Introduction

The end of a success story

Around AD 250 athletics was a significant part of civic life from southern Gaul and northern Africa to Syria and Egypt. Within this broad area, exercising in the gymnasium was a beloved pastime among those members of ancient society who could afford to be (occasionally) at leisure. Hundreds of *agones*, contests for athletes and/or performing artists, were organized by almost as many cities. Though some of these competitions could look back on centuries-old traditions, most had been founded only a century or even a few decades before, as part of a phenomenon described by Louis Robert as the "agonistic explosion" of the imperial age.[1] By about AD 350 most of these hundreds of games are no longer documented and by about 450 only one *agon* seems to have remained, the Olympics of Antioch. The agonistic explosion of the imperial period was, in other words, followed by an equally noteworthy implosion in late antiquity.

This rather dramatic change across the Mediterranean has never been studied comprehensively. Not only has it been insufficiently examined why these games disappeared, but no one has even attempted to chart this evolution chronologically and geographically. Thus far, discussion has focused solely on the fate of a handful of famous games. Yet the end of Greek athletics cannot be identified with the end of one symbolic contest. Therefore, this book will not be about the end of the ancient Olympics, nor about the end of any other individual contest, but about the end of competitive athletics as a whole. Together, the hundreds of contests across the Mediterranean formed one big circuit. All contests had their own spot on a four-year calendar, so the thousands of competitors knew where to go at each time of the year. They traveled from one contest to the other, from province to province. To attract the real champions, contests depended at

[1] Robert 1984: 38.

least as much on the success of neighboring games as on their own reputation. If we want to understand how this all fell apart, we need to understand first how this intricate system once had functioned and supported agonistic growth.

Coubertin's incentive quoted above as the epigraph to this book left no impact in scholarly circles.[2] The neglect of the final phase of Greek athletics is to a certain extent surprising, as the disappearance of competitive athletics has considerable symbolic value. In around 200 in Edessa, just outside the Roman Empire, Bardesan characterized all peoples by their most striking habit. The Greeks were those who practiced athletics.[3] Athletics was indeed one of those strikingly typical practices that set their culture apart from other cultures. The demise of the athletic contests can thus be considered symptomatic as well as symbolic of the end of ancient Greek culture in general. As Kaldellis has discussed in a monograph in this same series, Christian faith and adherence to the Roman Empire became in the fourth century AD the dominant elements in the constructed identity of the population of the eastern Mediterranean; for those who wanted to identify themselves as Greek only literary *paideia* remained available as a potential marker, since the increasingly harsh attitude to paganism and the centralization of the Empire made the religious and political interpretations of Greekness problematic.[4] To the importance of literary *paideia* one could add that at the start of the fourth century physical *paideia* too was still available as an alternative marker, but a century later it was on the verge of disappearing. This book is not, however, about why people stopped using athletics to construct a specific Greek identity. A process of identity construction involves interpreting the world and the practices in which one engages;[5] what is no longer engaged in can of course not be categorized as marking a specific ethnic or religious identity. Instead, this book is about why the practice of competitive athletics disappeared in late antiquity, which represents a small, but by no means unimportant, chapter in the greater story of the end of antiquity. It is entitled "The end of *Greek* athletics" only to distinguish the specific set of competitive sports practiced at the *agones* from other athletic traditions in the ancient world.

[2] Coubertin 2000: 271. The passage comes from a speech given at the Greek Liberal Club at Lausanne, and was originally published in French under the title "Ce que nous pouvons maintenant demander au Sport . . .".
[3] Bardesanes Edessenus, *The Book of the Laws of Countries* 599 (ed. Drijvers 1964: 53).
[4] Kaldellis 2007: 1–187 (central thesis of part one), esp. 2–6.
[5] This interpretation of 'identity' is based on Brubaker 2004: 1–63.

