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Chapter 1

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Introduction

The history of Greek athletic and musical contests is a very dynamic field of research, with studies looking on the topic from different perspectives and applying different methods. When we try to group recent publications into categories, three starting points seem to prevail: 1) a certain group of sources, 2) the athletes/artists, 3) the *agṓnes* and their structure and development.[1] Examples for the first category include studies on authors like Pindar or Herodotus,[2] on victor lists,[3] on statues,[4] on the so-called palmares,[5] on the iconography[6] and other genres. Scholars who have taken the athletes and/or artists as their starting point have written studies on great champions,[7] on their self-presentation and status,[8] or on the associations,[9] to name just a few examples.

In the books and articles of the third group, the big crown contests are dominant: Every handbook on ancient athletics contains an overview of the development and the program of the Olympics, mostly followed by some remarks on the Pythia, the Nemeia and the Isthmia. This focus is well justified; it was not modern scholarship that marked these contests as the "Big Four", but the Greeks themselves. Only those artists and athletes who had triumphed at these competitions were considered great champions of their discipline.

1 Obviously these aspects do not exclude each other mutually. Athletic and musical competitions, which are so characteristic for the ancient Greeks, need a combined analysis of the specific characteristics of the sources, of the athletes and artists (as the most important people) and the *agṓnes* (as the most important institutions for competitions).
2 Lattmann 2010; Kyle 2009.
3 Christesen 2007.
4 Spahlinger 2020.
5 Strasser 2021.
6 Bohne 2011; Strasser 2014.
7 Roubineau 2016.
8 Mann 2001; Papakonstantinou 2019; Scharff 2024.
9 Aneziri 2003; Fauconnier 2023.

Sebastian Scharff (editor). Beyond the Big Four. Local Games in Ancient Greek Athletic Culture. Teiresias Supplements Online, Volume 4. 2024: 10-18.

It is no wonder, then, that the sources are much richer for the "Big Four" than for the many other *agṓnes*, Pindar's epinician odes are only one example. But the "Big Four" are only one part of the story, and this volume takes a different approach in analyzing Greek *agṓnes*. Besides the famous Panhellenic festivals, there were many other competitions. Thomas Heine Nielsen has convincingly shown how high the number already was before Alexander the Great started his campaigns,[10] and the "explosion agonistique"[11] of the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods let the amount of agonistic festivals raise to many hundreds.[12] Some of these have been the object of case studies,[13] but since Ringwood Arnold's book nearly a century ago,[14] no systematic approach has been undertaken to get insights into Greek competitions by focusing on minor festivals. The chapters collected in this volume demonstrate in a very instructive way how useful it is to have a close look on the 'small' *agṓnes* (the readers will recognize that they were not this small at all). In so doing it is possible to detect certain phenomena that remain hidden if one looks on the "Big Four" only. In the following remarks I will group the research questions in three (overlapping) complexes: 1) the question of unity and variety within the Greek agonistic system, 2) interactions between the local, the regional and the Panhellenic dimensions of contests, 3) interdependencies between developments in the agonistic world on the one side and political, economic and social developments on the other.

The Greek Agonistic World: Unity and Diversity

The Greek agonistic festivals formed a system: not in the sense of a Luhmannian autopoietic system, but understood as a stable complex of actors and institutions. Even if supra-regional associations of artists and athletes, i.e. institutions that organized the connection of competitors and competitions, were a Hellenistic respectively Late-Hellenistic development,[15] the contests had been interrelated long before, i.e. since the Archaic period. Best evidence for this is the emergence of the "Big Four": The term *períodos* is not attested before the Hellenistic period,[16] while the historical phenomenon, i.e. the hierarchization of competitions with a group of four at the top, dates back to the sixth century BC.[17] Many sources refer to this hierarchy, for example victory monuments:

10 Nielsen 2016; id. 2018.
11 Robert 1984: 38.
12 About 500 contests are attested by coins and inscriptions of the Roman Empire (Leschhorn 1998: 31).
13 E.g., the Pythia of Sikyon (Farrington 2013).
14 Ringwood Arnold 1927.
15 Fauconnier 2023.
16 Remijsen 2011: 99.
17 Funke 2005.

an epigram on a statue base in Delphi tells us that Theogenes of Thasos, a famous boxer and *pankratiastḗs* of the fifth century BC, had won 1,300 victories altogether. But on the list below the epigram only those in Olympia, Delphi, Isthmia and Nemea (and one triumph in the *dólichos* at the Hekatombeia at Argos) are specified.[18]

