

Alison Futrell/Thomas F. Scanlon (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 2021 (Oxford Handbooks). XXX, 738 p., 74 ill. £ 110.00/\$ 145.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-959208-1.

“The Oxford Handbook of Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World” introduces the reader to a myriad of aspects of the study of ancient sport and spectacle. The hefty volume with fifty chapters, a modest number of images and a useful index (pp. 693–738) is not intended for a wider readership. Instead, the most likely users of this kind of handbook are graduate students looking for an orientation in the field and more experienced scholars wanting to be inspired by the new methodological or thematic approaches of colleagues from other disciplines or periods. One could say that an ideal handbook for this audience requires (1) an introduction in the history and current state of the field, (2) a good historical overview, (3) an overview of the main sources for the subject, (4) a cross-section of the topics and angles that are current hotspots of new research, and (5) a variety of disciplinary angles and interdisciplinary approaches, in chapters written by international experts in the field, who are sharing their (6) up-to-date insights. In this review, I hope to evaluate to which extent this book fulfills these criteria.

(1) The introduction of the volume¹ consists of two chapters: the actual introduction by Thomas F. Scanlon (pp. 3–13), which focuses on the importance of sport and spectacle within ancient and modern society, and, after that, a lucid chapter on theory by Paul Christesen (pp. 14–26), which starts by explaining why theory does not yet play a large role in the field, and then identifies a few theories which could be meaningfully used. For an actual introduction to the field as a whole, however, one should look elsewhere.²

A possible reason for this lack of an introduction to the field is that the volume actually covers multiple fields. The project shows the ambition

1 For the table of contents, readers are referred to the end of this review.

2 For example, P. Christesen/D. G. Kyle (eds.): *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity*. Chichester 2013 (Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World), which contains chapters on trends in the study of Greek sport (I. Weiler, pp. 112–129) and in the study of Roman sport and spectacle (J. Toner, pp. 451–461).

(which it shares with other recent overview books) to bring together expertise on both Greek and Roman traditions of games.³ By juxtaposing Greek and Roman topics in each section, the editors hope “to clarify areas of convergence” and “to shed light on similarities and differences” (p. 3). Most specialists, however, focus in their research on only one of these areas – and exceptions to this rule, such as Christian Mann, are not among the authors. As a result, most of the chapters deal either with athletics or with Roman spectacle, but do not bring these into a dialogue. The task of finding similarities and differences is, therefore, left to the reader.

(2) The second part (thirteen chapters) serves as an historical overview and is followed by a third part (six chapters) that introduces the different types of sport and spectacles. These overviews are wide-ranging, both chronologically and thematically, including for example pieces on the ancient near East (Wolfgang Decker, pp. 31–46) and on the afterlife of the games in Byzantium (Paul Milliman, pp. 194–206), and on often ignored spectacles performed in water basins (Rabun Taylor, pp. 266–279). The authors are generally presenting their designated topics within about ten pages, a word limit which some clearly struggled with. Some of the best chapters are written by the authors who limited themselves to one argument. I was particularly impressed by the excellent chapters by Ulrich Sinn (pp. 65–73) and David Potter (pp. 182–193), both of which focus on new insights, on the early history of Olympia and on the relation between games and Christian identity respectively. In her chapters of athletics in the Hellenistic period (pp. 124–132) and in the Roman period (pp. 168–181), Zahra Newby likewise deals well with the constraints by characterizing her topic by a few important features which have been intensively looked at in last few years. In part three, Nigel Nicholson (pp. 242–253) is similarly able to present the various kinds of Greek horse and chariot racing in a coherent short essay on how these reflected social hierarchies and changes to them.

