

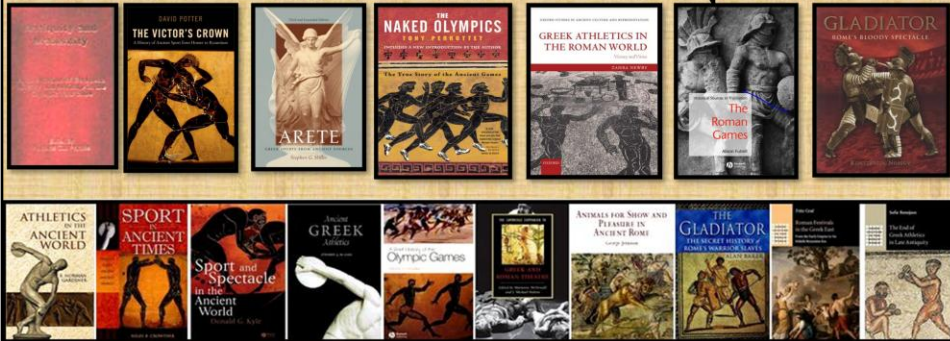
Sports, Theatre and Entertainment in the Ancient World



INTRODUCTION

Athletics, spectator sports, theatre, and other pastimes have become a consuming activity in our own time, cut short, at least temporarily, by our recent pandemic. How did these and other diversions develop in history? Are their antecedents found in the ancient world, especially in Greece and Rome? In this presentation, we will investigate the cultural roots and evolution of entertainment, especially the Greek and Roman games, as well as their theatre. Remember that the term culture comes from the Latin word *cultus*, in that most, if not all, of these activities have their origins in religious festivals or rites. We will also look into the social, economic and political dimensions of entertainment in antiquity. Since the Greek Olympic Year of 2014, dozens of studies have appeared that have enriched our understanding of these themes. While we will be concentrating on Greece and Rome, we will also briefly take glances of possible parallel developments in China, Egypt, Phoenicia, Byzantium, and elsewhere. Finally, we will study how these may have influenced our modern entertainments and recreation

New Studies on Ancient Athletics and Sport



Since the Greek Olympic year of 2004, dozens of studies and publications, both scholarly and popular, have appeared. Some have introduced new vistas in the study of sports and culture in antiquity.

In 2003, I participated in the First International Conference on History at the Athens Institute for Education and Research, and subsequently helped to edit the first collection of Essays, entitled *Antiquity and Modernity: A Celebration of European History and Heritage in the Olympic Year 2004*. It was soon followed by this host of publications. All of the books pictured (except two reprints) appeared between 2004 and 2015. A number of them gave new perspectives on Ancient athletics and sport, some of which I will briefly describe in this presentation....

Sports and Athletics before Ancient Greece

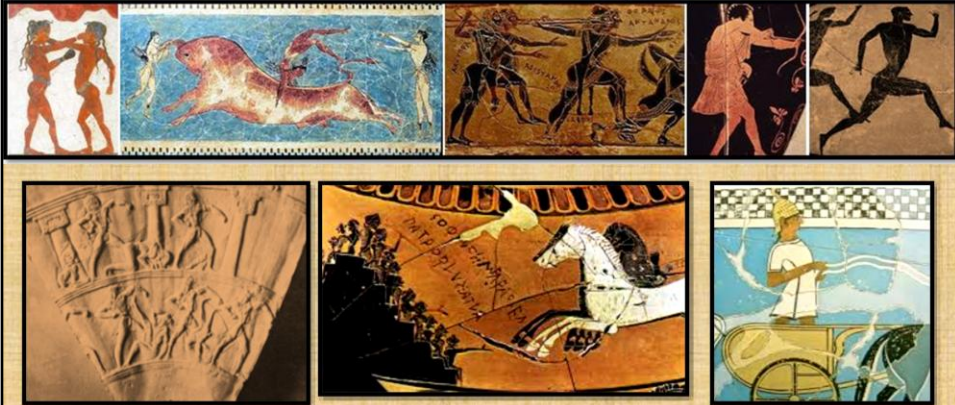


The development of Sports and Athletics in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia and the Levant, let alone China and India, has been ignored or overlooked by most studies on Ancient Sport, this has changed since 2004.



