

# A BRIEF ESSAY ON SPORT AND GREEK UNITY IN THE LATE ARCHAIC AND EARLY CLASSICAL PERIOD

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In memory of Rune Frederiksen (1971-2023)

**Summary:** This essay argues that athletics contributed significantly to whatever unity there was in the Greek world in the late archaic and early classical period. It does so by considering the significance of the so-called Panhellenic sanctuaries as one of the few contexts in which the collective appellation ‘the Greeks’ was appropriate and by emphasizing that what the four great sanctuaries of the *periodos* had in common was athletic competitions of great prestige. The crowds which assembled for the contests at the Panhellenic sanctuaries were discursively constructed as ‘the Greeks’ by contemporary sources. The athletic centrality of the four Panhellenic sanctuaries was a reflection of the fact that the festivals here were the ones that the athletes of the leisured elites valued most highly. By the classical period the *agon gymnikos* on the model of the Olympics had, by peer polity interaction, become a Panhellenic phenomenon and this allowed athletes to travel from festival to festival and compete in their chosen speciality.

## Prolegomenon

Athletics ought to appear in any discussion of early Greek unity: Athletics had a profound significance for whatever reality Greek unity had in the late archaic and early classical period, as the following pages are intended to make clear. Similar topics have, of course, been discussed before, also by the present writer,<sup>1</sup> but the significance of athletics is, in fact, larger than usually acknowledged and so another discussion is not entirely out of place.

1 See Nielsen 2007, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; the present essay, inevitably, repeats some of the points made in these studies.

Whereas diversity among the Greek *poleis* in numerous spheres of life was a plain fact in late archaic and early classical Greece,<sup>2</sup> Greek unity was almost non-existent, except at a few major sanctuaries. It is almost a cliché that the great sanctuaries such as Delphi and Olympia were of crucial importance for the creation, maintenance and cohesion of Greek as opposed to, e.g., Athenian or Theban identity.<sup>3</sup> It is, however, a cliché because it is a view which does have some merit. It is at such sites, where Greeks from numerous regions and city-states met to worship and honour the gods, that the collective label ‘the Greeks’ made sense, whereas it would be strange to claim that, for instance, the festival of Athena Alea at Arkadian Tegea was celebrated by ‘the Greeks’: It was not, it was celebrated by the *Tegeatai*, though a few foreigners may perhaps have attended or competed in the associated *agones gymnikoi*.<sup>4</sup> But to describe the festive gatherings which assembled every four years to worship, e.g., Zeus at Olympia by any other label than ‘the Greeks’ would be equally strange, since the crowds which met at Olympia were in fact of such diverse origins that no other term would be fitting. Even to say that the Olympics were celebrated by the *Eleioi* would be a little odd, though Elis was in fact the official host of the festival;<sup>5</sup> and, as we shall see, our sources do in fact quite often say that it was ‘the Greeks’ who assembled at, e.g., Olympia.

### The significance of the Panhellenic sanctuaries

To find Greek unity in the late archaic and early classical period we should look for contexts in which Greeks of diverse origins met in numbers to do things in collaboration, and these contexts are in this early period almost exclusively the major sanctuaries. By the end of the sixth century, that group of major festivals of Panhellenic appeal which was

2 See, e.g., Starr 1961: 98, 108, 171, 239, 297, 375; Dougherty & Kurke 2003: 1; Hall 2003; Nielsen 2007: 6-8; Parker & Steele 2021; Whitley 2021: 241.

3 Starr 1961: 308; Sealey 1976: 34-35; Hansen 2000: 144; Sansone 2004: 31-32; Mitchell 2007: 8, 62.

4 Nielsen 2014c: 119.

5 On Elis as the host of the Olympic festival, see Crowther 2003; Nielsen 2007: 29-54 and 2014b: 136-39.

later referred to by the term *periodos*<sup>6</sup> and which are commonly called ‘the Panhellenic festivals’<sup>7</sup> by modern scholars – the Olympics at Olympia, the *Pythia* at Delphi, the *Nemea* at Nemea and the *Isthmia* at the Isthmos of Corinth – had been established as beyond comparison the most important shared festivals of the Greek world. Exactly how this situation came about is not my main topic here, though I shall have a cautious suggestion to make at the end of the essay.

That the great shared sanctuaries were crucial to the definition and maintenance of Greek identity is, importantly, not simply a modern point of view. It was first and most influentially stated by none other than Herodotos. In a famous passage (8.144) he lets the Athenians lecture the Spartans on why they – the Athenians – would never betray the Greek cause and join the Persians. They are made to say this:

