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Review Essay: Satan's Business or the People's Choice? The Decline of Athletics in Late Antiquity

Thomas Scanlon

Sofie Remijsen, *The End of Greek Athletics in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xviii, 389. ISBN 9781107050785.

Palaestrica diaboli est negotium...nullus tibi coronarum usus est...", warned Tertullian (*De spectaculis* 18; ca. 200 CE); "The art of wrestling is the devil's business...you have no use for victor's crowns." Despite this and other early Christian polemics, Christians and pagans alike attended, participated in, and presided over Greek athletics in great numbers as late as the early fifth century CE. After about 420 CE, the Greek games were largely abandoned, but not mainly because of the stern sermons of the elite. A comprehensive autopsy of the death of Greek athletics in dramatic and complex circumstances has, until now, never been performed.

Remijsen's is a major, important study for the history of Greek athletics, one that for the first time carefully documents, reviews and synthesizes all available evidence regarding the fate of the games in the third to sixth centuries CE. Two recent books in English led the way as major studies of Greek sport to the mid-empire of the third century, but did not venture much beyond. Z. Newby's *Greek Athletics in the Roman World* (Oxford: 2005) is noteworthy for its treatment of artistic objects in the East and West, but also the treatment of the Capsa mosaic discussed below. J. König's *Athletics and Literature in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2005) is in the same series "Greek Culture in the Roman World" as that of Sofie Remijsen (hereafter R.) and is strong on the literature of the 'Second Sophistic' and on epigraphy. Several articles and chapters by O. Van Nijf, cited in R's bibliography, add greatly to our insights into Greek athletics in the Roman East, notably with epigraphic studies, especially concerning the *Demostheneia* festival at Oenoanda. H. W. Pleket is also a pioneer in the work on guilds, benefactors and social values that R. builds on in discussing institutions and financing (see R's bibliography). But none of these earlier works captures the bigger picture, none traces the story chronologically and by region, and none follows through to the facts and causes of collapse of the athletic system.

There has indeed been a small boom in the study of sport in late antiquity, and I would guess there will be much more to come in this largely fallow field. There have appeared recently two German books, an edited volume by A. Gutsfeld and S. Lehmann (*Der gymnische Agōn in der Spätantike.* Gutenberg: Computus Druck Satz & Verlag 2013), and a monograph by A. Puk (*Das Römische Spielewesen in der Spätantike.* Berlin, Boston: Walter de Gruyter 2014). Both have some overlaps with R's book, acknowledging similar late antique phenomena and tracing the phenomena in the West and in Spain and North Africa. Both also agree with R's general point that the decline was not closely caused by Christianity, but that the reasons for decline were complex, arguably traceable back to the Hellenistic period when the *agōnes* and athletic culture changed greatly from the Classical era. Yet neither seems as systematic and comprehensive as that of R.

R's work is important also in correcting the oft-repeated axiom that the Olympics and the other major Greek festivals all ended in 393 CE with the edict of Theodosius I or in about 420 CE with an edict of Theodosius II. R. has convincingly demonstrated that virtually all major and minor *agōnes* (athletic festival contests) ceased by about 420 CE; evidence suggests that only a few contests continued sporadically after that. The reasons for the decline are complex: blood sacrifices and the association of games with temples ceased; patronage of the games shifted from local cities and from a Hellenistic model of royal support, to imperial patronage and enforced liturgies (at their strongest during the second and third centuries CE); athletic circuits withered after local games ceased to attract support; the ephebic system of training youths died out by the third century; the associations of international athletes (xystic synods) waned with the athletic circuits. In short, according to R., the games ended due to changes for the stakeholders, both athletes and organizers, members of the urban male elite that had, toward the end, flourished in the East more than the West. These elite were finally discouraged by the absence of institutional advantages and by the changing valuation of career athletics.