Despite the symbolic value of the end of Greek athletics, the apparent absence of real interest in the topic is not entirely unexpected. That a custom popular for more than a millennium eventually came to an end implies decline, and decline is not likely to inspire enthusiasm. "To see how a blossoming tree dies slowly, how one branch after the other is cut off, that is not a happy sight."[6] With these words, Boetticher, who in 1883 wrote the first monograph on Olympia after the excavation of the site, deplored that as a professional academic he was obliged to add at least a small chapter about the postclassical period. Until well into the twentieth century, many scholars similarly thought of decline as a sad and ugly topic. Afterwards, it simply became unfashionable. What constitutes 'decline', however? Are there any objective criteria we can use to determine when athletic contests stopped flourishing and started to deteriorate? Before coming to our own definition of decline, this introduction aims to analyze how previous studies touching on the end of athletics have all started from their own, usually unconscious, preconceptions.

The traditional approach: a normative definition of decline

The first academic studies of Greek athletics appeared in the nineteenth century.[7] The popularity of contemporary sports, especially in Germany ('Turnen') and England ('amateur athletics'), were a major factor in this development. Sources used by the pioneers of the field were, besides a few statues, mainly literary texts, such as the victory odes of Pindar or Pausanias' books 5 and 6. These works of art and literature, however, are not equally informative about all games and periods, and therefore steered the field in a distinct direction. Most relevant texts either date from or discuss the archaic or classical periods (due to the Byzantine classicizing taste) and focus on the most prestigious contests, in particular on the Olympics. The study of athletics became, therefore, the study of the Olympic games and athletes, and of the three other famous games, in the archaic and classical periods.

The classical panhellenic sanctuaries were thus among the first ancient sites to be excavated in the late nineteenth century. In 1875 a German team

[6] Boetticher 1883: 385: " . . . die Jahrhunderte des Verfalles, welche der Mann der Wissenschaft zum Gegenstande seiner Forschung zu machen verpflichtet ist – dem blossen Liebhaber des Alterthums vermögen sie keine Neigung abzugewinnen; zu sehen, wie der einst blühende Baum langsam hinstirbt, wie ihm ein Ast nach dem anderen abgehauen wird, das ist kein erfreulicher Anblick."

[7] The first scholar to devote himself intensively to Greek athletics was Johann Heinrich Krause, who wrote four monographs on the topic: *Theagenes* (1835), *Olympia* (1838), *Die Gymnastik und Agonistik der Hellenen* (1840), and *Die Pythien, Nemeen und Isthmien* (1841).

around Ernst Curtius and Friedrich Adler started digging at Olympia. Between 1890 and 1897 the findings were meticulously published in five large volumes about the history, buildings, sculptures, bronzes and small finds, and inscriptions of the site. Throughout the twentieth century, excavations continued, with particular attention to the earliest stages of the sanctuary.[8] This detailed knowledge of the site only strengthened the central position of the Olympics in scholarship. In Delphi too excavations started in 1893.

During these excavation projects many Roman materials were brought to light. Even Boetticher admitted that the finds from the Roman age, both small objects and full-size statues, were numerous and of high quality. Nevertheless, political motives continued to stimulate a narrow focus on the archaic and classical period, after which decline was believed to have set in. Boetticher describes the period up to the Macedonian hegemony as the "hellenistische Zeit," that is the 'Greek period' in the sense of 'the period in which the Greek *poleis* were independent'. This term reflects nineteenth-century nationalism: as long as the Greeks were independent and experienced a sense of panhellenism, their culture was flourishing. A recurring notion, particularly in German studies on Greek athletics (Krause, Boetticher, Curtius) is that Greek 'national feeling' disappeared after the Persian war and that the later foreign occupation of Greece caused estrangement and a loss of healthy *Volkskraft*.[9]

The other major criterion applied by these studies in defining the sixth and fifth century as the golden age of Greek athletics was artistic. The early scholars referred in particular to the quality of the works of Pindar and Pheidias. This appraisal of the arts of the fifth and fourth centuries as the artistic norm was not a completely modern interpretation, but reflects norms derived from imperial-age texts.[10] In the early twentieth century 'classical' came into use as a term for the stage of the highest artistic development and therefore as a periodizing term for Greek history as well. Both 'Greek period' and 'classical period' imply a prescriptive definition of bloom and decline: some works of art, customs, political institutions, etc. were considered good, others bad. The norms regarding what was good and what was bad may have been perceived as timeless, but in reality they were determined by the contemporary values of the scholar. This was of course not exclusive to

