victory at Chaironeia in 338 BC and the establishment of the League of Corinth, Philip II might have intended to create an athletic festival at Plataiai as a common reference point for all Greeks. The cult of *Homonoia*, which is otherwise not attested in the fourth century BC, is usually considered a later addition,¹⁸ while Martin West assumes a simultaneous installation of the cults of Zeus Eleutherios and *Homonoia* and argues for Alexander the Great as the originator; he refers to the importance of *eleutheria* and *homonoia* in Alexander’s communication with the Greeks and to Alexander’s concern for Plataiai as a symbolic place.¹⁹ Shane Wallace elaborated this idea and proposed a precise date for the foundation, the Boedromion of 335 BC: If Alexander founded the *Eleutheria* at this time immediately after the destruction of Thebes, he could have celebrated the 144th anniversary of the battle of Plataiai in a symbolically powerful way.²⁰ Jung, on the other hand, rejects a connection of the *Eleutheria* with the Macedonian kings; in his view, the *agon* was

¹⁶ Ll. 32-34: καλεῖν εἰς προεδρίαν αὐτὸν | καὶ τοὺς ἐκγόνοὺς αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν ἄπα[ν]τα χρόνον ὅταν οἱ ἀγῶνες οἱ γυμνικοὶ | [σ]υντελῶνται ἐμ Πλαταιαῖς (...).

¹⁷ SEG 52.447, l. 21: [ἐν τῶι] ἀγῶνι, ὃν τίθεισι οἱ Ἕλληνας (...). The inscription can be dated to 190-180 BC, it was published by Stavrianopoulou 2002, with detailed commentary.

¹⁸ E.g. Piérart & Étienne 1975: 68-75, who prefer a foundation of the *Eleutheria* soon after Chaironeia, but do not exclude a later date, with Demetrios Poliorketes as initiator; the cult of *Homonoia*, in their opinion, was added after 267 BC. Dreyer 1999: 250 agrees with this reconstruction in principle, but connects the introduction of the cult of *Homonoia* with the Galatian invasion of 279 BC.

¹⁹ West 1977: 314-17 with Arr. *Anab.* 1.9.10.

²⁰ Wallace 2011: 153-55.

first founded by the Spartans and later lifted in importance in an anti-Macedonian context, either during the Chremonidean War or in the period 250-245 BC.²¹

The question of the date and the precise context of the foundation cannot, on current knowledge, be answered with certainty. What is certain, however, is that the *Eleutheria* were a well-known and prestigious event in Greek athletics from the third century BC onwards. Many inscriptions attest the existence of the *agon* until the third century AD. First of all, some lists of victors of the *Eleutheria* have survived,²² but much more numerous are the catalogues of victories set by or for athletic champions, which, among other successes, also mention one or more victories in Plataiai.²³ With these sources we can grasp the essential charac-

²¹ Jung 2006: 339-41.

²² The victory catalogues IG VII 1666 (early first century BC) and IG VII 1667 (early imperial period) were found in Plataiai; in the latter the priest of Zeus Eleutherios is named. The attribution of IG VII 1765 (second/first century BC), which comes from the border area between Plataiai and Thespiiai, to the *Eleutheria* is not entirely certain.

²³ An overview over the epigraphic material (with some variations) can be found in Robert 1929: 760 note 1; Pritchett 1979: 181; Schachter 1994: 138-41; Jung 2006: 345-49. Since the material is constantly growing – most recently through the new finds from Messene (see Makres 2021) – any inventory can only be provisional. The following inscriptions clearly refer to the *Eleutheria* of Plataiai: IG II/III³ 4, 599 (Moretti, *Lagonistiche* 51), ca. 150 BC; IG II/III³ 4, 607 (Strasser 2021: no. 179), early imperial period; IG II/III³ 4, 613 (Strasser 2021: no. 158), 230-260 AD (Strasser) and 170 AD (Hallof) respectively; IG II/III³ 4, 630 (Strasser 2021: no. 165), 240-260 AD; IG IV² 1, 629 (Moretti, *Lagonistiche* 53), from Epidauros, ca. 100 BC.; SEG 11.338 (Moretti, *Lagonistiche* 45), from Argos, early second century BC; SEG 59.411, from Messene; IG VII 49 (Moretti, *Lagonistiche* 88; Strasser 2021: no. 169), from Megara, 250-265 AD.; IG VII 1856 (Strasser 2021: no. 28; *I.Thesp.* 210), Augustan, *F.Delphes* III 1, 555 (Moretti, *Lagonistiche* 87; Strasser 2021: no. 159), ca. 230-250 AD; *IMilet* 369 + *I.Didyma* 201 (Moretti, *Lagonistiche* 59; Strasser 2021: nos. 4-5), after 20 BC; *IMilet* 1365 (Strasser 2021: no. 185), first half of the first century AD; *BCH* 1913, pp. 240-41, no. 47, from Notion; *IMagnesia* 149b (Moretti, *Lagonistiche* 62; Strasser 2021: no. 14), early imperial period; *INysa* 469 (Strasser (2021) no. 164), 240-260 AD; *Syll.*³ 1064 (Moretti, *Lagonistiche* 56; Strasser 2021: no. 247), from Halicarnassus, second/first century BC; *I.Perge* 272 (Strasser 2021: no. 186), 40 BC-20 AD. In addition, there are those texts which designate an athlete with the attribute ἀριστος (τῶν) Ἑλλήνων and thus also refer to this