Τὸ μὲν δεῖσαι Λακεδαιμονίους μὴ ὁμολογήσωμεν τῷ βαρβάρῳ κάρτα ἀνθρωπήιον ἦν· ἀτὰρ αἰσχροῦς γε εἰοίκατε, ἐξεπιστάμενοι τὸ Ἀθηναίων φρόνημα, ἀρρωδῆσαι, ὅτι οὔτε χρυσός ἐστι γῆς οὐδαμῶθι τοσοῦτος οὔτε χώρα <οὔτω> κάλλει καὶ ἀρετῇ μέγα ὑπερφέρουσα, τὰ ἡμεῖς δεξάμενοι ἐθέλομεν ἂν μηδίσαντες καταδουλώσαι τὴν Ἑλλάδα. Πολλὰ τε γὰρ καὶ μεγάλα ἐστὶ τὰ διακωλύοντα ταῦτα μὴ ποιείειν μηδ’ ἦν ἐθέλωμεν· πρῶτα μὲν καὶ μέγιστα τῶν θεῶν τὰ ἀγάλματα καὶ τὰ οἰκήματα ἐμπερησμένα τε καὶ συγκεχωσμένα, τοῖσι ἡμέας ἀναγκαίως ἔχει τιμωρέειν ἐς τὰ μέγιστα μᾶλλον ἢ περ ὁμολογέειν τῷ ταῦτα ἐργασαμένῳ· αὐτίς δὲ τὸ Ἑλληνικόν, ἐὸν ὅμαιμόν τε καὶ ὁμόγλωσσον, καὶ θεῶν ἰδρύματά τε κοινὰ καὶ θυσίαι ἡθεᾶ τε ὁμότροπα, τῶν προδότας γενέσθαι Ἀθηναίους οὐκ ἂν εὖ ἔχοι.<sup>8</sup>

6 The use of this term in reference to the festivals of the four famous ‘Panhellenic’ sanctuaries is a Hellenistic innovation, but the reality to which the term refers is a fact by the late archaic period: see Nielsen 2018: 13; on the formation of the *periodos*, see Funke 2005.

7 Nielsen 2014b: 134-36.

8 “It was most human that the Lacedaimonians should fear our making an agreement with the foreigner; but we think you do basely to be afraid, knowing the Athenian temper to be such that there is nowhere on earth such store of gold or such territory of surpassing fairness and excellence that the gift of it should win us to take the Persian part and enslave Greece. For there are many great reasons why we

In other words, according to the Athenian speakers of Herodotus, Greek identity (τὸ Ἑλληνικόν) was based on shared blood (ὄμαιμον), that is: a myth of common ancestry; shared language (ὁμόγλωσσον); shared sanctuaries (θεῶν ἰδρύματά τε κοινὰ καὶ θυσίαι); and a common way of life, i.e. shared customs (ἦθεα ὁμότροπα). As has often been pointed out, here are “all the usual markers”<sup>9</sup> of ethnic identity, and Herodotos’ rather emphatic repetition of the prefix ὁμο- (‘same’), coupled with κοινά (‘shared’), is worth emphasizing since it is certainly meant to highlight the “notion of common essence”<sup>10</sup> of the Greeks. By ‘shared blood’ is, as already indicated, implied a myth of common origin, the *sine qua non* of an ethnic group<sup>11</sup> and an obvious ideological construct.<sup>12</sup> By ‘shared language’ it is implied that the Greeks all spoke a common language. In actual fact, the linguistic situation in late archaic and classical Greece was characterised by a multiplicity of linguistic forms;<sup>13</sup> however, by the fifth century the different dialects were all subsumed under the abstract notion ‘the Greek language’ (ἡ Ἑλλάς γλῶσσα, 2.56) which, accordingly, is also a sort of ideological construct.<sup>14</sup> As to ἰδρύματα κοινά, “the great national centres of religion, with their cults, oracles, and festivals – Olympia, Delphi, Dodona (perhaps Delos), Eleusis – must be chiefly in the speaker’s (or writer’s) mind”, as Macan noted,<sup>15</sup> and as is commonly acknowledged.<sup>16</sup>

should not do this, even if we so desired; first and chiefest, the burning and destruction of the adornments and temples of our gods, whom we are constrained to avenge to the uttermost rather than make covenants with the doer of these things, and next the kinship of all Greeks in blood and speech, and the shrines of gods and the sacrifices that we have in common, and the likeness of our way of life, to all of which it would ill beseem Athenians to be false” (translation from Godley 1925). – The passage has been intensively studied by modern scholars, see (e.g.) Konstan 2001; Hall 2002: 172-94; Nielsen 2007: 8-10; Zacharia 2008; Polinskaya 2010.

9 Konstan 2001: 33.

10 Konstan 2001: 30.

11 Hall 1997: 25.

12 Cartledge 1993: 3 calls it “the fiction of genetic homogeneity”.

13 Hall (2002) 116.

14 Morpurgo Davies 1987; Mickey 1981; Hall 2002: 115; Nielsen 2007: 9 n. 24.

15 Macan 1908: *ad loc.*

16 See, e.g., Hansen 2000: 144 and Funke 2004: 161.

That the idea of ‘shared sanctuaries’ was well-developed in the classical period is clear also from the Peace of Nikias. The text of the Peace, in fact, begins with a stipulation concerning the shared sanctuaries (Thuc. 5.18.):

Περὶ μὲν τῶν ἱερῶν τῶν κοινῶν, θύειν καὶ ἰέναι καὶ μαντεύεσθαι καὶ θεωρεῖν κατὰ τὰ πάτρια τὸν βουλόμενον καὶ κατὰ γῆν καὶ κατὰ θάλασσαν ἀδεῶς.<sup>17</sup>

