

WHEN THE LOIN CLOTH DROPPED

Nudity among the Greeks

A brash young man competes nude in the most prestigious Hellenic contest, thumbs his nose at old restraints, and sets in motion changes that reach deep into Greek culture. Nudity becomes standard practice in Greek athletics, and is found in religious rituals, the visual arts and other aspects of life as well. It becomes a boundary marker between male and female, boy and man, Greek and non-Greek. It seems strange to us – an instance of cultural “warp”. How can we understand the ways the Greeks thought about it?

At the Olympic games 720 years before our era the loin cloth dropped. The competitors in the foot race all started off suitably girt, but along the way one of them, the Megarean Orsippos, let his loin cloth (perizoma) drop, and streaked naked to victory. So Pausanias (1.44.1) tells us. In his day, almost a millennium later, you could see Orsippos’ tomb in the marketplace of his home town –an exceptionally honorific burial place. They had made a hero of him, in *their* sense of the word – someone worthy of continuing respect and capable of acting with enduring power.

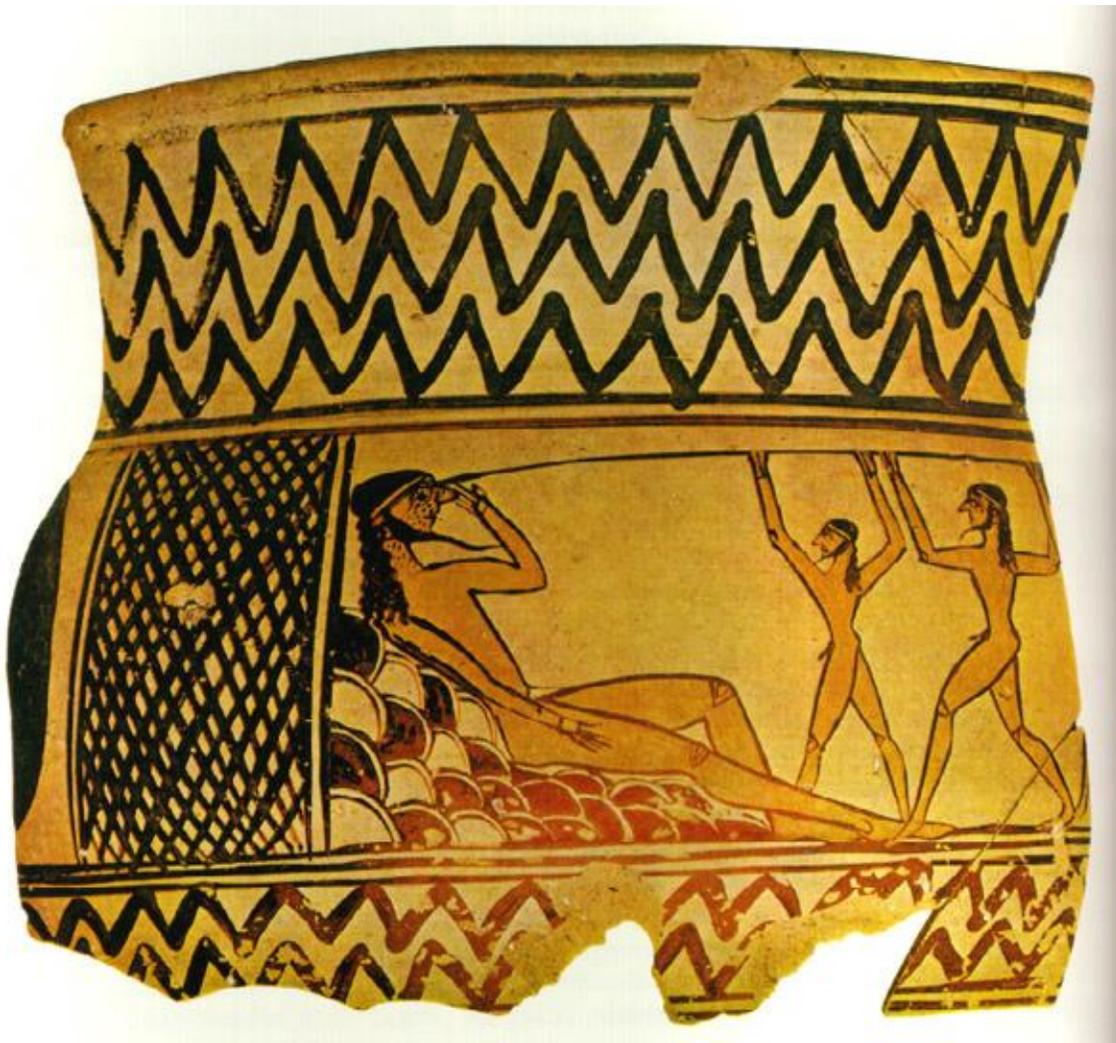
But is the story *historical*? It’s hard to say whether it was based on an entry in the lists they kept of Olympic victors. But if it was made up in an effort to provide a precedent for the practice of nude competition, why not ascribe it to Herakles, the mythic founder of the Olympic games, often shown naked in later art, for example on the metopes of the temple of Zeus at Olympia?