teristics of the *agon*: the name, the disciplines and age groups, the regional background of the participants and the rank of the *Eleutheria* in the Greek athletic system.

The name of the *agon* was Ἐλευθέρια ἐν Πλαταιαῖς, with some variations that are not surprising given the wide chronological and geographical spread of the inscriptions: Thus, one also finds Ἐλευθέρεια instead of Ἐλευθέρια, ἐμ instead of ἐν and Πλατεαῖς instead of Πλαταιαῖς, often also a τὰ before the preposition. When we find in inscriptions an *agon* called only Ἐλευθέρια,²⁴ leaving out the name of the place, the identification of the festival is not entirely sure, since there were other festivals of the same name: in particular the *Eleutheria* of Larisa in Thessaly, which had been established after the Roman victory over Philip V and the resulting independence.²⁵ The *agon* at Plataiai, however, remained the most prominent one, which means that, when a contest is called Ἐλευθέρια without any specifying addition, it is the most plausible option to assign it to Plataiai. Festivals referring to a military victory were not uncommon, the best-known example are the *Soteria* at Delphi in commemoration of the victory over the Galatians.²⁶ The Panhellenic dimension of the *Eleutheria*, known from literary sources, also appears in some inscriptions, when the *agon* is said to be administered by the *koinon* of the Greeks or when we read of Greeks celebrating the *Eleutheria* together.²⁷

The catchment area of the *agon* changed over the centuries; Michael Jung has conclusively traced the development.²⁸ In the early Hellenistic

agon (for a previous list see the appendix in van Nijf (2005)): three Spartan inscriptions (IG V.1, 553; IG V.1, 628; IG V.1, 641; IG V.1, 655); IG II² 1990, first century AD; IG IX.1, 146, second century AD, from Elateia; *I.Smyrna* 663, around 200 AD; SEG 34.1314-1317 (Strasser 2021: no. 34), from Xanthos, late first century AD; P.Lond. 3 1178, ll. 72-74, late second century AD. Most important for the analysis of the imperial-period victor inscriptions is now Strasser 2021.

²⁴ E.g. IG V.1, 656 + 657 (from Sparta, third century BC); IG XII.1, 78 (from Rhodes, second century BC).

²⁵ For the Thessalian *Eleutheria*, see Helly 2010 and Graninger 2011: 74-85. An explicit distinction between the two competitions is found, for example, in SEG 59.411 (col. 1, l. 13: Ἐλευθέρια τὰ ἐν Πλαταιαῖς, versus col. 2, l. 2: Ἐλευθέρια τὰ ἐν Λαρίσαι).

²⁶ For further examples, see Chaniotis 1991: 124.

²⁷ *I.Didyma* 201, l. 13: τὰ τιθέμενα ὑπὸ τοῦ κοινοῦ τῶν Ἑ[λλήνων]; BCH 1913: 240-41, no. 47, l. 4: Ἐλευθέρια | [ἄ συ]ντελοῦσιν οἱ Ἕλληνες.

