
Original research article

SYNCRETISM OF AGON, ATHLETICISM AND WAR IN ANCIENT GREECE

Violeta Šiljak¹, Vojkan Selaković¹

¹ Alfa University, The Faculty of Management in Sport, Belgrade, Serbia

UDK 796.42(38)
796/799

SUMMARY

Despite the fact that warfare was the most frequent subject of Greek writers and artists as well as the fact that almost every generation of ancient Greeks witnessed or participated in numerous war clashes and campaigns, the features of Greek warfare and terminology used in its description, reveal the context which differs significantly from the usual practice. It may seem unusual, but warfare in the ancient Greece was not induced by conventional motives that used to start conflicts, but by the same drive that led to the creation of ancient athletic Games, which was *agon*, the spirit of competition. The purpose of this work is to point out the agonal nature of the ancient Greeks, which affected their achievements in athletic competitions as well as at the battlefield. The historical method and the method of theoretical analysis were used in this paper. The results of research suggest that there were mutual permeation of athleticism and warfare in the ancient Greece.

Key words: agon, ancient Greece, sport, warfare

Correspondence author

Violeta Šiljak
violeta.siljak@alfa.edu.rs

INTRODUCTION

The ancient Greek term *agon* denotes abstract concept of honorable rivalry expressed through strong desire/drive to compete in the area of physical or intellectual enterprises. Being such, *agon* was one of the principal motivating forces of the all Greek society in which centre was the desire and need to gain glory (*kleos*) as well as honour (*time*) derived from that glory, through public demonstration of one's virtue and excellence (*arête*) in any form. Virtue and excellence demonstrated, especially in the field of athleticism, in minds of the ancient Greeks justified and signified the right to gain political and social authority. According to Aristotle, *arête* belonging to an individual or shared within a group, was one of the virtues believed to entitle an individual to aspire and gain the position of authority and keep it¹, or city-states (*poleis*) to establish domination over their enemies or hegemony², or the rest of Greeks the opportunity to be recognized by society and achieve the ideal lifestyle³. *Agon* whether in the form of war campaign⁴ or athletic competition⁵ - the meaning of the word was associated with these - was one of the most suitable means to measure and evaluate excellence.

SUBJECT, AIM AND METHODS OF THIS PAPER

The subject of this paper is related to syncretism of *agon*, athleticism and warfare in the ancient Greece. The purpose of the paper is to point out the agonal character of the ancient Greeks that influenced their achievements in athletic events and in war. The historical method and the method of theoretical analysis were used in this paper.

¹ Ross, W. D. *The Works of Aristotle* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952), p. 2960.

² Godley, A. D. *Herodotus* (London: W. Heinemann, 1921), p. 63.

³ Ross, W. D. *The Works of Aristotle*, (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952), p. 2761-2787

⁴ Godley, A. D. *Herodotus* (London: W. Heinemann, 1921), p. 231

⁵ Godley, A. D. *Herodotus* (London: W. Heinemann, 1921), p. 281

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Agon as a war motive in the ancient Greece

Desire to obtain material wealth as one of necessary means to express one's *arête* was often stated as major cause of Greek wars. Sometimes war started because of uncontrollable and persistent greed of the Greek aristocracy to widen territories, to plunder, to obtain ransom money or enslave prisoners of war, raise taxes from occupied and subjected territories etc.

However, according to Herodotus, the territories that the Greeks used to fight for were "small pieces of not particularly good soil"⁶ and the ransom money for the captured war prisoners (whose number was insignificant) hardly made any profit, just a little bit higher than a slave's wages.⁷ Arms and armour, though desired and precious rewards, in wars in which casualties were under 5%⁸, were insufficient incentives while loot and plunder of rural areas was usually prevented due to the fact that the territories in question had previously been evacuated. Even the outcome of war that would bring somehow higher income i.e. the occupation of a town⁹ was particularly rare therefore unlikely to be significant motivating factor.

Furthermore, there are numerous instances of obvious indifference towards the possessed territory¹⁰ or the act of its occupation¹¹. These examples imply that material gain and strategic value of a territory were far less significant than demonstration of superiority over enemy through direct military force competition making it the motive to start a conflict.