Only three of the many general works on athletics and sports in antiquity have covered evidence of earlier institutions and practices prior or parallel to the Greeks and Romans. Norman Gardiner's reprinted 1930 book barely covered the Ancient Near East and China, saying that they had little influence on the rest of the world. However two works on ancient sport have given these other civilizations their due. Both Nigel Crowther (2007) and Donald Kyle (2015) give examples of sports from several civilizations including: Egypt (also the Hyksos), Phoenicia, Nubia, Persia, Hittite Anatolia, Sumeria, and ancient China. Common denominators in sports among these civilizations are also telling. Most cultures had some form of combative sports, running, and later chariot-racing. Crowther even covers the team sports using balls in later Mayan history.

Minoan, Mycenaean and Homeric Athletics and Sports



Most scholars have traditionally traced the origins of Greek athletics to Homer's descriptions of games and competitions in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. However, now scholars are citing Minoan and Mycenaean harbingers of the Archaic and Classical Greek sports.

A number of smaller studies have shown that the Bull-leaping ritual was an athletic event among both Minoans and Mycenaean, and there is also evidence of combative sports, such as boxing and wrestling. The evidence is archaeological and artistic, which has led to different interpretations in article-length studies. Some look at Bull-Leaping, boxing, and wrestling competitions as a rite of passage for military age men, others claim that these, together with dancing, were ritual competitions between quarters within towns. Other scholars claim that there is evidence show that Bull-Leaping, along with chariot racing, were communal competitions for funerary festivals. Chariot racing entered Greek lands with the Mycenaean. Homer's vivid descriptions of the Patrocleian funerary games in the *Iliad*, as well as the Phaeacian games, seem to portray sporting events on the eve of the first Olympiad, during the Dark Age and Archaic Greece. Note that at the funerary games, chariot racing was paramount, while at the Phaeacian games in honor of the living Odysseus, running was the first event.

The Meaning and Purpose of Greek Athletics and Games

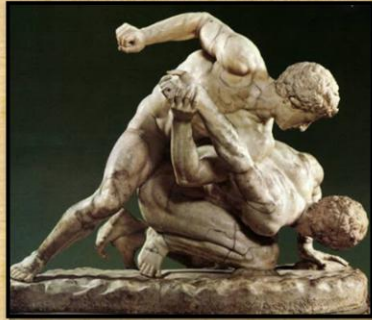


The Olympics and the other Pan-Hellenic games, as well as the localized festivals, had religious roots in which athletic and equestrian efforts were a form of sacrifice. While contestants competed as individuals, they participated in events that informally took on political and military considerations.



There were four sacred “Pan-Hellenic” games in Greece and all were tied to worship and ritual. The Olympics were the oldest and most renowned of the crown games. The events were held every four years on sacred ground dedicated to Zeus at Olympia in Elis. The three other crown games were: the Pythian Games (for Apollo at Delphi), the Isthmian Games (for Poseidon near Corinth), and the Nemean Games (for both Zeus and Heracles). These games were intercalated in a four year cycle. Hundreds of Athletic competitions were held as parts of localized festivals, sometime in conjunction with rituals and competitions in dance, music, theatre, recitals and poetry. Many scholars believe that the pursuit of *arete* (individual excellence or virtue) spurred on these competitions. Other say that the material gain and prestige brought by these events was important to both the individual and the community within the city state.

The Events of the Panhellenic Games



In the Panhellenic and local games, most events involved individuals, not groups. Although it seems that informal team sports existed among Greeks, the only Panhellenic team sport, forbidden during the games, was phalangial warfare.

It is a common theory that the origin and purpose of Greek athletic events was military training. Running events fatigues the body and promotes stamina, which is needed in a fight. Combat sports like boxing, wrestling, and the *pankration* are related to fighting an enemy on a field of war. Throwing a javelin is a form of military attack, and both jumping and throwing a discus promote strength and flexibility. Overall, the athletic events promote a fitness level that would help any soldier in a fight; therefore, they all have a martial bearing. The equestrian events have martial bearing because horses give cavalry and charioteers speed, upper ground, stamina, and another weapon in trained war horses. It is interesting to note that there were no archery or slingshot competitions at Panhellenic games.