²⁸ Jung 2006: 346-47.

period, participants seem to have been limited to Boeotia, Attica and the Peloponnese. Towards the end of the second century BC, the *Eleutheria* began to attract athletes from Chios and Rhodes, and in the following centuries, athletes from different regions of Asia Minor (the cities are Miletus, Magnesia, Halicarnassus, Xanthos and Perge) are attested to have competed in Plataiai. In the course of the second century AD, however, the catchment area narrowed down again to the Greek motherland; the *Eleutheria* seem to have lost ground within the agonistic system, for in general the epigraphic evidence does not point to a decline of athletic activity in this period. The impact of political developments, in particular the Roman conquest of Greece, is hard to estimate: Spawforth has put forward the idea of a caesura in Augustan times, with a Roman turn towards Greek athletics in general and a peculiar promotion of the *Eleutheria*,²⁹ but the epigraphic evidence does not reveal any such caesura. The victory list of a pentathlete from Kos³⁰ mentions a victory at the Ἐλευ[θέρ]ια τὰ καὶ Καισάρηα, and thus the *Eleutheria* of Plataiai may have included a reference to the emperor in the name; but a restauration of Ἐλευ[σί]ν]ια or a reference to other *Eleutheria* is also possible.³¹ In any case, no lasting connection of the *Eleutheria* of Plataiai with the imperial house can be proven.³²

With regard to the disciplines, a fragmentary list of winners from Plataiai³³ attests the *stadion*, the *dolichos* and the *pankration*, and as age groups *paides*, *ageneioi* and *andres*. Other inscriptions prove the existence of boxing,³⁴ wrestling,³⁵ and *pentathlon*³⁶ as well as the whole canon of running disciplines including the *hippios*,³⁷ the race over a distance of

²⁹ Spawforth 2011: 130–38.

³⁰ IG XII.4, 2, 935 (= Syll.³ 1066), late first century BC.

³¹ Cfr. Rigsby 2010.

³² Camia 2016: 273–74.

³³ IG VII 1666.

³⁴ I.Magnesia 149b (as successes in pankration and wrestling are explicitly named as such in this inscription, the victory in Plataiai plausibly refers to boxing). A further testimony for boxing in Plataiai is *Anth. Graec.* 11.81.

³⁵ SEG 59.411.

³⁶ BCH 1913: 240–41 no. 47.

³⁷ Syll.³ 1064; IG IV² 1, 629. The *diaulos*, the run over the double stadium distance, is attested in SEG 17.628.

four *stadia*, which was not held at the Olympic or Pythian Games, but at some other competitions. Thus, the entire catalogue of gymnastic disciplines common in Greek *stadia* was performed in Plataiai.³⁸ An inscription from Didyma is particularly informative about the running disciplines:³⁹ καὶ Ἐλευθ[έρια τ]ὰ ἐν Πλα|ταιαῖς τὰ τιθέμενα ὑπὸ τοῦ κοινοῦ τῶν Ἑ[λλήνων τ]ὸ δεύτερο[ν] | στάδιον, δίαυλον, ὀπλίτην καὶ τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ [τροπαίου] ἐνόπλι|ον δρόμον. This passage proves that besides the regular hoplite race, which was run over a length of two *stadia*, there was another race in arms, which was started at the *tropaion* of the battle. This is the discipline mentioned by Philostratos and Pausanias; it constitutes the peculiar character of the *agon*, discussed below in more detail.

The gymnastic disciplines dominated the *agon* in Plataiai, which is explicitly called *gymnikos agon* both in Strabo and in the decree for Glaukon.⁴⁰ The fact that contests for trumpeters (σαλπιστής) and for heralds (κῆρυξ) are also attested in a list of winners⁴¹ is not a contradiction to this gymnastic dominance, for these two disciplines also took place in Olympia to round off the competitions. There is no evidence for hippic disciplines; it has sometimes been postulated that hippic contests were part of the program,⁴² but this idea is based on the – understandable and widespread – misunderstanding of the *hippios* as a horse race. In fact, however, it was a foot race.⁴³ Whether there were other musical disciplines besides the competitions for trumpeters and heralds remains unclear: in a catalogue of victories by an *auletes* from Delphi, a victory in the κοινὸν

³⁸ The aforementioned inscription from the border area of Plataiai and Thespiai (IG VII 1765), which possibly refers to the *Eleutheria* of Plataiai, also shows this canon of disciplines. For the age classes, it also attests a division of the boys into a younger and an older group. – On Greek athletic disciplines, see also Nielsen in this volume (77–81).

³⁹ I. Didyma 201.12–15.

⁴⁰ See also Eust. *Hom. ad Il.* 2.504 (1.411 van der Valk).

⁴¹ IG VII 1667.

⁴² Alcock 2002: 80; Jung 2006: 345.

⁴³ See Paus. 6.16.4; Philostr. *Gymn.* 7; moreover, there are inscriptions of runners who won the *stadion*, the *diaulos*, and the *hippios* (cfr. the entry in Golden 2004: 83).

