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Bodily Functions at Ancient Olympia: Socio-political Views of Athletic Nudity Judith Waring

Ζηνὶ γενεθλίω: ...
Ἀλκιμέδοντα δὲ πὰρ Κρόνου λόφῳ
θῆκεν Ὀλυμπιονίκαν.
ἦν δ' ἔσσορ' ἄν καλός, ἔργῳ τ' οὐ κατὰ εἶδος ἐλέγχων

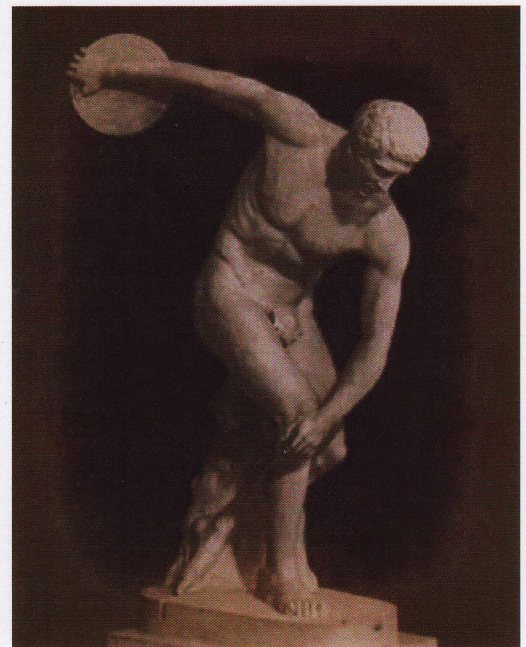
Zeus...
made Alcimedon an Olympic victor beside the hill of Kronos.
He was beautiful to look at, and his deeds did not belie his beauty

Pindar, *Olympian* 8.19-20, for Alcimedon of Aegina winner of the boys' wrestling event 460 B.C.

Olympian ideals rest in the lap of the gods. 'Excellence' (*arete*) of the athletic body and of the body politic are the promulgated legacies of 'demokratia'. Ancient Olympia is, in a way, a metaphor for classical Greece – a statement on a (con)fusion of culture and politics. In troubled times the late fifth-century orator Lysias used the concept of Olympia to make the case for 'democracy' over 'despotism' in his panegyric speech *Olympiakos*. While as an ideal Olympia could provide a definition of a constructed panhellenic culture, yet the reality was more one of fiercely autonomous, often warring, city-states (*poleis*). But Olympia was exclusively Greek and conspicuously so. The place itself is situated in a naturally beautiful plain, watered by the river Alpheios, located in the north-western Peloponnese. Here from 776 B.C. to A.D. 393 athletic contests (*gymnikoi agones*) were held with male nudity displayed. In the end a charge of 'paganism' had the event closed down.

Olympia was considered the most prestigious of the four national athletics contests with the attribution of the (not quite local) hero Herakles as founder. His 'Twelve Labours' were depicted in semi-relief on *metopes* around Zeus' temple, the main sanctuary. The fifth-century lyric poet Pindar wrote victory (*epinician*) odes to immortalise the winners. These poems were sometimes performed at the games, and more often, after the victor returned to his home city where he was feted and rewarded. Events took place beside the temple precinct and were open to free-born Greek males only, in two categories, men and boys. Women, slaves and non-Greeks were barred not only from competing but also from spectating. The programme which lasted for around 5 days was made up of running (various distances), throwing the spear (javelin), long jump, discus, wrestling (these 5 also combined as the pentathlon), boxing and the *pankraton*, another type of pugilistic discipline in which anything was permissible except eye-gouging and biting. And finally races for horses and chariots and a running event in full armour.