R's account is important both in its original general thesis, and in its painstaking documentation and intelligent discussion of the nuances of these events: synods, the ephebate, agonistic circuits, imperial interactions, game presidents and local officials, athletic careers, and the socio-political context of *agōnes* (including but not limited to the tensions between Christian fundamentalists, more flexible Christian citizens, and non-Christian 'pagans'). The use of method and argumentation is very carefully plotted, and the author takes into account all possible sources of data (epigraphic, papyrological, numismatic, archaeological, artistic, and literary) while being alert and responsive to the challenges set by source material, e.g. lack of evidence, like that of inscriptions or coins after 270 CE, does not mean lack of activity but rather changing cultural habits. Forty Oxyrhynchus papyri related to athletics are a particular treasure trove, and the texts of John Chrysostom, Libanius, other late antique authors, and law codes are duly subjected to close readings and deductions based on what is and is not mentioned. Mosaics provide many subtle clues such as the prize purse (*follis*) for games depicted with the amounts that indicate the dates of the event: 12,500 denarii on one at Piazza Armerina reflecting the Diocletian value of a *follis*, but inflated to a 25,000 prize for the *agōnes* in the Capsa mosaic by 301 CE.

R's book is sensibly divided into two parts, the first laying the foundations with a chronological survey of what we know about the development of *agōnes* in late antiquity in seven very different, major Mediterranean environments. This occupies seven chapters one each on Greece, Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, Italy, Gaul, and North Africa. Part II seeks explanations for the phenomena in Part I: looking at Christianity (Ch. 8); imperial policy toward *agōnes* (Ch. 9), in which top-down explanations are not convincing; then chapters 10-13 look at a 'bottom-up' model centered on organizers and athletes, including the organization of athletes (Ch. 10) and the financial organization of *agōnes* (Ch. 12), athletics as elite activity (Ch. 11) and the problematic character of the spectacles (Ch. 13). Each chapter is densely and clearly documented, and the following review of the contents of the two parts will focus on what are, in my view, particularly crucial or interesting findings, or those which prompt comments or questions.

In Part I, Chapter, Greece, recounts how Olympic victors diminished to a quarter of those known in the first and second centuries CE, how annual circuits of contests were carefully

arranged to avoid time conflicts for career participants (and audiences) (pp. 36-7). The 'Herulian wall' at Olympia may not have been built against those invaders, but rather in the second half of the fifth century CE, when it circumscribed the temple and its valuables. An intriguing bronze plate unearthed in recent decades at the Olympic site lists in a seemingly sporadic fashion ten victors from the early and late empire, without obvious common links, including some from 333 CE and later, the last from 385. Its original purpose is elusive, and its style seems informal, but it crucially confirms that the Olympics still attracted competitors from around the Mediterranean into the late fourth century. Weiler (I. Weiler. 2004. "Theodosius I und die Olympischen Spiele". *Nikephoros* 17: 53-75.) has already convincingly argued that the date of the end of the Olympics is probably 426 (or even, according to R., 453), when Theodosius II issued an edict for the destruction of the site, though contests were held later elsewhere, a point greatly expanded upon by R. In Delphi, the Pythian games likely lasted until the third quarter of the fifth century. The first luxury baths were built and the Pythian stadium and gymnasium remained clear of debris into the fifth century CE; a church was built above the palaestra in the sixth century. The Isthmian Games ended by about 400 CE, and the Nemean came to their end possibly by 380, probably by 400. The Panathenaia lasted until the early fifth century, as implied by the inscription *IG* II^2 3818 (62). In Constantinople, Constantine had completed the hippodrome by the 330s where both hippic and athletic events were held, though horse races greatly overshadowed the athletic in popularity.

In Chapter 2, Asia Minor, we find the *agōnes* in full bloom in the second and third centuries, but even later the economics and culture remain strong, with many smaller games attracting second-rate athletes on the coast of Asia Minor (*Koina Asias*) (73). Valerian and Galienus (253-68 CE) instituted 20 new games, and there were new stadium gates at Ephesus and Miletus (74). At Ephesus there was an Olympics into the fifth century evidenced by the 'stoa of the alytarchs' (*agōnes* benefactors) (81). Some sponsors signed proudly with a Christogram, but the stadium appears abandoned by the 420s. The magnificent stadium at Aphrodisias was converted to small amphitheater for *venationes* in late antiquity (390s or later), and there were likely no games at the venue after 400. An inscription of the mid-fifth century in the Aphrodisias palaistra indicates that 'palaistra' was applied to "multifunctional spaces for fervent athletes as well as playful amateurs" (83-4).

