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Nigel James Nicholson

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The memorial of Polydamas of Scotussa, victor in the pancration in 408, seems to have been a favorite with visitors to Olympia in the imperial period. Polydamas' statue was made by Lysippus and was one of the tallest at Olympia, but the monument's draw lay elsewhere. Many thought it would cure their fever, but many others stopped to look at the large pedestal, where, in the inscription and in relief, were narrated many of the victor's colorful feats. Polydamas, it was said, had killed a lion bare-handed, stopped a speeding chariot by grabbing it as it went by, killed three of the Persian king's bodyguards whom he had challenged to fight him three against one, and held onto the hoof of a bucking bull until it came away in his hands.¹

Polydamas' memorial may suggest that almost anything could be included in a victory memorial, but the content of these memorials was in almost all cases carefully controlled. Everything had to support an aristocratic ideology of athletics – Polydamas' memorial, with its list of his Herculean labors, elevates the victorious athlete to the status of a hero – and what did not support this ideology was rigorously excluded. These exclusions are of as much interest as the inclusions, and this study examines one of them, the exclusion from victory memorials in the late archaic and early classical periods of some of the personnel involved in the victories. For although these victory memorials could speak of the victors at length, they were almost entirely silent concerning the drivers, jockeys, and athletic trainers who helped them win.

The root cause of this silence was the lack of a real relationship between the patrons who sought the victories and the charioteers, jockeys, and trainers who were instrumental to their quest. In the late

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[More information](#)

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archaic and early classical periods, few of these sportsmen had any lasting relationship with their patrons; they were unlikely to have known them before the period of their service and had little expectation that their connection would continue once that service was over. Most sold their services to a number of patrons over their careers, and some trainers must have sold their services to several patrons concurrently. They were, in short, professionals; what relationship they had with their patrons was constituted by a commodity exchange, the exchange of their labor for a wage.

The use of professional charioteers, jockeys, and trainers to secure victory in the various events posed two significant problems for the aristocratic patrons who won the great majority of the victories.² First, the aristocrats' reliance on professionals to secure their victories undermined a central tenet of aristocratic ideology, that the qualities necessary for victory – the favor of the gods, determination, character, the intelligent application of wealth, and, in the gymnastic events (that is, the athletic, as opposed to equestrian or musical events), strength, endurance, and skill – were mostly the exclusive possessions of a few aristocratic families, whose new members possessed these qualities primarily by virtue of their birth into these families, and not because they had learned or invented them.³ As professionals, however, the charioteers, jockeys, and athletic trainers circulated with little restraint, and so exposed as false the idea that the qualities needed for victory were anchored within these few families; what was crucial now appeared to be the right personnel, not the right character, talent, or divine favor, and this personnel was clearly mobile, available to anyone who could pay their wages, not only to the aristocratic clans. This revelation had repercussions far beyond stadia and hippodromes, since the privileged political and social position of these clans was justified in part by identifying the qualities necessary for athletic victory with the qualities necessary for the exercise of political power.⁴ If these qualities were not the exclusive preserve of these clans, then there was no reason they should have a greater share of that power or a superior social position.

Second, aristocrats regularly denounced commodity exchange.⁵ Indeed, their opposition to this mode of exchange was so central to their identity that their use of professionals to secure athletic victories must have generated something of a crisis in their self-understanding. Their

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[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

denunciations of commodity exchange were not without reason: the spread of commodity exchange did, in fact, threaten their power, since it allowed individuals to bypass the traditional networks of reciprocity and redistribution that the aristocrats largely controlled, and so weakened their control of society and of the movement of goods and services within it.⁶

The services of charioteers, jockeys, and trainers had not always been commodified; in the earlier part of the sixth century and before, these services must have been typically supplied by family members, friends, slaves, bondsmen, or other members of the patron's estate. But as the services become increasingly available for purchase, the aristocratic clans that had a tradition of competing in the games were confronted with a difficult problem. On one hand, the use of professionals was extremely awkward; on the other hand, the commodification of these services offered buyers access to a much larger pool of experienced and skilled sportsmen, so that to keep aloof from such exchanges meant that patrons would in most cases have to compete at a disadvantage. Those aristocrats who were not lucky enough to have one of the leading charioteers within their circle of family or friends or on their estates had only two real options. They could simply withdraw from such competition and focus their energies on other forms of display that could justify their position in society, as King Agesilaus of Sparta was to do in the fourth century;⁷ or, as most of them did with trade more generally, they could make the most of the benefits of commodification, but make use of whatever resources were at their disposal to disguise their engagement in such exchanges.

