

Athletic Equipment: Objects of Praise, Narrative, and Dedication

Athletic objects are scattered across excavation reports, museum catalogues, and private collections as they were across sanctuaries and sites. There is no recent and comprehensive study of ancient Greek athletic equipment, and those that exist are over one hundred years old (e.g., Jüthner 1896) or selective (the *Quellendokumentation zur Gymnastik und Agonistik im Altertum* series [e.g., Lavrencic, Doblhofer, and Mauritsch 1991] devotes only five pages to equipment). This paper is the beginning of a comprehensive analysis of athletic equipment (here only from the Archaic through Hellenistic periods), from its representation in literary sources, to the question of why and when athletic equipment was dedicated, whether and why it was inscribed in prose or verse, and what happened to athletic equipment before and after competition.

My goal in this paper is twofold: first, to begin to understand how ancient Greeks thought about objects related to the athletic milieu, especially those that had been used in significant victories and been dedicated in significant locations; second, to consider how objects might motivate narratives associated with them, or act as prompts for stories. In order to understand both of these aspects of actual dedications of athletic objects, I turn first to examples from literature and build upon the rich scholarship on Homeric objects (e.g., Canavero 2018, Grethlein 2008): the bow of Odysseus in *Odyssey* 21, the discus used by Odysseus in the Phaiakian Games of *Odyssey* 8; but, I also examine Pindar's description of Karrhotos' reins in *Pythian* 5. I supplement these verse examples of important objects from competitions with the limited descriptions of athletic objects found in Pausanias' discussion of dedications at ancient Olympia. Pausanias mentions *halteres* (jumping weights from the pentathlon) in concert with three statues

that hold jumping-weights (5.26.3, 5.27.12, 6.3.10); he also discusses an inscribed discus when he describes the Disc of Iphitos that records the Olympic Truce (5.20).

With these examples in mind, the remainder of the paper considers some dedicated objects from the discus and jump of the pentathlon and some from equestrian competition along with other objects from the gymnasium like strigils. By closely examining uninscribed objects and by reading inscribed objects, this paper tries to understand the myriad meanings behind dedication of athletic equipment. Various discuses and *halteres* are extant from the Archaic and Classical periods, some incised with images, other inscribed with short pieces of prose, and others with longer verse epigrams. In the case of equestrian competition, while leather reins may be expected to have degraded over time in a sanctuary (hence the necessity for Pindar to immortalize them in song in *Pyth.* 5), numerous parts of chariots have come to light in Olympia, Nemea, and Isthmia, whether rims or wheels from winning chariots. Actual components of a chariot, however, are not the only objects of equestrian significance to be deposited at Panhellenic sanctuaries. Votive chariots and votive chariot wheels have been found at, among other places, Nemea and Olympia. Some of these miniatures have been inscribed and must be imagined as surrogates for the light wooden chariots that charioteers drove to victory. Strigils, while not exclusively athletic objects, are also a relatively frequent find, and they too are often inscribed. Since strigils were given as prizes at some competitions, they may have been appropriate dedications for victories: e.g., in the midst of the march up country described in Xenophon's *Anabasis*, the Greek army of Cyrus the Younger stopped to observe the festival of Lykaian Zeus with sacrifice and games (*Anab.* 1.2.10).

In short, then, this paper aims to outline a method of understanding athletic objects both as objects and as special dedications that played role in outstanding events and which may, therefore, prompt narratives.

Bibliography

Canavero, L.G. *Women of Substance in Homeric Epic: Objects, Gender, Agency*. Oxford University Press, 2018

Grethlein, J. "Memory and Material Objects in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*." *JHS* 128 (2008): 27-51.

Jüthner, J. *Antike Turngeräthe*. Alfred Hölder, 1896.

Lavrencic, M., G. Doblhofer, and P. Mauritsch (eds). *Diskos*. Böhlau, 1991.