Syria, the subject of Chapter 3, boasted, in the reign of Septimius Severus, twenty games in Syria and ten in Cilicia; Septimius himself organized an Aktia in Tyre, a Kapitolia in Laodicea, and co-organized a Severia Olympia in Cilicia (92). One program in Sidon was even dubbed *periporphyros*, 'purple bordered,' alluding to the locally sourced luxury dye for the Roman togas of senators or emperors (92-3), while other festivals honored local gods like Melkart/Herakles and the Nabatean Dousares (93). But the biggest attraction in Syria was the Antiochene Olympics, held in nearby Daphne from the first century CE to the sixth, and outlasting all other major Mediterranean *agōnes*, even the original Olympics. Libanius (314-390) and John Chrysostom (349-398), both residents of Antioch, are crucial and bountiful sources for these games, often cited by R. The site for the Olympic trials for combat sports was in Antioch itself, at the 'Plethron,' the "Hundred Foot Square" palaistra, built in 193, but enlarged twice thereafter (330s and 380s), prompting denunciations from the conservative Libanius (*Or.* 10 and 53) on financial, but even more so on moral grounds, since the expanded seating allowed schoolboys and the unemployed to attend, setting up harassment of the youths by drunken ne'er-do-wells (97). As chair of rhetoric at Antioch and aged 70 when he wrote *Oratio* 10,

Libanius is obviously an academic elitist, at odds with popular taste for the violent spectacles that must have regularly gotten rowdy. A 460 CE mosaic actually depicts the Olympic stadium (*To Olympiakon*), still in use on the road to Daphne (100). The fourth or fifth century chronicle of Dominus (cited by Malalas) describes the participants in the Antiochene Olympics then as "noble youths" who "conducted themselves chastely and with great moderation," thus justifying the contests to Christian detractors of the era, and possibly hinting that loincloths were worn, says R. (101-2). Malalas is, according to R., mistaken in locating the footraces of girls wearing leggings (a detail evidencing the modesty of a "Christian mindset") at an *agōn* in Antioch, confusing it perhaps with the Heraia at Olympia. I do not see any reason to reject Malalas' report of girls' games at Antioch. R. discusses the famous inscription (*SIG* 3 802; 45 CE) of a father from Tralles honoring his three daughters' numerous athletic victories, and speculates that it was "paid for by an indulgent father who probably projected on his daughters ambitions for the sons he never had." Even if there were third century games (likely 212), R. concludes, we cannot assume it continued later (102-3). R's suggestion is a possibility but still does not address the question of how a girls' circuit, presumably with a number of contestants, could be mustered and maintained, as they evidently were, at least on several occasions at major festivals in the early empire, and seemingly again in late antiquity. More likely, in my view, is that girls' public contests, though infrequent, typically never got the visibility of men's' games in the sources. The Antiochene Olympics ended in 524 with an edict of Justinus I ending all games after a riot by the Blues faction. Circuses existed in Syria from the first century CE on, and boomed in the second to fourth centuries, paid for mostly involuntarily by liturgists.

Chapter 4 narrates the history of *agōnes* in Egypt, where Alexandria dominated in games, including numerous victors at Olympia in the first to third centuries CE, and Antinoopolis from 130 CE had distinguished contests (111-3). The third century marked a boom in Egyptian athletic festivals, where they fit neatly into the bigger circuit biennially in the winters. Then most contests probably disappeared there by the second half of fourth century, but thereafter horse races continued and may have had sideshows involving athletic contests.

In Italy (Chapter 5), the major games began in the first century CE (Sebasta of Naples, and the Neroneia and Kapitolia of Rome), while several more followed in the second century in Southern Italy and Sicily, with less popularity (129-33). Aurelian's *Agōn Solis*, founded in 274 and held 25 December in Rome, while the events calendar in Rome overwhelmingly favored circuses, spectacles, and pantomime. An important international headquarters for athletics, the 'xystic synod' or *curia athletarum*, was set up in Rome by Antoninus Pius in the mid second century and lasted until the property was given to the Church by Theodosius II in the 420s CE. That donation effectively ended the international athletic circuit. In Sicily, the 'bikini girl' mosaic of Piazza Armerina (second half of the fourth century) shows girls as athletes, which R. says is either "a hobby for rich girls" or "only an artistic fantasy inspired by the *agōnes* for men" (140-1). In my view, the 'hobby' option is more likely, though less likely for rich girls than for a rich patron. I suggest they represent an event held as a sideshow at a circus and paid for by the (unknown) villa owner with, just as the same plutocrat displays at even greater magnificence in his villa realistic scenes of beast games, hunting, and chariot racing. These were, one imagines, all activities in which he delighted and of which he may have been benefactor. Incidentally, the girls are usually described as pentathletes (following H. Lee, 1984. "Athletics and the Bikini Girls from Piazza Armerina." *Stadion* 10: 45–76), though I prefer to see the event