Ἐλλήνων is mentioned, and one may think here of the *Eleutheria* of Plataiai, but Strasser has given the counter-argument.⁴⁴ The discipline is unclear in an early imperial victory epigram from Athens, which is only fragmentarily preserved: the word εὐεπίης (l. 2) provides an indication for a herald or poet, but other passages rather point to combat sport.⁴⁵ A very interesting contest was the *dialogos*, a ritualised rhetorical contest in which Athenians and Spartans competed for the *propompeia*, i.e. for the right to lead the procession.⁴⁶ This competition referred to the *Eleutheria*, because it was about the procession of this festival, but it did not take place within its framework; Noel Robertson assumes that the *dialogos* was always held two years earlier.⁴⁷

The structures of a theatre are visible in Plataiai,⁴⁸ where the musical disciplines, if they existed, will have been held. The search for a hippodrome is superfluous, since the *Eleutheria* had no horse or chariot races in their program. Traces of a stadium have not yet been discovered;⁴⁹ one does not necessarily have to assume that there was one in antiquity: gymnastic competitions could certainly be held without elaborate architectural structures. Especially in the case of campaign *agones*, one simply used the existing terrain with some rapid preparations.⁵⁰ In the case of the *Eleutheria*, which had a particularly strong connection to a battle and which, in addition, were not administered by a financially strong *polis* or sanctuary that could take care of the construction and maintenance of the sites, it is quite conceivable that one refrained from building a stadium; the peculiar and most important discipline, the race *apo tou tro-paiou*, did not take place in a stadium anyway.

The topography of the battlefield is discussed in detail by Christel Müller in this volume. With regard to the *Eleutheria*, it is striking that the sources do not indicate any specific references of the contests to the

⁴⁴ SEG 52.528 (= Strasser 2021: no. 46), time of Trajan.

⁴⁵ IG II³ 4, 607 (= Strasser 2021: no. 179, see there for a detailed discussion).

⁴⁶ Fundamental is Robertson 1986. A fragment of an Athenian speech is preserved (Chaniotis 1988: 42-48, T 10); see also Jung 2006: 351-60, with further bibliography.

⁴⁷ Robertson 1986: 90-91.

⁴⁸ Konecny 2013: 144-46.

⁴⁹ Konecny *et al.* 2013 give no hint to a stadium.

⁵⁰ See the description in Xen. *An.* 4.8.26-28. For a discussion of campaign *agones* see Mann 2020.

course of the battle: There is no mention of the javelin throw, held as part of the *pentathlon*, as a reenactment of a javelin fight in the battle, no mention of a foot race remembering an attack in the battle of 479 BC, and horse races, which could have referred to cavalry attacks during the fight, were omitted altogether. The topographical connection between the battle and the *agon* is made solely by the *tropaion*, albeit in a very massive form. The *Eleutheria* contained a symbolic reference to the battle, not a concrete re-enactment of the fight.

The poverty of Plataiai should not be exaggerated. Albert Schachter points out that the Plataeans were able to maintain two larger sanctuaries (for Hera and for Athena Areia) in the city.⁵¹ What is decisive is that the *Eleutheria* were not administered by the *polis*, but by a Panhellenic council. In the Glaukon decree this is called τὸ κοινὸν συνέδριον τῶν Ἑλλήνων (ll. 25-26), while a victory inscription names the κοινὸν τῶν Ἑλλήνων as the organising body.⁵² This Panhellenic institution, which refers to the Hellenic League of 480 BC, also hosted the annual sacrifices commemorating the battle against the Persians.⁵³ There is a lack of evidence about the actual organisation of the *Eleutheria*, but the Glaukon decree (lines 2 and 37f.) indicates that *agonothetai* were involved as early as the third century BC. The *agonothetes* Archelaos, son of Athenaios, as well as the priest of Zeus Eleutherios are mentioned without their ethnic attribution, which indicates that they were Plataeans. An inscription from the imperial period points in the same direction, listing an *agonothetes* alongside the priest of Zeus and the *pyrphoros*, all three belonging to the same family. It is not impossible that the institutions of Plataiai appointed the *agonothetai*, but with regard to the Panhellenic thrust of the *agon*, it seems more likely that the *koinon* did this.⁵⁴

There is more certainty about the prizes for the winners of the competitions. According to Strabo and Eustathios the *agon* was *stephanites*,⁵⁵

⁵¹ Schachter 2016: 135.

⁵² *I.Didyma* 201, ll. 16-17. *I.Milet* 369, A, l. 6. B, l. 7.

⁵³ See Müller in this volume (25-33).

⁵⁴ Jung 2006: 309.

