

CITIZENSHIP AND NUDITY, A ‘TRUE HISTORY’

By Oswyn Murray

Summary: This paper is an attempt to write the history of the ‘grandeur and decadence’ of the Greek *polis* through the history of nudity in the ancient world from ca. 700 BCE to ca. 700 CE in eight episodes: (1) The origins of Greek male nudity in athletics; (2) the development of the *ephebeia* and the *gymnasion* as a universal aspect of Greek education; (3) the spread of the *gymnasion* through the Hellenistic *polis*; (4) the Maccabaeen resistance and Jewish attitudes to public nudity; (5) the problem of circumcision; (6) conflicts between Greeks and Jews in the Alexandrian *gymnasion* and the *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*; (7) the Roman Empire and the rise of the public bath; nudity in the bathhouse; (8) the Christian emasculation of public statues and the end of the Greek *polis*. Each episode rests on the detailed researches of others; it is merely the possible interconnection between them that I am seeking to establish.

For Oswyn, from Mogens, a Dane
who writes books at a rate quite insane.
Some get covered in dust
But this one, I trust
Is the one which is not quite inane
30.7.1987 A.D.

With this limerick¹ Mogens Hansen introduced himself to me at the start of our long friendship, inscribed in his book on *The Athenian Assembly* which was published in my now defunct series with Basil Blackwell. It was the start of forty years of friendship and collaboration that brought me much Danish smoked fish: I can only respond to his passing with a contribution in similar light-hearted vein, which he would have appreciated at least for its originality.

1 How Mogens would have loved the inconclusive researches of Bob Turvey, *Why are Limericks called Limericks?* (Waldegrave Publishing: Bristol, 2025).

On May 26th, 2018, I gave a talk at a meeting in Uppsala of the European Network for the Study of Ancient Greek History, which one of our editors has asked me to rejuvenate in honour of a dear departed friend. It requires much more research than I can give it, but it is meant seriously.

—

In the second century of our era the Syrian mystic Bardesanes attempted to establish the existence of free will independent of astral influences by considering the differences in human customs related to death and sexual behaviour. The Hindus burn their wives, the Germans are killed by strangulation, men of Gaul have sex with each other, the Britons are addicted to polyandry, the Persians marry their sisters and daughters, the Medes are eaten by dogs, the Romans are prone to conquest, the people of Edessa live chastely, and the Greeks practice GMNSYN (*gymnasion*), that is naked sport: 'In each country and each nation people use the liberty belonging to their nature as they please'; the customs of men are stronger than the Fate in the stars.²

Every culture may indeed be different in ways that seem distinctive; but historians have a natural tendency towards 'presentism', the assumption that in many basic unresearched respects other cultures are fundamentally similar to their own. It may be that there are parallels between the Greek and modern political institutions of democracy which explain our obsession with the legacy of the Greeks, as Mogens Hansen has attempted to show in his life's work. But for most of my own academic life I have tried to undermine this view and to formulate some of the forgotten differences between the ancient Greeks and the modern world. I have argued that Greek practices in the consumption of wine were unique in their own period and quite alien to modern perceptions and tastes; they influenced in turn very different attitudes to pleasure, to poetry and literature, to sexuality and to the categorisation of human societies; moreover these attitudes changed in almost imperceptible

2 Bardaisan, *The Book of the Laws of Countries: dialogue on fate* ed. J.H. Hospers and Th.C. Vriezen (1965) p. 57. In the Syriac ms. there follows a lacuna of two or three erased words, and the editor (F. Nau) supplies 'standing naked', following the standard older edition (*Patrologia Syriaca* I.3, col. 599) (information from Sebastian Brock).

ways across the centuries of Greek and Roman interaction.³ But in this habit of historical amnesia the most striking examples concern the neglect of things that offer disturbing elements in our idealised picture of the Greek past.

As I contemplate the end of my long association with the *symposion*, I have also begun to reflect on the wider significance of this problem. I have always been puzzled by one aspect of the *longue durée* as it is reflected in cultural history, that is the question of movement or change. Jacob Burckhardt was unable to explain how his different static representations of 'Greek man' developed over time from one period to the next.⁴ If we take any specific aspect of culture, we can indeed see that it changes over time, but we find it far more difficult to explain how and why. That is part of the natural characteristic of historical study in general. Many of us spend most of our time evaluating the events that we find recorded in our sources, in the activity that the young Edward Gibbon in the eighteenth century described as that of the *érudit*; indeed more and more in the modern age, as we come to mistrust theories of history, we tend to confine ourselves in that prison of description, we follow the evidence towards the action, the event; we espouse change not continuity, as if the world, both past and present, consists of facts that do not need explanations. But we should remember the example of Gibbon who already argued that the true function of the historian lay in combining the approach of the *philosophe* with that of the *érudit*: *description* was the work of the *érudit*, but the real meaning of history lay in *explanation*, the work of the *philosophe*, in tracing and understanding movement over time.⁵

Of course Gibbon himself did not invent the idea of 'Decline and Fall'; he borrowed that from the famous work of Montesquieu, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*, published in 1734 simultaneously in French and in English: there, in less than two hundred pages Montesquieu explained the history of the Romans from their origin to the fall of Byzantium, and bequeathed to the Enlightenment and to Gibbon the task of filling out his little sketch. As he showed

3 Murray 1990 and 2018.

4 Murray 2024: 203-4, 220.

5 Momigliano 1966.

the movement of civilizations is not so much a question of conquest and destruction, as of changes in the hidden internal mechanisms of societies. That is what cultural history should aim to uncover, despite being essentially synchronic rather than diachronic.

Herodotus already understood the problem well. Greek culture, *to hellenikon*, is distinguished by blood, by language, by common sanctuaries, by religious practices and by common customs (8.144). So a culture is a unity, but its activities may cause it to change over time. What I think we cultural historians are attempting to explain is why and how that unity changes: how can we explain the *grandeur et décadence* of *to hellenikon*? So, in the spirit of Bardesanes and Montesquieu's *Considérations*, for a future lifetime's project I propose taking one neglected phenomenon that is characteristically Greek and asking how it changes over time. That phenomenon is male nudity.

An even more fundamental difference between ancient Greek and modern attitudes than the modes of drinking is visible between ancient Greek perceptions of the human body and our modern ways of thinking. Even in their own cultural period the Greeks knew that they were unique among contemporary societies in their attitude to nudity. It is the history of this curious difference between themselves and their surrounding cultures, and the conflicts and developments that it engendered, that I wish to explore in this little sketch.⁶ Why was nudity once regarded by the Greeks as a basic value of Hellenism and how and in what circumstances was it defined? And to put it more crudely, can we understand better the nature and differences between ancient and modern societies by their attitudes to the presence or absence of clothing?

Nudity whether total or partial is indeed a complex cultural concept whose meaning and significance changes across historical periods and societies. It is governed by many unspoken tabus, of varied religious or customary origins. It is often but not necessarily connected with both

6 On this theme I acknowledge especially the inspiration of Larissa Bonfante (1989) for her studies of the representation of the nude in Greek art. I must emphasise that this is a set of hypotheses, not a fully worked out theory: it is for others to test them with their superior knowledge. In particular my access to modern libraries is limited and my information may not be entirely up to date. In this respect I thank my two anonymous readers for helping me.

sexual desire and the sense of shame in relation to both male and female objects; in most but not perhaps all societies the rules of bodily exposure differ between the sexes: Polynesian attitudes to nudity for example might be held to offer little or no difference between male and female nudity. For the purpose of the following analysis of ancient attitudes to nudity I am confining myself to the significance of male nudity.

But first I'd like to dedicate this preliminary sketch to my Granny who taught me to reflect on nudity. All her life she was a naturist and sun worshipper. In that short wartime period between the Blitz and the Doodlebugs, when it was safe to go to London, I used to visit her house on Richmond Green. I can probably even date the event because the British Sunbathers Association was formed in 1943, and she must have been one of its first members, judging from the magazines in her house, which gave me my first sight of naked women. I was six years old. Every sunny morning, we would climb up through the bathroom skylight onto the roof by the chimneys, and sheltering behind canvas screens would sunbathe in the nude. It did not seem to worry her that her house was surrounded by much taller buildings, whose windows gave a perfect view of our activities. It was she who taught me that nakedness was as normal as clothing.

—

Male nudity in ancient Greece is a phenomenon closely connected to athletics, which is the display of the human form in action.⁷ Until the post-classical period such naked display is confined to men, and to gods conceived in anthropomorphic guise. Women were not permitted to attend the Olympic games because they involved a display of male nudity,⁸ but

7 For the many modern theories concerning the reasons for this connection see the excellent survey of Kyle 2015: 113. I see no evidence for the commonly asserted connection of nudity with democracy and egalitarianism: *ib.* 82–85.

