

The Emperors' New Games: An Examination of Imperial Interest in Greek Athletics

This paper considers the changing attitudes towards Greek athletics in the Roman world and the eager participation in *ludi graeci* by some emperors. Philhellenism served a key role in the development of Roman architecture, sculpture, literature and more for arguably all of Rome's history. Greek athletics is one such point of cultural contact that emphasizes this complicated exchange. Livy notes one of the first examples of this exchange in the Book 39 of *Ab Urbe Condita*, when Marcus Fulvius Nobilior brings Greek games to Rome in 186 BCE. The number of *ludi graeci* in the Western part of the empire remained relatively small during the Republic, as senators and political opponents often chastised those who tried instituting the games for polluting Roman culture with Greek elements (Stewart 2007; Crowther 1980). With that said, Greek athletics were popular amongst emperors, many of whom chose to attend, fund, and even compete in the *agonēs* (Valavanēs et al. 2004). This paper will explore the relationship between the emperors and Greek athletics and attempt to create a greater understanding of how emperors sought to benefit from the appropriation of Greek culture.

In the Greek world, athletics were directly connected with the Greek notion of *arête* (Miller 2012). The word is inherent with multiple meanings, not the least of which are excellence, skill, virtue, and valor. This quest for perfection through athletics is necessary to keep in mind when considering emperors and their interest in Greek sport. Athletic triumph and military triumph had long been associated with one another in ancient Greek society, as athletic training was often considered to be a form of military preparation for the Greeks. For emperors who were often validated through military victory, the glory given to victorious athletes was naturally enticing (Newby 2005). This connection to the idea of *arête* and athletics, the

perfection and triumph associated with the athletic victor, helps explain imperial interest in Greek sport.

This paper will explore questions of the athlete as hero, the emperor as athlete, and visual imperial rhetoric associated with athleticism. In addition to considering direct participation of emperors in athletic competitions, it will examine imperial patronage of the Greek circuit games. Finally, it will consider the institution of *ludi graeci* in Italy, with particular attention given to the Sebasteia, Neroneia, and the Capitoleia. Ultimately, through the analysis of the emperors' various connections to Greek athletics, this paper will demonstrate how emperors capitalized on the idea of immortal heroism placed on athletes to substantiate the idea of their enduring victories.

While the cultural exchange between the Greeks and Romans often focuses on processes of "Romanization" and the imbuing of Roman practices into Greek culture, Greek athletics offers a look at what the exchange looked like going in the other direction. Ultimately, the virtue and the Greek concept of *arête* imbedded in Greek sport proved enticing to the principate. The imperial involvement in Greek athletics shows a much deeper participation in the Greek world than the mere adoption of a particular spectacle or cultural practice; it demonstrates conscious appreciation and facilitation of Greek culture by those in the highest seat of power at Rome.

Bibliography

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