

ATHLETES IN THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD

SCHARFF (S.) *Hellenistic Athletes. Agonistic Cultures and Self-Presentation*. Pp. xiv + 369, b/w & colour ills, b/w & colour maps. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Cased, £100, US\$130. ISBN: 978-1-009-19995-7.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X24000908

This impressive book marks a significant step towards situating Hellenistic athletics in its own milieu rather than as a coda to the athletics of earlier time periods. S.'s thesis quickly and boldly announces itself as 'a detailed analysis of the self-presentation of Hellenistic victors' within the complexities of the Hellenistic world (p. 5). Exhaustive in its research, meticulous in its sources and conversational in its tone, this monograph offers a rich glimpse of Hellenistic athletics and athletes, and the world they inhabited.

In undertaking to understand the world of the Hellenistic athlete, S. focuses the research on the victory epigram, a genre of poem that rose in popularity during the Hellenistic age. Cleverly S. notes that these brief poems offer relatively secure access to the perspectives of the victors, since the athletes paid the poets and presumably approved the epigrams. By using these epigrams to peer into the world of victorious Hellenistic athletes, S. promises to unlock 'nuanced social, political, and ethnic messages' in their meanings (p. 10). In this, he does not disappoint.

After a couple of chapters to introduce the topic, explain methodology and describe essential features of Hellenistic athletic culture, S. dives into using specific epigrams to illuminate broader historical themes. For instance, two epigrams from Miletus, dated to the third and second centuries BCE, demonstrate the importance of family and crowns to victorious Milesian athletes. An emphasis on family origins (or the obscuring of less prestigious genealogy) and specific terms and vocabulary (such as the word 'crowns') demonstrate both a typical Milesian style of self-presentation as well as broader themes of Hellenistic history, including relations with Pergamon and the influence of Rome (p. 76).

Similarly, S. connects athletic victors from Rhodes with the 'especially mighty aristocracy' that ruled the island during much of the Hellenistic period (p. 87). In assessing the possible connections between this ruling aristocratic elite and the island's athletic victors, the author uncovers an 'astonishing' correlation (p. 84): athletic victories in Hellenistic Rhodes primarily occurred in the youth and 'beardless' categories, allowing S. to construct the idea that athletics in Rhodes played an outsized role in the lives of aristocratic youths, who then graduated into leadership roles in naval, civic and religious endeavours.

These are but two examples of how S. deploys the 'self-presentation' of the epigrams, along with appropriate contextualisation, to identify and address various historical questions of the Hellenistic era. Did Theban victory epigrams avoid mentioning Heracles because they sought 'new beginnings' after the disasters of the fourth century BCE (p. 109)? Can the drop-off in Athenian victories in the traditional Crown Games be attributed to an augmented status for the Panathenaia and Theseia festivals (p. 133)? At Sparta, how strongly did Lycurgan customs of agonistic 'modesty' persist into the Hellenistic era of powerful kings and dynasts (pp. 159 and 165)? Did a new 'agonistic culture' in Thessaly lead to the end of Thessalian equestrian victories at Olympia, starting in the third century BCE (p. 217)? The list goes on, roaming throughout mainland Greece,

the Aegean, Egypt, Attalid Asia Minor and into non-Greek regions such as Pontus, Numidia and Phoenicia.

Of course, dating epigrams can be difficult, and S.'s connections between the circumstances alluded to in the epigrams and the historical record are occasionally tenuous or argue from absence. For instance, a victory epigram describing a Spartan boy wrestler begins, 'I am no wrestler from Messene or Argos; Sparta . . . is my country' (pp. 162–3). The emphasis on Sparta, rather than the athlete's personal information, lines up nicely with S.'s contention that Spartan athletic sensibilities remained committed to Lyncurgan communalism into the Hellenistic era. On the other hand, S. suggests that the absence of the city of Megalopolis from this epigram's list of Sparta's 'favorite' enemies could place its composition to after 223 BCE, the date of the destruction of Megalopolis (p. 164). S. takes pains to pose this possibility as just that – a possibility – and studiously avoids overstating the case. As with his commentary concerning the lack of Athenian victors in major Crown Games events, or the absence of Heracles in Theban victory epigrams, S. responsibly declines to stretch the evidence. Instead, in these cases, the book strikes a healthy balance between argument and suggestion. Of course, there are many possible reasons for why the epigram's composer did not include Megalopolis in the unnamed Spartan's boast. S. supplies just one possibility, and the accompanying context and commentary invite considered reflection rather than scepticism.

The micro-to-macro view provided by the deep analysis of an individual victor's epigram while developing the wider historical context, using exhaustively researched additional sources and information, is one of the book's two great strengths in the estimation of this reviewer. Chapter 3 alone contains over 700 footnotes, through which S. expertly deploys wide-ranging epigraphic, literary, numismatic, papyrological and archaeological sources to situate and contextualise the broader Hellenistic issues evoked by an epigram or a group of epigrams. For example, the ancient supposition that Thebans enjoyed great bodily strength has been borne out by osteoarchaeological findings that indicate increased protein consumption at Thebes, beginning in the classical period. To this, S. adds his determination that the majority of known Theban athletic victors from the Hellenistic period earned their victories in combat sports, events famous for the strength of their victors. This synthesis of analysis and sources breathes vibrancy and life into the world and athletes of Hellenistic Thebes, and is emblematic of the book overall.

The other great strength of this book is its exposition and investigation of Hellenistic identity. The larger developments of the Hellenistic world, such as the expansion of Greek culture (including athletic culture and festivals), the synthesis of Greek and non-Greek cultures, and the eclipse of the city-state by the rise of royal dynasts are all on display in S.'s granular treatments of victory epigrams. Whether it was Ptolemy II claiming 'agonistic fame' for himself and for Egypt throughout the Hellenistic world (p. 256), or victorious athletes from Rhodes choosing to highlight a specific region or neighbourhood rather than the entire *polis*, or a local official (a '*dikastes*', p. 280 n. 16) in Sidon occupying both Greek and Phoenician spheres, complex identities emerge and interact. In this, perhaps, S.'s work enjoys its greatest strength; that is, its ability to uncover clues about the complexities of familial, regional, panhellenic and Greek/non-Greek identities – and the continuous negotiations of these identities in the Hellenistic world.

Occasionally, S. appears chagrined or perhaps even surprised that Hellenistic athletics remains relatively under-studied compared with Archaic and classical predecessors. As he notes, the past 40 or 50 years have led to a general discarding of the notion that Hellenistic athletics represented some kind of 'age of decline', yet this new consensus has not yet led to 'a new trend' in the study of Hellenistic athletics (p. 3). Later S. notes that, despite the relatively large amount of evidence from Rhodes, 'there is next to nothing in modern

research' on the island's athletes from the Hellenistic era (p. 81). Although these criticisms are well aimed, it is not a surprise that few scholars could marshal the vast amount of sources, spanning such great distances in chronology and geography, and then wrangle them into a readable, accessible and thoroughly captivating scholarly treatment as S. has done here. Plenty of research avenues remain, but this text marks an important anchor for future studies on Hellenistic athletics.

Southern Utah University

DAVID LUNT
davelunt@suu.edu