In some other chapters, however, the inclusion of overviews of types of sports or of contests, each of which can only be explained briefly, leads to

3 The aforementioned 2013 *Companion* has a similar broad scope, but does not aim to bring Greece and Rome together in the same way, dividing the volume in ‘Part I: Greece’ and ‘Part II: Rome’. P. Christesen/C. H. Stocking (eds.): *A Cultural History of Sport in Antiquity*. London 2021 (which appeared earlier than the *Oxford Handbook*, but was conceived later), on the other hand, takes this ambition a lot further by integrating Greek and Roman sport in each chapter.

pieces that do not necessarily help the reader to get a real sense of a period or sport. This is especially the case when chapters are filled with factual information from ancient sources, which needs to be problematized, but cannot within the scope of the article. This is for example the case in the chapter by John G. Younger (pp. 47–61), who examines which sport disciplines known from the archaic period can also be identified in the bronze age, without explicitly thematizing the difficulty of establishing a historical relation between phenomena that are so many centuries apart. The same goes for Manuela Mari and Paola Stirpe (pp. 87–97), who focus on the *periodos*, the four most famous athletic contests, in the archaic and classical period, without problematizing the many exact dates given for the introduction of these games and for new features, which often come from much later sources and are therefore questioned by recent research.⁴ Even the choice (presumably made by the editors) to discuss the ‘top four’ separately from the others (Julia L. Shear [pp. 98–108] discusses the Panathenaia, Artemisia and Delia, and Panos Valavanis [pp. 109–123] offers more general comments on politics and athletics in the same period) is in a sense outdated, as current research has shown how this traditional separation hides a much broader athletic culture from us, with very many local games.⁵ In general, I think that especially the historical overview section would have benefitted from less and longer chapters.

(3) For discussions of the different types of primary sources, this handbook is very useful. Different genres of texts are discussed in part IV: Gregory Nagy (pp. 283–304) on epic, Leslie Kurke (pp. 305–319) on epinician, Kathryn Chew (pp. 320–329) on Latin literature (Ovid, Martial and Terullian), Anne Hrychuk Kontokosta (pp. 330–341) on epigraphic evi-

4 P. Christesen: *Olympic Victor Lists and Ancient Greek History*. Cambridge 2009 is fundamental here. Other authors in the handbook, such as Sinn, do treat the dates such as 776 BC much more carefully. I was also struck by a reference to my own book in this article to support the traditional idea that Theodosius banned the Olympics in 393, as I actually argue here that this never happened (S. Remijsen: *The End of Greek Athletics in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge 2015, pp. 47–51).

5 See e. g. T. H. Nielsen: *An Essay on the Extent and Significance of the Greek Athletic Culture in the Classical Period*. In: *Proceedings of the Danish Institute at Athens 7, 2014*, pp. 11–35. The term *periodos* is, moreover, not even attested before the second century BC. Cf. S. Remijsen: *The So-Called “Crown-Games”: Terminology and Historical Context of the Ancient Categories for Agones*. In: *ZPE 177, 2011*, pp. 97–109, at p. 98.

dence, Alexander Hollmann (pp. 342–350) on curse tablets and Nathan T. Elkins (pp. 351–362) on coins. I particularly liked the inclusion of the latter two chapters as both curse tablets and coins are important, fascinating and still understudied sources that often do not make the cut in these kinds of overviews. The only weakness in this part is perhaps the absence of Greek inscriptions. Hrychuk Kontokosta focuses on gladiatorial inscriptions and graffiti. Inscriptions for Greek athletes, mostly honorific in character, are very different from those – their features are, for example, illustrated by the chapter of Onno Van Nijf in a later section. But as the study of Greek agonistic inscriptions has been the driving force behind the discovery of the Hellenistic and Roman imperial period as equally important for Greek sport, the focus on only early and literary Greek texts in part IV is misleading.

The archeological sources are included in sections 2 and 3 of part V. The stadium, bath-gymnasium complexes, amphitheater and circus all get their own chapter. Here again, the authors have to make choices about what to include, often leading to a focus on the most famous examples of the building type: Hazel Dodge (pp. 412–425) specifically discusses the Colosseum (as indicated in the title) and Peter J. Holliday (pp. 426–436) mostly deals with the Circus Maximus (not suggested by the title). David Gilman Romano (pp. 391–401) picks several examples and gives more space to general architectural features, but still focuses mostly on early and rural stadia (whereas most of the excavated stadia are urban and Roman). Garrett G. Fagan (pp. 402–411) chose a very different approach, focusing mostly on the usages of the building type. Iconographic sources get two chapters: one by Shelby Brown (pp. 439–454) on Roman private art (though also including comments on public art) and one by Wendy J. Raschke (pp. 455–471) on athlete statues at Olympia.