depicted as a quasi-pentathlon since a ball-game is substituted for wrestling, an alteration that points to a side-show event. The mosaics of Aquileia, from the 350s, are the latest dateable athletic images in the Mediterranean, and put the athletes in framed images, not in action. These were superstars similar to famous gladiators of the age (141). The important stadium of Domitian in Rome, today's Piazza Navona (derived from Piazza in Agone, earlier *Campus Agonis*), remained as a venue for *agōnes* into the late fourth century, and the *Agōn Solis* and *Kapitolia* also continued as long (144).

Gaul (Chapter 6) is present here mainly for its paintings and mosaics implying athletic awareness, if not activity, in the fourth century, including Spain, Portugal, and Trier. North Africa (Chapter 7) first evidences athletic festivals only late in the third century (Kommodeia and Severeia in Caesarea [Algeria]; Pythia and Asklepieia in Carthage). The large, splendid mosaic from Capsa (Gafsa, Tunisia; 300-350 CE) depicts a whole *agōnes* program, which R. takes to be the Asklepeia of Carthage since the apples of the Pythia are not on the prize table (160-1). Games in Africa were inconceivable after 430 when the Vandals expelled the elite ruling class of Carthage, though the invaders did still produce popular non-athletic spectacles into the sixth century (163).

Part I therefore documents a collapse of the circuit *agōnes* by the second quarter of the fourth century around the Mediterranean. Only the Olympics of Antioch survived to the sixth century. Innovations in programs were few, notably a torch race in armor, a dazzling end to events at nightfall, and a brutal new 'ultimate fighting'-like combat sport, the *pammachon* evidenced in the 300s. By the fourth century, circuses overshadowed the *agōnes*, though both existed alongside one another in "places with the liveliest civic life," like Antioch (170).

In Part II, the reasons for the decline unfold in a series of thematic essays. The theory of the end of *agōnes* as a result of the edict of Theodosius I (393) or of Theodosius II (420 or 435) does not correlate to the evidence reviewed. The emperors did not have either the power for or interest in managing contests across the empire, and also the *agōnes* were, by and large, not viewed as pagan religious feasts at odds with Christianity (Chs. 8 and 9). Blood sacrifices were at first banned, while incense and other offerings were not (186). Temples were not destroyed, but altars and cult statues were removed in the fourth century, without stopping the *agōnes*. Chapters 10-13 look at the reasons why the main stakeholders who could have continued to support the games opted not to do so. In essence, the lower-class performers in circuses satisfied the public appetite for athletes when the circuits collapsed for elite career competitors (Ch. 10). The distinction between career (wealthier) and professional (poorer) athletes of this period is comprehensively documented and invaluable (220-30); the history and changing status of associations (synods) for athletes during the empire is also a very welcome contribution (230-51). R. astutely clarifies inscriptional mentions of a 'whole xystos' (*xumpas xystos*) as references to the athletic community as a whole, apart from membership in the distinct, sacred and formal xystic synod (235-6). Paid professional performer athletes suffered a general *infamia* shared with other performers in the Roman Empire, and this drove elite would-be athletes to shun any taint of such a lower class reputation. The aim of a healthy body and self-control lost ground to the ascetic movement. Christianity promoted humility against the traditional Greek heroic ambition to excel over others (Ch. 11). In the third century, the athletic circuit machine 'overheated' and went beyond its limits of expansion with too many new games and insufficient funding. Hyperinflation threatened the games due to a lack

of cash. The privileges for victors strained the cities and annoyed synod members since the privileges also went to non-synod athletes. R. provides an exemplary exposition of the ways in which *agōnes* were funded before, during, and after financial crises, especially in her explanations of the ways in which the city is key to each region's games, and the way in which the funds from 'agonothetic lands' paid a significant proportion of most contests (Ch. 12). *Agōnes* became more theatrical, but were also outdated and inflexible in their fixed dates. Imperial help did not solve the structural problems. When spectacles in the West shifted to the East, there was a shift to a focus on the audience, and a consequent attention to the strong emotions that politicians could manipulate as well as to the immoral crowd behavior that Christians critiqued (see Tertullian, Novatian, Hippolytus; Ch. 13). Elite participation waned due to institutional changes and due to different views of practicing athletics and doing contests. Any remaining *agōnes* failed to adapt to preserve the custom, either out of inability or unwillingness, and hence decline ensued.

