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History of Physical Education in Ancient Greece

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History of Physical Education in Ancient Greece

For centuries Homer's Iliad and Odyssey were considered supreme as literature but unreliable as guides to what really happened during and immediately after the Trojan war (1194-1184 B.C). The poet, historians argued, had celebrated an era two or three hundred years after it had passed, telling of places and events of which no other evidence was known. And, they maintained, it was all the more difficult to distinguish between facts and fancy because Homer had borrowed much from legend.

In the late 1800s the Iliad gained new respectability as a historical reference. Heinrich Schliemann, a German merchant and classical scholar, believed, with little encouragement from scholars that he had gathered enough data to locate Homer's Troy. In 1871 he started excavations at Hissarlik on the Aegean shore of Asia Minor near the Hellespont. After digging through several layers of an ancient city, Schliemann struck what he thought was the city of Troy. Subsequent excavations on Crete turned up a multitude of cities and evidence of an advanced culture dating from the Neolithic (6000 B.C) to the Mycenaean (1200 B.C) ages.

The Minoans

Evans concluded that the dark-skinned and curly black-haired inhabitants of Crete, whom he called Minoans, were neither Greeks nor Romans. We know now that these people were of Mediterranean stock and that they had lived in the region several millennia before the arrival of the first Indo-Europeans. The Minoans, traders and skillful sailors, carried their manufactured goods and works of art, as well as olive oil, honey, fish, figs and other fruits, and aromatic and medicinal herbs to Aegean and Mediterranean ports in Asia, Africa, and Europe. For example, they imported copper from the island of Phoenicia and Asia Minor and papyrus from Egypt and in return delivered their popular black steatite vases, bronze ware, fabrics and glazed pottery.

The Minoans provided a limited education for scribes, who kept records on clay tablets and papyrus of business transactions and court activities. Evans tried for more than forty years to decipher the two languages used by the scribes, which he classified as Linear A and B. In 1952 Michael Ventris, an architect and amateur cryptographer, finally solved the Linear B,

which he proved to be a forerunner of classical greek. Linear A, the Minoan language, has not yet been deciphered.

Although the Minoans had no system of public education, Males were subject to military training. Cretan arches were respected throughout the ancient world. The Minoans, who began to use the bow and arrow at the close of the Stone Age, must have developed a system of instruction and practice that extended from youth through adulthood.

Evans distinguished two types of spear the short javelin employed in close-range fighting and the long javelin (6-foot) used in the attack and in hunting. About 2000 B.C the Minoans developed the short bronze sword for thrusting rather than slashing in hand to hand combat. Obviously, swordsmen had to be trained in parries, attacks, counterattacks, and feints. At the same time, horses and chariots were imported from Syria, but they were used to transport men and equipment more than as a weapon.

Cultural Significance of Sports in Religion

According to Evans, the Minoans reveled in their religious processions and rituals which honored a single goddess, the great mother earth, or several goddesses. Music and dancing and boxing and bull-grappling figured in these ceremonies, which usually were conducted in an arena seating about 500 spectators. From Minoan vases we learn that boxers sometimes wore helmets and always wore protective covering for the hands. Men and boys participated. The vases also clearly depict boxing technique.

Minoan artisans embellished vases, murals, frescoes, and jewelry with the figures of bulls and scenes of the half-man grappling. The Minoans also gave to posterity the myth of the half-man, half-bull Minotaur. The bull had an important role in religious ceremonies as a sacrificial animal and served as a dangerous prop for acrobats. The acrobat, a man or woman, grasped its horns, and as the bull tossed its head the performer swung high into the air and did a backward somersault to land on the bull's rump. From this insecure seat the acrobat escaped to the waiting arms of a fellow performer. No modern rodeo performer would attempt this feat, but bull-grappling scenes appear too frequently to have existed only in the imagination of the artisan. Their physical development suggests that acrobats and boxers were intensively trained and that only the best of the trainees were permitted to perform in religious ceremonies.

The Mycenaean or Homeric age

About 1900 B.C barbaric indo-Europeans invaded and settled in the northern region of Greek peninsula. Not until 1500 B.C did they occupy the entire peninsula and attain an identifiable culture. Called Achaeans by Homer, they were the first Greek-speaking people by 1400 B.C the powerful Tholos tomb dynasty controlled Athens, Thessaly and Aetolia on the peninsula and the Ionian and Aegean islands. It was these tomb builders who destroyed Knossos and "digested" the Minoan culture.

