Archaic Greek Poetry and the Ancient Gymnasium

The earliest physical remains of gymnasia in Greece are those in Delphi in the fourth century and the complicated remains at Delos soon thereafter (Glass 1967: 84; Glass 1967: 114). After this point, gymnasia remains proliferate, though indeed few have been fully excavated and assessed. Regardless, there is no clear evidence for gymnasia as architectural forms in the sixth or fifth century. Despite becoming mainstays of the ancient Greek urban landscape from the fourth century on, the architecture of the gymnasium seems to have been a somewhat late arrival. The distinction between the palaistra and gymnasium is sometimes unclear, though in this paper, I treat athletic facilities for training in general (as Glass points out, the differences are often not clear and disregarded by our sources, 1967: 77). In any case, a gymnasium seems to be defined by the larger spaces necessary for practicing the field sports and running.

Tradition locates gymnasia at, among other places, the Academy in Athens from the sixth century (Glass 1967: 60). We have no reason to imagine these gymnasia as incorporating all the elements that would become regular architectural aspects in the fourth and later centuries (e.g., *xystos, paradromis, palaistra,* baths, *apodyterion*, etc.). Still, facilities such as the private palaistra that Plato describes in *Lysis* include rooms and training areas that are similar enough to the physical remains at Delphi and elsewhere. In Athens, of course, and thanks at least to the philosophical tradition, the Academy and Lykeion – importantly, rural sanctuaries (Gauthier 2010: 87) – are the most famous gymnasium complexes, places where physical training and philosophical education were apparently combined. Despite the strong tradition in Plato and others of gymnasia at Athens, there are no physical remains at the Academy or Lykeion that date to the archaic period, and no contemporaneous texts (only later traditions that ascribe, for example, gymnastic rules to Solon: e.g., *Against Timarchos* 114). Indeed, the earliest unambiguous textual evidence for the gymnasium as a *place* is at Theognis 1335-6 when the speaker says he "exercises" (γυμνάζεται, the first use of the word in this sense) and "comes home" (οἴκαδε ἐλθών). Coming home, of course, means that he

went somewhere to exercise; but, where would Theognis' speaker have trained in sixth-century Megara? Where in this imaginary and poetic landscape of Megara was the gymnasium? The evidence from Theognis also confirms that training meant *being nude* in sixth century Megara; also, that the gymnasium was a *place to train* (not a place to receive education, a role it would retain throughout Greek history: see Gauthier 2010: 92). Surely, then, a defined space (if not an architecturally specific one) was necessary if men were to strip down to train (even more so if this practice were, as it must have been at one point, novel).

This paper turns to the textual evidence from the archaic period to begin to tease out the form, meaning, and physical situation of the gymnasium-palaistra, at least as it was imagined in archaic texts, most of which are poetry or song. It is, therefore, a kind of literary pre-history of the archaeologically attested gymnasia of the fourth century and onwards. Textual evidence begins, of course, with Homer, where representations of training occur at least obliquely in the *Iliad* (2.774) and *Odyssey* (4.626). More important, perhaps, is the Homeric use of the word *gymnos*, generally to refer to being unarmored rather than nude (except in reference to the corpse of Hector at *Il.* 22.510 and to Odysseus as actually naked at *Od.* 6.136). Hesiod, too, uses *gymnos* in the sense of naked, though not in connection with training (*WD* 391-2). Homeric heroes, of course, do not stirp down to compete (e.g., *Il.* 23.710), but in some sense, given their skill in relatively technical competitions, they must have trained. From these initial and meagre fragments of evidence, this paper examines how training is represented in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, along with its appearance and the vocabulary associated with it, in archaic lyric and early epigraphical texts.

Works Cited

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