Hierarchies are built on the notion of similarity, so the hierarchy of *agṓnes* is built on the idea that they were somehow similar, but different in rank. And they were similar indeed: Greeks from all poleis and tribes knew what *pýx*, *dólichos* or *kitharōdía* was about, and competitors could travel from competition to competition finding everywhere similar structures of organization and similar rules. The existence of *iso*-games (isolympic, isonemean etc.) that came into being in the early third century BC also points to a system of interconnected, hierarchized competitions. The "*iso*" declares that an *agṓn* should be regarded equal in rank to an important festival, the victors should therefore get the same rewards as *olympioníkai*, *nemeoníkai* etc.

Nevertheless, there were differences, and not only those in rank. Some contests included all three groups of disciplines – gymnic, hippic, thymelic –, while others did not. The program of the Olympics, to name the most famous example, did not list thymelic contests except those for heralds and trumpeters. Age-classes were different, ranging from the two-part division in boys and men in Olympia to more complex schemes; for example, we find boys, men and three different age-classes of ephebes in an inscription from Chios.[19] And there were also regional peculiarities concerning the disciplines: in Thessaly, a region famous for its horses, disciplines like *aphippodromás*, *aphippolampás* and *taurothēría* – almost unknown in the rest of Greece – were quite popular (**Graninger**). And, finally, at some places we find very peculiar rules: according to Philostratos, runners who had won the *hoplítes* of the Eleutheria at Plataiai and competed again, were killed if they missed the victory (**Jung**).

Considering the similarities and the varieties, it is an important question, raised by **Graninger** in this volume, how the organizers of contests observed each other, whether they took over innovations or aimed at keeping their own, distinctive character.[20] It is quite important not to limit this question to the "big" *agṓnes*, but to include the many competitions that had to struggle for their place in the agonistic system. An exciting example of innovation and imitation is the appointment of the victor of victors in the thymelic contests, i.e. a contest at the end of the festival in which the champions of every

18 *Syll.*³ 36A.
19 *Syll.*³ 959 (third / second century BC).
20 Technical innovations spread quite rapidly; cf. Dimde 2016 for the *hýsplēx*.

single discipline competed.[21] In Hellenistic Boiotia, we find evidence for this final contest, it is called *epiníkios*. In the charter of the Sebasta of Naples (AD 2), an *agṓn* founded and promoted by Roman emperors, the same contest is called *diá pántōn*, and under this name it found entrance in many *agṓnes* in Italy, in Greece and in Asia Minor, eiselastic *agṓnes* as well as thematic ones. But some very important contests went on without the *diá pántōn*. It is no wonder that the Olympic Games did not include it as they did not set great value on thymelic contests, but what is striking is that the Pythia in Delphi and *agṓnes* at Athens withstood the new trend. In short, we have a discipline that remained limited to one region for some time, while later on it spread in the Greek world under a different name, but did not enter some of the most important contests.

Local, Regional, Panhellenic: Spheres of Influence

It is a truism that 'local' and 'global' developments are interconnected, and currently historians and social scientists put much effort in understanding these interactions. "Glocalization" has become a common term to describe "the simultaneous occurrence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies in contemporary social, political, and economic systems."[22] The contributions in this volume demonstrate that festivals and competitions form an appropriate starting point for considerations about universalizing and particularizing tendencies in ancient Greece. In **Ganter**'s analysis of the Theban Herakleia "the interrelations between local, regional, and Panhellenic expressions of belonging come into play", and this is the case also in the other chapters.

The term "Panhellenic" needs some discussion. It is common in publications on ancient athletics, but has recently been critically discussed by Sofie Remijsen, who has argued against the idea that only Greeks were accepted as participants in the Olympic Games.[23] In contrast, "Panhellenic" is used – without inverted commas! – in many of the following papers (**Ganter**, **Tufano**, **Jung**, **McAuley**, **Graninger**), and in my view the term seems appropriate. When we look at current and previous publications, it becomes clear that scholars have (almost) always laid more emphasis on the inclusive dimension of "Panhellenic" than on the exclusive one: What is underlined is that all Greeks were allowed to participate, while the other side of the medal, the exclusion of barbarians, gets

21 Cf. the convincing analysis by Strasser 2006.
22 J. Blatter, s.v. Glocalization, Encyclopaedia Britannica Online (https://www.britannica.com/topic/glocalization; 29.5. 2020).
23 Remijsen 2019.

