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THE END OF THE ANCIENT OLYMPICS AND OTHER CONTESTS: WHY THE AGONISTIC CIRCUIT COLLAPSED IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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Abstract: In the second and third centuries AD, many of the cities in the eastern Mediterranean could boast about having their own athletic games. In the fourth century, however, these games quickly declined. In recent years, the traditional explanations for the end of athletic games, most prominently the supposed ban by Theodosius, have been proven unfounded. This paper proposes an alternative explanation: institutional and financial changes hindered the successful organization of athletic contests by the cities in the fourth and fifth centuries. In order to show the effect of these changes, this paper first offers a detailed analysis of how athletic contests were founded and funded in the early imperial period. It then examines how and to what extent these procedures and funds were affected by changes in late antiquity. The decline was not caused by a general financial crisis – in fact the estates (partially) funding the games remained a stable form of financing. Instead the shift of power to a centralized bureaucracy limited the cities in their administration of the games: they could no longer independently meet deficits in the agonistic budget from the city treasury and had to rely increasingly on elite sponsors, whose ambitions focused mainly on the provincial capitals and who gradually lost their interest in athletics.

Keywords: athletic contests, decline, finances, centralization of power, governors

I. Introduction

Until the 1980s it was generally believed that athletics experienced a relatively short golden age in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, when Greeks lived in the spirit of panhellenism and competed for sport's sake, and that this flourishing of sport was reflected in the high artistic quality of Pindar's victory odes or Classical athletic sculptures. Athletics started to decline, according to this traditional view, from the fourth century BC onwards, with brutality, specialization and corruption intruding into sports as a result of professionalization. After seven centuries of decline, the Herulian invasion of AD 267 caused serious devastation in the sanctuary at Olympia, and afterwards the games were supposedly celebrated only sporadically until Theodosius I banned them as part of his anti-pagan policy.[1]

Since the 1980s, these long-held ideas have gradually been discredited by critical new research. Thousands of agonistic inscriptions and coins from the imperial period clearly attest to the widespread popularity of athletics in the first to third century AD. Without downplaying the important earlier works of Luigi Moretti, Joachim Ebert or Harry Pleket, no paper more clearly imprinted a picture of continued agonistic bloom on collective academic knowledge than Louis Robert's opening discourse at the 1982 International Congress of Epigraphy.[2] Around the same time, David Young exposed the influence of the English 19th-century ideal of amateurism on the 19th- and 20th-century

* sofie.remijsen@uni-mannheim.de. I am grateful to Roger Brock and Andrew Connor for their advice on English usage. Abbreviations of papyrus editions follow the Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets: http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/papyrus/texts/clist_papyri.html. Other abbreviations follow *OCD*[4] with the following exceptions: *IAG* = *Iscrizioni agonistiche greche*, by L. Moretti (Rome 1953); *IAph2007* = *Inscriptions of Aphrodisias*, by J. Reynolds, C. Roueché and G. Bodard (2007): http://insaph.kcl.ac.uk/iaph2007/; *IGUR* = *Inscriptiones Graecae Urbis Romae*, by L. Moretti (Rome 1968–1990); *IvP* = *Die Inschriften von Pergamon* (Altertümer von Pergamon 8), by M. Fränkel (Berlin 1890–1895).

[1] For a *status quaestionis*, see I. Weiler, 'Der "Niedergang" und das Ende der antiken Olympischen Spiele in der Forschung', *Grazer Beiträge* 12–13 (1985–1986) 235–63.

[2] L. Robert, 'Discours d'ouverture', *Actes du VIIIe Congrès international d'épigraphie grecque et latine* I (Athens 1984) 35–45 = *Opera Minora Selecta* 6 (Amsterdam 1989) 709–19.

