
Sport and Democracy in Ancient Athens

Deporte y democracia en la antigua Atenas

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Abstract.— Democracy and the Olympic Games are nowadays the best-known products of ancient Greek culture. Against this background, this paper examines whether there was a causal link between democracy and sport in antiquity. To this end, three questions will be considered: we can observe a process that the circle of participants expanded in the course of the centuries, including more and more athletes from poorer families; is there a causal connection to the emergence of democracy in Athens? How did the Athenians, for whom the principle of equality was very important, deal with athletic champions who might be seen as a threat to the equality of citizens? Were there mental mindsets that were equally effective in athletic *agones* and democratic decision-making? Also discussed are the questions whether the nudity of Greek athletes had a democratic aspect and whether sporting competitions promoted the ability to endure defeat in political decision-making.

Keywords.— Democracy; nudity; athletics; Athens

Resumen.— La democracia y los Juegos Olímpicos son hoy en día los productos más conocidos de la antigua cultura griega. En este contexto, el presente artículo examina si existía un vínculo causal entre la democracia y el deporte en la Antigüedad. Para ello, se plantearán tres cuestiones: dada la progresiva ampliación del círculo de participantes, que, en el transcurso de los siglos, incluye cada vez a un mayor número de atletas de familias más pobres, ¿existe una relación causal con el surgimiento de la democracia en Atenas?; ¿cómo trataban los atenienses, para quienes el principio de igualdad era muy importante, a los campeones atléticos que podían ser vistos como una amenaza para la igualdad de los ciudadanos?; ¿existían mentalidades igualmente eficaces en los agones atléticos y en la toma de decisiones democrática? También se discute si la desnudez de los atletas griegos tenía un aspecto democrático y si las competiciones deportivas fomentaban la capacidad de soportar la derrota en la toma de decisiones políticas.

Palabras clave.— democracia; desnudez; atletas; Atenas

1. Introduction

Of all cultural achievements of the ancient Greeks, democracy and sporting competitions are probably the ones that are best known in our times. The importance of democracy is undisputed today; the word goes back to

the Greeks, but the question of similarity and difference between modern and ancient democracies is a controversial issue.¹ The sporting competitions of the Greeks live on in the name of the Olympic Games, an event watched by billions of people around the world. The name was chosen by the founders of the Olympic movement as a deliberate reference to antiquity, and even today some rituals, especially the lighting of the Olympic flame in the sanctuary of Zeus, refer to the ancient Greek world. Given the broad reception of both democracy and sporting competitions, it is natural to ask whether there was an interaction between these two specific manifestations of Greek culture. Some studies have drawn a causal connection and spoken of a democratisation of sport in the wake of a democratisation of politics in Athens. Harry Pleket once wrote that the decline of ancient sport was created in historical narratives as a little brother of the decline of the Roman Empire,² and in the same way the agonistic democracy appears to be the little sister of political democracy.

A possible connection between sport and democracy can be examined on different levels. The first level is the organisation of festivals with sporting competitions in Athens, because according to Thucydides, the number and splendour of festivals is praised in the funeral oration of Pericles as a special achievement of democratic Athens: “Moreover, we have provided for the spirit many relaxations from toil: we have games and sacrifices regularly throughout the year [...]”³ Indeed, Athens hosted numerous *agones*, and the Panathenaea were, in the Greek agonistic system, one of the most prestigious competitions after the so-called “Big Four” (Olympia, Pythia, Isthmia, Nemeen). The Panathenaic prize amphorae referred to Athens in image and inscription, with a scheme that remained stable over centuries, and when the winners took them home, the prizes were symbols for the wealth and the generosity of this polis.⁴ However, the Panathenaea were not a foundation of Athenian democracy. The tradition refers to Peisistratos, and even if the origin of this festival cannot be clearly clarified, the foundation undoubtedly took place decades before the reforms of Kleisthenes. Further, the Panathenaea were also much more inclusive than the democratic institutions of Athens, as the ceremonies integrated women

¹ The bibliography is vast. Finley (1985) is fundamental, for detailed studies see the contributions in Hansen & Ducrey (2010).

² Pleket 1975: 51.

³ Thuc. 2.38: καὶ μὴν τῶν πόνων πλείστας ἀναπαύλας τῇ γνώμῃ ἐπορισάμεθα, ἀγῶσι μὲν καὶ θυσίαις διετησίοις νομίζοντες, [...] (transl. C.F. Smith).

