1 Athletics in early Greece and in myth

There are two distinct sources of evidence for athletics in early Greece: artistic representations and literary texts. Each offers tantalizing glimpses of athletic events, but each comes with its own limitations. Our earliest evidence comes from the fragments of Minoan and Mycenean art unearthed on the islands of Crete and Thera (in the southern Aegean) in particular. These seem to show that there were traditions of familiar sports such as boxing and wrestling as well as the famous bull-leaping, for which no evidence has been discovered in later Greek culture. That, along with the unusual features of the other sports depicted, suggests that later Greeks did not directly inherit their athletic practices from their Minoan and Mycenean predecessors. Nevertheless, this early evidence makes a fascinating prelude to the long tradition of Greek athletics.

Minoan and Mycenean athletics

The best-known depiction of combat sport in this period comes from Thera. It is a fresco painted some time before the Santorini eruption (*c.* 1500 BC) which depicts two boys who seem to be boxing (**1.1**). The fresco is fragmentary and is put together rather like a jigsaw missing most of its pieces. If it has been correctly assembled, it looks as if the boys are wearing a single glove on the right hand and some form of covering on their heads from which long braids of hair emerge, but are otherwise naked except for a belt (or perhaps loincloth). Each aims a blow at the other's head, one with the gloved right hand, the other with his bare left.

1.1

Fragment from a fresco from Thera, possibly c. 1625 BC.

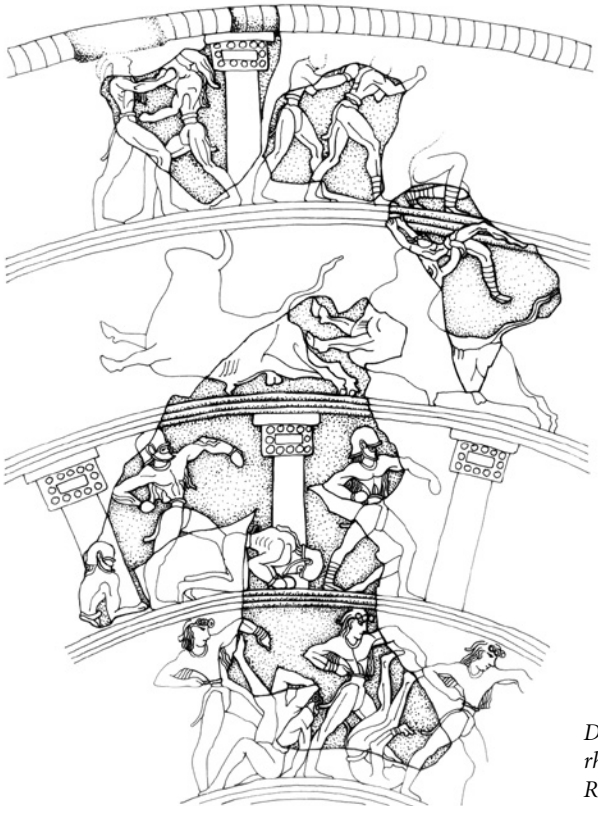
1 How has the artist arranged the figures to show the profile of the boxers to the best advantage?

2 How violent does this combat appear to be?

On a rhyton (drinking horn) from Hagia Triada in Crete (*c.* 1550 BC) (**1.2**) several sports seem to be illustrated in bands, although the fragmentary and worn vessel is hard to interpret. On the top band two men look as if they are boxing, although there is no indication of gloves. Separated from them by a column are three other figures. Two, with arms raised like boxers, face a figure whose lower legs partially survive in a pose suggesting that he is crouching with his back to the others.

