

**Original citation:**

Newby, Zahra (2017) Review of Athletics in the Hellenistic World by Mann, C., Remijsen, S. and Scharff, S. (eds.). The Ancient History Bulletin Online, 7 .

**Permanent WRAP URL:**

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/97588>

**Copyright and reuse:**

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Publisher's statement:**

Published version: <http://ancienthistorybulletin.org/online-reviews-vol-7>

**A note on versions:**

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP URL' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: [wrap@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:wrap@warwick.ac.uk)

**Mann, C., Remijsen, S. and Scharff, S. eds. *Athletics in the Hellenistic World*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2016. Pp. 366. ISBN 978-3-515-11571-1 (hardbound).**

This volume is an admirably timely publication of sixteen papers (9 in English, 7 in German) presented at a conference in Mannheim in June 2015. At first glance one might be tempted to consider it as just another collection of conference proceedings, but that would be a mistake. Here, the whole is certainly greater than the sum of the parts, forming an important volume which makes a real contribution to our understanding of the workings and significance of athletic culture in the Hellenistic period.

The opening paper by Mann sets out the context for the papers which follow by discussing the historiographical framework within which the volume sits. Noting the comparative neglect of Hellenistic athletics in contrast to the earlier periods and a recent interest in the Roman period, he defines the need to look at Hellenistic athletics within the wider history of the Hellenistic period, setting out possibilities and key questions.

These threads are picked up in the papers which follow, with the next four papers exploring different aspects of agonistic athletics. Nielsen sets the scene by going back to the period preceding the Hellenistic Age, in order to quantify the 'agonistic explosion' noted by Louis Robert.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the evidence of epinician poetry, inscriptions and archaeological findings he finds traces of at least 155 agonistic festivals in the period preceding the Hellenistic age, and given the gaps and biases of our evidence suggests that they may have run into the hundreds. As Mann notes in the introduction, Robert's 'explosion' may in fact have been more of a 'moderate increase' (20).

Van Nijf and Williamson apply social network analysis to the burgeoning festival culture of the Hellenistic period. Through the case studies of Magnesia on the Maeander, Stratonikeia, and Oropos they show that festivals were used to advertise the city as part of a wider *oikoumene*, though detailed analysis of the epigraphic evidence also suggests that for some their importance lay primarily in a regional context.

Fauconnier focusses on the agents who helped to create festival culture by examining the role of the athletic and artistic synods, and particularly the path towards the development, in the first century BCE, of an international athletic synod. He argues that it was the upheavals of the Mithradatic Wars, and the ensuing reorganisation and unification of the Mediterranean world, which gave rise to the circumstances in which ecumenical guilds of athletes and actors became indispensable.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert, L., 'Discours d'ouverture', in *Actes du VIIIe Congrès international d'épigraphie grecque e latine, 3-9 octobre 1982. Athènes*, 35–45 at 38.

Papakonstantinou's paper continues the focus on the workings of Hellenistic festivals by looking at their funding, and the institution of the *agonothesia*. From records of accounts and honorific degrees he argues that the rise of the *agonothesia* was not a result of poor civic finances, which continued to fund the bulk of the expenses, but was rather to do with the enduring appeal to the elite of athletics as a signifier of Greek values and identity.

The next four papers turn to more specific contexts. Franchi's paper interrogates the oft-quoted similarities between sport and war through discussion of the agonistic vocabulary used in Hellenistic epigrams on the Archaic Battle of the 300 Champions, between Sparta and Argos. Mathys turns to the evidence for display contexts of athletic statues, looking at the evidence for whether athletes were honoured with statues in the gymnasium at Pergamon. Her findings show the importance of the gymnasium as a place of honorific display towards kings and athletes, though the evidence for the latter clusters around the period of Augustus and seems likely to be closely tied to Pergamon's success in winning the right to hold the first provincial games in his honour. As in Papakonstantinou's paper, we find glimpses of the ways athletics was embedded into the elite lifestyle, with two men who are honoured for their political activities being also praised for winning athletic victories in their youth.