⁵⁵ Strab. 9.2.31 (412C); Eust. *Hom. ad Il.* 2.504 (1.411 van der Valk). The wreath assigned to the *Eleutheria* on Menodoros' monument in Athens (*IG II/III*³ 4, 599) seems to be made with olive branches, but that is not necessarily a valid indication for the real prize (see Strasser 2021: 593-94).

i.e. a crown contest; in Greek terminology, this category is contrasted with *agones thematikoi*, in which valuable prizes or cash were to be won.⁵⁶ But also in *agones stephanitai* additional prizes of economic worth could be won,⁵⁷ and that was the case in the hoplite race *apo tou tropaiou* in Plataiai: Pausanias characterises the *agon* with the words “in which great prizes are offered for running”,⁵⁸ which does not refer to the running disciplines in general, but to the peculiar discipline. A runner from Miletos won the *stadion*, the *diaulos* and the normal *hoplites* at the *Eleutheria*, but explicitly states that for his second victory in the race *apo tou tropaiou* he was awarded “a golden wreath as a victory prize”.⁵⁹ This was not only about economic gain; the word *geras* used by Pausanias generally refers to objects that had both material *and* symbolic value. Here, as in Greek sport in general, economic gain and honour were closely intertwined.⁶⁰

As *agon stephanites*, the *Eleutheria* were counted among the most prestigious festivals.⁶¹ The best way to assess their ranking in the competitive system of Greek athletics, in which not only athletes but also *agones* competed with each other, is to look at the victory catalogues in which the ancient sports stars listed a wide number of festivals. However, we face methodological problems because the prestige of an *agon* is one criterion for its position in a list, but not the only one: the chronological order in which the victories were achieved and a geographical sorting also played a role.⁶² An inscription in which, to all appearances, the order was based solely on the rank of the *agones* comes from Delphi: here, the festivals of the *periodos* are listed first, followed by five other important competitions and then by the *Eleutheria* of Plataiai; twelve more victories follow.⁶³ Other inscriptions confirm this picture: the *Eleutheria* could of course not

⁵⁶ On problems of definition see Remijsen 2011; Slater 2012.

⁵⁷ On the variety of prizes in Greek athletics see Kyle 1996; Mann 2018.

⁵⁸ Paus. 9.2.6: ἐν ᾧ μέγιστα γέρα πρόκειται δρόμου.

⁵⁹ *I.Didyma* 201, l. 17: χρυσῶι στεφάνωι ἀριστήωι. See below p. 60.

⁶⁰ For this phenomenon see now Begass *et al.* 2024.

⁶¹ Very instructive is the huge effort the Magnesians made to upgrade the festival of Artemis Leukophryene to a stephanitic *agon* (*I.Magnesia* 16 with Slater & Summa 2006; Thonemann 2007; van Nijf & Williamson 2016).

⁶² For a detailed account of the ranking of *agones* in the Roman imperial period see now Strasser 2021: 562–80.

⁶³ *F.Delphes* III 1, 555 (= Strasser 2021: no. 159; Moretti, *I.agonistiche* 87); 230–250 AD.

compete in prestige with the competitions of the *periodos* in Olympia, Delphi and, in the imperial period, Rome or Nicopolis, and even besides these there were a few others that had greater prestige. But based on the evidence, the *Eleutheria* seem to have been among the most important of the hundreds of *agones* that were held in the Greek world.⁶⁴

The *Eleutheria*, thus, occupied a prominent place in Greek athletics. They were fully integrated into the agonistic system, but, on the other side, they had some features that made them a very peculiar event. The organisation of the competitions was not carried out by a *polis* or a sanctuary, as it was the case in most other recurrent competitions in ancient Greece, but lay in the hands of a council that represented the unity of the Greeks. Other *agones* were 'Panhellenic', too – the term is used very early, in fifth-century victory odes, for the competitions in Olympia, Delphi, Nemea and Isthmia⁶⁵ – but in this sense it referred to participants and spectators. In Plataiai, on the contrary, it was also the organization that was Panhellenic. The background is obvious: Plataiai was a *lieu de mémoire*,⁶⁶ a place where memories came alive and were reshaped. The battle of 479 BC was the reference point for the *Eleutheria*: All our sources agree that the *Eleutheria* were established after the battle of 479 BC and in the very place where the battle had taken place.

