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SUMMARY

This thesis is dedicated to Greek athletes from the Roman period (31 B.C – 400 A.D), i.e. the participants in agonistic festivals in Italy and the eastern Mediterranean. Although these games normally existed of musical and equestrian competitions as well, I am only concerned here with athletic events in which runners, boxers, wrestlers, pankratiasts and pentathletes took part. While the topic of Greek athletics has been booming over the last three decades and many athletes have received scholarly attention, its protagonists as a whole have never been subject of a comprehensive study which takes in all the relevant epigraphic and literary sources. By analyzing a great number of these individual testimonies I intended to shed new and detailed light on the geographical mobility, ideology and daily life of athletes under the Roman Empire. A starting point has been provided by a summary of two hotly debated issues, viz. the social status of ancient athletes and the history of the athletic guild.

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Around the middle of the second century A.D. the showpiece orator Aelius Aristides travelled all over the Roman Empire. He studied in Athens and Smyrna and visited Egypt, Greece and Italy. In his famous encomium on Rome he noticed the blossoming of festival culture in his own day. He spoke of *'an infinite number of games'* (ἀγώνων ἄπειρος ἀριθμός) that were being celebrated all over the eastern Mediterranean. Aristides couldn't have been more right. Greek athletics flourished like never before under Roman rule. The first three centuries A.D. saw a spectacular increase in the number of festivals, a phenomenon that has so strikingly been dubbed *'une explosion agonistique'* by the eminent French scholar Louis Robert. The spread of Greek culture in the Hellenistic period and the blessings of the *pax Romana* had greatly expanded the world of Greek athletics. Athletes now travelled over far greater distances and were able to participate in far more festivals than their predecessors ever could.

This expansion, however, was not without problems. The existing festival calendar was in serious danger of becoming overcrowded. A recent study has estimated that during every Olympiad professional athletes could choose between 300 and 500 games to participate in. Therefore, new games had to be scheduled meticulously in order to prevent any major overlap and to suit the athletes' itineraries. In my opinion, this must have led to the creation of regional agonistic circuits which all had a fixed position in the four-year Olympic cycle. This would have taken athletes to Italy and Greece in one year, whilst travelling to Asia Minor or even Egypt in the next. I have tried to demonstrate the existence of this agonistic framework in the second chapter of this thesis.

Hints of such a system have since long been recognized by scholars. For instance, the local agonistic calendar in Carian Aphrodisias was clearly designed in relation to festivals elsewhere. When Marcus Ulpius Appuleius Eurykles, the imperial *curator* who had been appointed to oversee the city's finances, was asked to look at some of the local festivals as well, he seems to have had this specific objective in mind. He fixed their dates in such a way as to enable athletes to be present in time in two neighbouring cities and elsewhere in the empire. For instance, he stated that *'the contest from the (bequest) of Kallikrates, son of Diotimos, will be celebrated in the coming year, in the sixth month [i.e. March], before the departure of the synod for Rome'*.

'Rome' meant the Capitoline games, a Greek-style festival that was inaugurated by the emperor Domitian in 86 A.D. and that was celebrated every post-Olympic year during the months of May and June. It was the most prominent of four new festivals in Italy and western Greece that came into existence at the instigation of Roman imperial power.

Emperor Augustus initiated the Aktian games at Nikopolis in September 27 B.C. in order to commemorate his victory over Antony and Cleopatra. In 2 A.D. he promoted a similar festival in Neapolis to a higher rank and called it the Sebastan games. Domitian's example was followed by Antoninus Pius, who – following the death of Hadrian – in 142 A.D. instituted the *Eusebeia* in Puteoli in honor of his predecessor.

Upon close scrutiny, all these festivals are found to be held in the same second year of an Olympiad. This is no mere coincidence, but results from the expansionist nature of Greek athletics in the Roman period. In contrast to Classical times, athletes could now choose between so many games and became so geographically mobile that only a regional clustering of festivals would ensure their participation. Therefore, the Capitoline games were deliberately scheduled in the same year as the already existing Aktian and Sebastan games, because the athletes were in the region only once during the four-year cycle. The same goes for the *Eusebeia*. All of this led to the creation of a 'western tour', to which the Nemean games and the so-called Shield games of Argos also belonged.

Although the existence of this particular circuit has been noticed in the past, its implications for the Greek festival calendar as a whole have never been fully understood. Moreover, it has never led to a full-scale investigation of a specific type of evidence which can be found to be particularly revealing. These are the agonistic victory catalogues, honorific inscriptions that were put up for successful athletes in order to commemorate their achievements. They contain detailed lists with information on the number of wins, as well as the festivals, disciplines and age-categories in which the victories were won. These can be arranged according to hierarchy or even geographically, but quite a few of these documents follow a chronological order, in which all victories are listed by date. This pre-eminently suits them for reconstructing the sequence in which the various games were held.