⁴ Mann 2018: 299–302, with bibliography.

and metics.⁵ While tragedy and comedy, which were also performed as competitions, emerged and developed in close connection to the institutions of Athenian democracy, there is no direct causal relation between democracy and the development of Athenian competitions. The Athenian polis gained control over athletics in the 6th century BC—a process that Donald Kyle has called the emergence of “civic athletics”—but this process is not simultaneous with the emergence of popular rule. Crucial to Athens’ rich festive culture, which Pericles praises in the passage quoted above, were the enormous revenues from the empire the Athenians established in the 5th century BC.

Therefore, three other questions will be dealt with in this article. The first is about the participants and the debate whether there was a “democratisation” with regard to their social origin (section 2). It is followed by a discussion how the outstanding champions, who could pose a threat to the democratic ideal of equality for all citizens, were perceived and treated by their fellow citizens (section 3). And finally, there will be reflections to what extent sporting competitions and democratic decision-making shared certain mental dispositions (section 4). It is not necessary to emphasize that this brief treatment of such a broad topic cannot be more than a rough sketch.

2. The social background of the athletes: a process of democratisation?

When talking about participants in Greek sporting competitions, the difference between hippic and gymnastic disciplines is obvious. In horse and chariot races, it was not the jockeys and charioteers who were proclaimed as winners but the owners of the horses. And since the purchase or breeding of racehorses was very expensive, these disciplines remained the domain of the wealthy throughout antiquity. The plot in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* starts with the financial problems of an Athenian farmer ruined by his son’s expenses for racehorses. The audience knew that participation in hippic disciplines was out of question for ordinary citizens. Within the gymnastic disciplines the situation was different: Participation was possible for less wealthy men, because no expensive equipment was needed for foot races, combat sports, and the pentathlon. However, time was needed for training, a privately financed coach could considerably increase the

⁵ See now the detailed treatment of Shear (2021).

chances for winning, and money was necessary for traveling to Olympia and other competition sites. It is an important question how “democratic” the gymnastic disciplines were.

According to Donald Kyle, the Olympic Games shared, in the Classical period, several characteristics with Athenian democracy, above all the equality of opportunity and the participation of less well-off citizens.⁶ Paul Christesen goes one step further, postulating a connection between the emergence of “mass sport” and democracy. He puts forward three main arguments in support of this thesis: First, he refers to modern developments and to sociological theories showing such a connection between sport and democracy, and transfers these ideas to ancient Greece. Secondly, he refers to the athletic nudity of the Greeks, which he takes to be a democratic factor, and thirdly, he sees a chronological congruence: in his view, the social basis of the gymnastic competitions changed in the late 6th century BC with the inclusion of non-aristocratic athletes, precisely in the period when the origins of Athenian democracy are to be found.⁷

These are interesting considerations, but they face different problems. First of all it should be noted that the Greeks themselves did not draw such a connection between sporting competitions and democracy, no corresponding reflections can be found in the sources. Moreover, in Athenian democracy the goal, which is often echoed in the texts and which was sought to be achieved through the drawing of lots and the appointment of judges and councillors, was that all citizens should be able to participate in the political process, regardless of their property. The aim was not socio-economic equality of all citizens, but the neutralisation of socio-economic differences in the political institutions. Finally, the chronological congruence does not fit well, for there is no striking evidence for the emergence of mass sport in the 6th century BC. It is only from the late 5th century BC that we can find evidence of an increasing number of athletes who did not belong to wealthy families.⁸ By this time, democracy was already firmly established in Athens. Financial support organised by the polis for talented athletes who could not afford the training and the travels to the competitions did not develop until the Hellenistic period,⁹ when the heyday of Athenian democracy was already over.

A causal connection between developments in the agonistic world and

⁶ Kyle 1997: 67–74.

⁷ Christesen 2012; id. 2014.

⁸ Kyle 1987, with prosopography.