Other *agones* had their founding narratives, too, but usually more than one, and that makes a difference. At Olympia, for example, different stories connect the beginnings of competitions to Heracles, to Pelops, and to other gods and heroes.⁶⁷ The aforementioned Hellenistic foundations of the *Soteria* at Delphi and the *Eleutheria* at Larisa were traced back to historical events, but they were not staged on a battlefield as it was the case with the *Eleutheria* and the battle of Plataiai. This festival had a most important symbolic content: it commemorated the military victory of Greeks over barbarians and the warriors who had fallen in this great battle. Its very name referred to freedom as the goal of the battle, and it implicitly documented the unity of the Greeks as the precondition with

⁶⁴ In the Roman imperial period, more than 500 *agones* are attested by inscriptions or coins (Leschhorn 1998: 31).

⁶⁵ Pind. *Isthm.* 3/4.47; Bacchyl. 13.161.

⁶⁶ Cfr. Jung 2006 and Müller in this volume (17-42).

⁶⁷ Cfr. Ulf 1997.

which this victory could have been achieved. These aspects are strikingly found in the literary sources, especially in the resolution of the Greeks to unite in celebration of liberty and to hold the competitions, as reported by Diodoros: “the Greeks would unite in celebrating the Festival of Liberty and would hold the games of the Festival in Plataiai.”⁶⁸ The inscriptions follow the same pattern, for example when the decree for Glaukon states that the Greeks held the *agon* in honour of the men who had fought against the barbarians for the freedom of the Greeks.⁶⁹ And an epigram of the early imperial period mentions a victory in “Persian-killing Plataiai”.⁷⁰ The idea that the contests were founded immediately after the battle was firmly anchored in the minds of the Greeks in Hellenistic and Roman times; it was an invented tradition, but the fact that it was invented had no impact on the history of the *agon*.

The race *apo tou tropaiou*

The third peculiar feature was the very special running event.⁷¹ Philostratos and Pausanias as well as the inscriptions highlight the race *apo tou tropaiou* as what was most remarkable about the *Eleutheria*, and all sources agree in connecting the race to the events of 479 BC. The run of Euchidas, who is said to have hurried from Plataiai to Delphi after the battle with the sacred fire and to have died of exhaustion there, is probably a founding legend of the discipline.⁷² As we have seen, Philostratos recognised four specifics of the run at Plataiai: First, the battle against the Persians as reference point; secondly, the length of the running course; thirdly, the armour that had to be worn, which reached down to

⁶⁸ Diod. 11.29.1: ἄγειν κατὰ ταύτην τὴν ἡμέραν τοὺς Ἑλληνας ἐλευθέρια κοινῇ, καὶ τὸν ἐλευθέριον ἀγῶνα συντελεῖν ἐν ταῖς Πλαταιαῖς (transl. C.H. Oldfather).

⁶⁹ Ll. 20-24: καὶ τὸν | ἀγῶνα ὃ τιθέασιν οἱ Ἕλληνες ἐπὶ | τοῖς ἀνδράσιν τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς καὶ ἀγω|νισαμένοις πρὸς τοὺς βαρβάρους | ὑπὲρ τῆς τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἐλευθερίας.

⁷⁰ IG II³ 4, 607, A, l. 4: μηδοφόνος τε Πλάται' ἠγλά[ισαν στεφάνοις].

⁷¹ There were other footraces with unique features, e.g. the run with a vine tendril at the Oschophoria; cfr. *ThesCRA* VII, 25 (A. Chaniotis). But these were local events, while the run in Plataiai achieved a far greater outreach.

⁷² Plut. *Arist.* 20.4-6; cfr. Jung 2006: 349.

the feet; and fourthly, the rule that provided the death penalty for former victors who competed again and were defeated.

The very special connection of the race to the battle was made obvious by installing the *tropaion*⁷³ as starting point. This physical setting was so important that it gave the name to the discipline: the run is called *apo tou tropaiou*, mostly with the addition of *dromos* or *hoplites*, but sometimes without.⁷⁴ The finish was at the altar of Zeus Eleutherios, located near the walls of Plataiai, the exact location is still unclear.⁷⁵ From Pausanias' description of the run⁷⁶ it becomes obvious that the distance was about 15 *stadia*⁷⁷ and thus far longer than the two *stadia* that had to be covered in the usual Greek hoplite race. With the "armour, which stretches down to the feet covering the athlete completely", Philostratos marks another difference to the regular *hoplites* that had been common in Greek athletics since the Archaic period. Introduced at Olympia in 520 BC, the *hoplites* was initially performed with shield, helmet and greaves, but the armament to be worn by the runners was soon limited to only the shield.⁷⁸ As far as the shield in Plataiai is concerned, Jüthner considered the oval, cut-out Boeotian type to be the most likely,⁷⁹ but this remains unclear, as does the rest of the armament. Defining the Plataean race as a "quasi-military discipline",⁸⁰ i.e. as training for battle, misses the point: the heavy armament and the run were referring to warfare in the past, not to the current demands of war. Competitions in military disciplines, which served as training for war, were certainly held in the Greek gymnasium, but they were primarily concerned with archery and artillery.⁸¹ At

⁷³ For details on the *tropaion* see Müller in this volume (20-27).