8 At the Olympic Games the death penalty was allegedly mandatory for women who were caught attending: it is said that in 404 BCE the mother of a competitor in the boys' boxing disguised herself as a trainer and became so excited that she jumped up revealing her sex; she was let off because of the sporting traditions of her family, but in future all trainers had to appear naked: Paus. 5.6.7. But at 6.20.9 he says that the priestess of Demeter Chamyne is present, along with *parthenoi* (her unmarried attendants?) who 'are not debarred from watching.'

they can naturally view male statues, and take part in many religious festivals that involve parade of the phallus.⁹ Gradually in the Hellenistic age statues of naked women began to appear; but they remained confined to representations of goddesses (primarily Aphrodite) and mythical beings such as nymphs and personifications.

Thus, in the ancient world it is not only sport that is peculiar to the Greeks, it is also the fact that they engaged in it naked, whether or not that is appropriate to the activity. Although physical activity is a natural human pleasure giving delight in the perfection of the skills of the body, the Greeks invented sport as a competitive lifestyle for the aristocracy. Their sport was individual not a team activity, in contrast to much of the modern idea of sport, which evolved in the nineteenth century; it accepted the idea of competition both individual and civic, but lacked many aspects of the modern image, such as the ideas of fair play and professionalism versus amateur engagement.¹⁰ And despite the modern cult of the Olympic Games, in contrast to the Greeks the display of the naked human form is not today regarded as an essential aspect of athletics, at least among men; although there is perhaps emerging a contrary tendency towards encouraging bodily exposure among female athletes.

Naturally the Greeks developed a myth to explain this custom of naked display in sport, whose arrival they dated to the early archaic period of the late eighth century: around the 14th or 15th Olympiad (724-720 BCE). Orsippos of Megara (or perhaps Akanthos of Sparta or an unnamed Athenian) won the Olympic footrace after he discarded his loincloth, and ever afterwards all Greeks whatever their sport exercised naked.¹¹ Like most late *mythoi* the Orsippos story is crazy: it does not seem to be traceable before the second century CE. But unusually this dating, although much embroidered in the sources, has the advantage of being supported by contemporary artistic evidence: earlier representations of athletes on black-figure vases often show them wearing some form of loincloth, but by the mid seventh century nudity has become normal.¹²

9 E.g. Ar. *Ach.* 253-38.

10 Murray 2013.

11 Paus. 1.44.1.

12 Normal but not quite universal: it is suspected that representations of clothed athletes may be intended for the Etruscan market: Scanlon 2002.

In his discussion of the development of early Greek sartorial customs Thucydides (1.6.5) might seem to have placed this change rather later:

[The Lakedaimonians] were also the first to exercise naked and stripping down openly to rub themselves with oil after exercising. In ancient times, even at the Olympic games, athletes competed wearing loin cloths over their genitals, and it is *not many years ago* that they ended the practice.

Plato (*Resp.* 5.452c) seems to reflect the same view, in words that might suggest actual reading of Thucydides with a characteristic variation:

... *not long ago* it seemed shameful and laughable to Greeks, just as it seems now to most barbarians, for men to be seen naked, and when the Cretans first introduced nude exercising, followed by the Lakedaimonians, it was possible for the sophisticated people of that time to ridicule all these things.

The attribution of the change to Cretans is not significant, being part of the common belief that Spartan customs originated in Crete. But the phrases in these two passages, *ou polla ete* and *ou polus chronos*, have suggested to some commentators that the change should have occurred in the fifth century rather than earlier, although McDonnell gives good reason why this cannot be accepted.¹³ But whatever the date of the change, both literary passages attest a firm belief in the classical period that there had been a change in the past towards nudity in athletics, and this change was already a topic of open discussion in the discourse concerning the differences between Greek and other cultures. The claim of Thucydides may therefore be ambiguous in date, but at least it attests to two classical fifth-century ancient views. The Greeks invented competitive sport before they practised nudity: they knew that the Homeric heroes in their funeral games had worn some sort of clothing; but by the mid fifth century nudity in sport was the norm. And they were well aware that they were unique, not only in practising developed forms of sport, but also in valuing nudity in its performance. The association of this

13 In turn Plato is surely reflected in Plut. *Amat.* 751f-752a.

change with Sparta is perhaps supported by the tradition that the main sporting youth festival of Sparta the *Gymnopaidia* was instituted in 668 BCE, which again reflects a view that nudity in sport began in the seventh century.

By the late classical period nudity for exercise and for religiously sanctioned sport performed at sanctuaries was one of the distinguishing marks of Greek culture, part of *to hellenikon*; there seems in this respect no difference between public performance and secluded training. Apart from religious sanctuaries this activity was engaged in at designated training sites called *palaistrai* and *gymnasia* (as in our nudist beaches, or the notorious but now defunct Parsons Pleasure in Oxford), which excluded women and (at least in terms of participation) slaves; but as we know from multiple sources such as Aristophanes and Pindar, older men could enjoy viewing the younger ones, and *erastai* could meet and court their *eromenoi* in the normal and approved activity of intergenerational male homosexuality; it is clear generally that the prevalence of pederasty in archaic Greek culture was strongly connected with the development of the *gymnasion*.¹⁴ Outside the *gymnasion* of course male Greeks were clothed.

The earliest recorded *gymnasion* structures were doubtless temporary, such as those created by Kleisthenes of Sikyon in the early sixth century for the wedding competition of his daughter Agariste (Hdt. 6.126.3). There will have been others, but we do not I think possess evidence of civic building complexes for this naked activity before the late classical period, although it was already carried out in designated places. The activity may have been aristocratic in origin,¹⁵ but by the end of the classical period at least it was diffused among the hoplite classes. In Athens this may have begun to occur as early as the Kleisthenic reforms of 510 BCE; but in any event educational nudity became more dominant among the citizen body after the massive losses in the Peloponnesian War had shifted the class structure away from the *nautikos ochlos* to the

14 Dover 1978: esp. section III; Scanlon 2002: ch. 8.

15 Not according to Miller 2000, who would date the existence of *gymnasion* rules as early as the age of Solon, and yet associate athletic nudity with democracy.

hoplites.¹⁶ Even before then nudity and rituals of initiation into citizenship were closely related:

Describe to me what benefits you say you gain from your so-called rule over Greece.

- I get to see the boys' genitals when they are being registered as citizens.¹⁷

The existence of state subsidised *gymnasia* is mentioned by Xenophon in his last work dated to 355 BCE, the *Poroi* (IV.51-52), which is thought to be related to the financial policy of Euboulos; they are already connected to garrison duties in Attica. It seems that in this period the three main *gymnasia* of Athens, the Academy, the Lykeion and Kynosarges, were even supported by subventions from the state.¹⁸

The *Athenaion Politeia* 42 begins its account of the 'current constitution of Athens' with a description of the formal *ephebeia* established by Epikrates about 335 BCE after the defeat by Philip of Macedon in 338 BCE at Chaeronea; it is generally agreed that this second part of the *Ath. Pol.* is based on a direct reading of official decrees,¹⁹ and such a reorganisation of the *ephebeia* fits well with the other reforms of the age of Lykourgos. The author regards enrolment in the military *ephebeia* for two years at age eighteen as an essential step to full citizenship, although it may be disputed whether this relates only to those of the hoplite class and above, rather than all citizens including the thetes.²⁰ This reform was clearly influenced by Spartan models, and included the standard training in the *gymnasion*.²¹

16 On the numbers of Athenian citizens in relation to the *ephebeia*, see Hansen 1988, and De Marcellus 1978: appendix 1.

17 Ar. *Vesp.* 577-78. *Dokimasia* was a complex procedure, and it is not clear at what point or for what reason boys appeared naked, perhaps to verify their age: see Rhodes 1981: 496-502.

18 Delorme 1960: ch. 1; Höcker 2004.

19 Rhodes 1981: 30-37.

20 De Marcellus: App. 1.

21 De Marcellus: ch. 3. On the significance of Epikrates' law, see the bibliography cited in Rhodes 1981: esp. 503. More generally on the tangled history of the *ephebeia* in modern scholarship, see De Marcellus 1978 and Chankowski 2010.