Based on the honor given individuals at the festivals and the honor given the city-states upon military victory, it would seem that Greeks saved individual excellence for sports and culture, while military victory was a team achievement. Nevertheless, the city-state would still receive honor when one of theirs achieved an athletic victory.

Amateurism and Professionalism in Greek Athletics



Modern scholars have proved that Greek Athletes were not amateurs per se. The notion of amateurism in athletics and the Olympics comes from Victorian England, where, in order to separate classes in athletic competition, the aristocracy hearkened back to the Ancient Greeks and their supposed exclusion of professional athletes from competition. However, the Greeks had no word for "amateur" and word "athlete" meant someone who competes for a prize.

David C. Young, in his earlier monograph, *The Myth of Amateurism in Ancient Greek Athletics* (1984), contradicted earlier sports historians and the modern Olympic movements, by showing that Amateurism was a modern misconception of the nature of Ancient Greek athletes. They sacrificed much in training and won prizes and prestige that were very much like winning money. Ironically, victors at the Olympics won wreaths or crowns on-site, but their monetary rewards and "gifts" awaited their homecoming with money, free meals, no taxes, olive oil and more. Much like modern amateurs prior to 1988, who were sponsored by the State (in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany), the armed forces, sports clubs, as well as American Universities and colleges, Greek athletes were paid by gifts. As time went on, especially in the Roman era, they became fully professionalized. Today, Olympic athletes and teams support their training and competition through various means, including training and playing professionally, commercial sponsorship, product endorsement, athletic scholarships, and direct state support.

Women and Youth in Greek Athletics and Games



Ancient Greece, for the most part, was a very patriarchal civilization in its treatment of women and youth. Nevertheless in some instances, it pioneered in women and children participating in athletics, although seemingly in subsidiary or auxiliary roles.



Some primary and secondary sources reveal that the Greeks were among the first to allow women and children to participate or have a role in athletics. Women were mostly excluded from the Olympics as participants and spectators. Nevertheless, Women were not completely excluded from festivals and events. Married women were not permitted to attend the Olympic Games, but women held their own competition. Women competed in a foot race in a women's festival, called the Heraia, held at the Olympic stadium. They are put into age categories, allowed to let down their hair and the right side of their top (but only to the breast), and the winners are awarded olive crowns and a portion of meat from the cow sacrificed to Hera. Women were also permitted to win an Olympic event as owners of horses or chariots. Unmarried women, really girls, were permitted to attend all events. The only married woman who could attend the Olympics was Priestess of Hera. Girls participated in a festival or ritual in honor of Artemis at Brauron near Athens before they were married, and although there is some debate, it appears women could be married as young as twelve to about fifteen. The young girls would dance and compete in foot races, sometimes dressed as bears and donning saffron colored robes while younger girls competed in the nude. Boys were eventually given separate events at the Olympics and other games, according to their ages.

Greek Theatre and its Connection to Athletics and Games



The links between Athletics, sports and Theatre among the Ancient Greeks is an intimate one, both had religious origins and both were considered spectacles. Like athletic events, theatrical events were linked to festivals and competitions were held for best tragedy, comedy, and satyr play. In the major theatrical festival in honor of the God Dionysus, playwrights originally competed for the awards of Best Play, usually offering three tragedies and a satyr play. Later comedies were also rewarded and eventually actors also competed.

Another link was the fact that the Panhellenic games and local games also included cultural events, such as poetry recitals, musical presentations, dance performances. It is also said that authors read manuscripts of their works to attract reader to order copies. It is said that the Historian Herodotus read sections of his *Histories* to attract readers. Eventually Theatres and plays were introduced at some of the Athletic festival, the major example being the Pythian games under the Romans.