Mycenae, several miles inland from the seashore and protected by the citadel hill, or acropolis, facing the plain of Argive, became the capital of the Achaean world. To facilitate commerce their economic welfare was dependent upon trade the Mycenaean created a federation which included Corinth, Sicily, Egypt, Palestine, Cyprus, Troy, and Macedonia. Any attempt by members of the federations or free-lance pirates to interfere with trade brought immediate reprisals. Indeed, historians are inclined to believe that it was not the abduction of Helen that "launched a thousand ships". But rather that Agamemnon, king of

Mycenae, declared war on Troy because the Trojans had interfered with commerce between black sea ports and other members of the confederation.

Spartan education

The Spartans, located in the southern Peloponnese, were a totalitarian society. The state was oriented entirely toward the military life. Weak children were abandoned to die in the wilderness so that the strength of the state would not be threatened by weak citizens.

Education, which was controlled by the state, was a harsh process of training for the males. The educational process was almost entirely physical. The emphasis on preparing the child for the military life included diligent programs of running and throwing activities (javelin and discus), swimming, wrestling, boxing, and gymnastics activities. Dance was popular in Sparta because it not only was used to imitate military movements, but was part of the ceremonial and recreational occasions as well. Music also was important, for much of the exercise was performed to music. Many songs were composed to honor dead heroes, and the laws of the state were set to music.

The male children went through three stages of military training. They left their homes to live in barracks at the age of seven years and trained in packs under an older youth until they were about fourteen. They then underwent more intensive military training until they were about twenty years old, at which time they became regular members of the military. Even as military men, they had to live in the barracks until they were thirty years old. At that age they could marry and leave the barracks, though they still were required to eat with the other soldiers, rather than in their own homes.

The education of the girls was not neglected, for it also was controlled by the state from the time a girl was seven years old until she was about eighteen. The training which emphasized weight control and conditioning to prepare the girls for motherhood, included many of the same activities used by the boys; the girls participated regularly in athletics, just as the boys did, and many markers honoring their athletic feats were put up by proud fathers and brothers. Unlike the men, however, when a woman married, her athletic activities were ended, and she was expected to stay in the home.

While the Spartans were important participants in the games and sports at the many festivals of the times, they discouraged boxing and the pankration (a sort of free-style, no-holds-barred fighting) because the fighter had to admit defeat to prevent death or severe injury. Spartans were taught never to admit defeat. They considered victory very important, and the records of their victories provide many of the earliest clues to the nature of sports in Greece.

Because of their emphasis on military training, the Spartans developed the best war machine in Greece, but they did not develop the ability to rule well politically. The boundaries of the areas that they ruled successfully were never very large, even though they did defeat the Athenians in the Peloponnesian wars.

The Spartans placed no real emphasis upon intellectual forms of education. The Spartans were trained for war, but they were not equipped to survive a successful peace. Their inability to rule well in times of peace eventually led to the conquest of the Greek people, first by the Macedonians and then by the Romans. The Spartan failure points out the severe shortcomings of their unbalanced approach toward education.

Athenian education

Athens of classical times has long been the favorite model for the theoretical balance necessary in education, particularly so to physical educators because of its emphasis upon physical education.

Athens contrasted strongly to Sparta in many ways. While the state had begun as an oligarchy, the Athenians became a democratic society oriented toward the individual rather than towards the state. Their concept of democracy, however, was basically for the men rather than the women.

Athenian education was the first system of education that we think of as modern. It was the first system to be concerned with the all around development of the individual, both mentally and physically. The old motto that stresses the goal of education as “a sound mind in a body” expresses the essential balance that was the best quality of Athenian education. The process stressed physical training, public worship (which included music and learning the traditions and customs of the state. Later, “book learning” was added to this list, as reading and writing came to be considered more necessary skills.

Hermann Weimer speaks of Athenian education as stressing *paideia*, which means the “beautiful and the good”. This represented the ideal characteristics of the Athenian citizen: aesthetic sensibilities, knowledge, physical skills, and a strong sense of ethics.

The educational system in Athens, like democracy, was primarily for the men; the women and were educated in the home and had few rights. Plato had suggested that the educational process for boys should begin with physical education at about the age of six years, with grammar added at the age of ten and music added at the age of thirteen. In reality, however, all three portions of the process were begun at about the same time and continued until a boy reached the age of about eighteen and entered the military.

The program of physical education for older males was concentrated at the gymnasium. The name for this type of training school came from the Greek word meaning “naked” for the Greeks exercised and performed in the nude. The gymnasium was relatively elaborate, and because considerable room was needed for tuning and throwing activities, it was built outside the city. A smaller version of the gymnasium, the *palestra* or wrestling school, was located within the city, and was used primarily for the training of the schoolboys.