⁷⁴ *I.Milet* 369, l. 7 = *I.Didyma* 201, ll. 14-15 : τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ τροπαίου ἐνόπλιον δρόμον; *SEG* 11.338 (Moretti, *Lagonistiche* 45), ll. 6-7: Ἐλευθέρια ὀπλίτ[α]ν τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ τροπαίου; *SEG* 34.1314-17: τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ τροπαίου; *IG* V.1, 655, ll. 7-8: τὸν ἀπὸ [τροπαί]ου ἀνδρῶν.

⁷⁵ Konecny & Marchese 2013: 28 with note 100.

⁷⁶ Paus. 9.2.5-6: θέουσι δὲ ὠπλισμένοι πρὸ τοῦ βωμοῦ. τρόπαιον δέ, ὃ τῆς μάχης Πλαταιᾶσιν ἀνέθεσαν οἱ Ἕλληνες, πεντεκαίδεκα σταδίους μάλιστα ἔστηκεν ἀπωτέρω τῆς πόλεως. (transl. W.H.S. Jones).

⁷⁷ First recognised by Robert 1929: 760.

⁷⁸ Paus. 6.10.4; for further literary sources and vase illustrations see Gardiner 1903.

⁷⁹ Jüthner 1909: 201.

⁸⁰ Spawforth 2011: 131.

⁸¹ Chankowski 2004; Kah 2004.

Plataiai, the weapons were chosen according to the logic of memory, not for practical reasons.

It was certainly an enormous physical challenge to run cross-country over a long distance with heavy armament. Plato thought about even tougher runs – 60 *stadia* for the hoplites on level paths, 100 *stadia* for the lighter-armed archers through difficult terrain –,⁸² but these were theoretical considerations that did not find their way into athletic practice. The only other race *apo tou tropaiou* is documented in a victor list concerning the *Soteria* in Akraiphia.⁸³ This is probably an imitation of the run at Plataiai,⁸⁴ perhaps also due to the circumstances. The inscription indicates that these were the first *Soteria* after the (Mithridatic) wars, i.e. at a time when Greek *agones* were going through a severe crisis. It is possible that the *Eleutheria* were not celebrated in the year in question and the race was relocated for this one occasion. But this remains speculation.

The elevated status of the race *apo tou tropaiou* becomes clear not only from the prize of the golden wreath, but above all from a title that is unique in Greek athletics: best of the Greeks. The first to recognise that this title referred to a victory at Plataiai was Louis Robert, the key to the solution was provided by inscriptions for a successful runner from Miletus, who, among numerous other victories including the Olympics, was also successful at the *Eleutheria*: A fragment of the inscription reports victories in the *stadion* and in the run *apo tou tropaiou*, after which he was the first athlete from Asia to be awarded the title ἄριστος τῶν

⁸² Plat. *Leg.* 833a-b.

⁸³ IG VII 2727, ll. 30-33: Πρώταρχος Πρωτογένους Θεσπιεύς | τὸν ὀπλίτην ἀ[π]ὸ τοῦ τροπαίου | [Ῥ]ολύμπιος Ἄριστί[δ]ου Θηβαῖος | [- ἀπὸ τοῦ τρο]παίου. See the recent commentary by Müller 2019: 172-74.

⁸⁴ Robert 1929: 760 note 2.

Ἑλλήνων.⁸⁵ The inscription goes on to mention more successes in another staging of the *Eleutheria*.⁸⁶ This time our runner also won the *diaulos* and the regular *hoplites*, and he repeated his victories in the *stadion* and the race *apo tou tropaiou*. For the latter triumph, according to the text of the inscription, he was proclaimed ἄριστος τῶν Ἑλλήνων for the second time, the first and only one ever, and was presented with a golden wreath by the *koinon* of the Greeks.⁸⁷ This is epigraphic evidence that there were in fact athletes who, after winning the race *apo tou tropaiou*, competed once more in that discipline. But it was a rare phenomenon, such a double success had obviously not been achieved by anyone before, and therefore the *koinon* honoured him with a special prize. How many athletes succeeded in repeating a victory in the race *apo tou tropaiou*? Two centuries later we find an athlete from Ephesos who claims to have been *aristos Hellenon* twice,⁸⁸ and if one gives credit to Philostratos' anecdote about the coach who offered himself as a guarantor for his protégé, a third runner repeated this victory.⁸⁹