Argyriou-Casmeridis interrogates the notion of athletes as symbols of *arete* through a study of Hellenistic honorific decrees, noting that athletes are rarely praised here for their *arete*, whereas gymnasiarchs and others who fostered athletic activity through their financial generosity often are. Her findings about the social importance of athletics as an institution correspond with those of Papakonstantinou, and the two papers might usefully have been placed together.

Weber continues this focus on the social value of athletes through exploration of the representation of athletes in Hellenistic funerary art. Noting that the naked athletes found on classical reliefs are less common in the Hellenistic age, while images of intellectual education become more prominent, she considers whether they suggest a shift away from physical towards intellectual education as a source of value. Through careful analysis of a range of reliefs from different areas, she concludes that athletics remained an important element of self-display, though it was often now combined with a focus on intellectual education as one of the two key building blocks of the male citizen.

The next two papers turn to regional discussions. Scharff discusses the presentation of Thessalian hippic victories in Poseidippos' epigrams, tying their stress on the regional identity of the victors as Thessalians to the region's famed horses. Daubner looks at Macedonia and Epirus, and shows that there is evidence for wide engagement here with athletic activities in the Hellenistic period.

The following three papers look at the visual side of athletics and festivals, also raised by Mathys' paper. Sansom examines the role played by clothing in some Hellenistic papyri, in which we hear about the theft of a cloak at a festival, and the

need to secure the correct clothing for participants – concerns which underscore the role of visual display at these events. Dimde traces the development of stadium architecture in the Hellenistic period, with a stress on the ways architecture is used to set the scene for athletic display. Klauser's paper turns to the display contexts of athletic statues and dedications, focussing on the city of Athens. He notes that dedications by ephebes form a large group within the material, and stress civic Athenian identities to an audience which could have comprised both Athenians and outsiders. All three papers show that visual display was an important part of ancient festivals and athletic performance, and that statues, clothing and buildings could be used to frame athletic activity, and endow it with specific meanings or associations.

The final two papers offer complementary perspectives on the importance of athletics in Hellenistic Egypt. Cazzadori explores references to agonistic activity in Kallimachos' *Aetia*, setting these within the intellectual climate of scholarship on agons and agonistic poetry in the period, while also considering Ptolemaic strategies of self-representation. The latter is explored in more depth by Kainz, who notes that not all Hellenistic kings took part in agonistic events and that the Ptolemaic enthusiasm thus needs to be explained. He sees it as a strategy to prove their Greekness against potential representations of them as foreign, Egyptian, rulers, as well as a means of displaying family unity.

This is an excellent volume, packed with stimulating papers which are rooted in careful and detailed discussions, but always with an eye to the wider picture. It is more heavily weighted towards agonistic athletics, perhaps partly because the earlier volume by Kah and Scholz had already discussed aspects of the Hellenistic gymnasium, though some of the papers (Argyriou-Casmeridis, Mathys, Klauser) also give insights into the importance of the gymnasium as a civic institution.<sup>2</sup> A number of themes recur throughout the volume: one is the question of the level at which identities are expressed – civic, regional, or international; another is the need to examine our material more closely to see how the Hellenistic period differs from, but also foreshadows, the Roman. There are many continuities here, but also some important changes, with a true international festival circuit only really developing under the influence of Roman rule. A third theme is the way that athletic activity was deeply embedded into all areas of civic life.

The papers draw on a range of different evidence, with inscriptions featuring particularly strongly, alongside literary and visual evidence. There is a helpful *index locorum* for the texts and inscriptions cited, but the volume could perhaps have done more to make the visual evidence easily accessible, not least through consistent illustration. While the papers by Mathys and Weber are fully-illustrated, I found the lack of images for the monuments and statue bases discussed by Dimde and Klauser very frustrating. That aside, this volume should prove an excellent stimulus for further research into the role of athletics in the Hellenistic (and Roman) periods, and

---

<sup>2</sup> Kah, D. and Scholz, P. eds., *Das hellenistische Gymnasium*. Berlin, 2004.

offers much of interest to scholars and students of the Hellenistic period, ancient sport, and Greek festival culture alike.

ZAHRA NEWBY  
UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK  
z.l.newby@warwick.ac.uk