One especially suitable resource was the victory memorial, which developed during the sixth century, presumably to meet the aristocrats' demands for media through which to represent their newly problematic victories in ways that made them accord with aristocratic ideology. Ironically, the poets, sculptors, and vase makers who produced the memorials were also largely professionals from the late archaic period on,⁸ so that the victors found themselves engaged in the rather contradictory activity of hiring professionals to disguise their hiring of other professionals. Typically, the disguise took the form of a simple erasure: the memorials removed the professionals from the victory by ignoring (or trivializing) the role these sportsmen played in the victories. The

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[More information](#)

ARISTOCRACY AND ATHLETICS IN ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL GREECE

fact that charioteers, jockeys, and athletic trainers were not named in victory memorials was thus not the result of their poverty so much as of the ideological battles in which their patrons were involved.

Almost all the competitors in the equestrian and gymnastic contests relied on others in some significant way to secure their victories. In the sixth century, there were only two equestrian events at Olympia, the horse race and the four-horse chariot race, but at smaller festivals there were probably many more options: in the early fourth century a two-horse chariot race and a four-foal chariot race were added to the Olympic program, races for mares only were held at various local festivals, and the Panathenaia offered a sequence of races for some sort of cart other than a chariot.⁹ In the horse races owners never rode their horses (youths served as jockeys), and in the chariot races it was rare for owners to drive. Some owners did drive, however, and some met with success, especially in the minor festivals, where there was a greater variety of races and the fields were smaller and less competitive: in the first part of the fifth century, Herodotus of Thebes won six local victories, all in four-horse chariot races, serving as his own driver,¹⁰ and in the early fourth century Damonon of Sparta won forty-three local victories, twelve in the four-horse chariot race and thirty-one in the chariot race for full-grown mares, clearly something of a specialty.¹¹ To judge by the memorials from the late archaic period, however, victories at the major contests were extremely rare: memorials make it clear when a victor drove his own chariot, but only Herodotus of Thebes, in a victory at the Isthmian games, is explicitly credited with driving his own chariot.¹² Damonon had no success at the Panhellenic venues.

At the beginning of the fifth century two further equestrian events were introduced at Olympia, the mule-cart race and the mares' trotting race, the *kalpe*. Both events seem never to have been fully accepted and were discontinued half a century later.¹³ The mule-cart race certainly followed the pattern of the chariot race, with owners employing drivers, while the obscure *kalpe* probably resembled the Olympic horse race, rather than the *apobates* race at the Panathenaea, which did require the competitors to take part.¹⁴ Both races involved a mix of riding and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

running, but there the similarities end: in the *kalpe*, only one person was involved, and he rode the horse and then held its bridle as he ran to the finish, while the *apobates* was a chariot race, involving a charioteer and a second athlete, dressed as a hoplite, who dismounted from the chariot and ran to the finish.¹⁵ Moreover, the festivals in which the two events were held must be sharply distinguished: unlike the Olympics, the Panathenaea was located in a particular city and explicitly promoted its interests; the *apobates* race was, in fact, one of several equestrian events at the festival restricted to Athenian citizens.¹⁶ Such events were opposed to the traditional equestrian contests open to all Greek competitors: whereas the open contests did not concern themselves with the physical abilities of the competitors, the citizen-only contests sought to demonstrate the city's martial prowess.

In the gymnastic events, that is, the combat events (boxing, wrestling, and pancration), the running events (the stadion; the *diaulos*, or two-length race; the *hippios*, or horse-course race; the *dolichos*, or long race; and the hoplite race), and the pentathlon,¹⁷ trainers provided invaluable assistance. All these events required a technical mastery that would be hard, if not impossible, to develop or sustain on one's own; moreover, trainers, at least on occasion, traveled with the athletes to competitions and attended their events.¹⁸ It is generally accepted that the youths who sought to compete in the combat sports used trainers, but it is rarely admitted that other athletes used them too. Chapter 6 argues, however, that not only did youths use trainers for the other events, but most athletes continued to use them when they graduated to the open contests.¹⁹

We should not imagine some Edenic time early in the history of Greek athletics when competitors drove their own chariots and had no need of trainers; the use of drivers, jockeys, and trainers had always been an integral part of the different events for most competitors. This is clearest for the horse race, in which youths served as the jockeys, but there are also early references to the use of specialist charioteers in chariot races: although in the *Iliad* the leaders drive their own chariots during the funeral games of Patroclus, elsewhere Nestor speaks of a team of horses that Neleus had sent off with a charioteer to compete in some games (and which Augeias impounded) and Agamemnon's horses seem to have been winning prizes without him.²⁰ Further, the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ARISTOCRACY AND ATHLETICS IN ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL GREECE

social function of equestrian competition seems to have been precisely to allow those from the elite who were too old to compete as athletes to continue to compete.²¹ As for trainers, the earliest to be recorded, a pancration trainer named Eryxias, is linked to a victory in 564,²² and, although this is recorded only in a late source, trainers must always have been a prerequisite for success in the combat sports, even if they may have been less crucial in the running events.