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perception of Greek athletics, which opened the way for a more positive assessment of the professionalization of Greek sports.[3] Ingomar Weiler, meanwhile, in his 1985 review of scholarship on the end of the ancient Olympics, pointed out the influence of nationalism on the perception of the fifth century as a golden age after which the Greeks lacked the necessary *Volkskraft* to keep athletics at that same level.[4] As the supposedly negative effects of professionalization and of new political constellations turned out to be only pseudo-factors for the decline of athletic contests, the Herulian invasion and the imperial ban (that is, the events directly leading to the end of the games) naturally increased in significance in scholarly perceptions. New excavations, however, have discredited the theory that the Herulians caused devastation at Olympia.[5] Furthermore, the discovery of a bronze inscription listing 12 Olympic victors between AD 321 and 385 disproves the hypothesis that the games were no longer held regularly in the fourth century.[6] Finally, even the idea of an imperial ban has recently been refuted by several scholars. Such a legislative act is not attested in the few existing sources and is contradicted by the well-attested imperial policy of stimulating all kinds of games.[7] In fact, there is no proof whatsoever that the Olympics ended in AD 393.

Although the combined efforts of various scholars have dismantled the traditional theory on the end of athletic contests, no one has yet attempted to offer an alternative explanation for what happened. New works typically insist on the continuity of the athletic games into the fifth century AD and avoid talking about decline.[8] Eventually, however, the games did disappear. A scholiast on Lucian tells us that the Olympics came to an end during the reign of Theodosius II. This is confirmed by other indications of decline: around the same time the famous statue of Zeus by Pheidias was transported to Constantinople and a layer of sediment accumulated on the previously well-maintained racetrack of the stadium.[9] As the traditional view has been discredited, the end of the games is more intriguing than ever.

[3] D.C. Young, *The Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics* (Chicago 1984).

[4] Weiler (n.1) 238, 259–60.

[5] The evidence for third-century devastations at Olympia should be linked to an earthquake postdating the Herulian invasion. See U. Sinn, '"Ο Νέρωνας" και οι "Ερουλοι": δύο μοιραῖα γεγονότα στην ιστορία της Ολυμπίας;', in A.D. Rizakis (ed.), *Achaia und Elis in der Antike* (Athens 1991) 365–71.

[6] J. Ebert, 'Zur neuen Bronzeplatte mit Siegerinschriften aus Olympia', *Nikephoros* 10 (1997) 217–33.

[7] The lack of evidence for an imperial ban is discussed in I. Weiler, 'Theodosius I. und die Olympischen Spiele', *Nikephoros* 17 (2004) 53–75; also suggested in A. Gutsfeld and S. Lehmann, 'Die Umstaltung "panhellenischer" Heiligtümer im spätantiken Griechenland: Das Beispiel Olympia', in H. Cancik and J. Rüpke (eds), *Römische Reichsreligion und Provinzialreligion. Globalisierungs- und Regionalisieringsprozesse in der antiken Religionsgeschichte* (Erfurt 2003) 147–53. A. Teja, 'L'édit de Théodose et la fin des Jeux Olympiques', in R. Renson and M. Lämmer (eds), *The Olympic Games through the Ages: Greek Antiquity and its Impact on Modern Sport* (Athens 1991) 115–25, especially 122, notes that the Olympics were not the real objective of the edicts and allows for the possibility that some contests continued, but she does not question that it was the edicts that led to the end of the *agones*. For a full discussion, see S. Remijsen, 'The imperial policy on athletic games in late antiquity', in K. Harter-Uibopuu and T. Kruse (eds), *Sport und Recht in der Antike* (Vienna 2014) 329–47.

[8] For example A. Gutsfeld, 'Staat und Agon in der Spätantike (391–565)', in A. Gutsfeld and S. Lehmann (eds), *Der gymnische Agon in der Spätantike* (Gutenberg 2013) 151–76. His picture of continuity into the sixth century is based on very few sources: the list of cities with fifth-century contests (p.159) includes five cities where no contests are attested after 430 (Olympia, Delphi, Athens, Ephesus) or after the mid fifth century (Rome) and three more where the athletic spectacles attested cannot be identified as traditional *agones* (Constantinople, Oxyrhynchus and Gaza).