A teacher of physical exercise at *palestra* was called a *paidotribes* and was similar to today’s physical education instructor. Then men who coached or trained the athletes for competition were called *gymnasts*. These instructors were often retired champion athletes, and their duties were similar to today’s coaches.

The basic aim of the educational process at the gymnasium and at the *palestra* was not the development of the physical for its own sake; instead, it was designed to develop the qualities of the individual through the use of physical means. The activities used by the Athenians at the *palestra* and the gymnasium were essentially the same as those used by the Spartans, but with the addition of exercises designed to improve the movements skills, such as posture and the mechanics of graceful movements. The Spartans stressed the development of the man of action, while the Athenians sought a harmonious development of the individual across physical and intellectual lines. Because of this balance, physical education was a more important part of the education and was better integrated into the educational process than in any other civilization before or since Athens.

Athletic games and contests

Many of the religious games and festivals held by the Athenians and other Greeks during this period (1000 to 300 B.C.) were generally celebrated by athletic contests, dance, and music. Some of the festivals were celebrated within a single city-state and by only one sex, as in the case of honoring local gods, for example; other festivals, however, were border in appeal and sometimes were celebrated by all the greek people.

The greatest of these festivals was comprised of the Olympic games, which were celebrated in honor of zeus, chief god of Greeks. The festival lasted for five days in late august and was held in every fourth year (which resulted in the term Olympiad, meaning a four-year period). The first recorded Olympic games took place in 776 B.C though there were undoubtedly contests prior to that date. The games took place near the village of Elis in western Greece. Over a period of hundreds of years, the interest in the greek athletic competitions declined. The Olympic Games in particular gradually fell into disrepute as professional athletes began to compete. The athletes with more money were able to devote more time to training for the games, which gave them an advantage over the athletes who did not have similar training. This professionalism became more prevalent after the romans conquered the Greeks the games were finally abolished by the emperor of the byzantines (the eastern roman empire), Theodosius I, in A.D 394. This was partly because Theodosius, as a Christian, considered the games, which were held to honor the greek gods to be pagan events, though their corruption by professionalism has also changed the character of the games considerably by then.

The greek civilization, particularly as represented by the Athenians, was a high point in the history of education. This period marked the first time in western civilization that the educational process has developed beyond predominantly military or trade design and needs. For the first time in western civilization that the educational process had developed eyond predominantly military or trade designs and needs. For the first time education had a balanced goal: the development of a “whole” man, a person who was well and equally developed in mind and body, a man who was acceptable to the military needs of his day, but who, unlike the Spartans, could also fulfill the civic or governmental needs of his time. Philosophy had entered education in this period, for people such as Socrates, plato, and Aristotle has sought to develop or discover an “ideal” educational process to produce the well-rounded product of education that they believed should be the goal of education. Such a balanced educational process as the Athenians had been not to seen again until the renaissance, and when it did appear, it was a deliberate attempt to copy the newly rediscovered Greeks. As greek civilization declined and roman civilization grew to replace it, much of the glory of its culture was lost to western civilization as the power of greek people declined (largely because of prolonged wars between the city-states), they were conquered by the Macedonian empire of Alexander the great. When Alexander died around 320 B.C his empire broke into smaller nations, the greek civilization went through a process of blending with the civilization of the middle east over the next two centuries. The resulting diluted greek culture was encountered by the romans as they becoame powerful in the eastern Mediterranean between 200 and 100 B.C.

Decline of physical education in Athens

Athenian enthusiasm for physical education was at its peak during the sixth and into the first half of the century B.C. the Persian wars had engendered a deep respect for the value of the instruction provided in the palaestra.

With the appearance of the sophists in the last half of the fifth century, physical education had to compete with a new and fascinating interest. The sophists had a beneficial effect upon literature and thought. Their method of reasoning, however, had a damaging effect on social conduct and undermined cherished Greek traditions. Wealthy young men turned to deserting the palaestra to follow the new philosophy and turned to hunting, horseback riding, and less vigorous pursuits. After 335 B.C. the compulsory cadet training of the ephebia furnished practically the only systematic instruction in physical education.

Professionalism in athletics also undermined interest in physical education in Athens and other city-states. Intellectuals throughout the centuries had warned the Greeks of the danger of the growing public interest in games and spectator sports. By the fifth century Greek youth, once a good amateur athlete, bowed out of the scene and left the stage to the professionals.