The purpose of the story, whether history or fiction, is to mark change, the disruption of old ways and, perhaps, of old ideas of *aidos*, shame. What had formerly been shameful, the exposure of “the shameful,” the *aidoia*, was replaced by the idea that the only shame was to be a loser.

In any event the dropping of the loincloth was more than a one-time expression of youthful exuberance or a passing recognition of the surge of energy that comes from liberation from convention, a restraint. This was not an isolated act. The precedent was followed by others, and became standard practice in all Olympic events except the chariot race and the musical contests.

The change to nude competition had an analogue in the visual arts as old myths were restated in heroic nudity, as in this shard showing nude men blinding a nude Cyclops. There's no hint of nudity in Homer's account of the episode in the *Odyssey*, but there it is in Greek art of the Geometric period.



Argos Museum C 149, c. 650 BCE

(with thanks to Robert Sutton)

Other Greek cities competed with Megara for the honor of having the first contestant who competed naked in these Olympics. Thucydides (1.6.5) was convinced that the practice originated not long before his own day in Sparta; other sources identify a Spartan Acanthus as the first to let the loin cloth drop. The Athenians, too, laid claim to the practice while some sources blackened Orsippos' well tanned reputation, alleging that he didn't win; he ran with the usual covering, but it came loose. His feet became entangled in it; he stumbled, lost the race, may even have died on the race course. (Mouratidis 1985 pp. 213 - 15). In the Hellenistic period the Megareans reaffirmed their claim by putting up an inscription (I.G. 7.52) for all to see.

The Olympics continued even after 393 CE when the emperor Theodosius tried to ban the games (Littlewood 2006), quite probably with nude competitors. Far earlier, the other Panhellenic games – Isthmian, Nemean, Pythian and also the Panathenaic – adopted the practice. Winners were often honored by statues set up at the festival sites or in their home cities. The earliest known examples are wooden statues of the mid sixth century BCE set up to honor Praxidamas of Aegina and Rexibios of Opus (Pausanias 6.18.7 and see Marconi 1985 p. 300).

Statues of nude young men were not, however, reserved for honoring victors in the Panhellenic games.

Two chunky, over life size statues, dated to the first half of the sixth century BCE, are usually identified as an offering to Apollo honoring the feat of Cleobis and Biton, Argive brothers whose remarkable exertion and sudden death are described by Herodotus (1.31).



Like the victors in the Panhellenic games Cleobis and Biton were men whose efforts brought them right to the boundary of human attainment. There was something divine about what they had done. Such men were sufficiently hero-like to deserve special commemoration and celebration during their own lifetime. Pindar's poetry reminds us that victory odes were sometimes commissioned for the athletes,

sung and danced in the victory celebration, hinting at the athlete's transcendence, however temporary, of the normal boundaries of human action.

With nude athletic competition a well established part of Panhellenic games, striping down became part of the training routine in gymnasia, *nude-places*, around the Greek world. Over time this institution took on a role in education as well as physical training. In the Hellenistic period when many men in the lands Alexander had conquered were wager to be seen as Greek, the gymnasium became a powerful force for Hellenization. Exercising nude was, moreover, closely tied to Greek identity. Well before the Hellenistic period, the royalty of the Macedonia wanted to compete in the foot race at Olympia, they had to show their Hellenic descent (Herodotus 5.22.2) and then, like everyone else, compete in the nude. That was not easy for non-Greeks, since for the Lydians and "*... among nearly all the other barbarians even for a man to be seen naked leads to great disgrace.*" (Herodotus 1.10.3).