Below this is a second band depicting bull-leapers, and on the third band the four figures have also been interpreted as boxers. All wear helmets with cheekpieces and seem to have gloves. Two stand upright in a pose which might represent them delivering a left hook while the right arm is bent back to deliver the next blow. Their legs are spread apart and firmly set in the classic stance for unleashing powerful blows. The other two figures are on the ground, one leaning on his right elbow, the other slumped forward on his knees and hands, his head close to the ground as if he were struggling up from a prone position. The lowest band has parts of three figures standing in a very similar pose to those in the third. Two figures on the ground survive in part, with one or two legs in the air as if they have been thrown in wrestling. Other interpretations would have the lower bands representing armed combat, the standing figures holding short knives in their right hands drawn back to thrust at an opponent.

1.2



Drawing of the Hagia Triada rhyton with restorations by Ruben Santos, c. 1500 BC.

1 Does the illustration of bull-leaping in the second band help to provide a context for the other bands?
2 Is it possible to be certain which, if any, sports are depicted?
3 What purpose might training in sports such as these have served?

There are problems about the relationship of these combat sports (if this is what they are) to later Greek practices. First, there is no sign of a judge, a figure constantly present in later Greek competitions. On the Hagia Triada rhyton almost all individual combat is subsumed under largely repetitive patterns. The boxing gloves bear little resemblance to the thongs that later served as gloves and the wearing of helmets would rule out any suggestion of boxing to later Greeks who fought bare-headed. While there are images of chariots from the period, even when they appear to speed one behind another it is impossible to be certain that a race is indicated without corroborating evidence. Although it is always rash to judge from the absence of evidence (one never knows what archaeology may turn up), the fact that most of the events which are so regularly depicted later are not represented in this early period also points to the conclusion that any direct influence of Minoan and Mycenean sports on the athletic tradition of the later Greeks remains tantalizingly elusive.

These visual images are extremely difficult to interpret, not only because of their poor condition and heavy restoration, but principally because we have no context for them except that which archaeology can provide, and without written evidence we have to rely heavily on conjecture to interpret physical remains. In the next section we are faced with the opposite problem. Homeric epic offers some detailed descriptions of both the context for athletic competition and the events themselves. However, it is hard to determine just how closely the heroic society depicted by Homer is related to the Bronze Age or Dark Age societies whose physical remains nevertheless often seem to reflect Homeric description.

It is clear from the characteristics of the verse that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were composed by one or more poets in an oral tradition. At some point, probably around 750 BC, they were given their current form (and it is then that Homer, traditionally held to be their author, may have lived), although their transfer onto the written page may have been somewhat later. They describe mythical events of an earlier period traditionally dated to the Bronze Age, around 1200 BC.

There are two contexts in these passages in which competitive sports take place. The funeral games in honour of Achilles' close friend Patroclus are held immediately after the cremation of the body. Eight events are contested, two of which, armed combat and archery, do not feature in later Greek sports, and it is not entirely clear whether throwing the iron weight is meant to represent the discus. The fact that throwing the discus is mentioned twice in the narrative of the chariot race (*Iliad* 23.287–533) suggests that it was familiar at least to Homer's audience of the eighth century BC if not earlier. The association of armed combat with funeral games inevitably invites comparison with the origins of gladiatorial combat in Rome, but in this Homeric context it is major heroes who take up weapons (*Iliad* 23.798–825) and the contest is brought to an end before serious damage is done.

In fact, all the events in the *Iliad* are contested by the major heroes of the epic with the exception of boxing (*Iliad* 23.651–99), where Epeios' claim to pre-eminence is the first hint of a contestant specializing in a particular discipline. In this epic world the social order is dominated by heroes whose prowess extends from the battlefield to athletics, even including the chariot race which in later times brought honour not so much to the charioteer as to the owner of the victorious team of horses (see p. 58). Galen (second century AD) remarked that there was no name for 'athletics' or 'trainer' in Homer's time. He thought the change to specialization exemplified by Epeios began shortly before Plato (fourth century BC). The practice of awarding prizes to all the contestants (except for throwing the iron weight, *Iliad* 23.826–49) also contrasts markedly with the later award of first prize only (but see **9.2**) and the absence of especially valuable prizes from the 'crown' games. But the ethos of 'all must have prizes' suits the heroic world of the *Iliad* in which only heroes compete for prizes and in which leaving empty-handed would be an affront to their honour; and prizes could be hotly disputed (as they were at the end of the chariot race in *Iliad* 23). Indeed, Achilles had withdrawn from the fighting in

Iliad 1 precisely because of the slight to his honour by Agamemnon taking away the woman who was allotted to him in the division of war booty. With the funeral games, Achilles is reintegrated into the company of heroes by his generous distribution of prizes.