Part II prompts several questions and observations as follows. What was the special aspect of Greek *agōnes* that made them a more problematic aspect of pagan worship than, say, the Saturnalia or other Roman festivals (194)? This mystery is not solved and probably cannot be answered with certainty. Why, for example, did Christian zealots erase the names "Olympics" and "Pythia" on a Byzantine inscription at Aphrodisias (195-6)? Christian responses were not uniform, as R. illustrates in a discussion of "The afterlife of positive associations: agonistic metaphors" (280-8): the "spiritual stadium" of life, the Christian "athlete", the "training" (*askēsis*) for the contest of life, and so on, beginning with Paul. Perhaps less clear is an interpretation of the famous dream of Perpetua as she faced martyrdom in Carthage when she dreamed of becoming a naked male pankratiast facing off against and overcoming a fierce Egyptian foe; on waking up, she realized the opponent was the devil (*Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*; A. Futrell. 2006.180-3.*The Roman Games. A Sourcebook*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell; R. 287). Conquering Satan is clear enough, but less transparent are the transgender issues and the subtle eroticism of the girl-man described as stripped and rubbed down with oil. I suggest it spiced up the message in a covert way, while conveying the main point effectively. Athletic metaphors were for Christian authors popular, vivid, stylish, and useful appropriations toward the aims of educating and converting the Greek populace. In the end, the Christian 'hardliners' of late antiquity did not stop citizens from attending *agōnes* (196), but these critiques did plant the seeds of moral concerns that eventually took root.

R. observes passim a crucial relationship between Greek *agōnes* and Roman-originated spectacles including circuses, theater and pantomime: "[W]hat did change was the relationship between athletics and other entertainment. The most important evolution in the fourth-century entertainment sector is the introduction of circus races in the East" (169). It would have been beyond the scope of R's analysis to produce a close comparison of the evidence for the growth of spectacle in the East contemporaneous with the decline of athletics there. We wonder to what extent was this a battle of mass entertainment: athletics were displaced by a culture of Roman spectacle which distilled the most popular aspects of the *agōnes*, namely combat sports, available as sideshows to chariot racing, and these alongside other events with gladiatorial spectacle. The late antique choice of chariot races over *agōnes* is at least partly financial, occasioned by the reorganization of circus chariot racing and theaters under the same faction administration, probably under the reign of Theodosius II when city-based financing of games and circuses was no longer practicable (A. Cameron, *Circus Factions. Blues*

and Greens at Rome and Byzantium. Oxford, 1976). R. notes that circus capacity was larger and the schedule of offering them was not rigidly fixed, also offering flexible political opportunities for emperors and other patrons (202-3). Roman chariot racing declined in the West until the last known race in 549 CE when the Goths invaded (D. Kyle. 2015[2]. *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*. 338-9. Boston and Oxford: Wiley Blackwell). In the East, Roman-style chariot racing, with charioteers as owners, became popular about 400 CE and continued with ups and downs until the eleventh century (Kyle 2015: 338; F. Meijer. 2010. *Chariot Racing in the Roman Empire*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins).

The story of the decline of athletic *agōnes* can then be framed as a story of the shift from Greek to Roman forms of public cultural pastimes, of course fostered by the different perceptions of virtue and the body that R. recounts. One modern, smaller-scale parallel that may shed light on the phenomenon, *mutatis mutandis*, is the decline and transformation of American circus shows in the past two centuries (a counterpart chosen for its parallel cultural history and not to imply any continuity with ancient Roman circuses). The enduringly popular U. S. circus entertainment was effectively displaced by television after World War II, after which it survived and metamorphosed into the popular Disney on Ice, Cirque du Soleil, and other so-called '*nouveau* circus' formats. The decline of old-style circuses in America (less so in Europe) has been hastened by animal rights concerns in recent decades (see: http://www.circusfederation.org/uploads/circus_culture/about/america-huey.pdf).

The point here is that the decline in the popular entertainment forms in both the ancient Greek and modern American instances was precipitated by complex, external cultural and economic conditions, and then both finally disappeared only when viable new alternatives could undertake their social function.