[8] Finds were published in the series *Berichte über die Ausgrabungen in Olympia* and *Olympische Forschungen*.
[9] Weiler 1985–1986: 236–38, 256.
[10] Cf. P. Riemer, 'Klassizismus' in DNP 6 (1999): 493–94 and U. Walter, 'Periodisierung' in DNP 9 (2000): 576–82.

research on athletics. The model of emergence, golden age, and decline was a common paradigm for the interpretation of history. In the early twentieth century, authors such as Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee developed it as a theoretical framework for understanding cultures.

An additional argument for defining a golden age, specific to research on athletics, appeared in the English scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Mahaffy, Manning, Gardiner): that the sixth and fifth centuries were the 'age of the amateur', whereas after circa 400 BC began the 'age of the professional'. The honorable gentlemen of before were replaced by mindless, corrupt, and overtrained athletes competing for profit. This ideal of the perfect Greek athlete practicing 'sport for sport's sake' was first presented in 1879 by John Pentland Mahaffy, later editor of the Petrie papyri, who became interested in the matter during the 1875 Greek Olympic games in Athens. This Irish classical scholar idolized the English upper class and, therefore, his interpretation of Greek athletics was inspired by the refusal of nineteenth-century English gentlemen to compete with lower-class individuals.[11] From England, the idea of 'amateurism' – that is, a ban on competitors who earned money with their sport – spread to the rest of the Western world. In 1894, Pierre de Coubertin even used a discussion on amateurism as a pretext to lure people to his conference on instituting international modern Olympic games.[12]

The appeal of the modern Olympic games further stimulated scholarly interest in Greek athletics. Until the last quarter of the century most new works remained focused on the archaic and classical period and on Olympia.[13] At the same time, however, stadia and agonistic inscriptions, mostly postclassical, were discovered across the Mediterranean and these stimulated a very slow broadening of the field, in particular because of the efforts of Louis Robert and Luigi Moretti. From the 1920s to the 1980s, Robert devoted innumerable studies to epigraphic material from across the Greek world, often with reference to literary, papyrological, or numismatic parallels. There are few aspects of agonistic life he has not commented on with admirable insight. Moretti provided a ready collection of epigraphic evidence for further research, in 1953 by selecting and commenting on

[11] Weiler 1985–1986: 238–41; Young 1988: esp. 63–64. Kyle 1990 discusses the contemporary context of Gardiner's idealized view of Greek athletics, including notions of decline.

[12] Coubertin admitted this strategy in his memoirs, first published in 1932. See Coubertin 1989: 8; 2000: 315–16.

[13] E.g. Gardiner 1925, 1930, Jüthner 1965–1968 (written before his death in 1945), Drees 1962, 1967, Schöbel 1964, Harris 1972, Herrmann 1972, Hönle 1972, Mallwitz 1972 (a strong German interest coinciding with the Munich Olympics), Finley and Pleket 1976, Ebert 1980. Klee 1918 is rather exceptional in its early attention to inscriptions and Hellenistic festivals.

ninety agonistic inscriptions, of which sixty illustrated the Hellenistic and imperial period, and in 1957 by complementing Eusebius' list of Olympic *stadion* victors – at the time still attributed to Africanus – with all known victors from inscriptions and ancient literature.[14]

The idea that ancient sport was specialized and corrupted, and hence in decline from the fourth century BC on, was nevertheless still often taken for granted. Greek athletics was supposed to have developed quickly from the eighth century on, reached a golden age in the sixth and fifth centuries, and then declined for about 800 years before coming to its end. The Herulians, earthquakes, the rise of Christianity, and an edict by Theodosius I (or occasionally II) were named as immediate causes of this eventual end.[15] The rule that modern Olympic athletes needed to be amateurs persisted until the 1980s, and through this modern institution, the nineteenth-century ideal continued to influence twentieth-century scholarship.

