

Gendered Athletics in Greece and Rome

This paper demonstrates that the different reactions to female athletes we can recover in Greek and Roman sources are wholly a function of the differences in how these two societies viewed and constructed binary gender more broadly. Moreover, by investigating the dynamics of gendered athletics in antiquity, we may recover the seeds of contemporary discourse already at work in both Greece and Rome. This paper thus holds relevance for the modern world, in which female athletes are widely recognized as inferior to their male counterparts, an opinion grounded much more in societal perceptions of gendered difference than in any objective account of athletic performance.

While separate research has been done on the fields of Greco-Roman female athletes (e.g. Christensen 2012; Kyle 2014; Scanlon 2021; Tsouvala 2021) and gender (e.g. Pomeroy 1975; Blundell 1995; Foxhall and Salmon 1998; Williams 2010; Goldberg 2021), work remains to demonstrate how the two are interconnected with one another. Given that Greeks and Romans differ significantly in their notions of ideal gendered behavior, this paper is divided into two sections: one focused on female sports in Greece, the other on female gladiators in Rome. Each section first outlines the specific conceptions of binary gender that we can reconstruct as background, in order to explain the motivations that lie behind the reactions to female athletes on display in our evidence. Each section, then, shows that the differences in how gender was constructed in Greece and Rome account for the nuanced range of responses to female athletes.

The most direct way that Greek men proved their masculinity was through sports and competition (Christensen 2012; Kyle 2014; Scanlon 2021). Accordingly, when women did compete – for example, Cyniska, the daughter of the Spartan King Archidamos, who was a two-

time chariot racing champion and the first woman to win in the Olympic Games – their accomplishments were diminished by the Greek authors who mention them: “excellent accomplishments” were an exclusive right solely for men (Scanlon 2021). Cyniska’s victories were attributed to her wealth, while the sources that record her accomplishments go so far as to denounce the honor of chariot racing *tout court*.

In contrast to our Greek evidence, the Romans appear to have had a more complex view of masculinity. Roman masculinity is as much a function of class as it is of behavior: only elite Roman citizens could be true *vir*i (Goldberg 2021). It is against this background that my paper shows that we can nuance the orientation Roman male authors adopted toward female athletes. The Tabula Larinas forbids the gladiatorial recruitment of any female descendants of senators or knights, suggesting that the presence in the arena of elite women is *the* major threat to masculinity. On the other hand, we also have a marble relief from the 1st century CE which depicts two enslaved female gladiators fighting for their freedom. Taken together, our evidence demonstrates that class was a far more important aspect than gender when it came to female athletics in Rome.

Our ancient notices about women’s sports all come to us prepackaged with the biases and assumptions about gender of their (male) authors and audiences. This paper demonstrates that already here we can trace a gendered discourse regarding women’s sports that obtains even today, e.g., in the very labels of “Women’s” Tennis or “Women’s” Soccer in America or, more insidiously, in the political debates over trans athletes. Accordingly, this paper also contributes to the thriving field of reception studies, insofar as it excavates a discursive through-line – connecting Greece, Rome, and the modern world – via the minimization of female athletic prowess.

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