Recently, a new find has confirmed the existence of the aforementioned western tour and other regional circuits in the Roman Empire. A marble slab from Alexandria Troas was found to contain copies of three imperial letters, which were the official response from the emperor Hadrian to requests made by the association of theatrical performers and their members. Of the three letters, the second one is the most instructive. It contains a detailed account of the contemporary festival calendar, to which Hadrian had recently made several changes. On this matter a meeting had taken place during the 34th edition of the *Sebasta* in Neapolis (134 A.D.), at which the emperor was present in person. There he was joined by members of the theatrical association as well as by delegates from a number of cities and provincial assemblies, who urged him into action. Apparently, the existing configuration had become confused and required some adjustments.

It seems likely to associate this need for a thorough revision with the spectacular increase of festivals which was mentioned above. Hadrian himself had greatly contributed to this upsurge by instituting many new games. For his most recent creation, the *Panhellenia* in Athens, a suitable date still had to be found at the time of the meeting in Neapolis. The emperor took the proposals and requests of those present into serious consideration before deciding upon a new festival cycle (τάξις τῶν ἀγώνων). Afterwards, a copy of this scheme was sent to all provinces and cities concerned, of which Alexandria Troas appears to have been one.

The contents of this letter are particularly revealing, because it enables us to verify or falsify many of the theories that have been proposed over the last decades regarding the date of several competitions. By comparing the information from the new find with the data resulting from the chronologically arranged victory catalogues, I have been able to recognize several festival circuits and reconstruct the calendar of Greek athletics on a year to year basis (see maps 2.5, 2.6, 2.7). In doing so, the second chapter has provided a comprehensive framework for the interpretation of recent and future epigraphic finds, as well as for

reassessing inscriptions that have already been published. This will enable a far better understanding and reading of agonistic inscriptions in particular and of Greek athletics in general.

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Record-keeping in sports is often seen as a purely modern phenomenon, embedded in the insatiable quest for progress in our current industrialized society and the Olympic motto of *citius, altius, fortius*. The ancient world has, undeservingly, for a long time been denied such notions. Although in Greek nor Latin there existed an equivalent for the word 'record', the Graeco-Roman world nevertheless took great care in recording '*unsurpassed but presumably surpassable achievements*' in sports. They functioned in much the same way as today, with only one major difference. Contrary to modern athletics the ancients were not interested in expressing sport results in time and/or distance. For them, it was of no importance whether the last Olympic champion had run faster or thrown the discus further than their predecessors had done four or more years earlier. First of all, such a meticulous calculation in numbers would have been impossible because of the technical limitations of the time. More importantly, since the linear measure of the foot varied from city to city and over time (as did the weight of, for instance, the *diskos*), the length of the stadium also differed. Therefore, track records didn't exist as such.

Greek athletics, however, did share a similar concept of keeping, setting and breaking records with its modern counterpart, namely by memorizing who had been the first or fastest (of all times, since athlete X or Y) to have won a specific victory or distinction. During the Roman Empire these played an important part in the ways athletes shaped their careers. In chapter three I have tried to show that they were not only in competition with their contemporaries, but also vied for eternal glory with their predecessors from the near or distant past. The testimonies of previous champions were omnipresent in the agonistic landscape, as their statues and honorary inscriptions adorned the *gymnasia*, stadiums and sanctuaries all over the Greek world. By consulting local archives athletes knew exactly which extraordinary results had been achieved during the ages and what was required in order to be commemorated as an unrivalled athlete.

With the passing of the centuries, however, it became progressively difficult to distinguish oneself from what had been done before. Athletes from the Roman period experienced the downside of standing in a long and venerable tradition that stretched back to the year 776 B.C. More than seven hundred years of Olympic games (and others) had produced countless exceptional records, which in the first centuries A.D. proved hard to equal or more often even impossible to surpass. This led to a change in epigraphic conventions. Instead of recalling only their most memorable victories, as previously had been usage, athletes now resorted to enumerating all of their achievements in stone. In my opinion this was the direct result of the difficulties that athletes (and musicians, for that matter) were experiencing in earning their places in athletic history. Among other things, this included mentioning the number of prize festivals in which they had won, as well as summing up the honorary citizenships that were bestowed upon them by the grateful cities in whose festivals they participated.

But even with these extended means of commemoration only the most exceptional athletes managed to distinguish themselves in a satisfactory matter. They were, for instance, talented enough to outdo a triple victor in the Pythian games from the Classical or Hellenistic period by winning them four times in a row, thereby becoming '*the first and only athlete of all times*' to have done so. For others, there only remained the possibility of 'recycling' existing records on a regional or even local scale. Unable to claim to

have been first to have won a certain festival, they derived pride from being 'the first of the Ionians' or 'the first Milesian' with a specific victory. Some relief was provided by the aforementioned 'agonistic explosion', as this temporarily opened new ways for athletes to claim a significant 'πρῶτος-Erfolg'.