In the later twentieth century, however, the spread of postmodernist thought to diverse academic fields stimulated a greater sensitivity to the anachronistic character of normative criteria. In 1984 David Young convincingly exposed what he called "the Olympic myth of the Greek amateur athlete" as a nineteenth-century invention.[16] In 1985, Weiler pointed out the influence of other modern ideals, such as nationalism and Marxism, on the development of *Pseudofaktoren* for the end of the Olympics. As a result, athletics was no longer considered to have declined for 800 years after a relatively short golden age, but to have remained popular for many centuries.

A paradigm shift

The traditional preference for the 'classical' periods and for the paradigm of emergence, golden age, and lamentable decline slowed down the development of late antiquity as a field within history. Though the term 'late antiquity' dates from the early twentieth century – coined in 1901 by the art historian Alois Riegl – as a field late antiquity is barely half a century old. That currently it is a thriving separate field is connected to the 'cultural turn' in history research, particularly since the 1970s. Under the influence of cultural anthropology, social and cultural aspects and mentality became

[14] Moretti 1953 is commonly abbreviated as IAG. Moretti 1957 was supplemented in 1970 and 1992. Eusebius' victor list has received a new edition in Christesen and Martirosova-Torlone 2006. They follow the view that Eusebius took over the list from Cassius Longinus.

[15] Weiler 1985–1986: 241–61.

[16] Pleket 1974, on the social status of athletes, had already offered a more nuanced picture than the traditional dichotomy of wealthy amateurs versus poor professionals.

preferred subjects of research. While political and institutional topics are more closely related to the dissolving Empire, themes such as asceticism, religiosity, gender, or education can be analyzed more easily from the perspective of change instead of decline and fall. The traditional and rather prejudiced image of weakness and decadence, connected to the paradigm of emergence, golden age, and decline of cultures, has now indeed been replaced by a paradigm of transformation and creative adaptation.[17]

Scholarship on late-antique spectacles more or less follows the above evolution. Although some interest in the topic already existed among church historians of the early twentieth century, most studies date from the 1970s on, when aspects of culture became the center of attention.[18] Several standard books date from this period, for example Werner Weismann's study of the early Christian reaction to games (1972) and the innovative studies on the circus by Alan Cameron (1973 and 1976). Several dissertations have further investigated the Christian problem (e.g. DeVoe 1987, Lugaresi 2008), or focused on games in specific regions (e.g. Hugoniot 1998). Ruth Webb has examined how classicizing late-antique texts deal with contemporary views of mime and pantomime (2008). The 2012 dissertation of Alexander Puk offers a more comprehensive picture on games in late antiquity.

These studies discuss Roman style games in detail, but barely touch upon Greek *agones*. Several papers from the last decades, however, attest that also among students of athletics has been sparked an interest in the late-antique period.[19] In 1985, Ingomar Weiler surveyed the previous explanations of the end of the Olympics and identified most explanations as *Pseudofaktoren* for decline. Influenced by the paradigm change he refused to speak further of 'decline' of the Olympic games: he put "Niedergang" between quotation marks and preferred non-normative terms such as 'change' and 'end'. Though critical of the perceived decline, in 1985 Weiler did not yet question the traditional explanation for the eventual end.[20] In 1991, Ulrich Sinn, excavator of Olympia, questioned the role of the Herulians and in 2003, Iole Fargnoli put the traditional reading

[17] A good overview of the development of 'late antiquity' as a separate field can be found in Rebenich 2009. For the cultural turn see also Martin 2005: 1–11. For the paradigm change see likewise Bowersock 1996.

[18] Eriau 1914 on the Christian condemnation of the theater. For a detailed *status quaestionis* of the Christian opinions on spectacles see Lugaresi 2008: 30–53.