A marvelous three-part BBC documentary on Greek theatre, including Roman theatre, chronicles the evolution of theatre under the Greeks and Romans, becoming more and more like modern entertainment. This documentary, entitled *Ancient Greece: The Greatest Show on Earth* can be understood more fully by reading a short guide to ancient theatre written by Peter Arnot (entitled *The Ancient Greek and Roman Theatre*) nearly 50 years ago. He explains the intricacies of production, actors and the audience in ancient theatre, not only the playwrights and their works.

Greek Athletics in the Roman World



The evolution of a Greco-Roman connection in culture was most important in understanding the evolution of sports and entertainment into their modern forms. Rome, while dominating Greece by the 2nd century B.C., adopted many forms of Greek culture and put its implant on them, including athletics, sports and theatre.

Two recent studies Zahra Newby and Sofie Remijsen investigated Greek Athletics in the Roman Empire between 200 and 500 A.D. They found that Greek Athletic events spread throughout the Mediterranean with the sponsorship of new games (agones), at such diverse venues as Antioch (the *Antiocheia*), Nikopolis (the *Akteia* of Emperor Augustus), Rome (the *Agon Capitolina*). The researchers write that Romans adopted the same kind of athletic training and hosted the same type of athletic spectacles when compared with Greek athletics. Both authors address a difference in the way Greek culture placed athletics at the center of society and identification, while Romans enjoyed it as a leisurely activity to relax and claim or pretend to be Greek. The Romans had their own sporting traditions that became less based upon civic virtues but more grounded as entertainment.

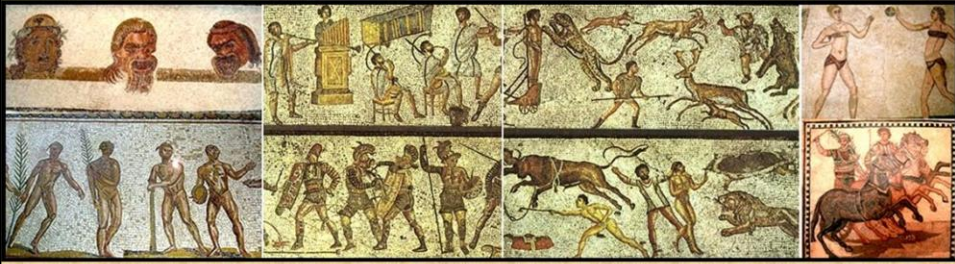
The Meaning of the Roman Games



While the roots of the Roman *ludes* are debated as being of either of Etruscan or Samnite origin, or emerged from the Roman military expansion itself, one can agree that they were very different from Greek *agones* in their events, mostly violent combat that involved a great deal of death. In its early phases, slaves were trained to fight to the death, either as individuals or as teams (*gladiatori*). They also fought wild animals (*bestiari*) and hunted them (*venationes*) for the pleasure of the spectators. Chariot races were organized and conducted by four racing clubs, the ancient equivalent of Formula 1, NASCAR, and demolition derby. The Greek games had deaths from boxing, wrestling and Pankration and other events, but were not purposeful. Executions of criminals, the mayhem of Gladiators, Bestiari and charioteers, were considered religious sacrifices to the greatness and glory of Rome.

The religious element of the games began to make way for other purposes. As Rome expanded, the success of military commanders brought in great wealth from conquered nations. This wealth was controlled by a wealthy elite and the military commanders who were successful at the helm of Rome's legions. However, part of the wealth they commandeered was also utilized as a major propaganda tool; demonstrating the power and dominion that Rome had over an ever increasing empire. By generously paying for great spectacles and games, Roman leaders were able to create images of both the empire and themselves, in exchange for the crowd's cooperation and political support. This relationship between military success, the returning flow of wealth, and the ever increasing number of spectacles and lavish games became firmly interconnected. Initially games and kitchens were sponsored by politicians and political factions. The emperors eventually monopolized most of the "bread and circuses" from Augustus through most of the Principate.

Theatre, Spectacle, and Games



Finally, the roles these games played were multipurpose, they demonstrated the strength, order, and control the leaders possessed. The games were meant to entertain, and avert the public's attention away from the ever widening gap between the privileged elite, and the common man. Finally, they also served as both a threat and a reward for the masses because many of the venues featured temporary theatres.