The treaty gives a guarantee of free access to the ‘shared sanctuaries’ (τῶν ἱερῶν τῶν κοινῶν). That the sanctuaries referred to here were, in fact, the well-known Panhellenic sanctuaries of modern scholarship is a safe inference from the treaty itself which stipulates that copies of the text were to be set up at Olympia, at Delphi and on the Isthmos (as well as on the Athenian Acropolis and the Amyklaion in Lakedaimon).<sup>18</sup> Shared ritual activity at such sites is compared by the Aristophanic *Lysistrata* to kinship activity,<sup>19</sup> and so worship at such shared sanctuaries could be thought of as based on shared blood. ‘Shared customs’, i.e. a shared (male) lifestyle, can cover anything from listening to recitals of the Homeric poems to the drinking of wine, going to the *ekklesia* or fighting as a hoplite.<sup>20</sup> Another ingredient of shared Greek male lifestyle was athletics, which may well be thought of as belonging to ἥθεα ὁμότροπα and was much more important than usually recognized.

It is, clearly, very probable that the contents of this Herodotean explication of shared Greek identity is a product of the period *following* the invasion of Xerxes which seems to have opened Greek eyes to the idea of

17 “Concerning the shared sanctuaries, anyone who wishes may sacrifice, travel there, consult the oracles and attend the games in accordance with ancestral tradition, in safety by land and by sea” (translation by author).

18 Thuc. 5.18.10: στήλας δὲ στήσαι Ὀλυμπίασι καὶ Πυθοῖ καὶ Ἴσθμοῖ καὶ Ἀθήνησιν ἐν πόλει καὶ ἐν Λακεδαίμονι ἐν Ἀμυκλαίῳ. On the absence of Nemea from this list, see Nielsen 2018: 215–29.

19 Ar. *Lys.* 1130–1131: ὥσπερ ξυγγενεῖς | Ὀλυμπίασι, ἐν Πύλαις, Πυθοῖ.

20 Hansen 2000: 144; Nielsen & Schwartz 2013: 143.

a shared Greek identity<sup>21</sup> and, perhaps, unity – an idea, which was probably not very significant if it existed at all in the archaic period. But, some of the items subsumed under τὸ Ἑλληνικόν did exist in the archaic period, in particular sanctuaries of Panhellenic appeal, i.e., such sanctuaries as Olympia and Delphi<sup>22</sup> and a few others of similar appeal. As already mentioned, at the end of the sixth century at the latest the four famous Panhellenic sanctuaries of the *periodos* stood out as the most important of the shared sanctuaries. The festivals at these four sanctuaries came to be scheduled with an eye to each other in such a way that they were staged in a continuous rhythm on the basis of a four-year period, an Olympiad in Greek parlance:

### The *Periodos* of the 75th Olympiad (after Golden 1998: 10-11)

<i>Olympiad year</i>	<i>Festival</i>	<i>Date</i>
75.1	Olympic	480
75.2	Nemean	479
75.2	Isthmian	478
75.3	Pythian	478
75.4	Nemean	477
75.4	Isthmian	476
76.1	Olympic	476

In the first year of an Olympiad the Olympics were celebrated at Olympia; the second year saw celebrations of the festivals both at Nemea and at the Isthmos, whereas the third year, like the first, was devoted to a single festival, the *Pythia* at Delphi; the fourth and final year of an Olympiad copied the second year and saw celebrations of festivals at both Nemea and at the Isthmos. After these six celebrations, a new Olympiad began, with a new celebration of the Olympics – and the four big festivals unrolled in this regular rhythm throughout antiquity. It seems rather clear

21 Murray 1988: 461; Hornblower 1991: 10; Cartledge 1993: 39; Mitchell 2007: 15; Zacharia 2008: 26.

22 On Olympia and Delphi prior to the classical period, see e.g. Morgan 1990.

that this structure is built around the Olympics, probably because this was the first festival to rise above mere local prominence and attain international fame. By the sixth century when most of the Greek city-states adorned their religious festivals with *agones gymnikoi*<sup>23</sup> the Olympics were already famous and influential and provided a handy model from which, it seems reasonable to assume, even Delphi took inspiration (more below).

### Sport at the Panhellenic sanctuaries

What did the big four Panhellenic festivals have in common which set them apart as such a prestigious group? They were not all dedicated to the same divinity. Two, the Olympics and the *Nemea*, were, admittedly, dedicated to Zeus, but the *Pythia* were dedicated to Apollo and the *Isthmia* to Poseidon. These are all male divinities, but this was hardly the reason for their great fame. Famous festivals were dedicated to goddesses, the Athenian *Panathenaia* to Athena and the Argive *Hekatomboia* to Hera, to mention just two obviously major festivals for goddesses which, incidentally, also featured famous *agones gymnikoi*.<sup>24</sup> Nor were the patron city-states of the Panhellenic sanctuaries large and powerful and the festivals in question, accordingly, probably did not owe their importance to their host cities. Admittedly, Corinth, the host of the Isthmian Festival, was by all counts a major city-state, but Kleonai, the host of the Nemean Festival,<sup>25</sup> and the *polis* of Delphi itself, were not large and important players on the stage of Greek city-states. Elis, the host city of the Olympic Festival, was clearly a larger city-state than Kleonai and Delphi, but it did not quite compare to Corinth, and it seems reasonable to assume that there was no simple correlation between the power and renown of a *polis* and the fame and prestige of its festivals. In fact, big and powerful cities such as Athens, Argos and Thebes hosted athletic festivals which, though

23 Bell 1989: 168; Pleket 2000: 642; Mann 2001: 19, 27; Young 2004: 23; Christesen 2007a, 2007b: 143, 2014: 217; Crowther 2007: 6; Kyle 2009: 188, 2014: 22; Scott 2010: 160-61; Neumann-Hartmann 2014: 31. See also Funke 2005: ii.