From the age of Solon the *polis* had concerned itself with the regulation of *gymnasia*, attempting to protect the adolescent young from sexual predation. Times of opening and closing were established and access to *gymnasia* was denied to undesirables. In the Hellenistic age the Athenian *ephebeia* served as a model for both older cities and the newly founded colonial *poleis*; there is evidence of its adoption in at least a hundred cities from mainland Greece and the Mediterranean to Afghanistan.²² The *gymnasia* were tightly controlled by regulations: two detailed laws have been found; both come from the kingdom of Macedon and the emphasis on the military nature of the education may be due to the needs of Macedon in its struggle against Rome and may not therefore be typical of other *poleis*, but they illustrate the centrality of this organisation to the Greek *polis*. There are many analogues or parallels between the two texts, although they treat of different aspects of the regulation of *gymnasia*; and it has been claimed that they both reflect the activities of the later years of Philip V (221-179) in reorganising his kingdom: he is known to have been a reformer whose work reflects the influence of Aristotle and other classical thinkers.²³

The first is from Beroia of the early second century BCE, headed 'The Law on the Gymnasiarchy' concerning the appointment of the *gymnasiarchos* and his duties. Side B details the rules for stripping in the *gymnasion*; exclusions are 'if he is a slave, a freedmen or a son of these, if he is *apalaistros* (probably disabled, unable to participate in the *palaistra*), if he is a pederast, or has practised a vulgar trade or is drunk or mad' (lines 26-30). The duties of the *gymnasiarchos* include supervising the contest held at the festival of Hermes and the provision of oil and umpires, his responsibility for the accounts and his duty to punish thieves.²⁴ These

22 Chankowski 2010.

23 Philip's historical interests are shown by his epitome of Theopompus (*FGrHist* 115 T 31) and his regulations for the ephebic 'hunters of Herakles' (*SEG* 56.625). It is indeed time to reconsider the modern scepticism about the importance of Aristotle and Athens in the standardisation of the structures of the Hellenistic *polis*; see Hatzopoulos 2015-2016.

24 Gauthier & Hatzopoulos 1993; Austin 1981: no. 118. A full and vivid discussion of the *gymnasion* of Amphipolis is found in Evans 2022: ch. 2, who notes that there is no evidence of continuity after the end of the first century CE.

regulations concern the supervision of the age group of the *paides* (15-18).

The second is from Amphipolis, containing regulations for the group of *epheboi* (18-20). It appears to be a republication in 24/3 BCE, possibly after the destruction of the *gymnasion* by marauding Thracian tribes, of an earlier law again of the same period as that of Beroia.²⁵ The official nominated is the *ephebarchos*, who is responsible for controlling the list of *epheboi* and ensuring that those coming from the *gymnasion* are enrolled; there is a wealth qualification for entry. They must attend and be registered daily and he must appoint *paidotrophoi* to instruct them in javelin, archery, stone throwing and horse riding and supervise these activities in the *palaistra*; they are to attend for two years in special dress without an attendant and with *petasos* and arms. They must come from dawn to dusk wearing no shoes in summer; they may not loiter in the streets, in shops, the agora or baths; they must eat only at home. The *ephebarchos* will supervise various annual competitions and arrange the prizes; he is permitted to enforce discipline but must register punishments; *epheboi* are immune from civic liturgies; in their second year the *ephebarchos* shall take charge of their manoeuvres.

At its core each *polis* was composed of *politai* whose right to citizenship was guaranteed by their enrolment in the *gymnasion* as the first stage of an education which differentiated them from the surrounding native peasantry; and the officials of the *gymnasion* and the *ephebeia*, the *gymnasiarchos*, *ephebarchos* or other *kosmetes*, became alongside perhaps the *stratego*i the most important magistrates in the control of the citizen lists.²⁶ Nudity was intrinsic to Greek culture, and the *gymnasion* was a distinguishing mark of the Greek *polis*: lack of one according to Pausanias was a sign of extreme poverty (10.4.1). It lay behind the dominance of a standard Koine Greek dialect, the *enkyklios paideia* in education, and enshrined the practice of nudity in education.

25 Lazaridou & Hatzopoulos 2015; Rousset 2017 disputes the claim that this is an accurate transcription of the previous law and considers it an eclectic reformulation created for the institution in the age of Augustus. I follow the original editors.

26 Discussed in Chankowski 2010: 277-84; cf. Gauthier 2011 [1995]: ch. XXI. The question of how far the *epheboi* were an elite within a wider citizen body is complex and probably depends on the nature of the individual *polis*.

The *gymnasion* was the focus of cultural continuity in the Greek *polis*, as is shown by the discovery of the *gymnasion* at Ai Khanoum in Afghanistan, with its visiting philosopher Klearchos and its inscribed Delphic maxims, which are known to have been repeated in similar public displays around the Hellenistic world.²⁷ It seems that each *polis* possessed as a physical entity a building or space designated as the *gymnasion*; and archaeologists can trace the spread of this distinctive type of space across the Mediterranean world. 'Qui dit gymnase, dans l'antiquité, dit mœurs grecques, pensée sur le mode grec.'²⁸ It represents the dominance of the *polis* system and of *to hellenikon* over native cultures. Education (*paideia*) within it became standardised; and, although I have no doubt that much of this activity was carried out in classrooms in which the male pupils were clothed, nevertheless nudity was expected for all forms of physical activity, which were a major component of the education of the citizen class: from this descends the re-creation of the male 'Gymnasium' in Germany and the male 'public school' in England during the 19th century, although (for reasons that will need explanation, and relate perhaps to the invention of team as opposed to individual sport) nudity in sport was not practised, even if homosexuality was often tolerated or even encouraged.

Si on parle de la diffusion de la civilisation de la cité à l'époque hellénistique il faut dire que l'éphébie et avec elle le gymnase constituaient un outil essentiel de cette diffusion. De même que la cité classique, la cité hellénistique distingue le groupe des "jeunes" et se préoccupe de leur préparation aux devoirs des citoyens. En éduquant ses "jeunes" et en leur transmettant les valeurs civiques, la cité hellénistique perpétue la tradition de la civilisation de la *polis*.²⁹

27 Veuve 1987; Robert 1969-1990.

28 Delorme 1960: 478 (see esp. chs. XI-XII: 'Le Gymnase. Institution intellectuelle', 'Le Gymnase. Centre religieux et civique'); Kennell 2015.

29 The conclusion of Chankowski 2010: 440.

Resistance to the culture of Hellenism can first be detected in the third century BCE. It was hardly surprising that the thoroughly Greek Antiochos IV Epiphanes, in the interests of consolidating his power over that part of Syria and Palestine that his father had wrested from the Ptolemies, should decide to extend his promotion of Hellenism to Judaea, and establish Jerusalem as a *polis*, with a *gymnasion* and an *ephebeia* structure.³⁰ Supported by a strong Hellenising party within the Jewish elite under the hereditary Oniad High Priests, he created the institutions of a Greek city. In the later Hasmonean tradition this forcible attempt to Hellenize the holy city was the cause of the resistance of the Jews in the Maccabean revolt. As I *Maccabees* 1.14 says, "they built a *gymnasion* according to the customs of the gentiles in Jerusalem; they made themselves foreskins (*akrobustiai*) and abandoned the holy covenant."³¹ The ensuing struggles of resistance centred on forcible circumcision by the rebels (I *Macc.* 2.42-48); Antiochos plundered the temple, and the period 168-164 saw the reaction of the Jewish countryside to this enforced attempt at Hellenization; the Maccabean Wars finally liberated the Jewish holy city and established the independent kingdom of Judaea. It was this ostensibly cultural conflict that provoked Antiochos' attack on the common Near Eastern practice of circumcision and definitively established the antipathy of orthodox Jews to the Greek practice of nudity. The Hellenizing faction under Onias III or IV eventually fled to Egypt with a large military following, which for a period under Ptolemy VI Philometor (181-145) became the main military support of the later Ptolemaic dynasty; for a time there even existed a second Temple at Leontopolis in Egypt, though the extent of its existence and significance as a rival of Jerusalem is disputed.³²

Much of this evidence of course comes from the Jewish tradition, and it may be doubted whether contemporary Greeks understood the importance of what lay behind a curious form of religious mutilation, which

30 Tac. *Hist.* 2.89; Joseph. *AJ* 12.254.

31 I *Macc.* I.13f; II *Macc.* IV.9-14; Joseph. *AJ* 12.5.1; *Jubilees* 3.30-31; 15.33-34.

32 On the much-disputed history of the temple at Leontopolis, see Tcherikover 1959: 278-80.

they must have regarded with distaste.³³ Indeed among the Greeks there is evidence of what amounts to a counter-movement, a veritable cult of the youthful prepuce: a number of medical practices known as *kynodesme* were at various times used to increase its length.³⁴

