

The Chronology of Athletic Nudity among the Greeks

Thucydides 1.6.5

In an insightful article, "Pindar, Athletes and the Early Greek Statue Habit" R.R.R. Smith shows that the artistic representation of naked males figures was "a symbolic metaphor that had become central to Greek representation from the beginning" (p. 107), meaning from at least the ninth century BCE. One implication: the tradition that naked competition in the Olympic games began in 720 BCE with the Megarean athlete Orsippus is not "a good deal too early," as Gomme (1950) p. 106 and many others have thought.

But then there's Thucydides, of whom Smith says (p.108), "...even for athletics the Greeks themselves had no idea what nudity signified or when it began (for example Thuc.1.6.5)." The scholarship on this passage, well summarized by Hornblower (1991), shows the confusion surrounding the passage. Yet, there is good reason to disagree with Smith and many other excellent scholars who have concluded that Thucydides believed that until not many years before his time *all* competitors in the ancient Olympics wore some covering around their midriffs. If these scholars are wrong, they have made an easily understandable mistake, because in section 5 of this chapter Thucydides leaves several verbs without stated subjects. In some cases that poses no interpretive difficulty since it is clear that *Lacedaemonians* should be understood as the subject of both egymnōthēsan in line 19 of the OCT and of ēleipsan in line 21. But pepautai in line 23 is more difficult.

Why is this verb singular? What is its subject? The *recentiores* got out of the difficulty by writing pepauntai, the plural making it easy to understand athlētai in the preceding line as its subject. That could mean that some group of athletes stopped competing in loin cloths at a date relatively close to Thucydides' time. de Romilly and Reiske followed the *recentiores*, even though that reading is *lectio facilior, non potior*, and unattested in any early manuscript. If one retains the better attested singular pepautai, one must understand 'the practice,' or equivalent, as Crawley does in his translation:

They also set the example of contending naked, publicly stripping and anointing themselves with oil in their gymnastic exercises. Formerly, even in the Olympic competition the athletes who contended wore belts across their middles; and it is but a few years since the practice ceased.

Since Thucydides then proceeds to discuss the practices of competitions among barbarians, especially those in Asia, it is tempting to draw the inference that hoi athlētai, if not a gloss, refers to *all* Greek athletes, and that Thucydides is therefore contradicting the tradition that nude competition began with

Orsippus of Megara or some other early figure and was the norm thereafter. An epigram (Palatine Anthology) proclaiming that Orsippus was first in this respect is quoted in the scholia on this passage, without any indication that the scholiast thought this tradition contradicted Thucydides' view.

There would be no contradiction if pepautai referred to the practice of the Lacedaemonians, not of all Greeks. The scholiast seems to think along these lines, and also noting that the material in section 5 resembles a digression (*parekbasis*). But more important than the scholia is the structure of chapter 6, which strongly suggests that this section refers only to Lacedaemonians.

Structure: The structure of 1.6.3-5 consists of two parallel "start then stop" patterns, surrounded by mentions of the barbarians. These, in turn, are embedded in a larger structure about Greece before the Trojan war (Connor (1984) Appendix One p. 251). The pattern is similar to other compositions elsewhere in Thucydides. Here a start-and-stop pattern combined with verbal repetitions marks out two units (each including a digression), one about the Athenians, the other about the Lacedaemonians. These are framed within a discussion comparing older Greek practices with those of contemporary non-Greek people. The sequence may be schematized in the following way, using line numbers from the OCT:

Barbarian practice I. 7

Athenians (lines 10 – 17) **start the stop**

Start: The Athenians were first prōtoi (lines 10 -15)
In not carrying weapons
In diaitē (clothing and hair style)

Stop: **negative + pol- + epeidē + -pau-** (line 12 f.): ou polus chronos epeidē. ...epausan

Digression on Ionians, lines 15 - 16

Lacedaemonians (lines 17 - 22) **start then stop**

Start: One: The Lacedaemonians were first, prōtoi (line 17 - 23)

Clothing

Isodaitoi in other respects

Two: They were first, prōtoi (lines 19 f.)

Exercise naked

Anoint themselves at the gymnasia

Digression on older athletic practice (lines 21 – 23)

Stop: negative + pol- + epeidē + -pau- (line 23) ou polla etē epedē pepautai

Barbarians lines 23 ff.

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Implications of the Structure: Thucydides uses this structure, I believe, to introduce his bipolar treatment of the process leading up to the Peloponnesian War, showing similarities and contrasts between the two principal belligerents, the Athenians and the Spartans. The structure makes it clear that the digression on older athletic practice applies to Sparta. Hoi athlētai in line 22, then, are athletes from Sparta, not from all parts of the Greek world. Thucydides, moreover, does not, assert that these Lacedaemonians were the first to *compete* naked in the Olympic games - simply that they were the first to *exercise* naked and anoint themselves with oil, that is, in their own gymnasia.

Thucydides' comments, then, do not contradict the tradition that naked competition in the Olympics began with Orsippos of Megara in 720 BCE. The resulting chronology, however, may seem anomalous since Thucydides seems to imply that until some years before his time Spartan athletes trained naked at home but competed with midriffs covered even in the Olympics, where nude competition was common. The Spartans, however, may have been slow to transfer to the Olympic stadium what had become standard practice in gymnasia at home. It is not hard to imagine cultural factors that might lead Spartan athletes to resist competing naked in the Olympic stadium, even though they exercised naked in Sparta. For example, they may have felt athletic nudity was from the outset a distinctively Spartan practice, a mark of *their* identity, not of some PanHellenic unity or of identity shared with remote cities and tribes. In that case, they would continue competing with midriffs covered until some surge of PanHellenic enthusiasm led them to adopt the now standard practice. That might well be at the games of 48 or 476, "not many years" from Thucydides' own day.

The possible role of some such cultural factor cannot be determined at this remove, but it calls for caution before Thucydides' comments are dismissed as muddled or mistaken. Naked competition, as Smith (2007) has reminded us, is a powerful symbolic act which, as Mouratidis (1985) has suggested, may not have had an entirely steady course toward full acceptance. Since practices of high symbolic significance can produce contestation and contestation can result in anomalies, we should not dismiss Thucydides' comments on the assumption that all was a smoothly linear progression to what eventually became the norm.

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