24 *Panathenaia*: Nielsen 2018: 132-33; *Hekatomboia*: Nielsen 2018: 129.

25 Nielsen 2018: 224-27.

they certainly did enjoy some international prestige,<sup>26</sup> could not compete with, for instance, the Nemean Festival hosted by tiny Kleonai.<sup>27</sup>

What the so-called Panhellenic festivals did have in common was famous athletic competitions, and it was on the basis of their athletic fame that they were singled out as the *periodos*. The competitions at the festivals of the *periodos* could be entered by ὁ βουλόμενος τῶν Ἑλλήνων (“any Greek who wants”) but this, in fact, was a characteristic of almost all athletic festivals in late archaic and classical Greece.<sup>28</sup> The crucial difference between the athletic festivals of the *periodos* and the numerous lesser festivals which existed already in the late archaic and early classical period was that the entrants in the *periodos* did in fact come from all over the Greek world and in large numbers as well. So the athletes and crowds assembling at the Panhellenic sanctuaries, and at Olympia and Delphi in particular, were of very diverse origins, as even the victor lists compiled by modern scholars show: Archaic and classical Olympic victors hail from more than 90 different *poleis*; Pythian victors hail from more than 50 different *poleis*; Nemean victors from 40; and Isthmian victors from at least 37.<sup>29</sup>

### ‘The Greeks’ at the Panhellenic sanctuaries

The best and perhaps only way to adequately describe such crowds is by calling them *Greek* and not Athenian, or Arkadian, or Peloponnesian etc. And – this is what our sources often do. I give a few examples. The first is the epigram from a statue erected at Olympia to celebrate the career of the long-distance runner Ergoteles, a citizen of Sicilian Himera and active in the 470s and 460s BC. It reads:<sup>30</sup>

Ἐργοτέλης μ’ ἀνέθηκ[ε Φιλάνορος ἀγλαὸς υἱὸς],

26 The *Panathenaia* at Athens: Nielsen 2018: 132-33; the *Hekatombia* at Argos: Nielsen 2018: 129; the *Herakleia* at Thebes: Nielsen 2018: 118.

27 Nielsen 2018: 169-14.

28 Nielsen 2014c.

29 Nielsen 2014c: 91.

30 Text after *Neue IvO* no. 23.



Ἕλληνας νικῶν Πύθι[α δις δόλιχον]  
καὶ δὴ Ὀλυμπιάδας, δ[ύο δ' Ἴσθμια καὶ Νεμέαι δις],  
Ἰμέραι ἄθάνατον μν[ᾶμ' ἀρετᾶς ἔμεναι].

Here the athletes of no less than eight Panhellenic celebrations of athletic festivals are subsumed under the collective label “the Greeks” (Ἕλληνας).

The next example is a rather remarkable passage from Herodotos (8.26), an anecdote placed right after the depiction of the battle of Thermopylai in 480 BC. It relates how some Arkadians went to see the Persians to apply for service as mercenaries. The Persians, Herodotos goes on, led the Arkadians into the presence of the Great King and inquired of them *what the Greeks were doing* (περὶ τῶν Ἑλλήνων τὰ ποιέοιεν). This remarkable question is, evidently, a literary device designed to allow the answer to it – which was that the Greeks were celebrating the Olympic festival and would be watching an athletic and an equestrian contest (Ὀλύμπια ἄγουσι καὶ θεωροῦσι ἀγῶνα γυμνικὸν καὶ ἵππικόν). Here those present at Olympia (i.e. not only the athletes) are taken to constitute the Greeks as such, a rather remarkable phenomenon, though not without parallels. The next example is from Bacchylides 9.30 where the spectators who witnessed the victory of the honorandus, Automedes of Phleious, at Nemea are described as Ἑλλάνων ... ἀπ[ε]ίρονα κύκλον, “the endless sea of Greeks” in McDevitt’s translation;<sup>31</sup> here the spectators at Nemea are described as Greeks. At *Isthm.* 4.28-29, moreover, Pindar calls the equestrian entrants at the “common festivals” (παναγυρίων ξυνᾶν), by which he probably means the four Panhellenic sanctuaries,<sup>32</sup> “all Greeks” (Πανελλάνεσσι), thus testifying to the diverse origins of even the equestrian entrants at these festivals.