[9] *Scholia in Lucianum* (in Teubner-edition Lucian) 41.9.9–11, 41–46. Cedrenus *Compendium Historiarum* (PG 121) 573 (i.e. 623 D – 624 A) dates the abandonment of the Olympics under Theodosius I, but is shown by I. Fargnoli ('Sulla "caduta senza rumore" delle Olimpiadi classiche', *RIDA* 50 (2003) 119–54, at 123–29) to have conflated evidence on Theodosius I and II. For the late antique history of the statue of Zeus, see T. Stevenson, 'What happened to the Zeus of Olympia?', *Ancient History Bulletin* 22 (2007) 65–88. E. Kunze and H. Schleif, 'II. Bericht über die Ausgrabungen in Olympia. Winter 1937–1938', *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 53 (1938) 18–19 and E. Kunze, *Bericht über die Ausgrabungen in Olympia* 7 (Berlin 1961) 23 describe the fifth-century material in the layer on top of the race track. That the quick accumulation of material enables us to date the abandonment of its use as sporting infrastructure is demonstrated for the stadium of Ephesus by S. Karwiese, 'Ephesos. Stadion', *JÖAI* 63 (1994) 21–24.

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Despite their critical stance, several recent studies touching on the end of athletic contests preserved one characteristic of traditional scholarship: an almost exclusive interest in the Olympics. The archaeological efforts of the *Olympia während der römischen Kaiserzeit* project naturally focused on the Olympics, but even historical studies of the political context, for example by Iole Fargnoli and Ingomar Weiler, concentrate on the most famous contest on the agonistic circuit.[10] Widening the perspective to the traditional top four is hardly more useful. Although the Olympic, Pythian, Isthmian and Nemean games were still known as the *periodos* in the second and third centuries AD, they faced competition in the battle for prestige from various other contests.[11] In the fourth century, however, the term *periodos* is no longer attested, not even in a law by Diocletian distinguishing between more prestigious and less prestigious sacred contests.[12]

A study of athletics in late antiquity should not start from the Classical athletic highlights, but from the situation in the imperial period. Several recent studies have shown how athletics was in this period a vibrant part of city life and a powerful elite identity marker.[13] From the first century AD onwards, the number of contests rose spectacularly. As before, many of these contests included both athletic and artistic competitions. The topic of this paper is athletic contests, but the artistic competitions were indissolubly connected to these and experienced similar opportunities and difficulties. There were never more contests than in the third century AD, because under the empire the traditional problems of the contest circuit, such as overlapping dates or unsupported claims of high status, were solved by central authorities: the Roman administration regulated the circuit with special attention to the ranking, funding and date of contests, and the international associations of artists and athletes monitored the supply and demand of participants.[14] This removed the traditional restraints on agonistic growth. Another reason why the number of *agones* could increase exponentially is that the contests were connected in regional networks forming part of a large international circuit. New contests without an established reputation could attract competitors and visitors because of the appeal of other contests in the surrounding region.[15] This could also work the other way around, however: the connectedness of contests made them more vulnerable to each other's crises.

In the 100 years between *ca*. 330 and 430, the circuit of *agones* collapsed. In the papyrological record, which is fairly continuous for the fourth century, references to *agones* disappear in the second quarter of the fourth century.[16] Across the rest of the Roman Empire too, the decline of the agonistic circuit became tangible around this time. Mosaics were a popular medium throughout late antiquity, but depictions of athletics become rare after the middle of the century.[17] In economically stable

[10] Fargnoli (n.9); Weiler (n.7). Preliminary results of the new excavations at Olympia were published in *Nikephoros* from 1992 to 1997.