Abhorrence of nudity was embedded in ancient Jewish culture, which had its own foundation myth in the story of Adam and Eve, who began life naked, but had eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge and so became aware of the shame of their nakedness: because of their disobedience to God they were expelled from the Garden of Eden; and the Lord sealed his compact with Abraham and the chosen people by requiring from them the mark of circumcision (*Genesis* 17.11-27). But male circumcision is not a unique Jewish phenomenon: it is attested in Egypt as early as the third millennium BCE, and was perhaps common among ancient near eastern societies: Herodotus regarded it as a sign of Egyptian influence spreading to the Syrians of Palestine, the Ethiopians and even the Colchians.³⁵ As in the modern world its origins are almost always social and cultural rather than rational, although sometimes justified by 'rational' arguments. In ethnic rivalries it has often been used for the purposes of persecution to identify and separate 'believers' from 'unbelievers' or racial groups, especially in Europe and the Islamic world.³⁶

33 The Greeks would have seen it as "the ultimate in mindless, barbaric irreverence, excess, and depravity" (Hodges 2001: 388). Strabo 16.2.37 attributes Jewish circumcision to the tyrannical tendencies of the priests who succeeded Moses, a renegade Egyptian priest, who led his followers to Palestine.

34 As the many ancient references in Hodges 2001 make clear there existed among the Greeks a positive aesthetic of the prepuce. See also Henderson 1991: ch. 4. For further detailed discussion see Dingwall 1925; the problem remains that the visual evidence for the techniques of infibulation centres on the archaic age, whereas the literary evidence (Martial and the medical writers) belongs to the imperial period. What seems clear is that classical Greeks found a prepuce that covered the glans attractive and sought to lengthen it by stretching techniques (*kynodesme*).

35 Hdt. 2.36-37, 104.

36 A brief modern survey of the historical and ethical problems related to circumcision is to be found in Aggleton 2007. There is a good general survey of the practice of circumcision on Wikipedia, and a scientific website by Robert Darby, called 'History of Circumcision'. See also Agnieszka Holland's award-winning film based on the life of Solomon Perel, *Europa Europa* (1990).

"Here we witness one of the fundamental and irreconcilable points of discord between the Greek and Hebrew views of the body."³⁷ We do not know on what religious or ethnic principles male circumcision was practised among other ancient peoples; but for the Jews it became the hallmark of Judaism, enjoined by religious tradition and enshrined in the original compact between God and his chosen people. For Hellenising Jews it became a major problem. The Alexandrian Jew Philo begins his explanation of Jewish customs with "that which is turned into ridicule by people in general", despite its being widely practiced by the Egyptians, the *peritome*. He offers four traditional Jewish justifications for the practice of circumcision, which may loosely be described as medical or concerned with bodily cleanliness. To these he adds two allegorical interpretations of his own, which have often been repeated in later cultures:

First of all, it is a symbol of the excision of the pleasures which delude the mind; for since, of all the delights which pleasure can afford, the association of man with woman is the most exquisite, it seemed good to the lawgivers to mutilate the organ which ministers to such connections; by which rite they signified figuratively the excision of all superfluous and excessive pleasure, not, indeed, of one only, but of all others whatever, through that one which is the most imperious of all. The second thing is, that it is a symbol of a man's knowing himself, and discarding that terrible disease, the vain opinion of the soul; for some men, like good statuaries, have boasted that they can make that most beautiful animal, man; and, being puffed up with arrogance, have deified themselves, hiding from sight the true cause of the creation of all things namely, God, although they might have corrected that error from a consideration of other persons among whom they live; for there are among them many men who have no children, and many barren women whose connections lead to nothing, so that they

37 Hodges 2001: 389.

grow old in childlessness. We must therefore eradicate evil opinions from the mind, and all other ideas which are not devoted to God.³⁸

The second reason clearly reflects disapproval of the same prevalence of pederasty in Greek culture as concerned the Romans. But Philo's whole discussion shows the sensitivity in contemporary Alexandria to the issue. In contrast the Hellenic conception of youthful male beauty and revulsion from any form of genital mutilation was equally deep rooted.

In the cultural context of Hellenism circumcision was of course problematic in relation to the principle of nudity in Greek *paideia*, and (as in later periods) was used by both sides in the conflict of religious orthodoxy with assimilation to Greek culture and citizenship, as a means of distinguishing Jews from Greeks. The attempts of Jewish Hellenizers to reverse or disguise the effects of circumcision by the various means of *epispasmos*, despite being widely practised, were condemned by the orthodox.³⁹

If the grandeur of nudity and the triumph of the *gymnasion* can be placed in the third century BCE, it is clear that it was being met by strong resistance in the course of the second century. This is not of course just a Jewish phenomenon, the same period saw the rise of native Egyptian culture after the battle of Raphia in 217; if politically this can be seen as a result of the struggle between Antiochos III and Ptolemy IV Philopator for the control of Syria under the increasingly watchful imperialistic eye of the Romans, the consequences of these events in cultural terms were the decline of Hellenism across the eastern Mediterranean. And in the context of the *gymnasion* the struggle came to be centred on the foreskin. The foreskin was politicised, and from henceforth (if not before) it became a way of excluding Jews (and Egyptians) from the cultural complex of Hellenism; it was a major factor in the rise of anti-semitism in Alexandria.

38 Philo *Spec. leg.* 1: *peri peritomes* (trans. Yonge); cf. *Migr. Abr.* 92. On the relation between the views of Philo and Saint Paul, see Barclay 1948.

39 On ancient techniques for *epispasmos*, 'restoring' foreskins, by *lipodermos* see esp. Celsus *Med.* 7.25; these procedures (sometimes referred to as the *pondus Iudaicum*) were used by Hellenizing Jews who wished to enter the *gymnasion*, in order to reverse their circumcision.

In the Hellenistic world the right to citizenship in the *polis* was hotly contested, and the *gymnasiarchoi* were the officials who effectively controlled entry to citizen lists. The infiltration of non-hellenic individuals into the citizen body doubtless varied; but it can to some extent be detected in the existence of non-Greek names among officials and in surviving ephebic lists, which are sufficiently rare to suggest that citizenship was indeed an exclusive right depending on education in the *gymnasion*.⁴⁰

The city of Alexandria was the largest after Rome in the Mediterranean with perhaps half a million inhabitants; its population was composed of three main groups, 'Greek citizens', Jews (who had become especially important in the later Ptolemaic period) and native Egyptians, the latter subject to periodic expulsion. After the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 BCE it was a separate *polis* in the province of Egypt which was governed by an equestrian *praefectus*. According to Dio 51.17 Augustus had refused the 'Alexandrians' the right to possess a *boule* or senate, although the Jews were permitted some form of separate organization under their elders; and the struggle by the Greek citizen population to achieve one was the source of many embassies to the emperor, until the right was finally granted under Septimius Severus. The relations between the two largest officially recognised communities, the Greeks and the Jews, are attested in the historical works of Philo through conflicting embassies from each group under Caligula and Claudius, and in a formal letter of response dated 41 CE in his first year from the emperor Claudius, in which he thanks the Alexandrians for their honorific proposals and defends the status quo, ordering Jews and Greeks to cease rioting and not to send separate embassies or intrude on each other's activities.⁴¹ For the Greeks he proclaims:

40 The conclusion of Delorme 1960: 427-40, who rightly emphasises the exclusiveness of the Hellenistic city. Evans 2022: 87 (and Appendix 2) points out that Delos after the second Athenian occupation in 167/6 was an exception as a major cosmopolitan trading centre; the records of its *gymnasion* attest individuals from 63 different named *poleis*.

41 *P. London* 1912 esp. lines 52ff; see Bell 1924: 1-37; translated Sherk 1988: no. 44.

To all those who have become *epheboi* up to my rule I confirm and guarantee Alexandrian citizenship with all privileges and benefits, except for those who deceived you by becoming *epheboi* though born of slaves. ... As for the Jews ... I also order them not to intrude into the games held by the *gymnasiarchoi* or the *kosmetai* since they enjoy their own affairs and have the benefit of an abundance of many good things.

The *gymnasion* at Alexandria was an especially impressive structure (Strabo 17.795), and it seems that much of the tension resulted from Jewish attempts to infiltrate the *gymnasion* system with its attendant right to Alexandrian citizenship.