[19] Besides the papers mentioned in the main text, more about the end of the Olympics can be found in Teja 1991, who just takes over (unfounded) traditional preconceptions and in Giatsis 1997, who is a bit more critical but very summary; a discussion of the *agones* in the reign of Diocletian is included in Wallner 2007.

[20] Weiler 1985–1986: esp. 261–63.

of the two Byzantine testimonies that supposedly attest imperial measures in a new light by studying their literary context. In 2004, Weiler went a step further and questioned the connection of these vague testimonies with precise imperial edicts. Around the same time, Gutsfeld and Lehmann carried out a research project on the last phases of the four traditional panhellenic sanctuaries and agonistic sites (Olympia, Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea).[21]

Although these recent contributions go along with the contemporary popularity of late antiquity, they still inherit from older research the focus on Olympia and the three other 'classical' sites, an exclusivity which is in fact not warranted by imperial-age reality. In 1988 Weiler took up anew the arguments he had developed in 1985, but this time applied them to the general "Krise" (again quotation marks) of athletics in the third century AD instead of only to the Olympics. While the 1985 article engaged mostly with more traditional scholarship, in 1988 he incorporated some new insights on the imperial period, indicating that even for the third century there are no certain signs of decline. Though he does not explicitly concede it, Weiler's approach leads him into an impasse: if one cannot discover decline, the end of the games is even more striking and in need of explanation. Weiler could not find a way out, as starting from previous studies he had no access to late-antique evidence from outside Olympia. Students of athletics typically avoid late antiquity, as the types of evidence they are used to working with are not available. Specialists on late antiquity, on the other hand, are usually unfamiliar with the technicalities of Greek athletics, which – as I have shown elsewhere – has led to misunderstandings regarding the best attested late-antique *agon*, the Olympics of Antioch.[22] There is indeed very little overlap between scholarship on imperial-age athletics and late-antique studies. Weiler thus lacked the necessary information for the crucial period. Charlotte Roueché has a better grasp of the late-antique material. In 1993 she described changes in the financial organization of games (Roman games as well as *agones*), which for her represented the essential factor for their survival or disappearance.[23] This is no doubt true for individual contests, but the financial arrangements alone do not explain why all *agones* disappeared while other types of games did not.

[21] Gutsfeld and Lehmann 2005, Gutsfeld, Hahn, and Lehmann 2007, Lehmann 2007a, and Lehmann 2007b offer preliminary results. Some of these are disputed by the excavators of the sites, particularly for Nemea. In 2013 they published the proceedings of a 2005 conference on spectacles in the Roman Empire, which was not limited to these four sites (Gutsfeld and Lehmann 2013a).

[22] Remijsen 2010a: 435–36.

[23] See also Roueché 2003–2004, a very brief but pertinent contribution.

Perhaps the most important reason for the relative unpopularity of the end of athletics as a subject is that it does not fit the modern idea that ancient culture did not 'fall', but 'transformed'. Weiler tried to apply the new paradigm, but his refusal to find decline led him to an impasse. *Agones* did fall: by the mid fifth century they were gone. At some point before, athletic contests had stopped being relevant for society and there is no reason to avoid the term 'decline' for this phase. 'Decline' is in this case not an outdated historiographical model that can be replaced by a model of 'transformation', but an accurate description. The question is then on the basis of which criteria this decline can be identified.

The epigraphic approach: a quantitative definition of decline

By the 1980s the availability of new evidence finally resulted in a new dynamic in the field of ancient athletics. The increased interest in the now abundant epigraphic and numismatic evidence drew greater attention to the Roman period.[24] In 1995, a colloquium in Münster was devoted to "Agonistik in der römischen Kaiserzeit".[25] Monographs started from the publication of exceptional new inscriptions or from a corpus of evidence that has never been studied as a whole, usually from a particular city or region, or took a more thematic approach.[26] A particularly popular theme in the last decade has been Greek identity in the imperial period.[27] The shift to the imperial period is also visible in the field of archaeology. Iconographic studies of coins and reliefs have improved the interpretation of agonistic images.[28] In 1987, Ulrich Sinn began the research project "Olympia während der römischen Kaiserzeit", which also covered late antiquity.[29]