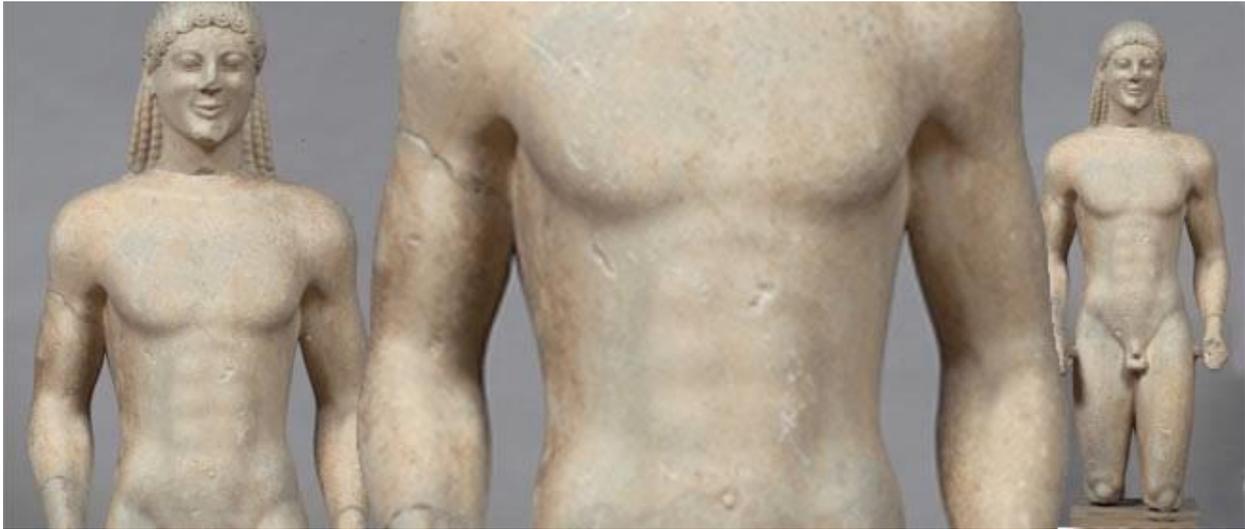
Since for the Greeks athletic competition and military combat were parallel, the convention of nudity transfers easily from the one to the other. Perhaps most memorable of the many sculptures showing naked males in battle are the square marble metopes from the south frieze of the Parthenon where naked men (Lapiths) battle ferocious centaurs.



Inside the Parthenon Athena's great shield showed naked Greeks fighting Amazons. Naked warriors appear time and time again on Greek sculpture -- not that Greeks went to war without full armor, a *panoply*; rather "heroic nudity" became an artistic convention to convey willingness to put oneself at risk without hesitation or self-preservation.

We also hear of nudity in ritual contexts, for example Herodotus (6.67.2) speaks of a religious festival in Sparta called the *Gymnopaidia*, or *naked-training*, probably introduced in 669/8 BCE. Later representations show young men with only a helmet and shield performing a dance. From roughly the same time comes a nude male statue from Dreros in Crete, quite possibly a representation of Apollo. This was the god honored in the Spartan gymnopaidia and elsewhere, including a sanctuary in Boeotia, the

Ptoion, from which over a hundred figures of naked young males have been excavated, many of them from the Archaic period.



These young males, stepping forward, with a slight but confident smile are perhaps most frequently occurring of early Greek sculptural forms. Though probably adapted from Egyptian models, the Greeks, abandoned the kilt regularly used on the Egyptian prototypes and let the young man stride forward in full frontal nudity. Art historians call this sculptural type “kouros,” *youths*, but that is a modern extrapolation from a Greek word never attested for statues. What would an ancient Greek say when he saw one of them? Is it a boy or a man, one might ask. The bodies are more fully developed than those of boys, but they are still beardless. The hair is as elaborately coiffed on almost all of them, as if in celebration of the koureion, the hair-do part of a coming-of-age festival, such as the Apatouria in Athens. They stand at the boundary between boy and man.

Apollo presides over that festival. Are these, then, images of the god? If over life size, there is an iconographic clue that this is someone of more than human stature. And, indeed, this type is used to represent the god Apollo, in whose sanctuaries many of these statues were found. But some of these statues bear the name of a human being. It is sometimes difficult to be sure whether such a statue represent a boy or a man, a human or a god. Much scholarly energy has gone into coming down on one side or the other on this question. But maybe the ambiguity is intentional and the message is “I stand at the boundaries and step forward with confidence.