Actually, from the point of the ambitious Greek aristocracy, especially the one pretending to establish hegemony (e.g. Sparta) nothing abstract or illogical could be found in such behavior. The important aim that had to be achieved was the victory and public acclamation over an adversary. Aristotle noted that "people

⁶ Godley, A. D. *Herodotus* (London: W. Heinemann, 1921), p. 51

⁷ Godley, A. D. *Herodotus* (London: W. Heinemann, 1921), p. 229

⁸ Krentz, Peter. "Casualties in Hoplite Battles" (*Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 26:1, 1985), p. 20

⁹ *Homer Iliad: Translation of Tomo Maretić* (3. edition, published Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1912), p. 307, 366-367

¹⁰ Godley, A. D. *Herodotus* (London: W. Heinemann, 1921), p. 103; Jowett, Benjamin. *Thucydides* (2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), p. 112.

¹¹ Godley, A. D. *Herodotus* (London: W. Heinemann, 1921), p. 229-231

commit the greatest acts of injustice in order to show their superiority, not because such acts are necessary” making the root of all conflicts the greed for more “being it property, honour, glory or all of that”¹². A prosperous society had become ambitious over the time, and that ambition created aggressive despise towards others. The Greeks had the name for that – *hybris*.

“Satiety creates *hybris*”¹³ claimed the ancient authors. Greek wars were not struggles for freedom or survival, but an escalation of rivalry, when each new success brought on the desire for next and larger enterprise. Greek war was *agon* in its most destructive form (Figure 1). Power and material resources were inevitable stakes in endless fighting for hegemony, local, regional or global. The Greeks themselves clearly thought of these conflicts as fights in order to achieve “honour and glory”, as *agon*, enjoyed flattering themselves while thinking of the barbarians from the East that were confound wondering “What kind of people they are when they not fight for money but for the victorious glory”¹⁴.



Fig.1 One of the earliest pictures of massive warfare which was not related to the Greek mythology. A protocorinthian aryballos (an oil pot) around 640 B.C. © Cecil Smith, *JHS* vol.11, 1890

During the conflict itself what was expected was rivalry and competition, towards the enemy with the view of obvious contest between opposed sides, but also among the allies in order to rank them¹⁵. Such approach applied to whole armies and to individuals alike¹⁶. There was even up to a point official selection for the best and most prominent warriors in a battle. Even the upbringing of

¹² Ross, W. D. *The Works of Aristotle* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952), p. 2832-2833

¹³ Podlecki, Anthony J. *The Early Greek Poets and Their times* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), p. 132

¹⁴ Godley, A. D. *Herodotus* (London: W. Heinemann, 1921), p. 25-27

¹⁵ Godley, A. D. *Herodotus* (London: W. Heinemann, 1921), p. 409, 279

¹⁶ Godley, A. D. *Herodotus* (London: W. Heinemann, 1921), p. 231,247,543-545

future warriors was conducted since very early age by athletic exercise and competition¹⁷. Situation did not change, thus in Sparta, for example, apart the usual vertical promotion in military career, only the best of warriors were chosen to become members of *hippies*, the Spartan honorary guard of 300 men; the honour to fight in a war next to the king while protecting him was reserved for those who achieved glory after winning some athletic competitions¹⁸.

The connection between war and athleticism in the ancient Greece

It may seem over-ambitious to conclude that war had shaped the Greek society, but it is evident that it had tremendous influence on athletic competitions and sport culture. Athleticism and war were inseparable in Greece. Both put on test physical and mental abilities, personality and morality, within both areas strong antagonism and stirred up emotions could be observed.

On one side athletic activities complemented war ones, not only because of their obvious contribution to physical training of warrior, extremely important for poor technological aspect of fight, but also because they stimulated and enhanced belligerent spirit essential in upbringing of young men in Greece, especially in some city-states (*poleis*).

On the other side, athletic contests were created as an alternative to war, a substitution whose role was to direct the same drive and accumulated strength of leisurely relaxed warrior population into less dangerous and less lethal activity. Still, warriors, who customarily were the best athletes, "were not allowed to participate in sport competitions unless had temporarily stopped fighting"¹⁹.

However, war and athleticism can be observed as two parallel manifestations of the same highly aggressively expressed drive for competition and as different expressions of the same drive conditioned by warfare or times of peace respectively. Sport competitions and the upbringing of young athletes were affected and shaped by "war-prone environment, preparation for struggle and warfare which included elements of sport activities"²⁰(Fig. 2).

¹⁷ Papapostolou, Metaxia, Pantelis Konstantinakos, Costas Mountakis, and Kostas Georgiadis. "Rites Of Passage And Their Role In The Socialization Of The Spartan Youth." (Choregia: 43-52, 2010), p. 48

¹⁸ Godley, A. D. Herodotus (London: W. Heinemann, 1921), p. 127

¹⁹ Perrin, Bernadotte. *Plutarch's Lives*. (Vol. 2. London: W. Heinemann, 1914), p.92

²⁰ Šiljak, Violeta, Mijatović, Sladjana & Parčina Ivana, "Politics and the Olympic Games", (Topics (Teme) 37(2), 2013), p. 889.



