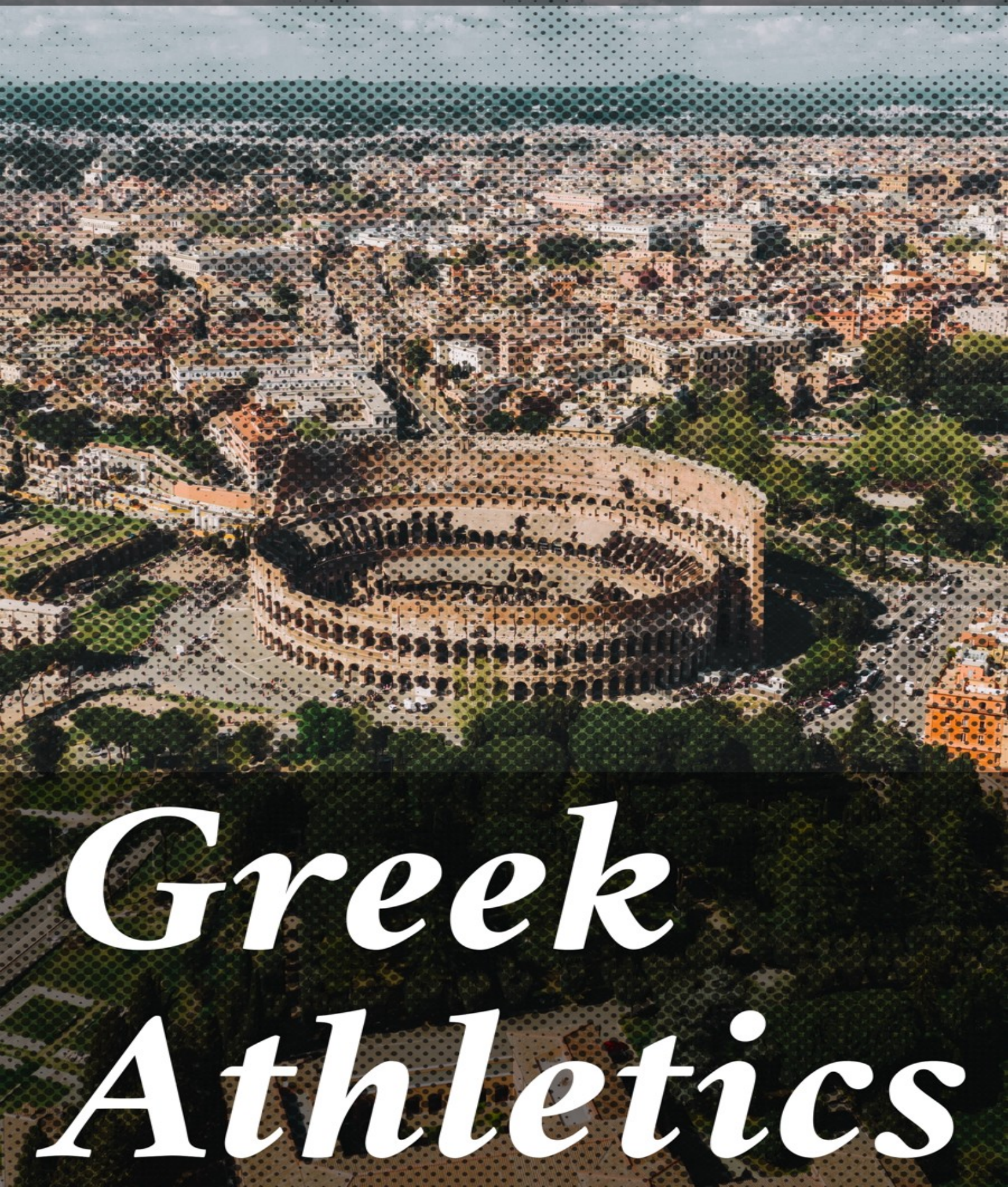
Frederick Adam Wright



Greek Athletics

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Table of Contents

PREFACE

Table of Contents

IN a previous volume[A] an attempt was made to set out the principles followed by the Greeks in the three sister arts of acting, music, and painting; and to show how in some respects we have failed to improve upon their practice. It is perhaps doubtful whether the mass of our countrymen will ever take a very deep interest in the laws that govern the right use of colour, sound, and gesture; and even if our inferiority in art were proved, it is probable that the position would be regarded with equanimity.