[24] Orth 1998: 3.
[25] The proceedings were published in volume 24.1 of the sports journal *Stadion*: Lämmer 1998.
[26] E.g. Wörrle 1988 with a long inscription from Oenoanda on the institution of a contest. An excellent review of this book (and of Ziegler 1985) with a complete English translation of the inscription is Mitchell 1990. Petzl and Schwertheim 2006 published three letters from Hadrian with regulations for games, discovered at Alexandria Troas. Jones 2007 gives corrections to the edition and an English translation. See also Strasser 2010. Books on the basis of a corpus: e.g. Frisch 1986, commenting on agonistic papyri; Ziegler 1985, collecting all evidence of eastern Cilicia; Roueché 1993, on Aphrodisias; Caldelli 1993a, on the *Kapitolia* in Rome, and 1997, on the games in southern Gaul. Thematic approaches: e.g. as sport under the soldier emperors (Wallner 1997), the chronology of the *agones* (Strasser 2000), the association of performing artists (Le Guen 2001, Aneziri 2003), or the life of imperial-age athletes (Gouw 2009).
[27] E.g. van Nijf 1999, 2003, 2004, König 2005, Newby 2005.
[28] E.g. Rumscheid 2000 examining imperial-age depictions of crowns and garlands.
[29] Annual progress reports were published in *Nikephoros*: Sinn (*e.a.*) from 1992 to 1997.

With the publication of new agonistic inscriptions and coins in more accessible editions and with the increasing importance of databases and statistics in general, the high quantity of these sources and of the contests mentioned on them became more easily recognizable in the late twentieth century. The impact of Robert's opening speech at the 1982 epigraphy conference, where he for the first time explicitly drew the attention of all to what he described as the "agonistic explosion" of the imperial age, cannot be overestimated. For this idea of an agonistic explosion, quantity is the foremost criterion. As with qualitative criteria, however, in most cases the quantitative criterion is used implicitly or even unconsciously. This is sometimes dangerous, as all quantitative data on antiquity are heavily biased by the state of the evidence. Inscriptions, even though they seem well suited for a quantitative approach because of the role of chance in their preservation, are particularly problematic in this respect, as putting up inscriptions was not equally common in all centuries and places or for all purposes. What and why people inscribed changed considerably in the course of antiquity. Ramsay MacMullen coined the term 'epigraphic habit' for these evolutions and pointed out how this habit has affected modern ideas of bloom and decline.[30] Similarly, the numismatic habit can be misleading as well.[31]

Andrew Farrington explicitly tried to trace evolutions in the popularity of the Olympic games with a quantitative method, namely by examining the chronological distribution of the known Olympic victors (on the basis of Moretti's list). In 1997, he calculated that no fewer than a fifth, or even a fourth, of all Olympic victors are known, enough to be representative for the whole. On the basis of his quantitative study he concludes that interest in Olympia as an agonistic center declined in the later Hellenistic period, rose again in the first century AD, and began to decline again in the second. However, his idea that the number of known victors, that is victors who were both recorded and preserved, is indicative of the contemporary popularity of athletics is essentially flawed. The actual number of Olympic victors was stable: in every Olympiad there were as many victors as there were events.[32] How many of them were recorded indeed depended

[30] MacMullen 1982: esp. 244–46.
[31] Nollé 2012: 16 argues that the number of imperial-age coins may exaggerate the agonistic explosion.
[32] Minor variations are of course possible, as some athletes won more than one event. Only if certain events were added or abandoned the number would change, but from the mid-Hellenistic period on the program seems to have been stable. Eusebius' list of *stadion* victors mentions that the equestrian events were reinstituted in AD 17, after having been absent for a long time, but Crowther 1995: 112–17 has shown that this statement is incorrect. Even if they were discontinued, this did not last for more than four Olympiads.