less emphasis in publications to the topic.[24] And that is what the ancient authors do. Moreover, it is well-known long since that there were participants whose Greekness was at least questionable: the Macedonian king Alexander I was allowed to participate in the early fifth century,[25] a Persian prince competed in Olympia, probably in 388 BC,[26] the Romans were admitted to the Isthmia in 212 BC[27] and to the Olympics at an unknown date. According to the *communis opinio*, there was a rule that only Greeks could participate, but the Eleian officials "seem to have admitted whomever they pleased for their own considerations",[28] and Nielsen has pointed out that "there is no known instance of an athlete denied admission on account of his ethnic identity."[29]

Based on the well-established insights into the flexible character of Greek ethnicity, Remijsen goes one step further: in her opinion, there was no rule at all that excluded non-Greeks from participation in the Olympics. Her main argument is that it would not have been possible to control the 'Greekness': "Greece did not have lists of citizens, as it was not politically united, nor did it levy taxes. This means that it would have been extremely difficult to control at Olympia or other sanctuaries who was 'Greek' and who was not."[30] This argument, however, only holds with static models of ethnicity, according to which there are clear divisions between one ethnic group and the other. Such models are very popular in political debates, but they do not reflect the discursive character of ethnicity. Ethnicity is not a fact one can "control", but an attribution that is volatile and open to discussion.

In addition to this, it is widely acknowledged among ancient historians that Greeks saw 'Greekness' more as a cultural than as a biological category.[31] The existence of the "only-Greeks-rule" is thus completely consistent with the low level of bureaucratization in ancient Greece; the task of the Eleian officials was not to find out who was Greek and who was not, but to decide who was worthy of competing and who was not (if the latter ever happened). To add another argument, even if we will never know what really happened when Alexander I came to Olympia, we can take it for granted that Herodotus' audience would have had difficulties to understand the episode if there had been no rule at all that excluded "barbarians". Thus it appears that the term "Panhellenic", with the

24 E.g., Krause 1838: 51–52; Nielsen 2007: 18. Cf. the first verses of Friedrich Schiller's *Die Kraniche des Ibycus* (1798): "Zum Kampf der Wagen und Gesänge, / Der auf Corinthus Landesenge / *Der Griechen Stämme froh vereint* …" (my italics).
25 Hdt. 5.22.
26 Xen. *Hell*. 4.1.39-40; cf. Bresson 2002 and Roy 2020.
27 Polyb. 2.12.8.
28 Crowther 2004: 13n11.
29 Nielsen 2014: 136.
30 Remijsen 2019: 4.
31 See, e.g. the contributions in Malkin 2001.

stress of its inclusive dimension, describes very well the character of the Olympics and other 'big' festivals. If there was anything common to all Greeks, it was athletics.

But the Panhellenic dimension does not tell us the whole story. The Olympics, despite being open to all Greeks, also had a strong affiliation to one single polis, Elis. It was Elis that organized the most famous competitions in the Greek world, and this polis drew capital out of this role, economic as well as symbolic. No wonder, then, that Elis tried to defend their control of the games. Such a connection to one polis was a defining feature not only of the Olympics, but the same is true for the other *agṓnes* as well. Yet there are many nuances to discover when we take a closer look. **McAuley** demonstrates how the Heraia in the Argolid developed from a festival connected to a region to a festival connected to a polis. His results are highly important for our understanding of the impact extramural sanctuaries had on political developments. Plataiai, according to Poseidippos, could claim the status of a polis only when the Eleutheria took place (**Jung**).

In addition to the Panhellenic and the polis dimension, we have to take into account the ethne and koina. The relationship between *agṓnes* and the federal states is often neglected because scholars have normally paid more attention to Egypt and Asia Minor when they discussed Hellenistic athletics. This volume, in contrast, with its focus on mainland Greece, shows the nexus of poleis and federal institutions in the context of agonistic festivals. A treaty dated to 216 BC shows detailed regulations concerning the competences and duties of the polis Anaktorion and the Akarnanian koinon with regard to the Aktian Games.[32] The Pamboiotia carry the reference to a significant Greek region in their name and were important for the ethnogenesis of Boiotia (**Tufano**), and the chapters collected in this volume show a fascinating variety of interactions between the local and the regional levels.

Interdependencies between Agonistic and Political / Social / Economic Developments

It is no matter of dispute that agonistic festivals were influenced by political developments. The Ptolemies' hippic dominance in the third century BC and their diplomatic efforts in favor of the Ptolemaia in Alexandria revealed how much the power structure of the Greek world had changed since Alexander's campaigns. The category of isolympic festivals came into being in this context; it was a new approach in order to lift the status of an *agṓn*.