The context for athletics in the *Odyssey* is very different from the funeral games in the *Iliad*. Odysseus is being entertained on the fantasy island of Phaeacia and his hosts indulge in some athletic sports as an after-dinner entertainment. Here there are no prizes, and only the winners are mentioned. Yet the ethos is still that of the heroic world, as is sharply revealed when Euryalos insults Odysseus, a hero of royal status, by comparing him to a merchant (**1.9**, lines 159–64), the implication being that only the leisured aristocracy have the time and resources to practise athletics seriously. Prowess in this field is therefore a mark of social class. There is a story in Herodotus (*Histories* 6.126–9) which describes similar elite behaviour in the sixth century BC. Cleisthenes, tyrant of Sicyon *c.* 600–570 BC, looking for a suitable son-in-law, issued an invitation at the Olympic Games to any eligible young men to demonstrate their qualities for a year at Sicyon. As part of his assessment he observed them in the **gymnasium**, but of crucial importance was their behaviour when dining in public. This is not far from the world of Phaeacia.

Missing from Homer is the context we find for later athletic competitions, held on occasions to honour the gods and in particular religious festivals. However, there were many ways in which the Greeks traced the origins of festivals back to the heroic age, or even further, as the foundation myths at Olympia reveal (see Chapter 2). The myth at Nemea attributed the foundation of the games to funeral games for the infant Opheltes.

The funeral games of Patroclus: Homer, *Iliad* 23.257–70 and 287–895

In the following extract from *Iliad* 23 (lines 257–70), Achilles announces the funeral games in honour of his dead friend Patroclus and brings out the prizes.

1.3 Achilles stopped the crowd leaving and made the broad assembly sit down. From his ships he brought prizes: cauldrons, tripods, horses, mules, several head of 260
strong oxen, **well-girdled** women and grey iron.

well-girdled compound epithets (adjectives describing a characteristic) are a regular feature of epic diction and often, along with other adjectives, are attached to nouns to form regular metrical units to aid oral composition (see also 'broad assembly' in the first line).

First he offered glittering prizes for the swiftest charioteers to take away: for the winner, a woman skilled in fine crafts and a tripod with handles holding **22 measures**; for the second, a six-year-old mare, not broken in and pregnant with a mule foal; for the third a lovely cauldron holding four measures and not yet put on the fire, but still shining and new; for the fourth **two talents of gold**; for the fifth an unused two-handled cooking bowl.

Cauldrons like **1.4** were valuable items and from the ninth century BC were frequently offered as dedications to the gods. In Homer's *Iliad* (11.698–701) Nestor refers to Neleus sending four horses to Elis to race 'for a tripod', and tripods feature among the prizes in **1.3** (line 264) and **1.7** (line 702). However, it is not clear whether the dedications found at Olympia were actual prizes. Many have handles like those represented here and in **1.5**.

1.4

A tripod cauldron found at Olympia.

In this scene of a chariot race from the François Vase (**1.5**), a tripod with handles is visible under the first team of horses and a dinos (mixing bowl) under the second. They are probably meant to indicate prizes. Racing towards Achilles with a tripod at the finishing line (not shown) are three chariots with Automedon in the lead, Diomedes second and Damasippos third, their names clearly visible in front of their chariots.

22 measures we don't know what a 'measure' amounted to, but this must have been a very big tripod bowl as it is five and a half times the size of the cauldron for third prize.

two talents of gold in Homer a talent was a weight used only for gold; we do not know its value.

1.5

A chariot race from the François Vase, c. 575 BC.