Equestrian events were not the only option in the mass-entertainment of late antiquity in the East. There were animal games (*venationes*), i.e. staged hunts, presented in the East in the first and second centuries CE, but especially popular in the fourth century and continuing until the sixth (R. 54, and discussed passim). Gladiator shows, originating in Italy, engaged wide popularity also in the East, as L. Robert, K. Welch, C. Mann, M. Carter, and others have discussed (L. Robert. 1940. *Les gladiateurs dans l'Orient grec*. Paris: Champion; K. Welch. 1999. "Negotiating Roman Spectacle Architecture in the Greek World: Athens and Corinth," 125-45 in B. Bergmann and C. Kondoleon, eds. *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press; C. Mann. 2010. "Gladiators in the Greek East: A Case Study in Romanization," 124-49 in Z. Papkonstantinou, ed. *Sport in the Cultures of the Ancient World*. Oxford and New York: Routledge; M. Carter. 2010. "Gladiators and Monomachoi: Greek Attitudes to a Roman 'Cultural Performance,'" 150-74, in Papkonstantinou 2010). Gladiatorial spectacles were introduced in the East as part of the festivals for the imperial cult, but over time they became ingrained in the Greek festival events and were even sponsored by Greeks themselves (Welch 1999: 125-6). Gladiatorial inscriptions are perhaps surprisingly absent in Egypt, and not surprisingly gone by the fourth century (when inscriptions generally ceased), but Robert studies over 300 altogether in the East, mainly in Greece and Asia Minor, and mostly in the second and third centuries CE, evidencing their general vitality: "le Grecs ont adopté ce spectacle romain et n'y ont nullement boudé" (Robert 1940: 240). R. discusses the very different status of gladiators and athletes throughout the Mediterranean (325-30); she cites the moral objections of Seneca, though these were anomalous. R. only briefly mentions that gladiator shows were less popular

benefactions than *agōnes* among the elite in the East (291), a point that is not self-evident. Robert (1940: 252-4) says that the spectacle attracted all classes, despite the criticism of elite moralists, and gives the example of a highly honored Pythian agonothete who sponsored 20 pairs of gladiators (Robert 1940: 262). Mann (2010) emphasizes the many ways in which gladiatorial spectacle was appropriated and made Greek, identifying contestants with heroes from Greek myth; Carter (2010) sees a similar performance of Greek culture, but with focus on the dialogue between the two. As successful 'performers' of mass entertainment, gladiators arguably helped to displace combat sports by satisfying the crowd's appetite for violence without harming citizens. For a gladiatorial "fight" and "fighting" (properly in Greek *machē* and *machesthai*) the terms for boxing (*pugmē* and *pukteuein*) were regularly used in inscriptions (Robert 1940), a usage that points to the assimilation of gladiatorial bouts to combat sports. Gladiatorial spectacle disappeared in the mid-fourth century, not due to any single abolitionism movement, but due to a combination of factors including imperial regulation, fundamental pagan and Christian criticisms, and the disappearance of the *munera* system (T. Wiedemann. 1995. "Das Ende der römischen Gladiatorenspiele." *Nikephoros* 8: 145-59). For one instance of moral objections parallel to those against the Greek games, Augustine's repulsion is voiced in a famous passage on how even one not disposed to watching the gladiator shows can be drawn into the love of them, his soul attracted to evil (*Confessions* 6.8, ca. 400 CE; other Christian critics: A. Futrell. 2006: 186-8). Augustine's narrative suggests that even Christians and humane individuals who otherwise resisted the bloody spectacles could be 'converted' to their enjoyment. Interestingly, violence was also a minor issue in the waning of athletics. The Christian critics of athletic violence were rare and mostly pre-late antiquity, for example Tatian and Tertullian, who also condemn combat sports along with other games, a view that found few sympathizers (271). Though gladiatorial contests vanish some 75 to 100 years before the effective end of Greek *agōnes*, this still allows for over three centuries earlier when spectators in the East became fans of both kinds of pastimes. In sum, the Greek voluntary adoption of gladiatorial spectacles fed the same audience appetite as did the combat sports, namely a love of watching performances of violence. Roman-style chariot racing, beast games, and gladiatorial spectacles each in their own way vied in the East with athletic *agōnes* for popular attention and these options, in my view, served to ease the transition to the disappearance of athletics.