32 *IG* IX 1², 2, 583.

The festivals examined in this volume offer many insights into political and socio-economic developments, but in a different way than the "Big Four" do. The difference becomes clear when we look at the Romans and their participation in Greek festivals. Victor lists of the "Big Four" show that some Roman emperors and members of their family used Greek *agṓnes* to present their power to the Greek world like Hellenistic kings: Tiberius and Germanicus are among the Olympic victors, and Nero's agonistic tour of AD 66/67 is very well-known. But in general, Roman participation in the big festivals was rare, especially in the gymnic disciplines. The situation is different for local *agṓnes*, as Sophia Zoumbaki has shown.[33] There are some victors with Roman names in the Republican period, and Zoumbaki plausibly argues that these were not athletes who had travelled from Italy to compete in the competitions, but residents of the respective polis. These residents, mostly merchants, visited the gymnasia and competed in the *agṓnes* with the aim to integrate themselves into the local Greek communities. In this way victor lists, combined with other evidence, show processes that lie below the big politics reported in the historiographical tradition. Furthermore, the names of the festivals indicate the symbolic penetration of Greece by the Romans. To name only one example, the name of the Erotideia of Thespiai was supplemented by kai Rhomaia or kai Kaisareia (**Schachter**).

The reasons for the foundation and the success/failure of *agṓnes* were manifold. The Basileia at Lebadeia were brought into being by Epameinondas after the victory at Leuktra; the new festival in honor of Zeus Basileus was intended to represent the rise of power of Boiotia (**Tufano**). An important point is the competitions' competition. It is well known that there was a lot of stability in the ranking of Greek contests – the Olympics kept their position at the top for nearly one millennium. But on the other hand, we can also observe *agṓnes* shrinking or gaining in importance, with the latter case occurring most often when Hellenistic kings or Roman Emperors entered the scene and pushed their favorite competition. The efforts of the Ptolemies in support of the Alexandrian Ptolemaia have been mentioned above; a striking fact is that the monarchs' power did not suffice to push this festival in the top group. Despite their isolympic status, the Ptolemaia never got the importance of the traditional Panhellenic festivals in Delphi and the Peloponnese. Much more successful was Augustus in his support of the Aktia of Nikopolis or Domitian with his foundation of the Kapitoleia in Rome.

The poleis did not have the monarchs' power to promote an *agṓn*, but they tried their best to make their festivals successful and prestigious; a famous example is the diplomatic

33 Zoumbaki 2014.

initiative of the Magnesians in support of the festival of Artemis Leukophryene.[34] **Farrington** discusses why the Pythia of Sikyon, which are said to have been founded by the tyrant Kleisthenes in the sixth century, fell behind two other festivals in the northeastern Peloponnese, the Isthmia and the Nemeia, established in roughly the same time; he rejects with good arguments economic reasons and refers instead to the bad reputation of the founder.

A kind of 'track record' not only of athletes and artists, but also of competitions would be a breakthrough in the study of Greek festivals. It is not impossible at all to achieve such a picture, since there are criteria to evaluate the success of competitions: the larger the catchment area of an *agṓn*, the higher its prestige; the bigger the honors and rewards a victor got in its hometown, and the higher the *agṓn* was placed in monuments of multiple victors, the higher was its rank. Due to the fragmentary tradition, it will not be possible to write a history of all the ups and downs of every single *agṓn*, but this volume with its "micro-history" of *agṓnes* leads the way to a better understanding of the developments, as many contributions present the data concerning catchment areas of single festivals. That is very important for understanding the choices athletes and artists made; and as the significance of the Olympics and other festivals of the *períodos* were beyond doubt, the local festivals seem to be a better key in search of festival hierarchies below the "Big Four". Databases[35] are helpful to make clusters visible, one example is **Graninger**'s observation on three different groups of victors at the Eleutheria at Larisa, the first being connected to the Olympics, the second tied to klerouchs in Egypt, the third related to central Greece.

In sum, this volume offers fresh insights into the fascinating world of festivals and competitions in ancient Greece, and at the same time it reveals how much work there is still to do!

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34 Van Nijf and Williamson 2016: 46–48.

35 *Database of Hellenistic Athletes* (http://mafas.geschichte.uni-mannheim.de/athletes/); *Connected Contests Database* (http://www.connectedcontests.org/database/).

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