⁹ Mann 2017.

the emergence of democracy in Athens is therefore difficult to prove. What can be made plausible, however, is that democracy led to an expansion of the group of participants. Gymnasia emerged in the 6th century BC, their main function was athletic training. Initially they formed exclusive institutions, but in the 5th century BC in Athens, they were opened to broader classes,¹⁰ and this had an impact on the social function of sport, as Zinon Papakonstantinou accurately summarises:

[...] even though elites, because of their control of plentiful financial resources and leisure time for training and travel, continued to have an edge in top-tier sport, during the late Archaic and Classical periods it became increasingly difficult for them to assert success in track and field or combat events as exclusively intertwined with social status. That role was now fulfilled by equestrian competitions, a truly exclusive sport that required ostentatious financial outlays beyond the reach of the overwhelming majority of Greeks.¹¹

3. The integration of successful athletes into the democratic polis

Athletic competitions were of utmost importance in ancient Greece, countless written and archaeological sources of all genres bear witness to this. One facet of this social significance was the commemoration of victories in different kinds of texts and monuments: it was completely uncontroversial that a victory in the Olympic Games or other panhellenic *agones* was a glorious achievement. And since the victory ceremony at Olympia and the inscriptions on victory monuments always included the name of the athletes' home polis, the community participated in this achievement. In return, it was customary to reward agonistic victors at home. However, honouring individual citizens was a delicate matter in Athenian democracy: since the political equality of all citizens was its highest principle, the *demos* in the 5th century BC avoided praising individual achievements too much and instead presented military victories, for example, as successes of the community of citizens. Examples for this phenomenon are Aeschylus' *Persians* and the herms erected after the victory at Eion.¹² For a long

¹⁰ Fisher 1998.

¹¹ Papakonstantinou 2021: 124.

¹² Cfr. Aeschin. 3.183: ἐφ' ὧτε μὴ ἐπιγράφειν τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ἐαυτῶν, ἵνα μὴ τῶν στρατηγῶν, ἀλλὰ τοῦ δήμου δοκῆ εἶναι τὸ ἐπίγραμμα. ("... on condition that they should not inscribe their own names upon them, in order that the inscription might not seem to be in honour of the generals, but of the people"; transl. C.D. Adams).

time, Athens refrained from erecting honorific statues of eminent citizens; this became common not before the 4th century BC.¹³ Thus, in Athenian democracy it was a complicated question how to deal with outstanding athletes and their panhellenic fame.

In the history of Athens there are examples of ambitious men trying to turn their agonistic successes into political supremacy. In the 7th century BC Cylon, an Olympic champion in the *diaulos* (foot race over two stadia), occupied the Acropolis during one of the following Olympic Games and attempted to establish a tyranny, but failed.¹⁴ Three centuries later, Alcibiades referred to his success at the Olympic Games of 416 BC in the Sicilian debate to support his claim to lead the campaign:

For the Hellenes, who had previously hoped that our state had been exhausted by the war, conceived an idea of its greatness that even transcended its actual power by reason of the magnificence of my display as sacred deputy at Olympia, because I entered seven chariots, a number that no private citizen had ever entered before, and won the first prize and the second and the fourth, and provided everything else in a style worthy of my victory. For by general custom such things do indeed mean honour, and from what is done men also infer power.¹⁵

What we see here is the already mentioned shift to the hippic disciplines. However, Alcibiades is a peculiar case, his behaviour is by no means representative for Athenian politicians of the 5th century BC; it was not a generally pursued strategy to gain political power through hippic competitions. There is no record of Cimon or Pericles taking part in horse or chariot races, although their material resources would have predestined them to do so. And in the case of Megacles from the famous family of the Alcmeonids, his hippic victories had negative consequences: In his Seventh *Pythia*, Pindar implies that the Athenians were jealous of his success and therefore ostracised him, and ostraca with references to Megacles' *hippotrophia* confirm that some citizens took offence at his equestrian involvement.¹⁶ In the aforementioned *Clouds*, Aristophanes mocked the

¹³ Gauthier 1985: 77–128.

¹⁴ Hdt. 5.70f.; Thuc. 1.126. On Cylon see Mann 2001: 64–67.

¹⁵ Thuc. 6.16.2: οἱ γὰρ Ἕλληγες καὶ ὑπὲρ δύνάμιν μείζω ἡμῶν τὴν πόλιν ἐνόμισαν τῷ ἐμῷ διαπρεπεῖ τῆς Ὀλυμπιάζε θεωρίας, πρότερον ἐλπίζοντες αὐτὴν καταπεπολεμησθαι, διότι ἄρματα μὲν ἑπτὰ καθήκα, ὅσα οὐδείς πω ιδιώτης πρότερον, ἐνίκησα δὲ καὶ δεύτερος καὶ τέταρτος ἐγεγόμεν καὶ τάλλα ἀξίως τῆς νίκης παρεσκευασάμην. νόμῳ μὲν γὰρ τιμῆ τοιαῦτα, ἐκ δὲ τοῦ δρωμένου καὶ δύνάμιν ἅμα ὑπόνοεῖται. (trans. C.F. Smith).