[11] *IAG* 85 (*ca*. AD 220) differentiates between the '*periodos*' (l.10) and the 'old *periodos*' (l.16-17). *SEG* XLI 1407 (*ca*. AD 150), *IGUR* I 244 (*ca*. AD 250) and *SEG* XXXIV 176 (third century) all mention a full *periodos*, which presumably included the *Aktia*, *Sebasta*, *Eusebeia* and *Kapitolia*. *Cf*. P. Gouw, *Griekse atleten in de Romeinse Keizertijd* (Ph.D. Diss. Amsterdam 2009) 144–47.

[12] *Cod. Iust.* 10.54.1; *P.Lips.* I 44.

[13] For example O. van Nijf, 'Athletics and *paideia*: festivals and physical education in the world of the Second Sophistic', in B.E. Borg (ed.), *Paideia: The World Of The Second Sophistic* (Berlin and New York 2004) 203–27; J. König, *Athletics and Literature in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge 2005); Z. Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World. Victory and Virtue* (Oxford 2005).

[14] An example of the negative effect of overlapping dates is *IG* V.2 516, an honorary decree (early first century AD) for a man who took up the financial responsibility for mysteries at Lykosoura when no one else wanted to, knowing that the mysteries would not attract any money that year because of their concurrence with the Olympics.

[15] Important studies on this connectivity are R. Ziegler, *Städtisches Prestige und kaiserliche Politik. Studien zum Festwesen in Ostkilikien im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert n.Chr.* (Düsseldorf 1985); J.-Y. Strasser, *Les concours grecs d'Octave Auguste aux invasions Barbares du 3ème siècle. Recherches sur la date et la périodicité des concours sacrés* (Ph.D. Diss. Paris 2000).

[16] The latest papyri attesting *agones* and professional competitors (some of them retired) are *CPR* VI 41, 50 (*ca*. AD 320); *P.Oxy.* LX 4079 (AD 328); F.A.J. Hoogendijk, 'Athletes and liturgists in a petition to Flavius Olympius, *Praeses Augustamnicae*', in P. Schubert (ed.), *Actes du 26e Congrès international de papyrologie* (Genève 2012) 352 (*ca.* AD 343); *P. Herm.Landl.* 1 (G) l.182, l.217; 2 (F) l.404, l.407 (*ca*. AD 350).

[17] *Cf.* A. Bohne, *Bilder vom Sport. Untersuchungen zur Ikonographie römischer Athleten-Darstellungen* (Nikephoros Beihefte 19) (Hildesheim 2011) 12–14.

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regions, such as Syria, and in major cities across the empire, *agones* are still attested in the second half of the fourth century.[18] Up to the reign of Theodosius I, therefore, athletes could still build a career travelling from contest to contest.[19] In the early fifth century, however, the strongholds of this international circuit, such as the Olympics, the Isthmian games or the Olympics of Ephesus, seem to have disappeared.[20] Only the Olympics of Antioch are known to have continued after this date.[21]

To understand the decline, one should not focus on the fate of a single contest, but instead on the decline of the entire circuit. The next section aims to explain how this circuit worked in practice. Who took the initiative for a new contest? Who was responsible for maintaining a contest after the initiator was gone? Where did the money come from? The following step will be to examine how this organizational procedure was affected by the new historical circumstances of late antiquity.