These disputes are reflected in a number of papyri of the first century CE known as the *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs* which give semi-fictional accounts of the sufferings and executions of the leaders of the Alexandrians in their struggle for a *boule*. Although this anti-Roman and anti-Jewish literature clearly reflects the interests of the Alexandrian Greeks, it was also disseminated across the Egyptian *chora* among the Hellenized elite of Egypt in the various nomes.⁴² These texts seem at least partially based on the format of official proceedings in the imperial *consistorium* and transcripts of trials; but they offer such egregious examples of Greek philosophical freedom of speech (*parrhesia*) before the imperial tyrant that few modern scholars have been willing to consider them historically accurate or more than loosely based on the actual record of proceedings. For present purposes the most important aspect is that a number of them present one official, the *gymnasiarchos*, as the hero and victim of martyrdom in the process of defending and promoting the demands of the Greeks against both Roman officials and their Jewish rivals. The *gymnasiarchos* is portrayed as hereditary and aristocratic in nature, and he controlled entry to the *gymnasion* whose education was required for citizenship. One of the more apparently historical texts, the 'boule papyrus' purports to be part of a speech before the emperor (probably Claudius) on the advantages that would accrue from granting the Alexandrians a *boule*:

42 Musurillo 1954 and 1961; with new papyri, Paladino 2018; on their circulation, see Rowlandson & Harker 2004: esp. 94-100.

I submit then, that [a *boule*] will ensure that none of those liable for enrolment in the poll-tax diminish its revenue by being listed in the public records along with the *epheboi* for each year, and it will take care that the pure citizen body of Alexandria is not corrupted by men who are uncultured and uneducated.

It would also protect anyone from being wrongly taxed by the *idiologos* or any other official and represent him before the prefect, "and if there is need for a diplomatic mission to you, the *boule* might elect those who are suitable, so that no-one ignoble might make the journey and no-one who is eligible might avoid this duty to his native city." That is, the existence of a *boule* would protect the tax revenues by ensuring that the privileges of and the distinction between Alexandrian citizens enrolled in the *ephebeia* and others liable for poll-tax (Egyptians, but not perhaps Jews) were protected by Greek monitoring of the citizen lists.

In another papyrus, the *Acts of Isidoros* (P. Berol. 8877) Isidoros accuses Herod Agrippa of the royal Judaeian family and defends himself at a public *consistorium* in the presence of twenty senators, sixteen consulars and the women of the court. The insults begin with the emperor Claudius asking, "Are you really the son of an actress?" Isidoros replies, "I am neither slave nor actress's son, but gymnasiarch of the glorious city of Alexandria. But you [that is Claudius' friend Herod Agrippa] are the cast-off son of the Jewess Salome" and a "three-obol Jew", before he is led off to execution. In another account Isidoros addresses Agrippa directly:

But to you, Agrippa, I wish to retort in connection with the points you bring up about the Jews. I accuse them of wishing to stir up the entire world ... We must consider the entire mass. They do not have the same lifestyle as the Alexandrians but live like the Egyptians: are they not equal to those who pay the poll-tax? [To which Agrippa replies] The Egyptians have had taxes levied on them by their rulers ... But no-one has levied taxes on the Jews.

Records of insults swapped between emperor and gymnasiarchs continue into the reign of Trajan. The endemic riots and troubles between Greeks and Jews in Alexandria seem indeed centred on the *ephebeia* and the *gymnasion* as a means of entry into citizenship of the *polis*, which was

closely guarded and excluded Jews and Egyptians. What lay behind this dispute centred on the *gymnasion* and citizenship? Although couched in general terms of objections to lifestyle it was surely the by now centuries old conflict over the presence or absence of the foreskin.⁴³

At this point the philosophical historian may well despair. One of the least respected of the early Roman emperors with the full paraphernalia of the imperial court has sought to solve by common sense a dispute between two communities, both equally fixed in their prejudices, to be met only by narratives of abuse from both sides. The dispute over the foreskin had come to the attention of the imperial government: this continued to the end of antiquity, with Hadrian prohibiting the custom of circumcision, and legislation as late as the age of Theodosius permitting it only for Jews, but not (as enjoined by the Abrahamic covenant) their slaves.⁴⁴ But this was only the beginning of the 'Decline and Fall' of Hellenism, which is once more related to the fortunes of nudity.

Alexandrian citizenship (or that of another Greek *polis* in Egypt), was also necessary for Egyptians to acquire the most desirable of privileges, eligibility for Roman citizenship.⁴⁵ There were three *poleis* in Egypt, Alexandria, Naucratis and Ptolemais; to these in 130 CE Hadrian added a fourth, Antinoöpolis, in honour of his deceased favourite Antinous, whose 'new Hellenes' were drawn from auxiliary veterans, Greeks from Ptolemais and 'those from the *gymnasion*'.⁴⁶ Such distinctions were of interest to the tax authorities, because they involved freedom from the poll-tax and other fiscal privileges.⁴⁷ There are documents from different *nomes* – Arsinoë, Heracleopolis, Hermopolis, Oxyrhynchus, which are registrations by *metropolitai* on behalf of their sons for the right to a reduced rate of the poll-tax. The category of 'Hellenes' included a number

43 The foreskin seems also to be involved in the controversy over the *Fiscus Iudaicus*, a tax levied on Jews after the destruction of the Temple under the Flavians, which caused Nerva to mint coins with the legend *FISCI IUDAICI CALUMNIA SUBLATA*: Suet. *Dom.* 12.2; Goodman 1989: 40–44.

44 See Hodges 2001: 390–92.

45 As the younger Pliny discovered when he wanted Trajan to grant his doctor Roman citizenship: *Ep.* 10.5.

46 Zahnrt 1988; Boatwright 2002: ch. 8, 190–96.

47 For an introduction to the problems and complexities of this process see Lewis 1983: 39–48.

of different statuses, which in these documents required application by *epikrisis* to the authorities, before a commission of *ex-gymnasiarchoi* or other officials, which was usually initiated by parents around the time of enrolment as *epheboi* at the age of 13-14. Those providing credentials assert that they belong to the *metropolis*. The relevant documents are from the second and third centuries CE and seem to have been discontinued after the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of 212, when the privileged category perhaps disappeared. From Oxyrhynchus and Hermopolis there are similar documents, asserting a claim to the status of *hoi ek tou gymnasiou* with evidence of ancestry up to three generations or more to a census of the age of Augustus (4/5 CE), or to that of *katoikoi*, the 'six thousand four hundred and seventy-five Hellenic men' whose privileges went back to the Augustan or even the Ptolemaic period. From the same nomes there are requests by former *epheboi* for their sons to be enrolled as an *ephebos*. It emerges that in the province of Egypt the civic status of an individual claiming to be a *Hellen* depended as far as taxation was concerned on enrolment as an *ephebos* and in the *gymnasion*, and that this was strictly registered and controlled.

—

Traditional Romans seem to have disapproved of the Greek ephebic education in general and the practice of nudity in particular.⁴⁸ And as Delorme already recognised in his classic archaeological study of the *gymnasion*, the arrival of Rome also heralded a new phenomenon in the architecture of the ancient city, the eclipse of the *gymnasion* by the heated bath complex, *thermae* or *balaneia*.⁴⁹ The pleasures of the bath and physical exercise rather than individual agonistic sport became the dominant expression of the Roman city:

... when clustered together and coupled with the physical, architectural, and engineering features of the building – the arches, the domes, the aqueducts, and the hypocaust – a public bath offered one

48 See Cic. *Rep.* 4.3-4 (cf. Ennius: *flagiti principium est nudare inter civis corpora*, apud Cic. *Tusc.* 4.70-71); a full list of Roman disapproval is collected in Evans 2022: n. 451.

49 Delorme 1960: ch. 8.

of the most condensed expressions of Roman culture in a single space anywhere in the Mediterranean world.⁵⁰

This created a different context of nudity, which in turn threw up its own problems. The phenomenon of ‘A Jew in the Roman Bathhouse’ has been explored in the groundbreaking work of Y.Z. Eliav, who has shown how the rabbinic rules on nudity and the naked mixing of sexes were formulated in the context not of preventing but of *allowing* orthodox Jews (and especially rabbis) to feel comfortable with access to the Roman baths across the empire. These rules are enshrined in the examples found in the Babylonian Talmud and reflect in turn the general Jewish unease at the earlier dominance of nakedness in the Greek culture of the *polis*.