But as regards athletics the case is different; and it is with some hesitation that in this book, after giving a brief account of Greek gymnastics and physical training, I have ventured to raise the question whether Greek systems of bodily culture were not in some ways superior to ours, and whether on the whole the Athenians of the fifth century b.c. were not a finer and a healthier people than are the Englishmen of to-day.

Before the year 1914 such doubts might never have presented themselves. But one of the many unpleasant truths that the War revealed was that the physical condition of our average middle-aged citizen was very far from being what it should be. Indeed, anyone whose business it was then to examine recruits, if he was at all familiar with the work of Greek sculptors, must often have noticed with positive pain the difference that was apparent between the figure of the typical Greek athlete and the figure of the typical English town-dweller.

The reasons for this poverty of physique were manifold—city life, alcohol, nicotine, sedentary occupations, unsuitable food among the most frequent—but there was one that overshadowed all the rest, a complete ignorance of the structure and functions of the human body. Accompanying this ignorance nearly always came an utter lack of acquaintance with the elementary principles of gymnastics. There were very few men who did not take a passionate interest in the progress of some football team, and there were equally few who had ever given any intelligent thought to their own physical condition.

Games have certainly been of immense value to modern England, and we have succeeded in making of them a real instrument of moral education. On the cricket and the football field our national qualities of individual initiative and cheerful obedience have been developed, the virtues of courage, endurance, and self-control fostered. But the average man to-day is inclined to take games too seriously, and to the competitive element in them he attaches an altogether absurd importance. In cricket, football, or tennis it really makes little difference which side wins, as long as all the participants get their due share of exercise. The true object of a game is not to secure runs or points or goals, but rather to develop and increase the strength of every part of our body.

On the other hand, gymnastics, in their widest sense, are not taken seriously enough. It is the duty, and it should be the pleasure, of every man and woman amongst us to make themselves as healthy and as beautiful as Nature meant them to be. For this purpose the playing—not of course the

mere watching—of games has a definite value, but it does not take the place of a properly devised system of gymnastic exercises. Knowledge of the right methods is here of the first importance, and I therefore dedicate this book to our real experts in physical science, the gymnastic instructors of His Majesty’s Army.

1

Athletics and Athletic Festivals

Table of Contents

ATHLETICS, whether ancient or modern, is a wide term covering a large field of bodily activities, while the boundaries between sport and athletics are often hard to fix. But we may safely distinguish four main branches of physical energy.

1. Athletics proper, where the essential feature is the competition with its almost invariable concomitant the prize, —athlon; the two things going so closely together that, as in the ‘Grand Prix,’ the same word is used for race and reward.

2. Gymnastics, the training of the body by a system of exercises in which the naked limbs are allowed free play. Competition is here often replaced by united action, and there is a close connexion with the sister arts of music and medicine.

3. Drill, the particular form of bodily training which is necessary to fit a man for the duties of a soldier. It includes all the varieties of military exercise and practice with arms, and differs from athletics and gymnastics in that its formal purpose is purely utilitarian.

4. Games of various kinds, played either singly or in company, and usually requiring some sort of implement, a ball, a stick, or a hoop. The elements of competition and united effort are usually present, but a prize is not essential.