In Thucydides’ interesting description of the Olympics of 420 BC the phenomenon of calling the crowd at Olympia ‘the Greeks’ may also be observed. The Eleians had fined the Spartans 2.000 mines for what they took to be a breach of the Olympic truce.<sup>33</sup> The Spartans refused to pay and the Eleians instead suggested that, as Thucydides says (5.50.1-2):

31 McDevitt 2009: 51.

32 Bury 1892: *ad v.* 28; Willcock 1995: *ad vv.* 28-29.

33 On this incident, see Roy 1998 and 2022: 117-19 and Nielsen 2005: 67-74.

ἀναβάντας δὲ ἐπὶ τὸν βωμὸν τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Ὀλυμπίου, ἐπειδὴ προθυμοῦνται χρῆσθαι τῷ ἱερῷ, ἐπομόσαι ἐναντίον τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἢ μὴ ἀποδώσειν ὕστερον τὴν καταδίκην. ὡς δὲ οὐδὲ ταῦτα ἤθελον, Λακεδαιμόνιοι μὲν εἴργοντο τοῦ ἱεροῦ [θυσίας καὶ ἀγώνων] καὶ οἴκοι ἔθουον.<sup>34</sup>

Thucydides ends his description by saying οἱ δὲ ἄλλοι Ἕλληνες ἐθεώρουν πλὴν Λεπρεατῶν.<sup>35</sup> Twice in this short passage, then, the festive crowd at Olympia is described as ‘the Greeks’ pure and simple. No wonder that Plato could describe the Olympics as “the *panegyris* of the Greeks”<sup>36</sup> and that Aristophanes in *Ploutos* could make Penia (Poverty) declare that Zeus gathers “all the Greeks” at Olympia.<sup>37</sup>

Even a few Eleian sources show a similar usage. Thus, sometime in the early fifth century Elis gave their umpires at the Olympics the new official title of *Hellanodikai*, ‘Judges of the Greeks’, though strictly speaking they were officials appointed by the *polis* of Elis itself. But the designation clearly highlighted the fact that Olympia was so prestigious as to attract athletes from all corners of the Greek world.<sup>38</sup> An even clearer case is provided by *IvO* 166 of the mid-fourth century. It is an epigram which accompanied a sculptural victory dedication by an Eleian equestrian victor, Troilos the son of Alkinoos. Its first distich reads:

Ἑλλήνων ἦρχον τότε Ὀλυμπίαι, ἠνίκα μοι Ζεὺς  
δῶκεν νικῆσαι πρῶτον Ὀλυμπιάδα.

34 “... the Spartans should ascend the altar of the Olympian Zeus, as they were so anxious to have access to the temple, and swear before the Greeks (ἐπομόσαι ἐναντίον τῶν Ἑλλήνων) that they would surely pay the fine at a later day. This also being refused, the Spartans were excluded from the temple, the sacrifice, and the games, and sacrificed at home” (translation from Strassler 1996).

35 “... the other Greeks attended the festival except for the *Lepreatai*” (translation by author).

36 Pl. *Hp. mi.* 363c: τὴν τῶν Ἑλλήνων πανήγυριν.

37 Ar. *Plut.* 584: τοὺς Ἕλληνας ἅπαντας ἀεὶ δι’ ἔτους πέμπτου ξυναγείρει.

38 Nielsen 2007: 20-21.

Troilos had been officiating as *Hellandikas* in 372 BC when he achieved his victory, and “I was ruling the Greeks at Olympia” is a stately poetic circumlocution of this fact (known from Paus. 6.1.4). The epigram, then, uses the same designation – ‘the Greeks’ – for the competitors and crowds at Olympia as the passages discussed above and, incidentally, confirms that the title *Hellandikas* means ‘Judge of the Greeks’.

In conclusion, to describe the festive gatherings which assembled every four years to worship, e.g. Zeus at Olympia, the best and most fitting designation was ‘the Greeks’, because the crowds which met at Olympia were in fact of such diverse origins that no other term would be suitable. And – outstanding among those who gathered at the athletic sites of the sanctuaries of the *periodos* were the athletes themselves, and it is to the athletes that I now turn.<sup>39</sup>

### The events of Greek athletics

As the modern Olympics demonstrate, there is in reality no end to the number of physical activities that humans can turn into competitions. It is, accordingly, quite striking just how *few* events Classical Greek athletics comprised. The classical program of the ancient Olympics comprised merely 11 competitions in three different sports, subdivided simply into men and boys. Men competed in the *pentathlon*, in four different foot-races (*stadion*, *diaulos*, *dolichos* and *hoplites*) and three different combat sports (*pale*, *pyx* and *pankration*) whereas boys competed merely in the *stadion*, the short sprint, in wrestling (*pale*) and in boxing (*pyx*).<sup>40</sup> This program, which was stable for hundreds of years, was the end-product of some development and experimentation. Thus, *pentathlon* for boys was tried once, in 628 according to tradition, but immediately dropped.<sup>41</sup> In the classical period, the programs of the various athletic festivals

39 The following is based on Nielsen 2023.

40 On the Olympic program, see Lee 2001; on the individual events, see Miller 2004: 31-86. – I do not consider equestrian events here; such consideration would not materially change the points I make. On Greek equestrian sport, see De Rossi 2011-2016.