Fig. 2 A warrior helmet with a wreath –an award in the athletic competition. A detail from an archaic black-figured amphora, Atika , 575-550 B.C.



Fig. 3 Development of athletic events followed closely progress in war methods and techniques. Pankration, a warfare skill, became an event at Games in Olympia 648 B.C. A black-figured skyphos (a drinking dish), Atika, around 500 B.C.

Demonstrating his physical predominance at an athletic contest, under condition very similar to those during war²¹ (Fig.3) , a man would announce his ability to participate in a war, survive, protect his family and finally win in a battle. Even the traditional way of celebrating the victory in an athletic competition was directly derived from the customs of sacrificing animals after a military victory in order to honour and thank gods that in such an important moment had supported victorious warriors²². The fact must not be forgotten that the members of traditionally belligerent Doric Greek societies (Corinthians, Crotonians, Argives, Messenians, Cretans and Spartans) had much more victories than any members of any other Greek population at the Panhellenic games.

Competitions were created out of the need to enable survival and establish supremacy over adversary's forces, out of the wish to establish communication among divided tribes²³ and out of need to become recognized in society. Strain, seen as the main means in competition since it could activate all physical and

²¹ Stefanović, Djordje, *Theory and Practice of Sports Training* (Belgrade: Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, 2006), p.11.

²² *Homer Iliad: Translated by Tomo Maretić* (3. edition., published in Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1912), p. 383.

²³ Burnett, Anne Pippin. *The art of Bacchylides* (Cambridge, Mass: Published for Oberlin College by Harvard University Press, 1985) , p. 38.

mental powers in order to achieve the best possible result in the particular event, was defined by the term *áthlos* or *áthlon* meaning a contest, effort, feat after which the athletes received awards²⁴ - is found as the root of present day words athlete and athletics. The term in its original meaning, in its singular form *áthlon* denoted the award itself received for competition²⁵, being it the award for a sport event or war trophy gained in warfare. *Áthlos* as a sport activity, the meaning nowadays closest to us because of the words derived from it which we often use, in Homer's works represented the favourite form of leisurely recreation for Achilles's Myrmidons and Penelope's shameless suitors²⁶. This blurred linguistic border line between different meanings of the term *áthlos* actually reflects the complementary quality of the two worlds of the ancient Greece. Having in mind that the supremacy of the authorities in ruling position as well as their ascension to that position were determined by, among other factors, by their *arête*, any challenge towards that *arête* might have turned into perilous political weapon aimed at home and foreign affairs alike.

At the time of war, as one kind of such a challenge, members of social elite could have confirm their excellence or dominant position through war activities or similar bellicose conflict, acquiring their *kleos* at the same time while accumulating their war trophies which eventually transformed into power. The equivalent to those challenges at the time of peace was agonal athletic contests. Thus athletic competitions, just one of the forms of *áthlos*, relatively quickly, became accepted by all, being incomparably cheaper and significantly less dangerous method of establishing and protecting political and social authority, but at the same time being true to highest ideals of manhood in the ancient Greece. This is supported by the example of Cylon, the son-in-law of the Theagenes, the tyrant of Megara, who tried in 630 B.C. to overtake the power in Athens by force, in an attempt to transform his fame, since he was the Olympic champion, into absolute political power over the whole poleis. The political epilogue of this incident is not our primary concern, but Thucydides's claim that the mentioned coup d'etat, specially its timing is determined if not enabled by Cylon's status of an Olympic champion²⁷.

²⁴ Šiljak, Violeta, *Olympism* (Alfa University– The Faculty of Sport Management, 2013), p.8

²⁵ *Homer Iliad: Translated by Tomo Maretić* (3. edition., published. Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1912), p. 128-136

²⁶ *Homer Iliad: Translated by Tomo Maretić* (3. edition., published. Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1912), p. 396-400

²⁷ *Homer Iliad: Translated by Tomo Maretić* (3. edition., published. Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1912), p. 38