The history of organized athletics in Greece is a very long one, and extends for some twelve hundred years. The Olympic register of winners in the foot-race begins 776 b.c., this year being taken as the first Olympiad when, in the third century b.c., the Olympic register came into use as the recognized method of reckoning dates. From 776 b.c. to a.d. 217 the list, as drawn up by Julius Africanus, has been preserved intact for us by Eusebius. In the third century of our era the Roman Empire, attacked by Goths, was forced to call in the Greeks to fight once more for their native land, and even when the invading hordes were repulsed the effects of their ravages were still felt. The Olympic games, as a permanent institution, apparently ceased after the Gothic invasion, and the policy of Constantine hastened the process of decay. Christianity, now the official religion, looked with little favour on the ancient festivals, and finally Theodosius I, probably on the advice of St. Ambrose, in a.d. 393 abolished the games by imperial edict, the last Olympic victor known to history being a certain Armenian knight, a man of gigantic strength, named Varaztad.

There is hardly any other Greek institution which had so long a career. Through the centuries, from the age of the tyrants to the great era of the free States; from the rise of Macedonia to supremacy, through the troubled years of the Achæan and Ætolian Leagues; while Greece lay crushed under the rule of the Roman Senate and while it had its brief revival of prosperity under the Roman Empire; in spite of every vicissitude of fortune, year by year the Olympic games took place. There is something impressive in this continuity which links together periods otherwise so

different, and historians have laid full stress on the services that Olympia rendered in emphasizing the sense of national unity and goodwill. But exaggeration is very possible here, and no one can say that these athletic festivals created or maintained an atmosphere of peace among the constantly warring Greek States, any more than that their recent revival as an international event has succeeded in bringing harmony to our modern empires. The chief benefit of all these gatherings is the stimulus they afford to local and national patriotism; but whether the dangers of such competitions are not greater than the advantages is a question still undecided, and it may be useful to remember that in Greece, despite the general popularity of athletics, the two leading States, Athens and Sparta, during the greatest period of their history held somewhat aloof. The reasons that actuated them were different: for Athens, athletics were too specialized; for Sparta, they were not specialized enough. But the fact remains that the two cities which give to us most of what is valuable in Greek culture took but little interest in this particular organization.

The Athenian, in his indifference, was influenced probably by various currents of thought. There was the old Ionian vein of softness, which made the arduous straining of the athlete distasteful and led to the formation of the adjective *athlios*, ‘distressful,’ from the noun *athlon*; the spirit that regarded work as a ‘plaguy nuisance,’ the carrying of burdens as ‘vulgar,’ and any form of manual labour as beneath the dignity of a gentleman. There was also the finer feeling that the excessive pursuit of athletics tended to coarsen rather than to refine the human body by developing

particular muscles at the expense of general grace, and thus destroying that *eutrapelia*, the ready nimbleness of mind and limb, which the Athenian valued most. Lastly, there was the just belief that athletics in themselves are but a means to an end, the health of the body, and that although that end is a desirable one, a healthy mind is even more important. This is the point of view that Xenophanes of Colophon (576-480 b.c.) represents when he says:

‘It is not right to prefer strength to the blessings of wisdom: our wisdom is better than the strength of men and horses. It is not speed of foot that gives a city good government; nor does it bring fatness into the dark places of a land.’

In the next century Euripides repeats the complaint, and in more bitter language:

‘Of all the countless evils in Greece, none is worse than the athlete tribe. Slaves of their belly, they know neither how to make money nor to bear poverty. In early manhood they seem fine fellows and strut about, the darlings of the town; but when old age comes, like worn-out cloaks they are flung aside.’

And for all this mischief the athletic gatherings, with their crowds of useless spectators, are chiefly responsible. The principle of valuation is wrong, for

‘Who by skill in wrestling, or by lifting the diskos, or by a shrewd blow on the jaw ever helped his native land, even though he won the prize? Will men fight the foe holding a diskos in both hands, or will they get home with one fist through the foemen’s shield? No one thinks of such folly when he is standing near cold steel.’