Another development in the Roman period was the spectacular increase of agonistic titles, concise terms that summarized an athlete's accomplishments and that are to be found in the heading of many honorary inscriptions. These corresponded to specific victories and achievements in one or multiple games and provided contemporaries with a clear indication on someone's athletic merits. For instance, a victor in the *Kapitolia* of Rome was entitled to style himself a *Kapitolioneikes*, whilst an athlete who had remained unbeaten during his entire career acquired the right to be called ἄλειπτος. Chapter three has attempted to show the exact meaning and range of all these individual titles.

None of the athletic titles has so vehemently been debated by scholars as that of *periodoneikes*, or winner of the so-called *periodos*. There has been a general consensus among (sport)historians and classicists that the ancient *Grand Slam* circuit expanded at some point in the imperial period and came to exist of seven or eight festivals. In my opinion, the original *periodos* (ἀρχαία περίοδος) never underwent any changes and in Roman times, just like before, composed of the Olympic, Pythian, Nemean and Isthmian games. It was winning these four festivals that in the first centuries AD still qualified an athlete for the title of *periodoneikes*. The introduction of new festivals in Rome, Puteoli, Neapolis en Nikopolis did, however, have an impact on the agonistic vocabulary. From the mid-second century onwards the *Kapitolia*, *Eusebeia*, *Sebasta* and *Aktia* constituted a new, 'Roman-style' *periodos*. Athletes who managed to win in both these circuits were hailed as *periodoneikes teleios*, or winner of the complete *periodos*.

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The fourth chapter has tried to provide a clear picture of what it was like to be a Greek athlete in the Roman Empire, by focusing on several aspects regarding their daily lives. First of all, some light was shed on the build-up and duration of their careers. Most athletes, being from aristocratic stock, started participating in Greek athletics as part of their military education and training in the local *gymnasion*. Competitions in their native cities could act as a springboard for a professional career, as talented youngsters discovered that they were sufficiently trained and skilled to compete at a higher level. Afterwards, the initial steps in the wider world of Greek athletics were generally carefully planned. An athlete would at first try his luck in local and/or regional festivals, gaining enough experience (and, in case of less noble birth, wealth) before registering for the great festivals of Italy, Greece and Asia Minor. Several examples of such career planning can be discerned in the epigraphic sources and have been treated in some detail.

Around the age of eighteen a significant decision had to be made: whether to continue within the world of Greek athletics (and to embark on a truly professional career in the men's category) or to withdraw from sports in favor of a political and/or military career. Numerically, very few young athletes appear to have chosen the first option. Those who did generally enjoyed a total of between five and fifteen years touring the festival circuit. Competitors over thirty will have been a rarity. During these years a significant amount of money could be made. Besides substantial earnings from so-called prize games (which could amount to 6000 denarii for a single win) successful athletes were entitled to monthly pensions from their native cities and could claim hefty participation fees. Other honors included being conferred honorary citizenship and admittance into the bouletic class of cities organizing festivals. Foremost among these was the gift of Roman citizenship

(Ῥωμαίων πολιτεία), which was generally awarded to victors in the Capitoline games in Rome.

Athletes owed a great deal to their trainers, who not only physically and mentally prepared them for competitions but also accompanied them on their numerous journeys abroad. Despite the fact that their presence is only infrequently attested, they unmistakably received great gratitude from their pupils. This can, for instance, be seen from the several instances in which trainers get an honourable mention on the inscriptions which were erected for and by athletes. Besides coaches another important role in the life of athletes would have been played by doctors, whose dealings with them would have been frequent. Greek athletics, and especially the heavy events, were notoriously brutal and could sometimes result in serious injury. Considering the underdeveloped medical profession of the Roman period and the near complete absence of rules and protective gear in the combat sports, this meant that many athletes will have experienced the harmful effects of their participation in festivals. Disablement or even death will have occurred often.

Athletes used all means in order to achieve victory and to overcome their opponents. Foul play, intimidation and dirty tricks were not at all eschewed. Both the epigraphic and literary sources contain many instances of such immoral behaviour. It was, for instance, this atmosphere of intrigue and envy that brought an end to the successful career of the Alexandrian pankratiast Marcus Aurelius Asklepiades. He could, in his own words, no longer cope with the *'dangers and jealousies which were gathering around'* him. Undoubtedly, his disgruntled adversaries had violently tried to stop him from competing any longer. Paradoxically, the same sources can be used to shed quite a different light on the understanding between athletes. Despite the fact that competition was fierce *during* the actual games, a high degree of *corps d'esprit* can nevertheless be discerned *outside* the stadium. Athletes were more than just rivals, as they must have been travelling companions, colleagues and sometimes even longtime friends. Nowhere better does this solidarity express itself than in the consolation decrees that were issued by the athletic guild at the untimely death of one of its members. Within the athletic profession, therefore, ties of friendship co-existed with mutual feelings of envy and even hatred.

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Finally, chapter five offers a *prosopographia athletarum*, consisting of the short biographies of some 160 athletes from the Roman period. In these notes, I have tried to piece together all the relevant evidence regarding specific individuals and to provide a plausible reconstruction of the careers.