The architectural history of the *gymnasion* in the Roman period is therefore a history of slow decline or absorption in competition with the bathhouse.⁵¹ We are only beginning to know in detail from the archaeologists, how well supported the activities of the *gymnasion* and *palaestra* remained in the second and third centuries CE, or further into the period of the Christian empire. But certainly, the work of Delorme already showed that many *gymnasia* were transformed into adjuncts of the increasingly complex bath structures, and there seems to have been little specific new building of *gymnasia*. The process will have varied between different parts of the Empire; the *gymnasion* of Amphipolis appears to have ceased to function already around the end of the first century. Often older *gymnasia* were incorporated into new complexes including bathhouses, as can be seen for instance in sites like Sardis, Priene, Miletus and Ephesos:

Overall, continuity appears to be an important factor in the bathing facilities of *gymnasia* in mainland Greece as compared to those in Asia Minor. Only a limited degree of Roman influence can be discerned at certain sites (such as Delphi and possibly Andros). In contrast to Asia Minor, no monumental bath *gymnasion* complexes are known in Roman Macedonia or Achaia ... *Gymnasia* in Roman Greece acted as bastions of Hellenic cultural practices by preserving traditional forms of

50 Eliav 2023: ch. 1; see also Satlow 1997 and Poliakoff 1997.

51 Delorme 1960: ch. VIII (a useful initial survey).

bathing rather than adopting new Roman-style techniques. This is specific to the region, given that comparatively more Roman cultural influences can be discerned in Roman Asia Minor where monumental bath-gymnasium complexes appear.⁵²

—

In the beginning was the Word.
 Superfetation of *to hen*,
 And at the mensual turn of time
 Produced enervate Origen.⁵³

The final 'fall' of nudity in the *polis* is independent of the practice of circumcision. The early Christians disputed among themselves the conflicting claims to membership of the new religion among converts from the Jewish and the other communities: it was discussed at the first council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), and Saint Paul in his letters settled the matter definitively, refusing to recognise the distinction between circumcised and uncircumcised: "Circumcision has value, provided you keep the law; but if you break the law, then your circumcision becomes *akrobustia*. Equally, if an uncircumcised man keeps the precepts of the law, will he not count as circumcised? ... The true Jew is not he who is such in externals, neither is the true circumcision the external mark in the flesh" (Rom. 2.25-29). "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor the foreskin (*akrobustia*) strengthens us, but faith activated through love" (Galatians 5.6); "Was one summoned circumcised? Let him not reverse it. Was he called with a foreskin? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and the foreskin is nothing. But keep to the commands of God. Let each man remain in the state in which he was called" (I Corinthians 57.18-19).

Nudity was a different matter: Christianity brought a new urgency to the purification of *to hellenikon*. However much occasional emperors might claim to protect pagan sanctuaries and pagan values until the Theodosian period of the late fourth century, Christianity increasingly

52 The conclusion of Evans 2022: ch. 5.

53 T.S. Eliot, *Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service*.

taught intolerance of the body: it intensified the Jewish concept of original sin, to maintain that all nudity was a temptation of the human body to evil. And this belief in the corruption of the flesh found expression in the mutilation of statues.

Archaeologists have long been aware that a considerable number of antique naked male statues have been emasculated: originally this was attributed to the prudery of later cultures, whether Muslim or Christian. More recently it has been seen as a small subsection of the systematic purification through destruction of statuary and buildings which were deemed unacceptable to the Christian church.⁵⁴ While this general category of the destruction of the gods of hostile religions is surely correct, like the modern destruction by ISIS of images of Buddha or the temples of Palmyra, it does not entirely explain the concentration on genitalia. And the problem of all forms of damage is not only the distinction between the accidental and the deliberate: it remains that in the case of individual statues it is extremely difficult to establish the time and purpose of any deliberate mutilation. But two examples of the survival of emasculated *groups* of statues whose provenance is known enable us to begin to date and perhaps explain more clearly the activity.

The excavator of Aphrodisias, Bert Smith, has investigated the impact of Christianity and Judaism on the monuments of the city in the course of the changes of civic culture in Late Antiquity.⁵⁵ It was perhaps reasonable that the bishop should try to change the name from the city of Aphrodite to the city of the Cross, Stauropolis. The rebuilding of the temple of Aphrodite as a cathedral to St Michael around 500 CE was perhaps sensible, and one might understand the formal chiselling of the features of those statues which represent gods or goddesses and could be used in secret worship. The occasional scratched graffiti of crosses and Jewish symbols on pagan monuments may be mere signs of individual enthusiasm; but the systematic mutilation of genitalia inflicted on the great first-century *Sebasteion* of Aphrodisias is evidence of an officially authorised act of vandalism not specifically related to religion: the genitalia of all naked statues (usually specifically the penises but not the bollocks),

54 Pollini 2013.

55 Smith 2012. For the complex fate of temples in Anatolia, see more generally Talloen & Vercauteren 2011.

even including those of the naked Julio-Claudian emperors (an act that earlier would have been regarded as the *crimen maiestatis*), were removed without damaging the surrounding sculpture:

The defacing was done carefully, selectively or minimally, and cautiously. Both full defacing and the 'lesser' genital and breast mutilation required planning, resources, and scaffolding. We should place this sanitizing activity probably in the later fifth or sixth century, after the great strengthening of the bishop's hand attested by the conversion of the temple of Aphrodite into a church and before the turmoil in city life and eventual collapse of what remained of the Sebasteion building in the seventh century.⁵⁶

In my travels I discovered that the Museum of Antalya contains an especially fine collection of life size naked statues from the city of Perge; their inscriptions show that these were donated as a group to the monumental South Baths by Claudius Peison in the mid second century CE. At some point every single naked statue has been carefully mutilated, removing all trace of the genitalia (often testicles as well as penises, and in the case of female statues nipples and pudenda).⁵⁷ Although so far largely unremarked by archaeologists, this was again a systematic and careful mutilation by skilled sculptors who were concerned to otherwise protect the nudity of the works entrusted to them. What were their professional emotions as they smoothed out the offending areas so carefully created by their predecessors? The fact that these statues adorned the public baths suggests that their damage should be seen in the same context as the Talmudic discussions, as a sincere attempt by the civic authorities to purify the pleasures of the bathhouse.

56 I suspect that the mutilation may be as much as a century earlier.

57 Wood 2017. The author makes no reference to this prominent feature; but one of these statues is mentioned in the collection of Hannestad 2001.



The weary Herakles: an episode in Antalya Museum (photo Oswyn Murray).

This particular type of sexually targeted damage might seem to be attested on more individual surviving monuments across the empire; but these two examples from the provinces of Asia Minor are so far the only certain evidence for an official and systematic destruction of pudenda; Smith argues that such deliberate damage was mostly confined to the eastern provinces, but others may have their doubts. And, as Smith observes, it requires us to distinguish between the manner of emasculation, whether performed in a state of religious enthusiasm or with official care, attempting to preserve and adapt the beauty of the object.

Late antique statues were not inanimate objects: they were symbols of cultural and political authority, actors in a civic psychodrama. In 387 CE at Antioch, third city of the Empire, they came centre stage. Serious riots broke out as a result of the imperial demand for extra taxes in the form of *aurum coronarium*; unusually they seem to have begun with the city councillors who were responsible for collection; but the populace and even the monks from the caves in the hills joined in, and the bronze imperial statues of Theodosius were torn down. Then panic set in as the

inhabitants tried to flee the city in the expectation of imperial vengeance. In the end after an inquiry and the execution of alleged ringleaders the city was forgiven. In this episode two great orators, Libanius the supporter of Hellenism (who believed that his hero Julian had been murdered by the Christians) and his former pupil John Chrysostom sought to reassure their respective flocks: the tensions and hatred between cultural traditionalists and the dominant Christian communities resonate through the resulting speeches of the two men.⁵⁸

This must be seen as the background to the mutilation of statues, whether for political or religious reasons: statues were the living representation of tradition and power. The ideas behind the specific attack on those bodily areas imagined to arouse sexual temptation and desire have been brilliantly analysed by Peter Brown in his *The Body and Society*; it is surely significant that he singles out the most eloquent exponent of this attitude in eastern Christianity as John Chrysostom.⁵⁹ It is of course related to the Christian attitude to sexual abstinence and female virginity as an essential step towards sanctity, and the abhorrence of all forms of sexual pleasure. The Christian obsession with what society still indeed calls the pudenda (things to be ashamed of) surely heralds the formal end of ancient nudity.