¹⁶ Pi. P. 7.18f. Brenne 2019: nos. 3221. 4213. 5186b.

Alcmeonids' well-known passion for equestrian sports. It is therefore not surprising that Alcibiades' Olympic victory did not cause unanimous applause, but rather led to a polarisation in Athens: some citizens were enthusiastic and trusted that an outstanding person like him would change things for the better, while others were deterred because they regarded Alcibiades' conduct as that of a tyrant.¹⁷

One facet of the emergence of "civic athletics" is the polis' control over honours for victorious athletes. For on the one hand, it was the victors' private decision to have their victories glorified in monuments or in epinician odes. This was also true for Athens; agonistic victory monuments from the Athenian Acropolis bear witness to this. On the other hand, there were, already in Archaic times, efforts to control the honours for victors, i.e. to create uniform regulations on how to deal with successful athletes. Several authors mention that Solon determined the awards to be paid to Panhellenic victors from the polis treasury.¹⁸ Like almost all laws attributed to Solon, also this one is controversial, but it should be borne in mind that there is other evidence for awards paid by the polis to athletes in the Archaic period.¹⁹ It is quite possible that the law is historical; it also fits well with the thrust of Solon's measures to strengthen the citizens' ties to the polis.

In the Classical period, there is firm ground for studying the rewards for athletes. The practice of granting *sitesis* to athletes, i.e. the right to participate in the meals in the Prytaneion, is not only documented in numerous literary sources, but also in inscriptions. Here is the relevant passage from the Prytaneion Decree (ca. 440–420 BC):

And those who [have been victorious at the Olympic Games] or the Pythian Games or the Isthmian Games or the Nemean [Games or will be victorious in future, for] them let there be *sitesis* in the Prytaneion and [the other grants?] beside *sitesis*, in accordance with [what is written on the stele in] the Prytaneion.

Those who have been victorious [with a horse-drawn chariot or with] a riding horse at the Olympic Games [or the Pythian Games or the Isthmian Games or the Nemean Games or] will be victorious in future, also [for them let there be *sitesis* in accordance with] what is written on the stele.²⁰

¹⁷ Thuc. 6.15.

¹⁸ F 89 Leão & Rhodes; see Kyle 1987: 21–2; Mann 2001: 68–81; Papakonstantinou 2019: 69–70.

¹⁹ An inscription from Sybaris states that an Olympic champion had a statue erected from the tenth part of the award (*SEG* xxxv 1053 = *LX* 1047; see the commentary in Ebert 1972: 251–255). Xenophanes (West, *IEG* F 2) mentions, among other honours, a monetary gift for Olympic champions.

²⁰ *IG* I³ 131, ll. 11–18: κατ[ι] ἡγοράσ[οι] νενικέκασ[ι] Ὀλυμπίασ[ι] ἔ Πυθο[ῖ] ἔ ἡσθμόσ[οι] ἔ Ν[ε]μ[έ] [αι ἔ νικ]έσσο[ι]

The most plausible way to explain the strange duplication of honours is to refer the first passage to gymnastic winners, for musical winners the *sitesis* not mentioned in the literary sources. Then, if the gap in question is filled with *καὶ τὰς ἄλλας δορυεῖας* or a comparable formula, the gymnastic athletes would be awarded further honours beyond the *sitesis*, whereas the hippic winners would not. The reference to a predecessor stele is also important, it proves that there must have been a general regulation for honouring Panhellenic victors before this decree. In contrast to the votive gifts on the Acropolis, whose splendour was based on the wealth of the athletes who dedicated them, the Prytaneion decree established an honour that was decoupled from the athletes' social status, and in this respect it was more "democratic".