41 Lee 2001: 2.

throughout Greece resembled the Olympics apart from some very minor variations which were all variations on a well-known theme, as it were. In fact, they were presumably more or less based on the Olympic program. In the archaic period, however, the picture was a little more varied. In archaic sources we find events which do not reappear in the classical period. In the funeral games for Patroklos as described in *Iliad* 23,<sup>42</sup> we find contests in armed duel to first blood,<sup>43</sup> weight-throwing,<sup>44</sup> bow-shot for live pigeon,<sup>45</sup> and throwing the javelin.<sup>46</sup> None of these events are found again in the classical period, and we may perhaps doubt that there ever were armed duels to first blood or bowshots for live pigeon: they seem not impossible improvisations by the poet of the *Iliad*. But even throwing the javelin is not met with in the classical period as an event in its own right; in the classical period, throwing the javelin was invariably a part of the *pentathlon*.<sup>47</sup> The unusual weight-throwing resembles discus-throwing and may perhaps be a consciously archaizing depiction of this event; it, too, formed part of the *pentathlon* in the classical period.

In *Odyssey* 8, we find a fine description of a set of competitive contests staged by the Phaeacian King Alkinoos to relieve the anonymous stranger – who is Odysseus – of his sorrows which the king has noticed. The poet describes a foot-race,<sup>48</sup> bouts of wrestling<sup>49</sup> and boxing<sup>50</sup> as well as long jumping<sup>51</sup> and throwing the discus.<sup>52</sup> Whereas foot-races with

42 On the depiction of the games for Patroklos, see Howland 1954; Willcock 1972; O’Neal 1980; Dickie 1984; Dunkle 1981 and 1987; Kyle 1984; Hinckley 1986; Scott 1997; Kitchell 1998; Papakonstantinou 2002; Brown 2003; Ulf 2004; Tyrrell 2004: 8–27; Perry 2014.

43 Hom. *Il.* 23.801–825.

44 Hom. *Il.* 23.826–849.

45 Hom. *Il.* 23.850–883.

46 Hom. *Il.* 23.884–897; old Nestor, too, in his reminiscences about his youth treats throwing the javelin as an individual event (Hom. *Il.* 23.637).

47 On the events found at the festivals of the late archaic and classical period, see the entry ‘attested events’ in the inventory of festivals at Nielsen 2018: 110–53.

48 Hom. *Od.* 8.120–125.

49 Hom. *Od.* 8.126–127.

50 Hom. *Od.* 8.130.

51 Hom. *Od.* 8.128.

52 Hom. *Od.* 8.129.

wrestling and boxing as individual events were the very essence of classical Greek athletics,<sup>53</sup> long jumping and throwing the discus are not met with as individual events in the classical period; like throwing the javelin, they invariably formed parts of the *pentathlon*.

The Homeric poems, admittedly, are not simple realistic depictions of any single point in time, but rather traditional oral poetry; however, the Homeric picture of long jumping and throwing the discus as individual events does seem to find some confirmation in archaic epigraphical material. From Eleusis comes an inscribed jumping weight (*halter*) dating to ca. 580-570 BC and inscribed *χαλόμενος νίκησεν Ἐπαίνετος*.<sup>54</sup> This dedication presumably commemorates a victory in long jumping as an individual event.<sup>55</sup> dedications of jumping weights commemorating victories in the *pentathlon* often make clear that they do so.<sup>56</sup> And this, it should be noted, is at a time when the *pentathlon* is in fact known to have existed, since it is attested by a victory dedication made at the Corinthian Isthmos more or less at the same time as Epainetos made his dedication at Eleusis.<sup>57</sup> From, presumably, Kephallenia comes a bronze discus of the mid-sixth century inscribed with two hexameters: <sup>58</sup> Ἐχσοῖδα μ' ἀνέθεκε Διφὸς Θόροιν μεγάλοιο | χάλκεον ἠοῖ νίκασε Κεφαλαῖνας μεγαθύμος.<sup>59</sup> Again, it seems a reasonable assumption that this dedication of a discus used for the winning throw was made to commemorate a victory in the discus staged as an individual event and not as part of the *pentathlon*. So, both discus and the long jump were, at least sometimes, staged as individual events in the late archaic period, whereas there is no sign of them as individual events at the great Panhellenic games.

What we see in the late archaic period is presumably the end of a development by which athletics took on a uniform character across the Greek world and by which such local peculiarities as the long jump as an

53 Golden 2013.

54 *IG* I<sup>3</sup> 988; Moretti 1953: no. 1; see also Ebert 1972: 31 (“Epainetos was victorious in the long jump” (translation by author)).

55 Moretti 1953: 3; Ebert 1972: 31.

56 See, e.g., Ebert 1972: no. 1; *SEG* 11.1227 (= *Neue IvO* 21).

57 Ebert 1972: no. 1.

58 Moretti 1953: no. 6; Cook 1987: 60; *IG* IX.1 649; *CEG* 1.391.

59 “Exoidas dedicated me to the sons of mighty Zeus, (the) bronze with which he overcame the great-hearted Kephallenians” (translation by Cook 1987: 60).

