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**Greek Athletics and Ruins, Romans and Western Civilization**

By E.G. Vallianatos

Zahra Newby, "Greek Athletics in the Roman World: Victory and Virtue."  
New York: Oxford University Press, 314 pp. \$ 150.

Cyriac of Ancona, "Later Travels." Edited and translated from the Latin by  
Edward W. Bodnar with Clive Foss. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University  
Press. 459 pages, \$ 29.95.

According to the Roman poet Horace, 65-8 BCE: Hellas conquered her wild  
Roman conqueror. The Greeks had long-standing relations with the Romans,  
building poleis, city-states, in Italy and Sicily as early as the eighth century  
BCE. The Romans borrowed their alphabet, art and religion from the Greeks  
and, in time, their athletics.

Greeks used athletics to express their political and religious identity,  
including their adoration of manliness as virtue, which they expected of their  
athletes. Exercising in the nude out in the open and competing during  
religious festivals was both an act of piety towards the gods and a  
characteristic of being Greek. Like philosophy, history, literature, science,  
democracy and the dramatic theater, athletics was a Greek creation that  
distinguished Greeks from non-Greeks.

According to Zahra Newby, Greek influence, including Greek athletics, did  
not flow without tensions between Greeks and Romans. The Romans, after  
all, destroyed Greek freedom, annexing Greece in 146 BCE. But despite the  
difficulties of the relationship, including the misuse of Greek athletics by  
Romans, Greek culture mattered to the Roman ruling class.

Zahra Newby's "Greek Athletics in the Roman World" is a wonderful,  
lavishly illustrated, and pioneering book, an original scholarly study  
documenting a far-reaching impact Greek athletics had in the Roman  
Empire. Romans adopted and adapted Greek athletics for sports, cultural  
elegance, pleasure, and politics. The emperor, says Newby, put himself "at  
the very heart of Greek festival culture," holding the keys to the Greek  
athletics becoming a measure of some kind of Hellenization of the ruling  
class. A city that wanted to start a "crown" or "sacred" game, had to have

imperial approval. So communities in the Roman Empire, both Greek and non-Greek, made Greek athletics a badge of identity, distinguishing themselves from others in the Mediterranean.

Greek athletics was especially important to the Greeks living under Roman domination. The Panhellenic games took their minds away from the harsh political reality governing their lives, allowing them to celebrate their common culture.

Pausanias, a second century Greek geographer from Asia, occupying a central role in Newby's study, documented the Greek nature and seminal importance of athletics in Greek culture. He traveled extensively in mainland Greece, his "Guide to Greece" ("Periegesis Hellados") remaining one of the best descriptions and histories of the country. He says one sees many wonderful sights and hears many wonders in Greece, though one could find nothing more divine than the rites at Eleusis and the athletic contest at Olympia. Eleusis because of the Athenians' yearly fall festival in praise of Demeter and Dionysos in the Eleusinian mysteries that sought the blessings of the gods for the crops that had just been sown and for a good life; and Olympia because of the Panhellenic Olympics, the virtue of manliness in athletic competition, and the celebration of Greek identity.

Pausanias anchors athletics at the core of Hellenism. As a result Olympia becomes the center of the Greek world. Here Greeks came together for their Panhellenic dreams, worshipping Zeus, surrounded by hundreds of beautiful statues and magnificent temples, admiring their past achievements, feeling good about being Greek. History was alive in Olympia, talking to the Greeks in a way they understood. In addition, city-states erected statues of their Olympic victors at home, thus preserving their connection to Olympia – and their memory of Hellenism.

Newby is right to suggest that Greek athletics for the Greeks in the Roman Empire was essential "in the creation of good citizen-soldiers, civic festivals, or the Hellenic lifestyle while incorporating and celebrating the contemporary world." While Greek athletics in Greece accommodated the participation of Roman athletes, it was a fulfillment for the Greeks alone. The Romans, Newby says, failed to make the connection between victory and virtue; neither did the Romans consider the training of athletes at the gymnasium as a necessary step to the upbringing of soldiers and citizens.