Given the current state of our knowledge, it is not possible to determine the precise historical context neither of the Prytaneion Decree nor of the former stele; however, there are some events and developments that may have led the Athenians to consider a general regulation of agonistic honours. The value of victories may have been discussed when Megacles was ostracized in 471 BC and when Callias shared this fate in the early 440s BC. A victory dedication on the Acropolis, which decidedly refers to the latter's brilliant career as a pancratiast, was, according to paleographic criteria, most probably set up posthumously between 440 and 430 BC.²¹ It is possible that the debate, palpable in Pseudo-Andocides,²² whether such an outstanding athlete should not have been expelled from the *polis* goes back to this period. Between 448 and 420 BC the Spartans dominated the chariot races of the Olympic Games with a series of victories, which may have been painful for some Athenians. Aristophanes' *Clouds* of 423 and Euripides' *Autolykus* (see below) of about the same period may have reflected current debates about the value of hippic and gymnastic activities. And in Thucydides' description of the Sicilian debate of 415, Nicias and Alcibiades argued *coram publico* about whether Athens had benefited from the latter's glorious Olympic victories or not.²³ This event, however, occurred later than the Prytaneion Decree.

τὸ λοιπὸν, ἔνα αὐτῶσι τὴν σίτεσιν ἐν πρυτανείῳ| καὶ τὰς ἄλλας δορυεῖας? πρὸς τῆι σιτέσει κατὰ τὰ
[ἐν τῆ]ι στέλει γεγραμμένα τῆι ἐ]ν τοῖ πρυτανείῳ. ἡ[π]όσο[ι] δὲ ἡάρματι τελείῳ ἔ ἡίπποι κ]έλετι
νευ[ι]κάσαι Ὁ[λ]υμπ[ι]άσι ἔ Πυθοῖ ἔ ἡισθοῖ ἔ Νεμέαι ἔ] νικέσσοσι τὸ λοιπὸ[ν], ἔνα [καὶ αὐ]τοῖσι
σίτεσιν κατὰ τὰ ἐν τῆι στέλει| γεγραμ[μ]ένα. (translation according to AIO 1137).

For a historical interpretation of this passage, see Mann (2023), with bibliography.

²¹ IG I³ 893.

²² [And.] 4,32.

²³ Thuc. 6.12 and 15-6.

However, the approval of these honours for athletes was not unanimous. In the Platonic *Apology* of Socrates, the latter provokes the judges by demanding *sitesis* as a “punishment” for himself after his conviction, and in doing so he refers to the winners in horse and chariot races: They received this honour although they only appeared to made the citizens happier; therefore he himself, who made the citizens happier in reality, deserved the *sitesis* all the more.²⁴ The polemic directed against the gymnastic athletes in Euripides’ satyr play *Autolycus* is even harsher:

Of countless bad things existing throughout Greece none is worse than athletes as a breed. First, they neither learn well how to manage a household, nor would they be able to learn —for how could a man who is a slave to eating and dominated by his belly acquire wealth to exceed his father’s? [...] They are splendid in their prime and go proudly about as ornaments to a city; but when old age in its harshness falls upon them, they fade away like cloaks that have lost their threads. I blame too the Greeks’ custom of gathering because of these men to value useless pleasures for the sake of a feast. Why —what man who has wrestled well, what man fleet of foot or that has thrown a discus or boxed a jaw well, has defended his ancestral city by winning a wreath? Are they going to fight enemies with a discus in their hands, or drive enemies from a fatherland by punching through shields with a fist? No one is this stupid †when standing† near a sword! [...] ²⁵

Here Euripides takes up older arguments against honouring athletes, such as that voiced by Xenophanes of Colophon,²⁶ but increases them considerably. The athletes, useless as they are in battle or in their household, should not be recipients of honours at all. It is impossible to determine whether the verses express Euripides’ own opinion, but they certainly show that criticizing athletes harshly was conceivable in democratic Athens. Other

²⁴ Pl. *Ap.* 36d-37a.