individual event were eliminated. The end product was the *agon gymnikos* which was more or less identical with the Olympic program except for very trivial variations. When archaic elegists want to say ‘all kinds of athletic events’ they point to well-known events of the Olympic program; Tyrtaios, famously, is unwilling to praise any man for *speed of feet* or *skilful wrestling*,<sup>60</sup> and thus points to the two most prestigious Greek events;<sup>61</sup> and Xenophanes in this well-known critique of the worship of athletes lists simply the Olympic program: foot-races (ταχυτήτι ποδῶν, 1), *pentathlon* (πενταθλεύων, 2), wrestling (παλαίων, 3), boxing (πυκτοσύνην, 4) and *pankration* (παγκράτιον, 5).<sup>62</sup> From the late-sixth century, the Olympic program in some form or other was the norm at athletic festivals including the three other festivals of the *periodos*.<sup>63</sup> When variations do occur, they are minor or even trivial. Thus, at, e.g., Isthmia and Nemea there were three and not two age-classes,<sup>64</sup> but the basic idea is the same: competitors must be divided into age-classes; and, at Nemea the foot-racers contested an event called the *hippios* which was a foot-race of some 800 m,<sup>65</sup> that is, it was a double *diaulos* just as the *diaulos* itself was a double *stadion*, and it could easily be staged in the same stadium as the *stadion* and the *diaulos*.

In 2018, I published a large study in which I identified 155 festivals of the late archaic and classical period which had athletic contests on their festive programmes.<sup>66</sup> Only a single one of these did *perhaps* stage an event which was not on the Olympic programme: at Olbia, there was possibly a competition in longshot with bow.<sup>67</sup> But the Olympic events occur frequently: *Pentathlon* is known at 8 festivals apart from the *periodos*;<sup>68</sup> foot-races are known from 38 other festivals; boxing is known at 15 festivals; wrestling likewise at 15 festivals; and *pankration* at 14. In most

60 Tyrtaios fr. 12.2 (West): οὔτε ποδῶν ἀρετῆς οὔτε παλαιμοσύνης.

61 Golden 2013.

62 Xenophanes fr. 2. (West).

63 Neumann-Hartmann 2007.

64 Golden 1998: 104.

65 Golden (1998) 37; Miller (2004) 32; Romano (2021) 214.

66 Nielsen 2018.

67 Nielsen 2018: 75.

68 For this and the following data, see the entry ‘attested events’ in the inventory of festivals at Nielsen 2018: 110-53.

cases, no details about the competitive program of a festival are known, and the sources simply state that the festival included an *agon gymnikos*,<sup>69</sup> or *agones gymnikoi*.<sup>70</sup> In such cases the *agon gymnikos* probably consisted of a copy of or a suitable selection from the Olympic program, which had emerged as the model of the *agon gymnikos*, and the competitors were probably subdivided into two or three age-classes.

### Athletics and peer polity interaction

By the late archaic period, the *agon gymnikos* had become, as it were, a Panhellenic piece of portable cultural technology which was known everywhere and could be practised anywhere. As Christian Mann has recently discussed at length, armies in the field, for instance, often celebrated an *agon gymnikos* e.g. to mark victory or to amuse the soldiers.<sup>71</sup> Thus, when Xenophon and the 10.000 had reached the coast of the Black Sea they immediately arranged for an *agon gymnikos* to let joy and relief get free rein.<sup>72</sup> The competitions comprised a selection of the Olympic *agon gymnikos*: foot-races, wrestling, boxing and *pankration*. Arrianos in several passages records that Alexander the Great arranged *agones gymnikoi* for his army.<sup>73</sup> He never specifies the events contested but simply states that an *agon gymnikos* took place.<sup>74</sup> But *agon gymnikos* presumably means a suitable selection of events from the standard repertoire and the occasions will probably, *mutatis mutandis*, have resembled that of Xenophon's charming description.

How and why did the Greek repertoire of sports end up being so limited and the concept of the *agon gymnikos* so unambiguous that there was never any doubt about its meaning? I suggest that two simple mechanisms must have been at work. One is the fact that the Olympic program was so famous and prestigious already in the sixth century that when the

69 E.g. Hdt. 6.38.1; Pl. *Menex.* 249b; Strabo 5.4.7 (with Nielsen 2018: 59).

70 E.g. Lys. 2.80; *IG XII.9* 187A.

71 Mann 2020.

72 Xen. *An.* 4.8.25.

73 Mann 2020: 103-4.

74 Arr. *Anab.* 2.5.8, 2.24.6, 3.1.4 etc.

Greek *poleis* began in great numbers to put athletics on the programs of their religious festivals they looked to Olympia as an admired model, as was almost certainly the case when Athens transformed the *Panathenaia* in the 560s BC.<sup>75</sup> The Olympics were, simply, the model for an *agon gymnikos*.

The second is the fact that the Greek *poleis* in general took examples and inspiration from each other and (thus) patterned themselves on each other by the process of peer polity interaction, which is a process by which relatively similar entities by regular interaction come to resemble each other even more and to have the same cultural preferences, and so on.<sup>76</sup> A fine example of this process is provided by *polis*-coinages which, after a somewhat fumbling and experimental start in the sixth century, quickly came to resemble each other in all basic respects (circular blankets, figurative types, abbreviated legends *etc.*). There were minor variations in e.g. weight standards,<sup>77</sup> but in all essentials the system was the same across city-state boundaries and a Greek coin was easily recognisable as a Greek coin. Another example is provided by the Doric temple. In spite of some local variations,<sup>78</sup> Doric temples are easily recognisable as such everywhere they were constructed, be it in on Sicily, in the Peloponnese or in Attica. Or, as a final example, one may point to the foundational political institutions of the Greek *poleis*: Practically speaking, all *poleis* had a smaller council called *boule* and a larger assembly called *ekklesia* or something similar, and practically all *poleis* had public magistrates called *archontes*;<sup>79</sup> there were local variations<sup>80</sup> but the basic system was more or less the same everywhere, be it in democracies or oligarchies.