This fragment of a bowl (**1.6**) shows the crowd at Patroclus' funeral games. They are sitting on tiers of seats as in a modern **stadium**, a unique image of the crowds which gathered to watch athletic competitions. The bowl is signed by Sophilos and names both Patroclus' games and Achilles.

1.6

Fragment of a bowl by Sophilos, c. 600–575 BC.

1 How has the painter indicated audience reaction?
2 How many horses are depicted?

After the chariot race (*Iliad* 23.271–533) and the boxing (*Iliad* 23.651–99), Homer describes the wrestling.

Wrestling: *Iliad* 23.700–39

1.7 The son of Peleus at once put out on display to the Greeks the third set of prizes for painful wrestling. For the winner there was a large tripod to go over the fire, which the Greeks among themselves reckoned worth twelve oxen. For the loser he put on display a woman with skill in many tasks and they thought she was worth four oxen. He stood up and addressed the Greeks, 'Two men come forward to take part in this contest.'

So he spoke and then great Ajax, son of Telamon, got up and cunning Odysseus with his knowledge of tricks was up on his feet. Wearing loincloths, they both strode into the centre of the crowd and grasped each other by the arms with their strong hands, **like interlocking rafters** which a renowned builder has fitted in a high building to resist the force of the wind. Their backs creaked from the firm pressure of their strong arms. Sweat began to pour down them in streams, and clusters of bruises red with blood swelled up over their ribs and shoulders. Their desire for victory and for the well-made tripod never wavered. Neither could Odysseus **bring his opponent to the ground** with a trip, nor could Ajax as Odysseus' strength held firm. But when they began to make the well-greaved Greeks anxious, great Ajax son of Telamon said to Odysseus, 'Son of Laertes, Odysseus of divine descent and full of wiles, either lift me, or I'll lift you. Then everything will be up to Zeus.'

With that he lifted him up, but Odysseus did not forget his cunning and caught Ajax in the hollow of the knee with a blow from behind, making his leg give way. Ajax fell backwards and Odysseus landed on his chest. The crowd watched in amazement. Much-enduring, godlike Odysseus made the second lift. He did actually get him a little way off the ground, but he failed to complete the lift. Then he hooked his leg behind Ajax's knee and they both fell to the ground side by side and were soiled with dust. And now they would have leapt up again and begun to wrestle for a third time if Achilles himself had not stood up and stopped them. 'Don't get yourselves set again and wear yourselves out in the struggle. Victory goes to you both. **Take equal prizes** and make way for other Greeks to compete too.'

like interlocking rafters the opening stance as the wrestlers lean towards one another. See **7.3**.

bring his opponent to the ground this sentence contrasts the technique of Odysseus with the strength of Ajax as they try to throw each other. This type of wrestling was later decided by three throws, but this contest ends prematurely and does not reveal what was required to win.

Take equal prizes not an easy task when one is worth twelve oxen and the other four.

So he spoke and they did as he said, wiping off the dust and putting on their tunics.

1 'Victory goes to you both': do you think it was an equal contest or did one of the competitors seem to have the edge?
2 What indications are there of what motivates the heroes to compete with each other?
3 Is there any indication of how the use of cunning in sport is viewed?

The foot race: *Iliad* 23.740–97

1.8 At once the son of Peleus laid out other prizes for the sprint. There was a **mixing bowl made of silver** which held six measures, and in its beauty it was by far the greatest in all the world, since Sidonian craftsmen had made it with skill. The Phoenicians who transported it over the misty sea had given it as a gift to Thoas when they moored in the harbour. Euenos son of Jason gave it to the hero Patroclus in payment for Priam's son Lykaon. Now Achilles set it up to honour his companion as a prize for whoever proved the fastest in the sprint. For the runner-up he brought out a huge ox rich in fat and for the last prize he set down half a talent of gold. Then he stood up and addressed the Greeks: 'Competitors for this event stand up.' So he spoke and instantly swift Ajax son of Oileus got up, followed by cunning Odysseus, then Nestor's son Antilochus as he was the fastest runner of all the younger men. They stood in line and Achilles pointed out the **finishing post**. From the start they set a fast pace and the son of Oileus quickly established a lead, but godlike Odysseus was in very close pursuit. As close as a **heddle-rod** is to the breast of a girdled woman when with her hands she pulls it