Sophie Remijsen has explored the end of Greek athletics with exemplary care.⁶⁰ Whereas in the age of the Tetrarchs the imperial government had promoted public games, later emperors were no longer interested in much beyond chariot racing. As long as contests in athletics continued, they preserved the 'gymnastic' principle of nudity in a society

58 Lib. Or. 19-22 (Loeb, vol. 2); John Chrys. PG 49.73; cf. Van de Paverd 1991; Leyerle 2020: 126-31. On John Chrysostom I thank Christian Mann for alerting me to Koch 2007, which shows the fascination of Late Antiochene society with the athletic games. See esp. p.139, *Ad populum Antiochenum* 1.8 (PG 49,26): "In secular competitions, these powerful and well built athletes do not appear particularly imposing when they are clad in their oil-slicked robes. However once they have taken off their robes and are led onto the arena naked, they usually astonish the spectators with their well-proportioned limbs."

59 Brown 1988.

60 Petit 1955 ch. III; Remijsen 2015; a detailed discussion of the Antioch Olympics, ib. 93-104.

obsessed with its moral dangers. In the late fourth century the last surviving 'Olympic' games of Antioch (founded in 212 CE) were a major festival at Daphnae, which involved a naked banquet given by the presiding *alytarches*, at which the athletes were unclothed, which was attended by young boys, also naked: this is deplored by the aged Libanius, despite his love of ancient customs and involvement in the games themselves, in his speech *On invitations to festivals*:

17. "It is an honour and a pleasure to fathers that their sons should feast in this manner." But if it is argued that this is not in accordance with the law, but better for a righteous man to do for their sake, how is this not wrong? For we do not honour the victors with any honours, but with those that no-one would criticise. And if anyone were to dishonour the God in order to honour a human, how would he not make a most grievous mistake?

18. We too now declare that this is harmful to the sons, and harmful to the fathers, and indeed to the interests both of sons and of fathers. For if the shame of the sons be an evil how can it be a good to those who begat them? What brings harm how could it be called an honour bringing dishonour to the honoured? And yet I have heard a respectable man pronounce, without having the right to speak because he had no conception of the occasion, to his friends and to himself, that "since the athletes come to the Olympia naked a young man should also be naked at such a public feast. He can keep a little back from the table and look at the legs of the reclining man rather than at what is exposed." Yet we know how Demosthenes revealed that in feasts and among drunken men a young person was abused and how he used it as a powerful witness against the companions of Aeschines.⁶¹

61 The reference is to the famous episode in Dem. 19. 196-198, when Aeschines was alleged to have been present at a Macedonian *symposion* at which a young girl recently enslaved after the sack of Olynthus was abused for being unable to entertain her captors by singing (an episode so damaging that Aeschines was forced to deny it and produce witnesses to show that it was fabricated (2.4; 153-158)); seven centuries later Libanius compares the aristocratic youths of his own day with the girl in their vulnerability to sexual abuse. He goes on to ask, what if your wives and their slaves were to engage in such naked orgies?

19. For to one accepting such harm which is no honour in my opinion, how could he comfortably salute God with his right hand? How is it possible for the recipient to be honoured? I would not deny that there is pleasure for fathers in this. Yet it is to us not a good idea in terms of what benefits the city as a whole to value so highly the pleasure of a few. For if we look at this aspect and consider it alone, the pleasure of a few, and do not investigate it, what is to prevent women also from feasting in common with their maidservants and those from the mill? – even the lowest slaves, who might say that they would especially enjoy and take pleasure participating in the Olympics if they could share in the feast. In praising the better should I not be unable to abuse the baser?

20. Do not yourselves give all and enjoy all without thought of what pleasure you are providing to these men. And if you fathers think it no great matter why should we accept this? If it is a great matter, they act thoughtlessly, and one must not take such people seriously. “But they will regret their sons being not invited and incurring no shame thereby.” It is better for them to forgo a shameless honour rather than enjoy such pleasures (*Or.* 53. 17-20).

In this convoluted passage Libanius is trying to support the Christian rejection of naked boys at the festival banquet against the traditionalist defence of nudity in the celebration of the games. Over a century later John Malalas (*Chron.* 11-12) gives a detailed if imaginative account of these same Olympic games, and records that he was present at their last celebration in 520 CE.

More generally Remijsen traces the slow abandonment of the *gymnasia*, the *palaistrai*, the running tracks and all the other structures of the ancient Greek city designed to serve the sporting activities associated with nudity. There was no sudden prohibition, simply a slow abandonment of activities no longer acceptable to the Christian population. Professional athletes found their opportunities for display and sources of patronage drying up; but it is more difficult to follow the slow disappearance of *gymnasion* structures in education and therefore (if citizenship still mattered) the wider relation between nudity and membership of the *polis*.

So ultimately Gibbon was right to see the ‘Decline and Fall’ of the ancient world view as at least in part a consequence of the triumph of Christianity: the end of the ancient Greek *polis* as a cultural phenomenon and its replacement by the Bishopric can surely be symbolised in the slow decline of male nudity, which ended “not with a bang but a whimper”.⁶²

The consequences were already well recognised in the nineteenth century; they are described by Matthew Arnold in his book *Culture and Anarchy*, where he identifies the great cultural conflict between Hellenism and Hebraism:⁶³

The Discobolus is put here because he is vulgar,
He hath neither vest nor pants with which to cover his limbs;
I, sir, am a person of most respectable connections,
My brother-in-law is haberdasher to Mr. Spurgeon.
*O God, O Montreal!*⁶⁴

—

But let us return to the moment of grandeur: what did *to hellenikon* mean when it spread across the ancient world after the conquests of Alexander? That is a theme that encompasses not just nudity and the *gymnasion*, but also the concept of citizenship, the history of the Hellenistic theatre, the spread of the *symposion*, the system of education that created the Koine dialect, as these were imposed and adapted in their new environments.⁶⁵ It is a huge theme worthy of a cultural Rostovtzeff, which I am too old to embark on now, and can only leave to my successors, but which would surely exemplify the truth that it is religious ideas and the conflict between social customs, not historical events, that determines cultural change. Hellenism is not a matter of conquest and exploitation, but the result of a widespread belief, among both Greeks and those with whom

62 T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men* (1925).

63 Arnold 1869.

64 Samuel Butler, *Psalm of Montreal* (1878), mocking the banishment of a naked statue of Apollo to the lumber-room of Montreal Museum.

65 On the earlier attempt of Schneider 1967–1969 see Murray 1969; cf. Marrou 1965; Hadot 2005.

they came into contact, in the superiority of Greek culture, which sustained the Hellenistic world for almost a millennium. As all modern scholars would agree, its slow transformation is not actually to be seen as a matter of 'decline and fall', but rather of the changing of cultural and religious norms that caused it to cease to be attractive.

Nudity is an important aspect of the ancient Greek *polis* that needs further exploration. For instance there is no archaeological study of the morphology of genitalia even for the purpose of dating; nudity is indeed still an almost tabu subject even in modern culture, involving formal disapproval or at best covert sniggers: even serious researchers seem confused by a Judaeo-Christian conception of disapproval: "the figleaf rules OK".⁶⁶ We need to liberate ourselves from these irrational prejudices: as Thomas Carlyle demonstrated in 1833-34 with his magnificent parody of German idealist philosophy, *Sartor Resartus*, clothing (or its lack) is a serious matter that defines and separates civilizations. It is time to revive 'The Life and Times of Herr Teufelsdröckh'. Why are our modern studies of the ancient Greek *polis* so antiseptic?

It was in this spirit that in 2004 I celebrated with my good friend the completion of his great collaborative work, *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis*, recording the standard institutions of the classical Greek *polis*, in which he already includes some fourteen cities with attested *gymnasia* (but no separate entry for *palaistrai*),⁶⁷ and not a brothel nor a drinking establishment in view, although we know they existed⁶⁸ – how unlike the normal Roman city! – by quoting words borrowed from a competitor in the (now defunct) Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest to create the "opening sentence to the worst of all possible unpublished and unpublishable novels".⁶⁹

66 Barbara Górnicka, *Nakedness, Shame and Embarrassment* (Springer 2016) on Irish nudism; or the works of the feminist rabbi Delphine Horvilleur, on the theme of *Nudità e pudore: En tenue d'Eve: Féminin, Pudeur et Judaïsme*.

67 See Hansen & Nielsen 2004: index.

68 See e.g. Ar. *Nub.* 996; Demosthenes *In Neairam* passim. For the Hellenistic world there is plenty of evidence (still unexploited) for 'houses of pleasure' in the tangled plots of New Comedy, both Greek and Roman.

⁶⁹The web entry in the Bulwer Lytton Essay Prize for 2003 by Rebecca Nagy of Hilliard, Ohio [Harold Goldfinch is the original name].