This rather remarkable similarity of key institutions in the Greek city-state culture, which was so profoundly geographically dispersed, may not unreasonably be explained by intense interaction among *poleis* and the concomitant processes of peer polity interaction.

75 Neils 2007.

76 On peer polity interaction in the Greek city-state culture, see Snodgrass 1986; a case-study of the working of peer polity interaction the Peloponnese in the sixth century is provided by Forsdyke 2011; for the Hellenistic period, see Ma 2003.

77 Kraay 1976: 329-30; Kallet & Kroll 2020: 148-51. See also Psoma in this volume.

78 See e.g. Winter 1991 on Doric temples in Arkadia.

79 Hansen 2006: 113.

80 For details, see Hansen & Nielsen 2004.



There were, undoubtedly, many advantages in this overall similarity of central aspects of Greek culture. The uniformity of the *agon gymnikos* across the Greek world meant that *poleis* could expect to attract top-level athletes from outside, as most of them actually succeeded in doing.<sup>81</sup> This clearly enhanced the quality of the athletic spectacle and thus increased the honour paid to the divinity presiding over the festival into which the *agon gymnikos* was incorporated.<sup>82</sup> Seen from the point of view of the athletes, the uniformity of the *agon gymnikos* ensured that they could count on being able to enter well-known competitions anywhere: It may have varied precisely how long a *stadion*-race was,<sup>83</sup> but one knew *what* it was. This enabled athletes to travel from one festival to another and on to the next as several actually did; the famous boxer Theogenes of Thasos won some 1.400 victories during his career and he must have travelled extensively though this aspect of his career is not very well known.<sup>84</sup> But the travelling of another great boxer, Diagoras of Ialysos on Rhodes, is known in at least its broad outline, since he commissioned an epinician ode from Pindar, the famous *Seventh Olympic Ode*, which includes a victory catalogue (15-17, 80-87) from which it appears that in addition to the Olympics, Diagoras entered competitions at Delphi, the Isthmos, Nemea, Athens, Argos, in Arkadia, at Thebes and in Boiotia more generally, at Pellene in Achaia, at Megara, on Aigina, and on Rhodes itself. He, like Theogenes, must clearly have been a great traveller. Such intense travelling was feasible for athletes because an *agon gymnikos* was a well-known and rather static cultural phenomenon: Both Theogenes and Diagoras knew that if an *agon gymnikos* were announced to take place at, e.g., Thebes, it would include boxing and was thus worth travelling for.

Moreover, such travelling athletes may also very well have been the chief agents of that (peer polity) interaction which limited the number of events at Greek athletic festivals and brought the *agon gymnikos* in its well-known form into existence. It was, after all, to a large degree *their* preferences to which the uniformity of the *agon gymnikos* catered. And,

81 Nielsen 2014c.

82 See further Nielsen 2024..

83 Golden 2004: 157-58.

84 Nielsen 2018: 27-30.

let me end by cautiously suggesting that even the *periodos* itself crystallized as a result of the agonistic preferences of the travelling athletes, in the sense that the four famous festivals at Olympia, Delphi, Nemea and the Isthmos became famous and outstanding because these festivals were the ones that athletes valued particularly. In the archaic period, when this crystallization took place, athletes were beyond doubt recruited from the leisure class of Thorstein Veblen,<sup>85</sup> and the preferences and opinions of this class, which still dominated most *poleis*, must have been factors to which festival organizers had to pay due regard.

### Conclusions

To sum up. The great Panhellenic sanctuaries were in the late archaic and early classical period the most important venues for the display of the fragile Greek unity which existed in this period. What the four famous Panhellenic sanctuaries had in common was prestigious athletic competitions which in many ways developed into markers of Greek identity. By the end of the archaic period the Greek *agon gymnikos* was firmly in place and comprised only a very limited number of events, which means that it was, very probably, codified from an earlier situation where more events existed. This uniformity of the *agon gymnikos* across the Greek world meant that athletes hailing from the leisure class could travel from festival to festival and compete in well-known events. In fact, it may have been to cater to the preferences of the aristocratic and upper-class athletes, as they were, that the *agon gymnikos* took its final form, though admiration of the Olympic model must also have played its part. And, finally, it may perhaps have been the agonistic preferences of the athletes which singled out the four Panhellenic festivals of the *periodos* as the most prestigious athletic festivals. In brief, two central ingredients of late archaic and early classical Greek unity, the *agon gymnikos* and the centrality of the four great sanctuaries of the *periodos*, may be traced back to the agonistic preferences of the leisure class.

85 Veblen 2007. – I wish to thank Kostas Buraselis for arranging the memorable symposium at Delphi and Christel Müller and Olga Palagia for comments on my paper.

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