It would thus be odd if the use of drivers, jockeys, and trainers constituted a problem in itself; yet in the late archaic and early classical periods, 550 to 440, these figures were indeed a locus of concern. What generated this concern was the general commodification of their services during this time, combined with a general perception that these services were central to success in the event in question. The process of commodification should be traced not so much in the objects used to remunerate the charioteer or trainer as in the nature of his relationship with his patron. Certain forms of remuneration, such as a wage, strongly suggest that the object of exchange has been commodified but cannot be taken as definitive of this.²³ Rather, commodity exchange is defined by the lack of an enduring relationship between the parties to the exchange. In gift exchange, in principle, no transaction is singular or complete but is always made in the expectation of continued exchanges; it establishes a relation between the subjects of the exchange, not the objects.²⁴ Commodity exchange, however, implies the reduction of such personal costs; there is no expectation that a lasting relationship is established. What must primarily be examined to judge the commodification of the work of trainers, jockeys, and charioteers is, therefore, the depth of the relationship between these figures and their patrons.

Trainers certainly received wages for their work in Athens by at least the 450s: Plato records that Thucydides, the son of Melesias, spent money on the trainers Xanthias and Eudorus for his sons, who must have been born around 470.²⁵ What is more significant is that the relation between the trainers and their charges appears tenuous throughout the fifth century. There is no suggestion that Xanthias and Eudorus were chosen because they were friends or relatives of Thucydides; indeed, Plato suggests that their qualification was simply their quality as wrestlers. This is all the more surprising given that

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

Thucydides' family probably had a fine pedigree in coaching wrestlers: his father, Melesias, a successful pancratiast in his own right, should probably be identified with the Melesias celebrated by Pindar in 460 for having guided his charges to thirty wins, a large proportion, apparently, in wrestling contests,²⁶ and Thucydides himself may have been a good wrestler.²⁷ Melesias offers an excellent illustration more generally of the shallow relation between patron and trainer in this period: he must have worked for a large number of families to amass such a record, and it is not likely that he was closely connected to them all. Pindar tells us of three different clans that he worked for, the Blepsiads, Bassids, and Theandrids; all are Aeginetan.²⁸ There is some reason to believe that Thucydides, Melesias' son, had a close relationship with the Aeginetan aristocracy, perhaps as a proxenos of Aegina,²⁹ but there is no reason to believe that this relationship with the island preceded his father's coaching activity there. Rather, it seems more likely that Melesias was drawn to the island by the Aeginetan clans' demand for high-quality coaching in wrestling and pancration and their willingness to pay handsomely for it, and that this initiated relations between his family and Aegina. Consequently, although Thomas Figueira sees Melesias' training as a form of patronage of the Aeginetan aristocracy (and thus, presumably, not a paid activity), other scholars view him as a professional, although perhaps one that was not denigrated as a wage earner.³⁰

A second Athenian trainer employed in Aegina is also recorded, Menander, and in praising him Pindar suggests that Athens provided the lion's share of the coaches of combat sports in this period, which implies that the coaches had little or no prior relationship with the patrons for whom they worked.³¹ Bacchylides, in his ode for the same victory, claims that Menander's charges have had frequent successes at Olympia;³² such a record at Olympia can only have been achieved by coaching youths from a number of families in Aegina and Attica, and Menander cannot have been connected to them all.³³

Some training was surely done in-house, by friends or family members with the appropriate skills and experience, but in the late archaic and early classical period, it must have been rare for athletes to find success at the major festivals without having availed themselves of the services of a professional trainer, just as it was rare for successful

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ARISTOCRACY AND ATHLETICS IN ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL GREECE

competitors in the chariot races at such festivals to drive their own chariots. Consequently, the majority opinion that successful athletes hired trainers in the late archaic and early classical period should be upheld.³⁴

For the commodification of charioteers there is less evidence. Just as it was rare for owners to drive their own chariots in the major games, it also seems to have been rare for friends or family to drive: as with the owners, memorials seem to have taken some trouble to make it clear when this happens, but only two such memorials remain, suggesting that the vast majority of chariots were not driven by friends or family.³⁵ This leaves members of the owner's estate or hired drivers, and at least in the second half of the fifth century the latter seems to have been the norm: according to Plato, Lysis' father, Democrates, who was part of one of the most successful chariot-racing families in Athens in the fifth century, with victories at the Pythian, Isthmian, and Nemean games, employed a hired charioteer, something Plato presents as entirely to be expected.³⁶ The practice, evident in the last quarter of the fifth century, of entering multiple chariot teams in a single competition also suggests that it was usual to hire charioteers: as the example of Alcibiades' massive entry in the Olympics of 416 demonstrates, some of these teams were purchased from far afield, rather than bred in-house, and it is a fair assumption that charioteers came with them.³⁷ There is no evidence that multiple entries were made earlier in the century,³⁸ but one of the factors that prepared the ground for this practice was surely the ready availability of drivers, generated by their commodification. From the late archaic period itself, the only direct testimony for the relationship between a charioteer and his patron is Pindar's *Isthmian* 2. Pindar describes a charioteer, Nicomachus, who drove for more than one patron, but the patrons he speaks of, Theron and Xenocrates, are brothers, so that Nicomachus' circulation follows the tracks of kinship.³⁹ Pindar's portrait is, however, likely to be a mystification of the circumstances of Nicomachus' employment; the charioteer was almost certainly a professional who worked for a number of other patrons also, although the scholiast's claim that he was Athenian is fabricated.⁴⁰

