

The Aesthetics of Muscle and the Performance of Strength in Roman Culture

This paper examines the public performance of physical strength and musculature within popular culture in Rome, and argues that the aesthetic value of muscle and fitness (including erotic aspects) was a key component of Roman enjoyment of athletics. Scholarship on ancient athletic culture has tended to focus on Greek practice (Harris 1964, Kyle 1987) even when analyzing erotic interest in athletes (Scanlon 2003), and studies of the aesthetic appreciation of muscular bodies tend to favor the Greek athletic world (Crowther 2004, Crowther and Frass 2010). Scholars have given less attention to Roman interest in muscle and fitness; although gladiatorial studies (e.g., Poliakoff 1987) have noted an erotic facet to the viewer experience (typically associated with the violence of the sport), research has largely ignored the notion of aesthetic appreciation of muscle as an end in itself. This oversight limits our understanding of the appeal of Roman athletics and unnecessarily prioritizes certain strength performances (gladiators, boxing) over others (strongman demonstrations, bodybuilding) within Roman popular culture. Furthermore, by situating physical culture more broadly among the aesthetic activities of the Romans, we can better understand references to the visual appeal of muscle in Roman literature.

Demonstrations of physical strength were a popular form of public performance in Rome. Vinnius Valens lifted full carts and stopped wagons pulled by pack animals, and included illustrations of his feats of strength on his tombstone (Pliny *NH* 7.82); he was famous enough to be referenced by Horace and known by Maecenas and Augustus (Deroux 1989). Pliny notes several historical instances of Roman strength performance (*NH* 7.81-83, cf. Martial 5.12), including one specifically demonstrated on the stage (*per scaenam*); these were not informal or

impromptu deeds but legitimate public exhibitions. Varro also composed a work compiling such public examples of remarkable strength. One first century BCE Roman strongman, a Tritanus, was still famous centuries later as an exemplar of strength (*Hist. Aug., Quad. Tyr.* 4.2-3). Even the Roman habit of exercising in the Campus Martius was understood as a public performance, comparable to the Muscle Beach phenomenon of midcentury America (which, as Wyke 1997 demonstrates, itself had classical pretensions).

These performances of strength were rooted in Roman aesthetic appreciation of musculature, which manifested itself in other ways (beyond traditional scholarly evidence like statuary). A popular Roman admiration for male muscle motivates comments by Quintilian (10.1.3) and Seneca (*Ep.* 80.2), and Cicero on multiple occasions (e.g. *Orator* 228, *De Off.* 1.144) admits that athletes' bodies can be aesthetically pleasing; Quintilian even mocks those who think athletes' muscular frames are gross and unnatural (12.10.41). Pliny records a strongman known for showing off impressive vasculature (*NH* 7.81) and mentions the growing practice of "throwing the neck back to show off the muscles of the chest" (*pectorosa cervicis repandae ostentatio*, *NH* 14.140). Simply put, many Romans liked to look at brawny bodies.

We can better understand the erotic attractions to men in Latin love poetry in light of this mainstream visual appeal of muscle. Scholars have previously noted the erotic longing directed toward athletic male bodies in various poems of Horace (Leach 1994, Oliensis 2007), which runs counter to scholarly assumptions about the ideal features of youths in pederastic relationships. Nappa 2018 wonders if Propertius 1.20's depiction of Hylas as a virile athlete yet passive participant in love with an older man may have reflected real life Roman practice, which in light of the subculture of strength performance in Propertius's time can be more confidently asserted. An analysis of physical culture at Rome which considers the aesthetic appeal of muscle and

strength can better explain Roman attitudes toward athletics and help us interpret references to athletics in contemporary literature.

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