²⁵ E. F 282 Nauck: κακῶν γὰρ ὄντων μυρίων καθ’ Ἑλλάδα / οὐδὲν κἀκίον ἔστιν ἀθλητῶν γένους / οἱ πρῶτα μὲν ζῆν οὔτε μανθάνουσιν εὖ / οὔτ’ ἂν δύναιτο πῶς γὰρ ὅστις ἔστ’ ἀνὴρ / γνάθου τε δούλου νηδύος θ’ ἡσσημένους / κτήσασατ’ ἂν ὄλβον εἰς ὑπερβολὴν πατρός; [...] / λαμπροὶ δ’ ἐν ἡβῇ καὶ πόλεως ἀγάλματα / φοιτῶσ’ ὅταν δὲ προσπέσῃ γῆρας πικρὸν, / τρίβωνες ἐκβαλόντες οἴχονται κρόκας, / ἐμμεψάμην δὲ καὶ τὸν Ἑλλήνων νόμον, / οἱ τῶν δ’ ἕκαστι σύλλογον ποιοῦμενοι / τιμῶσ’ ἀχρεῖους ἡδονᾶς δαιτὸς χάριν. / τί γὰρ παλαιάσας εὐ, τί δ’ ἀκύπους ἀνὴρ / ἢ δίσκον ἄρας ἢ γνάθον πάσας καλῶς / πόλει πατρώα στέφανον ἤρκεσαν λαβῶν; / πότερα μαχοῦνται πολεμίοισιν ἐν χειροῖν / δίσκους ἔχοντες ἢ δι’ ἀσπίδων χερὶ / θείνοντες ἐκβαλοῦσι πολεμίους πάτρας; / οὐδέεις σιδήρου ταῦτα μωραίνει πέλας / ἴστας. [...] (text according to Pechstein, translation by C. Collard/M. Cropp). The most detailed analysis of the verses is provided by Pechstein (1998: 56–85). For a recent discussion, see Giuseppetti (2020), with bibliography.

²⁶ West, *IEG* F 2.

passages in satyr plays and comedies, but also in court speeches, prove that criticism of athletes was widespread in Athens.²⁷

However, one should not overestimate these critical passages. Overall, the opinion prevailed that citizens who won victories in Olympia or another major competition site contributed to the glory of the polis and were to be honoured. In his study on the emergence of euergetism, Marc Domingo Gygax demonstrated that athletes were beneficiaries of public honours earlier than any other group of citizens, precisely because their victories were seen as achievements for the polis.²⁸ Athletic honours thus mark the beginning of the emergence of euergetism and thus of an institution that would shape the Greek poleis for the centuries to come.

4. Athletic mindsets and democracy

In Greece, sporting competitions not only had a far greater social significance than in other ancient cultures, it had another peculiar feature: the Greeks trained and competed naked. And they were well aware that athletic nudity was a marker of Greek identity, a custom that distinguished themselves from others. One testimony among many is Thucydides:

And they (the Lacedaemonians) were the first to bare their bodies and, after stripping openly, to anoint themselves with oil when they engaged in athletic exercise; for in early times, even in the Olympic games, the athletes wore girdles about their loins in the contests, and it is not many years since the practice has ceased. Indeed, even now among some of the Barbarians, especially those of Asia, where prizes for wrestling and boxing are offered, the contestants wear loin-cloths. And one could show that the early Hellenes had many other customs similar to those of the Barbarians of the present day.²⁹

With reference to this passage, some scholars have assumed that athletic nudity was a factor in the emergence of democracy, or at least an indicator of democratic structures.³⁰ Nudity, the argument goes, makes

²⁷ Achaicus F 3–4 (cfr. Sutton 1980: 69f.); Timocl. F 18, v. 17–21; Lycurg. 1.51.

²⁸ Domingo Gygax 2016: 63–72 and *passim*.

²⁹ Thuc. 1.6.5–6: ἐγυμνώθησάν τε πρώτοι καὶ ἐς τὸ φανερόν ἀποδύντες λίπα μετὰ τοῦ γυμνάζεσθαι ἡλείψαντο: τὸ δὲ πάλαι καὶ ἐν τῷ Ὀλυμπικῷ ἀγῶνι διαζώματα ἔχοντες περὶ τὰ αἰδοῖα οἱ ἀθληταὶ ἡγωνίζοντο, καὶ οὐ πολλὰ ἔτι ἐπειδὴ πέπαιται. ἔτι δὲ καὶ ἐν τοῖς βαρβάροις ἔστιν οἷς νῦν, καὶ μάλιστα τοῖς Ἀσιανοῖς, πυγμῆς καὶ πάλης ἄθλα τίθεται, καὶ διεζωμένοι τοῦτο δρῶσιν. [6] πολλὰ δ' ἂν καὶ ἄλλα τις ἀποδείξειε τὸ παλαιὸν Ἑλληνικὸν ὁμοίτροπα τῷ νῦν βαρβαρικῷ διαιώμενον. (transl. C.F. Smith)

