

## Contextualizing Ancient Greek Blood Sports

While research on Roman spectacles of bestial violence (e.g. *venationes*, *damnatio ad bestias*) has had success in elucidating the cultural and universal meanings of these events, less attention has been paid to acts of communal violence against animals within the ancient Greek world. There is ample evidence for the existence of quail flipping, partridge fighting, bull fighting, cockfighting, and other acts such as bull leaping and animal baiting, to show that the Greeks found value in these blood sports. Although past scholars have addressed issues such as the symbolism of cocks and cockfighting (Csapso 1993) and the potential psychology and sociology underlying the events (Shelton 2011; Geertz 1971 on Balinese cockfighting), few have attempted to analyze these various games and contests within the overarching scheme of Greek athletics. While victories in chariot racing at Olympia could confer honor onto a *polis* (one may recall Alcibiades boasting of such a deed during the debate about the Sicilian expedition, Thucydides, 6.16), the outcome of the smaller blood sports brought about honors inherently limited to closed circles of individuals. Further, the heightened violence of these games necessitates an analysis in regards to their social functions and meanings. While it is accepted that blood sports among the Greeks could serve as markers of status and masculinity (Kyle 2007), further research is needed to explain why these events could serve such a function and also how the honors obtained differed from those acquired through the games and athletics of the Pan-Hellenic sanctuaries.

Given the richness of evidence in both the literary and material record, the Greek predilection for cockfighting is a natural place to begin an inquiry into Greek blood sports. Although later Roman writers mention the Greek fondness for the event—including an account by Aelian that alludes to an Athenian state sponsored annual cock fight in a theatre (*Variae*

*Historiae* 2.28)—unfortunately, Classical and Hellenistic Greek authors mention the sport rarely, seeming to isolate the contests to the sordid game houses (Aeschines, *Against Timarchus*, 53). However, many Greeks still viewed the cock as a potent symbol of both love (cocks were a favorite gift for a man to give to his beloved) and war (cocks fought to the death, had natural physical attributes of a hoplite in both their crests and spurs) and thus they interpreted the contests between two cocks as loaded with symbolic importance. This seemingly contradictory duality of the cock and the cockfight—the bird as *exemplum* of courage but the contests potentially relegated to the lowly gambling houses—is a key issue that I will explore in this study.

The material evidence for animal-based contests within the Greek world is abundant: cockfights decorated Attic vases, and other scenes of potential animal combat were depicted on various media. On a statue base of the late-Archaic period, Greek athletics and blood sport are directly intermixed (NM 3476). On one side of the base two young men sit as one holds an aggressive dog on a leash and the other holds a similarly pugnacious feline. In the background two men stand and appear to be waiting for the contest to begin. On another side of the base, Greek men are shown engaged in different athletic contests, while on yet another side young men are shown wrestling. Such an amalgamation of blood sport and normal *palaestra* activities lends support to the idea that blood sports occupied an important—though presently less understood—position within Greek athletics.

In sum, this paper attempts to determine the social status and meaning of animal-based combative contests within the schema of Greek athletic competitions. While sponsoring a winning horse could bring glory onto one's *polis* as well as to the individual, it seems clear that owning a successful gamecock or other animal brought a more personal and necessarily limited

glory. In seeking to uncover the cultural significance of these smaller contests, I hope to both emphasize the importance of these events in relation to the more understood ancient sports and athletics while also contributing to our larger understanding of the human-animal dynamic within the Greek world.

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