Unfortunately, imperial Rome adopted Christianity as the state religion in the fourth century, a policy with catastrophic consequences for the Greeks, their civilization, and, of course, athletics. In 393, the Christian emperor Theodosios I abolished the Olympics.

According to my research in late antiquity, Christianity triumphed in Europe at the expense of both Greek and Roman culture. The end of the Olympics was symbolic of centuries-long destruction of Greek culture. The barbarians even capture Rome in 409, a convenient time to date the millennial darkness that engulfed Europe.

The Eastern Graeco-Roman Empire or Byzantium, which included Greece, escaped the worst forms of darkness while lasting down to 1453. Ancient Greek culture, however, survived largely underground. Nevertheless, Greeks kept copying the texts of ancient Greek writers, guaranteeing that some of those texts would reach our day. That became a reality when, in fourteenth century Italy, scholars, searching the ruins of Greek and Roman culture, discovered fragments of ancient texts. That discovery, the export of Greek texts from the collapsing Byzantium to Italy, and the study of those texts defined a new epoch, the Renaissance.

The “Later Travels” by Cyriac of Ancona (Ciriaco de Pizzecolli, 1391-1452) is a great document about the passion of Renaissance scholars for the Greeks, why they really mattered.

The protagonist of this extraordinary and original story, Cyriac of Ancona, was an Italian merchant and a philhellene scholar who traveled through mainland Greece, the Aegean islands, and Asia Minor on the eve of its horrendous collapse of Greece to the Turks in 1453. Everywhere he went he collected manuscripts, ancient gems and coins. He went to Mount Athos where he bought most of the works of Ploutarchos and other Greek texts from the monks of the Iveron monastery; he examined the texts of Platon, Aristoteles, Galenos (Galen), Hippokrates, Herodotos, Nonnos’s “Dionysiaka,” and archbishop Eustathios’ commentaries on Homeros in the library of Grand Lavra.

Cyriac also copied Greek inscriptions and described the ruins of temples and theaters, making sketches and drawings of buildings and statues. He denounced the neglect of his contemporaries for antiquities, interpreting that attitude as “negligence, slothfulness and lack of humane culture.”

However, he left us with valuable impressions of what he saw. For instance, in 1447, he saw Greeks in southern Peloponnesos, near the ancient polis of Amatheia, celebrating being Greek with an annual athletic contest, “androdromon pentastadion,” in which, “they compete in a men’s footrace over a distance of five stadia, which they run barefoot, mind you, and dressed only in a linen undertunic; and whoever runs more swiftly and comes in first is given ten bronze drachmas, which they call ‘hyperpera,’ the second [is given] five; the third, three; and after that, all the others, in order of finishing, a little cash or a quantity of Hyrcanian meat.”

At another site, this one near the gymnasium of Sparte, he copied a Greek inscription from a marble base: “The city [honors] M. Aurelios Aristokrates, son of Damainetos, priest for his family, 48<sup>th</sup> from Heracles, 44<sup>th</sup> from the Dioskouroi, permanent gymnasiarch ... incomparable citizen.” Herakles was the Greeks’ greatest hero, founder of the Olympics, and son of Zeus. And Dioskouroi (Kastor and Polydeukes) were sons of Zeus and native to Sparte.

Cyriac went to Lakonia in order to see his “very good friend” George Gemistos Plethon, “the most learned of the Greeks in our time.” True, Gemistos Plethon (1362-1452) was a Platonic philosopher who single-handedly tried to resurrect Hellas in Peloponnesos, urging the emperor to discard Christianity for the ancient Hellenic gods, reviving a national Greek state defended by its own citizen-soldiers. However, the Western Christian dismemberment of Byzantium in the thirteenth century, the ever-present Turkish danger, and the Christian policies of the imperial government undermined his efforts, crippling his Renaissance.

Cyriac captures the hopelessness of Greece in the mid-fifteenth century. He says the “once famous Laconian towns” were in “utter collapse or demolition,” a calamity no less severe than the moral decline of the Greeks living in the midst of those ruins. In 1447, he concluded that the Spartans had “fallen completely from that famous pristine moral integrity of the Laconian, Lacedaimonian way of life.” Cyriac reports that “those who dwell in the Laconian land, on the Spartan foothill of Mount Taygetus, in the town of Mistra (which has discarded its ancient name), men who practice a poor sort of agriculture or commerce or ignoble trades and every kind of worthless superstitious rite, are ruled by barbarians or by foreigners.”