There is thus little to go on with charioteers because, unlike the trainers, they were carefully ignored in almost all our sources. Yet

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

there are good reasons to accept that charioteers sold their services. For something to become a commodity, as Arjun Appadurai argues, there must be a context, such as a market, where it can be converted into a commodity, and there must be a general perception that it is appropriate for that thing to become a commodity⁴¹; both conditions are satisfied for competitive chariot driving. First, the games themselves provided an excellent venue for the charioteers to sell their services: owners, or their representatives, would regularly congregate at a place where the charioteers displayed their abilities. Second, it is clear that a general perception that athletic services could be bought and sold had developed by the late archaic period; not only were trainers selling their training in this period, but some athletes were selling their services also. After winning victories in the Olympic stadion and diaulos in 488, Astylus, the most successful Olympic athlete in the fifth century, was induced by Gelon or Hieron to change his civic affiliation from Croton to Syracuse; as a Syracusan, he won two more double victories in the stadion and *diaulos*, as well as at least one victory in the hoplite race.⁴² Another highly successful runner, Ergoteles, may also have been tempted by the wealth of the Sicilian tyrants: after being exiled from Cnossos, he settled in Himera, a town apparently under Theron's control;⁴³ it is unclear whether he had already established himself as a leading runner, but at Olympia he proclaimed himself a native of Himera on the memorial recording his eight Panhellenic victories in the long race, two at each festival.⁴⁴ Given these developments in the way in which athletics was valued, and given the potential of the games to serve as a market, the opinion of many scholars that in the late archaic period the majority of charioteers was hired can be accepted.⁴⁵

Whether there were contexts in which a jockey's services could be bought and sold is less clear. The fact that youths took the role of the jockeys meant that jockeys had only brief careers, which meant that there would have been little point in scouting out the most experienced jockeys at the major festivals. This in turn suggests that victors were constrained to draw on local resources, especially their own estates. There is no reason to expect all aspects of athletics to become commodified at roughly the same time; indeed, the horses themselves only become commodified in the late fifth century.⁴⁶ Yet the prestige of a victory in the horse race, although not equal to that

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ARISTOCRACY AND ATHLETICS IN ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL GREECE

of a victory in the chariot race, was so significant that it is hard to imagine that the same owners who hired the best charioteers in their bid for chariot victories would not have employed similar methods in their bid for glory in the horse race. Moreover, it is clear from the memorials themselves that jockeys, like charioteers and trainers, were a source of considerable anxiety to the victors, which points to some sort of implication in commodity exchange, with either their services or themselves for sale. We should perhaps imagine a more localized market for jockeys than for the charioteers, restricted in size by the speed with which the information about the jockeys became out-of-date. There were so many local competitions each year that a successful jockey would certainly have had plenty of opportunities to catch an owner's eye before he became too large for a racehorse.

There are, therefore, compelling reasons to conclude that the services of athletic trainers, charioteers, and jockeys became increasingly commodified in the late archaic period. In their increasing circulation, these athletes thus mirrored the artists who commemorated the victories they helped their patrons win. Artists like Pindar, Simonides, and Pythagoras of Rhegium were not tied to a single patron or his family for any length of time, but served many patrons over their careers, often commemorating several victories concurrently⁴⁷; and just as, prior to the commodification of their services, most poets must have been drawn from among each patron's family, clan, friends, household, and estate, so, in the first half of the sixth century, must have most trainers, jockeys, and charioteers. The bulk of the charioteers were probably drawn from the slaves, debt bondsmen, and tenant farmers on the aristocrat's estate, and most of the trainers probably came from his family or friends, since they had themselves probably been competitors, or at least potential competitors. Traces of this earlier use of friends and kinsmen as trainers (and as poets) survive in the ideology of Pindar's odes.⁴⁸

Many developments created the conditions in which the services these sportsmen provided could be commodified: the spread of trade fostered the propensity to view things as commodities, the increased availability of coinage allowed wealth to be transported more easily,⁴⁹ and the increasing numbers of athletic festivals offered convenient markets. The transformation was not, however, smooth or uniform.