³⁰ Bonfante 1989: 556f.; Miller 2000: 283–285; Christesen 2012: 172–178; id. 2014: 226–229.

people more equal: clothes make social differences visible as rich people can afford expensive clothing, poor people cannot —not to mention status symbols and class-related dress codes. Naked bodies, in contrast, are said to be independent of a person's position in society. Moreover, a chronological congruence was observed. As Thucydides writes, it was not from the beginning the custom of the Greeks to strip for athletic exercise—even the Homeric heroes competed wearing loincloths—but this custom emerged in the course of a historical process. It has now been observed that the depiction of naked athletes in Attic vase painting increased sharply from 520 BC onwards and thus in the period when the decisive steps towards democracy took place.³¹ Miller concludes his reflections with the rhetorical question: “Is nudity perhaps the costume of democracy?”³²

In fact, Thucydides sets athletic nudity in contrast to luxurious costume; immediately before the quoted passage, he describes fine robes and golden cicadas worn by rich Athenians. And likewise, it cannot be denied that naked bodies are less dependent on the social status of their owner than clothed ones. For Pseudo-Xenophon, when he happened to meet poorly dressed men in the streets of Athens, it was impossible to distinguish who was a poor citizen, who was a metic and who was a slave.³³ What he obviously takes for granted is the apparent difference between a rich citizen and a poor one. The “Old Oligarch” is annoyed that the political equality of Athenian democracy took no account of such visible differences.

Nevertheless, the thesis of a “naked democracy” is problematic. Firstly, the ancient Greeks did not draw such a connection; the sources do not mention any connection between nudity and equality, and certainly not a connection between nudity and democracy. This is not surprising, because the custom of undressing for athletic training and competition was not limited to Athens and other democratic poleis, but applied throughout the Greek world, including oligarchies and monarchies. Thucydides names the Spartans and not the Athenians as pioneers of athletic nudity. Secondly, as Thucydides testifies, the alternative to athletic nudity was not a splendid robe but a loincloth, a garment unsuitable for expressing a person's wealth and status in an imposing manner.³⁴ And thirdly, the nude body is not detached from the social status of its owner, it is a product of society. In

³¹ Miller 2000: 283.

³² *Ibid.* 284.

³³ [X.] *Ath.* 1.10.

³⁴ Brüggembeck 2006: 109.

the Homeric *Odyssey*, Odysseus is recognised as a noble man even when found naked and without any possessions on the beaches of Scheria, and the Athenian vase painters made social differences visible when depicting naked bodies.³⁵

More important than nudity, considering the mental preconditions of Athenian democracy, was the athletic competition itself. It is one of the sociological peculiarities of sport that it produces both inequality and equality: Inequality, because differentiation into winners and losers is at the core of every sporting competition; equality, because everyone who takes part in a sporting competition recognises other participants as “equals”, i.e. as people who are fighting for the same goal according to the same rules with the same chances. Sport thus promotes the idea of belonging to a group of equals. Now, the strong notion of equality in ancient Greece is undisputed, but equality itself is not a democratic value; in the Archaic period in particular, it was used to denote equality among the members of the elite.³⁶ The strong idea of equality, to which the sporting competitions also contributed, was only a necessary, not a sufficient condition for the emergence of democracy in Athens.

Another facet of athletic competition that is specifically democratic is the practice of losing. According to Egon Flaig, Greek athletics created mental dispositions that were important for the principle of majority. And since he sees majority vote as the most important structure of Athenian democracy, athletics thus created the basis that made democracy possible. According to Flaig, the Greeks learned, through daily athletic training and frequent competitions, to follow formal rules and to obey referees, to accept others as equals and to endure defeat.³⁷ When the Athenians took decisions in the *ekklesia*, some decisions were close, especially in important affairs such as those on war and peace. It was crucial for the survival of Athenian democracy that the “losers” did not withdraw from politics in disappointment, but continued to be committed to the polis. To do this, they had to be able to cope with defeat —and this applied not only to the politicians who competed for being elected as *strategos* and who spoke to the people regularly, but also to the ordinary citizens who “only” voted. Losing was practised in athletic competitions, and this is indeed an important, mostly underestimated contribution of sport to the emergence of democracy in Athens.

³⁵ Hom. *Od.* 6.187 and passim; on vase painting see Stähli 2009.

³⁶ See for example Morris 1996.

³⁷ Flaig 2010; id. 2013: 183–186.

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