mixing bowl made of silver this prize is given a fuller description than any other in the games. The fact that it belonged to Patroclus makes it particularly appropriate for games in his honour. By recounting its history Homer gives it a significant value. Made in Phoenicia at Sidon (a coastal city in modern Lebanon), it is brought to Lemnos by Phoenician merchants who give it to Thoas, the king of the island. Jason married Thoas' daughter Hypsipyle and their son Euenos gave it to Patroclus as ransom for Lykaon, a son of Priam captured and enslaved by Achilles. After being ransomed, Lykaon met Achilles a second time and was killed. His story is told at length in *Iliad* 21.

finishing post it is hard to tell whether this race conforms to the later ***stadion*** (one length of the track, approximately 200 metres) or *diaulos* (a double leg, approximately 400 metres). The finishing post might equally well be the turning post, and 'the final part of the course' the return leg.

heddle-rod this simile essentially says that Odysseus is as close to Ajax as a woman weaving is to the part of the loom she pulls towards her. As is typical in Homeric similes, this one also contains a more detailed comparison, with the woman's effort and skill implying the same qualities in Odysseus.

firmly and holds it close to her breast as she draws the shuttle along through the **warp**, so close was Odysseus running, only behind him, with his feet falling in Ajax's tracks before the dust settled. Godlike Odysseus kept running fast all the time and was breathing down on his head. All the Greeks were cheering his will to win and shouting advice as he made every effort. But as they were completing the final part of the course, at that moment Odysseus prayed to grey-eyed Athene in his head, 'Hear me goddess, and come with kind aid for my feet.' So he spoke in prayer and Pallas Athene heard him. She made his limbs light, his feet and, above them, his hands. Just when they were about to make a dash for the prize, Ajax slipped as he ran – it was Athene who did the damage – where dung was scattered from the bellowing oxen that **swift-footed** Achilles had slaughtered in honour of Patroclus. His mouth and nose were filled with cow dung. But it was patient, godlike Odysseus who picked up the mixing bowl as he had come first, and famous Ajax took the ox. There he stood holding in his hands the horn of the ox of the fields as he spat out dung and he addressed the Greeks, 'Damn it all! It must have been the goddess who tripped me, the one who has always stood beside Odysseus like a mother and helped him.' So he spoke and everyone laughed cheerfully at him. With a smile Antilochus took the last prize and spoke to the Greeks, 'My friends, you all know, but I'll say it. Even now the gods still honour the older men. For Ajax is only a little older than me, but **this one** belongs to an older generation, one of our senior men. They say he's on the threshold of old age. It is hard for the Greeks to compete with him in running, with the exception of Achilles.' So he spoke, honouring the swift-footed son of Peleus. In reply Achilles said to him, 'Antilochus, your praise will not be spoken in vain, but I shall give you an extra half talent of gold.' With these words he handed it over and Antilochus received it with pleasure.

765 770 775 780 785 790 795

1 How might a modern athlete invoke divine aid?
2 What humorous elements can you find in the description of this event?
3 How much attention does Homer devote to proceedings after the race? How similar is that to the coverage of modern athletics and other sports?

warp vertical threads on the loom. Familiarity with the loom is assumed, but nowadays this is no longer a household item as it used to be. Briefly, alternate vertical (warp) threads are tied with a leash to the heddle-rod. The shuttle passes the horizontal threads under and over alternate warp threads. Then the heddle-rod is pulled towards the weaver, allowing the shuttle to pass under and over the opposite warp threads.

swift-footed the regular epithet for Achilles. His prowess as a runner features prominently in this section, especially in Antilochus' praise.

this one Odysseus.