Violence was tolerated in *agōnes* and spectacles, but did it degenerate to more brutal humiliation when traditional athletics yielded to circus professionals? R. discusses the very different ethos of traditional *agōnes* compared with lower status professional athletes, especially combat sportsmen, functioning in the circus context in the East (336-40). As noted above, circus athletes were subject to the same taint of *infamia* (legal disrepute) as gladiators, while athletes in *agōnes* were not. Consequently these professional athletes fit in with the generally dehumanized spirit of circus spectacles, R. argues, as is starkly illustrated on the sixth-century 'Kovacs vase.' On this bronze pot with relief figures and text inscribed, the victor, a certain Privatulus, taunts the loser, Victorinus, calls him *cinaede* ('sodomite'; R. translates 'sissy') and even seems to be sodomizing him (a particular scene not discussed by R. 148-50 [figs. 5a, 5b, 5c], and 337). The vase is also the focus of a chapter by D. O. A. Klose and T. Klein in Gustsfield and Lehmann (2013: 143-50). Though the "indulgence in defeat," as R. describes the vase scene (336-40), may be an aspect of late antique contests of hired athletes, the (quite late and quirky) Kovacs vase and a mosaic from Thuburbo Maius (R. 338 Fig. 7), found in baths used

until the fifth century, are the only real proof offered. Nor does the mosaic make the case strongly. It shows, without context, simply one pair of boxers, one bleeding and squatting, clearly the loser, and the other standing proudly; it is equally possible that the scene is meant to portray an *agōn* context. The Patras mosaic (138, mentioned, but not illustrated; late second-early third century) offers a counter example, albeit without blood. It shows among other events in a full-blown *agōn*, and not in a circus context, five pairs of combat sports athletes, each depicting the loser in a humiliating position. There are three pairs of wrestlers (or pancratiasts) with losers on the ground and the victor poised menacingly above, and two pairs of boxers with victors both holding their fists held over the cowering losers, the latter pose close to that in the Thuburbo Maius scene (ancientrome.ru/at/artworken/img.htm?id=6394). It is still imaginable, with R., that circus boxing in late antiquity was sometimes staged and exaggerated, emphasizing the ignominy of defeat more than was done in traditional *agōnes*. Yet except for the anomalous Kovacs vase, greater humiliation in the circus is not proven by the visual evidence.

R. observes that athletic participation (in the ephebate, palaistra and *agōnes*) were "alternative markers [to the rhetorical option] of a masculine elite identity" for those who did not have literate inclinations, or were even illiterate (256-7). Although R. does not discuss this point more widely, the changing view of validated masculine identities could be highlighted further to explain the shift away from athletics. The binary choice of athletics or literary pursuits was part of the reason for the changing trend of athletic participation, but this trend also responded to the fact that the performance of traditional machismo could be found in *vicarious* athletic participation, namely as an audience member in the circus watching combat sports or gladiatorial matches. Much as spectator sports function for males today watching football or 'ultimate fighting' matches, the ancient violent events served to vent or reinforce macho images. Spectating was of course open to all classes of males, but surely wealthier males attended the circus even after active participation was no longer an option. Elite critics like Basil of Seleucia and Severus of Antioch (R. 104, 192) certainly discouraged spectatorship on both religious and moral grounds; a fifth century monk, Hypatius of Chalcedon, called the games "a dreadful feast of Satan" (193). But, as R. observes, stern denunciation is evidence that elite attendance continued despite the attacks from hardline Christians and from rhetoric teachers (196).

The *erōs* associated with Greek athletics was, like violence, not a major factor in the decline in late antiquity. The specter of pederasty associated with Greek palaistras, a concern for Romans in the West, was a notably rare target of Christian critics in the East. In the West, Novatian (ca. 200-258; mostly resident in Rome), for example, objected to the indecency of men in the grips of men in wrestling (*foeda...luctamina*) from which there was 'sexual shame' (*pudor*, *De spec*. 8.2). Sidonius Apollinaris (from Lugdunum [mod. Lyons]) in 460s praises his local baths at Avitacum (mod. Aydat, France) for lacking the "boxers or wrestlers intertwining their oiled limbs"—implying that such scenes were still possible and expected at other baths (Ep.2.2.6); the comment also suggests a conflict of nudity with Christian morals (R. 154; J-P. Thuillier. 2004. 167 in W. Decker and J-P Thuillier, *Le Sport dans l'Antiquité*. Paris: A. and J. Picard). Yet in the East, athletic nudity was prized even into the mid-fifth century CE, to judge from contorniates (medallions) of Theodosius II (402-450 CE) and of Valentinian III (425-55 CE) that have images of nude athletes on the obverse (R. 147). Also in the East, Menander Rhetor (II.406-7, *On the epithalamium*; fourth c.) gives a rousing wedding night pep talk using athletic