[Mogens Hansen] froze, his fierce pride at having placed the last brick on what would now be known as the biggest Lego metropolis ever built by one man melting into terror, as from somewhere in the blue plastic streets below him a tiny voice called out, “Hey buddy, where can a guy get a drink in this four-color town?”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aggleton, P. 2007. “‘Just a Snip’”? A Social History of Male Circumcision’ *Reproductive Health Matters* 15.29, 15-21.
- Arnold, M. 1869. *Culture and Anarchy*. London.
- Austin, M.M. 1981. *The Hellenistic World from Alexander to the Roman Conquest*. Cambridge.
- Barclay, J.M.G. 1948. ‘Paul and Philo on Circumcision’ *New Testament Studies* 44, 536-56.
- Bell, H.I. 1924. *Jews and Christians in Egypt*. London.
- Boatwright, M.T. 2002. *Hadrian and the Cities of the Roman Empire*. Princeton.
- Bonfante, L. 1989. ‘Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art’ *AJA* 93, 543-70.
- Brown, P. 1988. *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York.
- Chankowski, A.S. 2010. *L’Éphébie hellénistique*. Paris.
- Delorme, J. 1960. *Gymnasion*. Paris.
- De Marcellus, H. 1978. *The Origins and Nature of the Attic Ephebeia to 200 BC*. D.Phil. University of Oxford.
- Dingwall, E.J. 1925. *Male Infibulation*. London.
- Dover, K.J. 1978. *Greek Homosexuality*. London.
- Eliav, Y.Z. 2023. *A Jew in the Roman Bathhouse*. Princeton.
- Evans, M.P. 2022. *Gymnasia in Postclassical Greece: Change, Continuity and the Built Environment*. Diss. University of Warwick.
- Gauthier, P. 2011. *Études d’histoire et d’institutions grecques, Choix d’écrits*. Paris.
- Gauthier, P. & M.V. Hatzopoulos 1993. *La loi gymnasiarque de Beroia*. Athens.
- Goodman, M. 1989. ‘Nerva, the Fiscus Iudaicus and Jewish Identity’ *JRS* 79, 40-44.

- Hadot, I. 2005. *Arts libéraux et philosophie dans la pensée antique: contribution à l'histoire de l'éducation et de la culture dans l'Antiquité*. 2nd ed. Paris.
- Hannestad, N. 2001. 'Castration in the Baths' in N. Birkle (ed.) *Macellum: culinaria archaeologica: Robert Fleischer zum 60. Geburtstag von Kollegen, Freunden und Schülern*. Mainz, 67-77.
- Hansen, M.H. 1988. *Three Studies in Athenian Demography*. Copenhagen.
- Hansen, M.H. & T.H. Nielsen (eds.) 2004. *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis*. Oxford.
- Hatzopoulos M.V. 2015-16. 'Comprendre la loi éphébarchique d'Amphipolis' *Tekmeria* 13, 145-71.
- Henderson, J. 1991. *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*. 2nd ed. Oxford.
- Höcker, C. & I. Hadot 2004. 'Gymnasium' *Brills New Pauly*. Leiden.
- Hodges, F.M. 2001. 'The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to Lipodermos, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration, and the Kynodesme' *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 75, 375-405.
- Kennell, N. 2015. 'The Ephebeia in the Hellenistic Period' in W.M. Bloomer (ed.) *A Companion to Ancient Education*. Malden, 172-83.
- Koch, A. 2007. *Johannes Chrysostomos und seine Kenntnisse der antiken Agonistik im Spiegel der in seinen Schriften verwandeten Bilder und Vergleiche* (Nikephoros Beihefte 14). Wiesbaden.
- Kyle, D. 2015. *Sport & Spectacle in the Ancient World*. Malden.
- Lazaridou, K.D. & M.B. Hatzopoulos 2015 [2016]. 'Εφηβάρχικος νόμος από τὴν Ἀμφίπολη' *ArchEph* 154, 1-48.
- Legras, B. 2022. 'Statut civique et mobilité sociale dans l'Alexandrie romaine' in S. Lefebvre (ed.) *Quis sum? Provincialis?* Dijon.
- Lewis, N. 1983. *Life in Egypt under Roman Rule*. Oxford.
- Leyerle, B. 2020. *The Narrative Shape of Emotion in the Preaching of John Chrysostom*. California.
- Marrou, H.I. 1948. *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité*. Paris (trans. by G. Lamb, *A History of Education in Antiquity*. Madison, 1956).
- McDonnell, M. 1991. 'The introduction of athletic nudity: Thucydides, Plato, and the vases' *JHS* 111, 182-93.

- Miller, S.G. 2000. 'Naked Democracy' in P. Flensted-Jensen et al. (eds.) *Polis and Politics: Studies in Ancient History Presented to Mogens Herman Hansen on his Sixtieth Birthday*. Copenhagen, 277-96.
- Momigliano, A. 1966. 'Gibbon's Contribution to Historical Method' in *Studies in Historiography*. London, 40-55.
- Montesquieu, Baron de 1734. *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*. Amsterdam.
- Murray, O. 1969. 'Cultural Imperialism' (review of Schneider 1967) *CR* 19, 69-72.
- Murray, O. (ed.) 1990. *Symptotica*. Oxford.
- Murray, O. 2013. 'The Olympic Games and the Cult of Sport' in S. Brownell (ed.) *From Athens to Beijing*. New York, 25-33.
- Murray, O. 2018. *The Symposion: Drinking Greek Style*. Oxford.
- Murray, O. 2024. *The Muse of History*. London.
- Musurillo, H. 1954. *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs – Acta Alexandrinorum*, edited with commentary. Oxford.
- Musurillo, H. 1961. *Acta Alexandrinorum*. Leipzig.
- Nelson, C.A. 1979. *Status Declarations in Roman Egypt*. Amsterdam.
- Paladino, L.C. 2018. *Acta Alexandrinorum: testi scelti con edizione e commento*. Tivoli.
- Petit, P. 1955. *Libanius et la vie municipale à Antioche au IV^e siècle après J.C.* Paris.
- Poliakoff, M. 1993. "'They Should Cover Their Shame": Attitudes toward Nudity in Greco-Roman Judaism' *Notes in the History of Art* 12.2, 56-62.
- Pollini, J. 2013. 'The Archaeology of Destruction: Christians, Images of Antiquity, and Some Problems of Interpretation' *Chaos e Kosmos* (online) 14, 1-29.
- Remijsen, S. 2015. *The End of Greek Athletics in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge.
- Rhodes, P.J. 1981. *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia*. Oxford.
- Robert, L. 1969-1990. 'De Delphes à l'Oxus: inscriptions grecques nouvelles de la Bactriane' *Opera Minora Selecta* V, 510-51.
- Rousset, D. 2017. 'Considérations sur la loi éphébarchique d'Amphipolis' *REA* 119, 49-84.

- Rowlandson, J. & A. Harker 2004. 'Roman Alexandria from the Perspective of the Papyri' in A. Hirst & M. Silk (eds.) *Alexandria. Real and Imagined*. London, 79-112.
- Satlow, M.L. 1997. 'Jewish Constructions of Nakedness in Late Antiquity' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116, 429-54.
- Scanlon, T.F. 2002. *Eros and Greek Athletics*. New York.
- Schneider, C. 1967-1969. *Kulturgeschichte des Hellenismus*. 2 vols. Munich.
- Sherk, R.K. (ed.) 1988. *The Roman Empire: Augustus to Hadrian*. Translated Documents of Greece and Rome. Cambridge.
- Smith, R.R.R. 2012. 'Defacing the Gods at Aphrodisias' in B. Dignas et al. (eds.) *History and Religious Memory in the Ancient World*. Oxford.
- Talloon, P. & L. Vercauteren 2011. 'The Fate of Temples in Late Antique Anatolia' in L. Lavan & M. Mulryan (eds.) *The Archaeology of Late Antique 'Paganism'*. Leiden, 347-87.
- Tcherikover, V. 1959. *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*. Philadelphia.
- Van de Paverd, F. 1991. *St. John Chrysostom. The Homilies on the Statues: An Introduction*. Rome (*non vidi*).
- Veuve, S. 1987. *Fouilles d'Ai Khanoum VI. Le gymnase*. Paris.
- Wood, S. 2017. 'Klaudius Peison anetheken: a Gift of Sculpture at the South Baths of Perge' *AJA* 121, 439-66.
- Zahrnt, M. 1988. 'Antinoopolis in Ägypten: die hadrianische Gründung und ihre Privilegien in der neueren Forschung' *ANRW II.10.1*, 669-706.