This melancholy picture also mirrored the anxieties of a man who was close to the ancient Greeks. Cyriac worshipped Hermes, Zeus, and the Nymphs and Muses, especially Kalliope and Kymodokea, “the most brilliant and kindly of Poseidon’s Nereids.” Yet he felt comfortable with Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. He was a “lover of antiquity,” half polytheist, half Christian, much like the humanists of the Renaissance. His work earned him the title of the father of classical archaeology, influencing more Europeans to continue his search in the land of Greece and Rome, slowly resurrecting our understanding of the genius of Greek culture.

But Cyriac was no apolitical academic. He cared for the Greeks of his time as well, though he shared the biases of the Catholic West against them. Before his visit to Peloponnesos, he saw countless Greek women and girls and boys being sold like cattle in the markets of Macedonia and Thrace. In Adrianople, he came across a slave market selling thousands of Greeks. These were the prisoners of the Turks after the 1431 fall of Thessalonike.

He rushed to Rome where he lobbied his friend pope Eugene IV to declare war against the Turks, whom he described as “barbarians” and “the cruel devourers of Christians.” Eugene followed Cyriac’s advice. First, he invited the Orthodox to join the Catholic and the churches became one in 1439, ending the 1054 schism. Then, in 1443, the pope launched a crusade against the Turks, the year Cyriac went to Greece, exploring the country until 1449. The letters and diaries of those years make up the contents of this memorable volume.

In 1446, Cyriac visited Chios and, instantly, he fell in love with the birthplace of Homeros. He was very impressed with the global export of the gum, the “glittering mastic” of Chios. The world, he said, “was being filled with the scent of this island’s gift, this wholesome exhalation.”

In 1447, the state of the Greek world deteriorated sharply. Cyriac came across Turks settling Gallipoli, a Greek polis facing Asia on the Hellespont or Dardanelles. He says that in Gallipoli he saw “long lines of barbarians laden with booty,” including Europeans trading with the Turks. He was struck with sorrow with the “captives from the Greek nation, miserable in their iron chains.” Some of those enslaved Greeks told him that the Turks had invaded Peloponnesos, devastating the defensive works at the Isthmus. Cyriac blames the Turkish invasion of Peloponnesos to the “slothful neglect of our princes.” “What an enormity!” he says. “Alas for the ancient nobility

of our superior race! For I think that the pitiable disaster inflicted on this people by the barbarians – even if they are Greeks and in a sense deserve punishment – that this lamentable downfall of Christians must be thought of as a serious setback for our religion and a great humiliation of the Latin name.”

True, the Greeks were about to vanish. Pope Eugene’s crusade against the Turks failed because the divided Europeans were unwilling to fight for the Greeks whom they considered heretics worthy of punishment. They had conveniently forgotten that the Greeks’ church, for a moment, had become one with the church of the Catholics. Officially, pope Eugene was the pope of the Greeks as well. The Greeks were to disappear from Christendom. Byzantium’s fall in 1453 dissolved the union of the churches.

The Renaissance, too, came to a premature end, Christianity silencing it in the late sixteenth century. But the Greek genie was out of the bottle. The texts of the Greeks – the relatively few that survived the first Christian fires - - were now in many published books and dispersed all over Europe to be easily tossed into flames. So despite the anger of Christianity, inflamed by the Protestant Reformation, Greek influence survived in Western Europe, spreading beyond Florence, Padua, Rome and Venice.

The books under review give us an honest clue of the Promethean importance of ancient Hellenic culture and the horrific price Greeks paid for losing their freedom to the Romans and, through them, to the Christians. Greek athletics cushioned the conquest of Greece by Rome while the ruins of Greek culture, which the Italian merchant Cyriac of Ancona studied in the 1440s, triggered the Renaissance that made our world.

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