

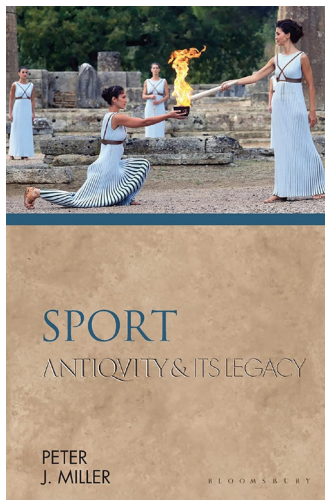
Book Review

Sport: Antiquity and Its Legacy

Miller (P.J.) Pp. x + 223, ills. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Paper, £19.99 (Cased, £65). ISBN: 978-1-350-14021-9

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Professor Miller is a specialist on ancient sporting phenomena, having taught such courses at Canada's University of Winnipeg for a number of years. His erudition with this subject matter not only sparkles on each page of the work reviewed here, but he has diachronically stretched his expertise to encompass the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, a particularly strong focus upon the Olympics (ancient and modern) and then into multiple modern continuities of such phenomena. Miller also plays quite masterfully with the

tension between sports and spectacles as enjoyed by the ancients and how their modern-day transmission and reception is often artful at best. Bouncing along his greater-than 3,000 year timeline, the reader is entertained by Miller's deft control of his expansive topic(s), especially where he presents astute observations of the idealised athletic physique in both antiquity and modernity, or engages in cleverly informed interpretations of everything from gladiatorial spectacles, chariot racing and gymnasium culture to the manner in which open competition spaces evolved into architecturally-significant structures that continue to 'live on' as often-immense arenas, stadiums or even Colosseums (as with the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, which hosted the Olympics in 1932 and 1984 and will again in 2028 – p. 156).

After his brief introductory chapter – which pays particular attention to the lacunose historical record involving female athletes (p. 4) and Miller's own desire to highlight the more neglected and novel aspects (p. 6) of his broad field of study – the six key chapters address primarily Western sporting traditions in a thematic fashion. Somewhat unusually, there is no concluding chapter, with a mini-summation of each chapter being sequentially embedded. Nor is there much attention paid to the reception of non-Western

cultures to the sporting traditions of the West, other than some passing references to the Tokyo Olympics of 1964 (pp. 172–173). Far from minimising or undercutting the conclusive weight of his work, though, Miller's judicious excising is in part-keeping with the sheer bulk of his source material as well as a pronounced (and quite fascinating) interest in having something 'new and original' to convey: from the contemporary revivification of the cult of the body beautiful, to transgenderism in sports and onto the symbolism of modern Olympic poster art. This is also well in keeping with the series of works that Miller is contributing to with this volume, as the Bloomsbury 'Ancients and Moderns' library now stretches to a dozen of these comparative treatments with this latest inclusion, with each volume (covering topics as diverse as death, gender, race, slavery and war etc) seeking to highlight continuities and discontinuities within the Western traditions.

Miller sums up the mirage-like effect of moderns trying to recapture the sporting glories of the past at such a great cultural and contextual distance quite neatly on page 160: 'Still, as with most re-imaginings of the past in the present, these apparently essential connections are tenuous, and the places or spaces of modern sports, perhaps when they most claim a connection with those of classical antiquity, are anything but a simple manifestation of historical and athletic continuity.' As a citizen of one of the Olympic cities upon which he writes – and only the second city outside of Europe to host a modern Games – I was also particularly struck with this symbolic tension between the Old World and the New, especially as it was leveraged to either break or engage with antiquity (p. 171): 'The 1956 Melbourne Games...are harbingers of things to come...The Organizing Committee explicitly acknowledged its departure from the traditional motifs of Olympic posters...Despite the bold, new design of the Melbourne 1956 Games, the official poster for the 1960 Rome Games returned to the traditional mode of antiquity, modernity and civic ideology. Of course, civic identity in Rome is tied to its ancient past.' Miller's lively exploration of this clash of symbolism, only heightened by the 1964 Tokyo Games' return to the 'stark modernity' of Melbourne's self-identifying imagery, certainly reminds us of very real, surviving anxieties between past and present, while also highlighting the huge stakes involved in even promotional efforts for these extravagant international sporting events. The pride of entire nations being at stake.

As with Miller's own work, I will not offer a convenient conclusion to my study of his Bloomsbury volume. Instead, I would encourage anyone with even a passing interest in the sporting identity of the West to seek out this remarkable book for the wealth of insights it offers on the often startling ways that the past connects to the present (or fails to), how we self-identify as sporting nation-states and why physicality remains so epicentral to notions of beauty, health and even civic solidarity. I would also encourage those who come after Miller in this field of study to pick up the torch from where he has placed it and run a little further with the inclusion of female athletics – where, of course, the historical record permits – and the major sporting dichotomies between Western and non-Western sporting traditions, especially as they are today received within the arenas of the Olympics.

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