Perhaps that is why nudity is also found in specifically religious contexts, not only in quasi-athletic rituals such as the one depicted on a bell krater of around 430 BCE in the Harvard collection (1960.344). (maybe the rae rom the altar of Eros in the ?gymnasium at the Academy to the altar of Ateros on the Acropolis)



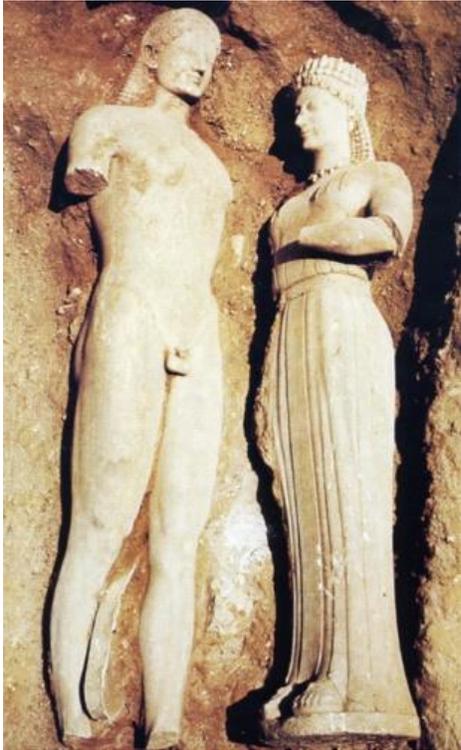
Religious initiations were a setting where ritual nudity often prevailed. The mid fifth century BCE relief from Eleusis showing Demeter, Persephone and a naked young Triptolemos hints at nudity in certain stage of initiation in the Eleusinian mysteries. Later, nudity may have a similar function in the Mithras cult as frescoes from the Mithraeum of ancient Capua suggest ([CIMRM 187](#)). Nudity in religious settings continued through antiquity into Christian times. One baptismal rite included the provision that those to be baptized should be naked: “Then, after these things, the bishop passes each of them on nude to the elder who stands at the water. They shall stand in the water naked” (from the “Apostolic Tradition”, or [Diataxis](#) ch. 21, 11 –21. The work is often ascribed to St. Hippolytus (170 - 235 CE). A similar baptism is depicted in the late fifth or early sixth century CE baptistery in Ravenna.



Such ritual nudity, whether early or late, is a reminder of one of the greatest innovations the Greeks made in religion. Anthropomorphism was widespread in ancient civilizations, but among the Greeks it took a new turn when they began to imagine some of their male gods -- among them Ares, Hermes, Poseidon and especially Apollo-- as naked. These Greek gods were in a sense the counterparts of the athletes -- in superb physical form, standing, as it were, at the boundary between human perfection and the divine. On the west pediment of the Parthenon the similarity goes one step further. Through the depiction of a contest among the patron divinities of Athens, Athena discretely clothed in her military outfit, while Poseidon is in full frontal nudity. Spectator craned their necks to see this defining moment of Athenian identity -- the instant in which the Athenians became the people of Athena.



Much more remains to be explored, the tyrannicides statues in the Athenian agora, for example. But where are the women? Praxiteles' naked Aphrodite must have been a sensation, for women are almost never nude in Greek art or ritual. While the naked male body sends powerful messages which we are still learning to interpret, Greek women send their messages through clothing. This dimorphism came vividly to light in 1972 with the discovery of two sixth century statues, buried side by side in Merenda Attica. The female is lavishly clothed; traces of pigment attest the bright colors of those garments. She holds in her hand an unopened lotos bud. The other statue, a taller male figure, is nude.



Our understanding of the semiotics of the female statue is helped by an inscription ([CEG 24](#)):

“Marker of Phrasikleia. I shall forever bear the name kore (girl),
since instead of marriage I received from the gods this name.”

The two figures illustrate an extensive dimorphism in Greek culture, male and female, naked and clothed, gymnasium and house, inner and outer, and perhaps two different concepts of aidos, shame. We have, I hope, made some progress in understanding some of these contrasts, by seeing nudity as a marker of boundaries -- between male and female, youth and adulthood, Greek and non-Greek, human or more than human. Or so it seems to me. Orsippos, or whoever first ran naked in the games, may smile at how far we have to go. We are still chasing you, Orsippos!

Bob Connor

Suggestions welcome: wrconnor1@gmail.com

Some Reading:

Balot, Ryan, 2014 Courage in the Democratic Polis Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press

Clark, Kenneth, 1957. The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art London, John Murray

Littlewood, A.R., 2006. "Olympic Games" pp. 514 – 15 in Wilson, N. Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece New York, Routledge.

Mouratidis, John, 1985. "The Origin of Nudity in Greek Athletics" Journal of Sport History, 12, pp. 213 - 32.

Smith, R.R.R., 2007. "Pindar, Athletes and the Early Greek Statue Habit" pp. 83 – 139 in Pindar's Poetry, Patrons and Festival ed. S. Hornblower and C. Morgan Oxford and New York, Oxford Univ. Press.