metaphors approvingly, in which Erōs is the umpire and the bed is the racecourse (R. 282). Note also the erotic overtones in the story of Perpetua mentioned above. By the sixth century, prudishness is evident, at least in the elite comments of another Menander, possibly from the East to judge by his name (Suidas, s.v. *Menandros*; residence not known); he compared taking off his clothes for exercise with removing his decency (R. 226). At least until the fifth century, the very different views of the sexualized body in the East (mainland Greece, Asia, and Egypt) and West (Italy, Gaul, and Western North Africa) are crucial factors in understanding the role of public athletic displays in each area.

A major part of the erotic appeal of the athlete in the East was nudity in competition and in the gymnasium. When Romans introduced *agōnes* to central Italy, the competitors were apparently clothed from the fifth to first centuries BCE, if we trust the testimony of Dionysius of Halicarnassus (7.72.2-4; N. Crowther. 2004. "Nudity and Morality: Athletics in Ancient Italy," 375-9 in N. Crowther. *Athletika. Studies on the Olympic Games and Greek Athletics.* Nikephoros Beiheft 11. Hildesheim: Weidmann). Nero's Neronia festival in 60 CE is the first confirmed instance of naked athletes in Rome, attested to by Tacitus' record of the grumblings of old men at the time, complaining about the fundamental overthrow of traditional mores by a summoning of lewdness (*accitam lasciviam*) through which youths are corrupted by "foreign fads" (*externis studiis*), gymnasia, leisure and the practice of base forms of love (*turpis amores*), brought on by the emperor and the senate: "what remains but that [the youths] also bare their bodies, put on boxing gloves, and practice these fights instead of armed warfare" (*An.* 14.20). Athletic nudity was then associated with sexual profligacy by censorious elders, at least in Julio-Claudian times. We note that the nudity of Roman baths with their common pools was not censured, but common in Rome and the West since the first century BCE (Crowther 2004: 378). It was the performance of a Roman citizen as a naked athlete that was presumably the chief concern among those in central Italy, and this qualm seemed not to diminish despite the introduction of regular Greek games in Rome by Augustus, Domitian, and others. Watching Greek *agōnes* in Italy was tolerated (certainly in Naples where the tradition went back to Greek colonies there) and Romans on rare occasions may have participated in non-equestrian events (Crowther 2004: 377). Yet there was an ongoing tension concerning the cultural acceptability of the custom of athletic nudity in Italy (and Gaul). With regard to late antiquity, we can see that in the East, athletic nudity was entirely normal, and the critique of Novatian, possibly originally from the West, is a Christian intervention akin to that of the North African Tertullian, echoing early Roman scruples.

The questions I have posed are not intended as a challenge to R's overall thesis, nor to most of its detail. Rather they are a testimony to the thought-provoking quality of the study, with additional thoughts about the complementary markets for Roman and Greek mass entertainment, the high popularity of violent performance in both, their appeal to male identity, and their somewhat different views on nudity, sexuality, and the body. R's work has newly clarified the study of Greek athletics in the late period, piecing together, mosaic-like, the most all-inclusive portrait to date. This study uses all the evidence currently available from every kind of source, laid out chronologically, and considered through the lenses of economy, sociology, literary studies, and cultural studies. It sensibly does not hypothesize if proof does not permit, but makes shrewd deductions where possible. In style, there are numerous signposts pointing the direction of discussion and summarizing conclusions along the way. It was for me not a quick read as I carefully took in the extensively detailed data given to

document a region or period, or to support theories of general trends. But the detail is what makes the work rich, a mine of information about phenomena that have, in the field of Greek sports, not previously been assembled and given a convincing, finely grained narrative. This is an account that will stand for a long time, I suspect, as the authoritative history of Greek athletics in late antiquity.

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