CONCLUSION

The results obtained in this research are based on the observation and clarification of the phenomenon of *agon* among the ancient Greeks, which existed as inseparable from warfare and athletic competitions. Contrary to the common idea of warfare as massive violence whose aim is to acquire certain material gain (money, land, slaves), the Greek wars ignored this common driving force but were motivated by the same drive which was the reason of the Panhellenic athletic contests. The Greek wars as well as the athletic Games were focused escalation of rivalry, the consequence of claims regarding political or military domination or their denial. The worlds of wars and athleticism became complementary at relatively early stage. Even the athletic contest became in a short time, at the time of peace, an alternative way to establish and defend political or social authority, or to reach highest ideals of a community. Thus in order to completely and thoroughly understand and cherish the ancient athletic tradition, it is necessary to recognize and define the motives and ideology behind the sport and warfare in the ancient Greece, as well as their mutual connections in order to avoid sanitizing the history of sport or its selective interpretation motivated by the attempt to adjust it to the contemporary, socially acceptable context.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Burnett, Anne Pippin. *The art of Bacchylides*. Cambridge, Mass: Published for Oberlin College by Harvard University Press, 1985.
2. Butler, Samuel. *The Odyssey*. Champaign, Ill.: Project Gutenberg, 1998.
3. Godley, A. D. *Herodotus*. London: W. Heinemann, 1921.
4. *Homer Iliad: Translated by Tomo Maretić*. 3. Edition, published, Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1912.
5. Jowett, Benjamin. *Thucydides*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900.
6. Krentz, Peter. "Casualties in Hoplite Battles" , *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 26:1, 1985.
7. Papapostolou, Metaxia, Pantelis Konstantinakos, Costas Mountakis, and Kostas Georgiadis. "Rites Of Passage And Their Role In The Socialization Of The Spartan Youth." *Choregia*: 43-52.
8. Perrin, Bernadotte. *Plutarch's Lives*. Vol. 2. London: W. Heinemann ;, 1914.
9. Podlecki, Anthony J. *The Early Greek Poets and Their times*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984.
10. Ross, W. D. "Nicomachean Ethics." U *The Works of Aristotle*, Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952.
11. Ross, W. D. *The Works of Aristotle*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952.
12. Stefanović, Djordje. *Theory and Practice of sport training*. Belgrade: The Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, 2006.

13. Šiljak, Violeta, Mijatović, Sladjana & Parčina, Ivana. "Politics and the Olympic Games", *Teme*, 37(2), 2013.
14. Šiljak . Violeta, *Olympism*. Alfa University – The Faculty of Sport Management, 2013.

СИНКРЕТИЗАМ АГОНА, АТЛЕТИЗМА И РАТА У АНТИЧКОЈ ГРЧКОЈ

САЖЕТАК

Упркос чињеници да је ратовање најчешћа тема античких Грчких писаца и уметника, и да је готово свака генерација античких Грка била сведок или савременик неком од мноштва ратних сукоба и похода, карактеристике ратовања у Грчкој, као и терминологија која је коришћена за њено описивање, откривају контекст који значајно одступа од устаљене људске праксе. Можда неуобичајено, ратовање у античкој Грчкој није било руковођено уобичајеним мотивима иза ове врсте конфликта, већ је, можда изненађујуће, мотив за рат лежао у истом нагону који је створио античке атлетске Игре, *агону*, нагону за надметањем. Циљ овога рада је да укаже на агонални карактер старих Грка који је утицао на њихова достигнућа како у атлетским/спортским надметањима, тако и у ратним приликама. У раду су примењени историјски метод и метод теоријске анализе. Резултати истраживања указују на присутност међусобног прожимања атлетизма и вођења ратова у античкој Грчкој.

Кључне речи: нагон за надметањем, античка Грчка, спорт, рат,

СИНКРЕТИЗМ АГОНА, АТЛЕТИЗМА И ВОЙНЫ В ДРЕВНЕЙ ГРЕЦИИ

РЕЗЈУМЕ

Несмотря на то, что война наиболее общая тема древних греческих писателей и художников и, что почти каждое поколение древних греков было современником какой-то из множества войн и завоеваний, характеристики войн в Греции, а также терминологии, которая использовалась для описания, раскрывают контекст, который значительно отклоняется от обычной человеческой практики. Возможно это звучит необычно, что война в Древней Греции не руководствовалась обычными мотивами этих видов конфликтов, но, как это ни удивительно, мотивом для войн являлся тот же импульс, который создал древние игры, агон, желание конкурировать. Целью данной

работы является освещение агонального характера древних греков, который повлиял на их достижения как в атлетических / спортивных мероприятиях, а также и в военное время. В статье применяется исторический метод и метод теоретического анализа. Результаты исследования указывают на наличие конвергенции атлетизма и ведения войн в Древней Греции.

Ключевые слова: агон, Древняя Греция, спорт, война