While gaudy and brutal, the Roman games had a vitality and anarchy that appealed to many. The relationship of the Roman games (*ludi*), spectacles and theatre became more intimate. Theatres were set up in the *ludi* to provide further entertainment, while gladiators and *bestiarii* performed feats in theatres. Indeed, as time went on, gladiatorial combat became similar to modern professional wrestling, with its heroes, villains and theatrics. Many gladiators were spared their ultimate sacrifice by either manumission or faking their deaths. Star status and cults of personality developed among certain gladiators and other performers. Some of this adulation continued well into the Byzantine era for charioteers.

Roman theatre developed under three influences, Etruscan music and dancing, Greek theatrical organization and form, an native Italian form, *Fabulae Atellae*, comic skits. Most Romans preferred comedy and were more interested in being entertained than learning a moral lesson. Roman comedies included flute music and a great deal of singing.

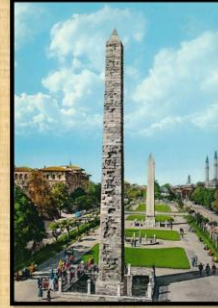
Roman plays, for many years, were performed on wooden stages that could be put up and moved very quickly. Pompey had the first permanent theatre built in Rome in 55 B.C., which was somewhat late considering the immense popularity of theatrical performances for at least three centuries prior. The Theatre of Pompey was known to seat upwards of 8,000 people and had not equal.

Roman theatre mirrored society by having entertainment develop into pure spectacle. The largest theatres were for extravagant pageantry with dancing, singing, gladiatorial events, animal hunts, and even naval battles. Smaller theatres were for solemn plays, and only the most educated elite were interested in that form of 'outdated' entertainment.

Therefore like our own culture, Roman culture bifurcated into popular culture and "high culture." The Greeks probably also had this division, comedy was more popular than tragedy This is seen in the rise of the "New" comedy and the move from satirical comedy to situational comedy in Hellenistic times. Many if the comedies of Plautus and Terence are based upon Greek originals or Greek themes.

What distinguished Roman theatre for the Greek theatre is the blurring of the games with theatre, which introduced more physical action and "special effects. This mirrors the difference between small elite productions and broad popular productions in modern theatre and film

Venues of Athletics and Theatre



Throughout the Mediterranean and beyond, one can find the remnants of Stadiums, Greek and Roman theatres, Amphitheatres, Palaestrae, Gymnasia, Thermae, and other structures that bear witness to sport, theatre and ultimately entertainment.

The first two photos are of the stadium and theatre at Delphi. This cult center sponsored pan-Hellenic Pythian games in honor of Apollo every four years, intercalated with the Olympics. These remains give evidence of not only athletic, but also theatrical spectacles at Delphi, especially under the Romans. The next two images are of Roman Theatres at Aspendos in Turkey and Athens, Greece. Not only were Greek and Roman plays presented there, but also feasts by Gladiators and Bestiarii. Both still host modern events. The last two images are of Roman arenas or amphitheatres in Nimes, France and Verona in Italy. The Nimes arena hosted modern Bull-fights and other events. At Verona, they specialize in Operas at the Arena. I once attended a spectacular performance of AIDA in the Arena there. The first larger image is of the Athenian Olympic Stadium. It is called that because the ruins of Athenian Stadium was partially restored by Evangeles Zappas for the Greek Olympics in 1870 and 1875, and fully restored by Georgios Averoff for the First International Olympics of 1896, it was subsequently used for the intercalated Olympic games of 1906, and every Olympic Torch lighting ceremony since 1936. It depicts an event in the 2004 Olympics.

The second larger image is the remnants of the Hippodrome of Byzantium, now a central park in Istanbul. It was there that Roman and Greek style games, mostly chariot races, continued until the Crusading Era. Thereafter, eastern-style polo and western style jousting tournaments were held there until the end of Byzantium. Under the Ottomans, it was used for parades and wrestling tournaments.