(4) Part V of the handbook, called “Civic Contexts”, is with nineteen chapters the longest of the book. Subdivided into five sections of different length, it is also the most thematically disjointed. It remains unclear to the reviewer, for example, why Paul Cartledge’s chapter (pp. 367–377) on Sparta and Guy Chamberland’s chapter (pp. 378–388) on Roman games in the provinces together form section 1, and are separated from Luciana Jacobelli’s chapter (pp. 488–497) on games in Pompeii (to be recommended for reading with students) and Onno Van Nijf’s contribution (pp. 475–487) on Greek games in the Roman province of Asia in section 4. Section 5, entitled

“Games and Community”, includes probably the broadest range: various organizations of athletes and performers, aspects of economy, religion and the intersection of sport and law. This subdivision of part V in fact contains twice as many chapters as the whole of part VI on the body (including a chapter by David M. Pritchard [pp. 629–649] focusing on the social background of people taking part in athletic training in Athens, which is not so much on the body and thematically would have fitted more logically in part V).

A few topics reoccur in several chapters (e. g. social separation in the seating area of sports venues, the discussion about the social status of Greek athletes, but also smaller topics such as the hunting-association of the *Telegenii* or the *Zanes* statues). For the user – who is not likely to read this book from cover to cover – this is not a problem. However, together with the lack of cross-references in the handbook and its sometimes loose organization, the reduplications show that most authors were not aware of what the other authors were doing, and that there was little editorial steering.

Some of the thematic pieces are intended mostly as overviews of the topic (e. g. Matthew Dillon [pp. 567–591] on sport and cult or Steven L. Tuck [pp. 534–544] on organizations of Roman performers). Those of Valerie M. Hope (pp. 557–566), Geoffrey S. Sumi (pp. 603–613), Thomas F. Scanlon (pp. 653–675) and Alison Futrell (pp. 676–692) probably give the best examples of currently successful approaches in the history of sport and spectacle. The first two form good examples of how new insights often derive from attention for previously understudied, lower-status groups. Hope discusses the ambiguity of the status of gladiators with a refreshing attention to the perspective of the gladiators’ own points of view. Sumi carefully deconstructs various processes at play during a riot that broke out during the circus games, making the spectators and not the politicians the main actors in the event. Scanlon and Futrell, who are also the editors of the handbook, are both specialists in the role of sex and gender for the games and offer nuanced introductions into their own field of study.

(5) The number and quality of scholars who contributed to this volume is impressive. The editors convinced a diverse selection of philologists, ancient historians and archaeologists, many of whom are very prominent scholars in the field, to participate in this venture. The only minor point of criticism that could be voiced is that specialists working at North-American and British universities are overrepresented, especially among the younger generations.

(6) The compilation of a volume of over 700 pages with over 47 contributing authors is a daunting task for any editor, which requires an enormous time-investment in finding authors, keeping them on track and reviewing all the submissions over the course of several years. Throughout this book, one finds indications that this handbook took a particularly long time to get published. Two of the authors unfortunately died before it was finished: Decker (2020) and Fagan (2017) – the book is dedicated to both. Chamberland adds a cautionary note to his paper that it was written as early as 2011. Whereas he (and many other authors) updated at least their bibliographies with new references, ten of the chapters have no references at all to studies from the last ten years. This suggests that some chapters in this book are in fact representing older research than Christesen and Donald G. Kyle’s “Companion to Sport and Spectacle”, a 2014 book with a comparable purpose.⁶ Eighteen additional chapters contain no references to studies from the last five years (24, in fact, if I include the authors who only refer to their own later work). So only a minority of the authors had the opportunity to update their bibliographies more thoroughly or to (re)write their pieces in the final stage (e. g. the chapters of Newby and Brown). This is a drawback for a handbook that aims to bring together the latest research in the field, and a background the reader should be aware of.

Nevertheless, I have no doubt that the book will, and should, be intensively used, especially for advanced orientation in the field. Though by now twelve years old, Chamberland comments about the epigraphic habit (why are they so few inscriptions about games in comparison to the archaeological record for game sites?) are, for example, still relevant. And this is just one of the chapters in the book that come highly recommended. The handbook offers a useful and wide-ranging instrument for all students of ancient sport and spectacle.

6 See note 2 above.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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