Apart from the last two events, athletes competed nude. The fifth-century historian Thucydides stated that this was so while non-Greeks who in their own countries only practiced boxing and wrestling, did so in loin-cloths (*Peloponnesian War* 1.6.5). Nakedness as an identity is particular to the Greek athlete. But christianity and time



Photograph of Discobolus of Myron, copy after the Greek original. Mid to late nineteenth century albumen print. Photographed by Fratelli Alinari Editori (Florence). Photo credit: ©Royal Academy of Arts, London

collude to distort how to look at this nudity. One argument is that nudity was a purely pragmatic position, an appropriate 'costume' for exercise. The eighth-century B.C. athletes Orsippos and Akanthos have both been credited with being the first to run naked, and, of course, win. Perhaps it was also a way of viewing anatomically the 'men only' ethos of the contests. But that Olympian ideal of the naked and toned body, tanned from exercising outdoors was much more than competition. The athlete, as concept, was used extensively in the artistic programmes of sculpture and vase-painting. By contrast women did not venture beyond the threshold of the home. Modest virtue was made visible by clothing and in the appearance of pale skin (increased by use of cosmetics) and an un-toned, soft body. If a woman was other, she was, at very best, a prostitute. Until, that is, the fifth-century sculptor Praxiteles unveiled his Aphrodite of Knidos who had absolutely nothing to hide. The Knidians, renowned for their wine and medical school, adored her; unlike the islanders of Kos who, given first choice, had preferred her clothed sister.

Nudity and exercise, intrinsic to the state-sponsored education of young men (*ephebes*), defined in visual culture the oppositions of Greek/non-Greek, citizen/slave, male/female, adult/child. This had much to do with city-state politics and the demands of an army and a navy (triremes were powered by rowers) to defend and acquire territories. The fourth-century historian Xenophon recorded that in Sparta, the paradigm of a fully militarised city-state, good physical condition was officially regulated and frequent public 'inspections' of citizens' bodies carried out by civil servants. Accordingly the socio-political ideologies of the athletic body were represented and fetishised in public art, particularly in free-standing figurative sculpture which had by the fifth century freed itself somewhat from the architectural. The 'Discus-Thrower', *Diskobolos*, (c.450 B.C.) by the sculptor Myron who worked mainly in bronze, has survived in several marble Roman copies: the athlete is crouched over, his throwing arm extended behind his body, at that critical moment of restraint before, with the concentrated power of his god-like physique, he uncoils to release the discus. Myron has been much eulogised, then and now, for his emphasis on the harmony and balance of the human form. And, maybe the discus-thrower is instinctively attractive to the gaze because of a divine perfection in his human physicality. The 'Townley Diskobolos' offers another narrative on how to look at the Olympian ideal. The head of this marble Roman copy had been restored 'incorrectly', that is, not as the 'original', nor indeed Myron's bronze. The restorer replaced the 'new' head looking downwards rather than backwards towards the discus. He saw this, along with the collector Townley, as bettering the 'ideal'.

Olympia and the other contests were the apogee of an athlete's career, the big stage on which to perform. But the everyday reality of training was part of a broader programme of youth education. The local *gymnasion* (sports ground) had, at least, a running track and a *palaestra*, a building which housed changing facilities and was constructed around a sand-filled courtyard for wrestling. Olympia's *gymnasion* is topographically typical, situated beyond the sanctuary walls and close to a stream. Evidence from Plato's dialogues (in particular *Charmides*) together with an emphasis on the viewing and display of the nude male elicits a homoerotic charge to gymnasia as social spaces. Sports grounds, it seems, were venues for personal, sexualised relationships between an older man, 'an admirer' (*erasta*) and an adolescent boy, 'the beloved' (*eromenos*). This is 'Greek Love'. The fifth-century sculptor Phidias, when already ostracised from Athens for impiety, inscribed the name of his *eromenos* on the little finger of his colossal, gold and ivory (*chryselephantine*) cult statue of Zeus at Olympia, one of the seven 'wonders' of the ancient Mediterranean world; and at the statue's feet was a relief of the boy putting on the olive crown of the victorious athlete.

Olympia and the Olympian ideal inscribed the political, the sacred and the personal on the body. But the body beautiful was invariably a manifestation of the needs of the body politic. What's new?

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