The runners who held the title 'best of the Greeks' referred to it with pride, but the title does not seem to have been as important as it sounds. An inscription for a Spartan runner first calls him a πλειστονείκην πα[ράδο]ξον, which was evidently considered a more important title; accordingly, Mnasiboulos from Elateia put his double title περιδονίκης

⁸⁵ *I.Milet* 369, A, ll. 5-9: καὶ Ἐλευθέρια τὰ ἐν Πλαταιαῖς | [τὰ τ]ιθέμενα ὑπὸ τοῦ κοινοῦ τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἄνδρας | [στά]διον καὶ τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ τροπαιοῦ ἐνόπλιον δρόμον | [καὶ] ἀναγορευθέντα ἄριστον τῶν Ἑλλήνων πρῶτον | [καὶ] μόνον τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀσίας. Philostratos does not mention the title, but it echoes in his praise for the race in Plataiai as ἄριστος ... ὀπλίτης.

⁸⁶ The Olympic victory of this anonymous runner (the beginning of the inscription is badly damaged) dates to the year 20 BC, the successes at the *Eleutheria* probably belong to the years 25/24 BC and 21/20 BC (Strasser 2021: 48).

⁸⁷ *I.Didyma* 201, 12-17: καὶ Ἐλευθ[έρια τ]ὰ ἐν Πλα[τα]ιαῖς τὰ τιθέμενα ὑπὸ τοῦ κοινοῦ τῶν Ἑ[λλήνων τ]ὸ δεῦτερο[ν] | στάδιον, δίαυλον, ὀπλίτην καὶ τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ [τροπαιο]ῦ ἐνόπλιον δρόμον καὶ ἀναγορευθέντα τὸ δεῦτερον [ἄριστο]ν τῶν Ἑλλή[νων] πρῶτον καὶ μόνον καὶ τιμηθέντα ὑπὸ τ[οῦ κοινο]ῦ τῶν Ἑλ[λή]νων χρυσῶι στεφάνωι ἀριστήωι. Cf. *I.Milet* 369, B, ll. 3-8.

⁸⁸ P.Lond. 3 1178, ll. 72-74. The papyrus is dated to 194 AD, but the victories must have been much earlier.

⁸⁹ Jung 2006: 349 note 326 gives two other examples, but these were winners in other disciplines.

first.⁹⁰ Mnasiboulos belonged, and this is another relevant fact, to a leading family, and this is also true of other bearers of the title ἄριστος τῶν Ἑλλήνων.⁹¹ The race *apo tou tropaiou* thus seems to have been popular among the elites of Roman Greece. However, it was by no means a race for notables, for the best runners in the Greek world also competed.

The meaning of the strange rule with the threat of death, if it is historical at all, is hard to explain.⁹² It is possible that the winner of the race *apo tou tropaiou* was so closely associated with the Greek victory of Plataiai, equating the latter's *aristeia* with the *aristeia* in battle, that a defeat of this symbolic figure would have been considered a bad omen.

Conclusion

Sporting competitions create both difference and unity: they produce winners and losers, but beforehand all participants recognise their fellow competitors as equals in the sense that they strive for the same goal according to the same rules. The Greeks were well aware that their way of doing sport formed a specific feature of their culture; the Panhellenic *agones* reproduced Greek identity.⁹³ In a very special way, the *Eleutheria* of Plataiai referred to the unity of the Greeks: by referring to the great joint success of beating the Persians, by means of the organisation by a Panhellenic council, and by the staging of a discipline that was unique in performance and in the title for the winners: the race *apo tou tropaiou* was not a mere curiosity of ancient athletics, but a contest whose symbolic power was based on the function of Plataiai as a place of remembrance for all Greeks.

⁹⁰ IG V.1, 553, ll. 8-9; IG IX.1, 146, ll. 3-5.

⁹¹ Alcock 2002: 80; Jung 2006: 350 note 31; Spawforth 2011: 131-32; Camia 2016: 273.

⁹² According to Yiannakis 1994, the rule was aimed to protect the victorious runner as a spiritual symbol against the dark forces, an idea that must remain speculation.

⁹³ See Nielsen 2007: 12-21, with sources.

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