II. The institution and organization of *agones* in the Roman Empire

An excellent starting point for analysing how a contest was introduced and organized in the Roman Empire is *SEG* XXXVIII 1462, a document on the introduction of the *Demostheneia* in Oenoanda.[22] Thanks to this minor town's predilection for long inscriptions, the text offers a remarkably detailed account of the foundation of an otherwise unremarkable contest for artists. The first step (l.6–46) in the process was the proposal by a local benefactor, in this case C. Iulius Demosthenes. In AD 124, when he was *prytanis* and secretary of the council, he wanted to use the momentum of his political career to increase his social capital by a benefaction: a quadrennial festival with competitions for artists and with donations of money to members of the community. Demosthenes' financial plan was sound: the festival would be financed by an estate that was leased out in order to procure 1,000 denarii annually. This estate and the accruing money were to be administered by a financial official of the city, who had to make sure that the estate would never lose value and that the money would produce interest, so that after four years the four times 1,000 denarii and the interest would amount to 4,450 denarii and would suffice for the organization of the games. The permanent cultivation of the estate would ensure the continuity of the games. At the moment of his proposal, however, Demosthenes did not have a suitable estate to donate and therefore he promised to give 1,000 denarii each year until he had designated a plot of land.

The next step, only alluded to in the inscription, was the official decree of the city council, which then, as a third step, sent an embassy to the emperor to obtain formal approval. Because Oenoanda did not apply for 'sacred' or 'sacred and eiselastic' status for its contest – statuses which required international recognition because victors of such contests were granted privileges in their home towns: tax exemption for sacred games, and a monthly pension and a welcome-home feast (*eiselasis*) for eiselastic games – this step may seem unnecessary. The imperial answer (l.1–6) was short, but revealing: after praising Demosthenes for his euergetic act, Hadrian confirmed the contest because

[18] Besides the well-attested Olympics of Antioch, less important Syrian games are still attested in the 360s: *cf*. Libanius *Ep*. 663, 668 (Olympics of Apamea) and 1392, 1243 (Pythian games of Laodicea). Also in cities such as Carthage (*Cod. Theod.* 15.7.3), Rome (Julian *Or.* 11.42 [nr. Budé]) and Athens (Himerius *Or*. 47; *IG* II^2 3818) *agones* are still attested.

[19] For example Philoumenos of Philadelphia (*CIL* VI 10154) and John of Smyrna (*CIL* VI 10153).

[20] The Isthmian games are still attested in Themistius *Or*. 15.185c–186a (AD 381) and Claudian *Panegyricus de consulatu Flavii Manlii Theodori* 288–90 (AD 399). On the site, there is evidence of poor maintenance in the fourth century, and essential buildings were spoliated for the construction of the Hexamilion, probably in the 410s. *Cf.* R.M. Rothaus, *Corinth: The First City of Greece* (Leiden 2000) 84–92, 141–46; T.E. Gregory, *Isthmia: The Hexamilion and the Fortress* (Princeton 1993) especially 139–42. The president of the Olympics of Ephesus, the alytarch, is still attested in the late fourth and early fifth century: see *IK Ephesos* 43 (l.7, l.21) and 447. Karwiese (n.9) 21–24 dates the abandonment of the stadium as sporting infrastructure shortly after AD 423.

[21] They took place until AD 520: see Malalas 17.416–17.

[22] The original edition of this inscription, with translation and detailed commentary, is M. Wörrle, *Stadt und Fest in Kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien. Studien zu einer agonistischen Stiftung aus Oenoanda* (München 1988). S. Mitchell, 'Festivals, games and civic life in Roman Asia Minor', *JRS* 80 (1990) 183–93 gives an English translation and more general comments.

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Demosthenes had promised to pay for it from his own pocket and confirmed the penalties proposed by Demosthenes for all who contravened the rules. The emperor liked to be involved in such local matters, because new contests could potentially weigh on the city finances – and consequently hinder a city's payment of taxes – in particular when (part of) the expenses were carried by the city treasury rather than by a clearly earmarked fund. Demosthenes in turn wanted the emperor to be involved because the long-term impact of his benefaction depended on the continuity of the contest and of recognizable links between the games and his family. This continuity could only be assured if the estate did not lose value because of bad management and if the estate remained recognized as the property of Demosthenes' family, despite its civic use. If this could not be enforced by a higher authority, Demosthenes' benefaction would not have the effect he aimed for.

Imperial involvement stopped at the official confirmation; it was the city that controlled the organization. The next step in the procedure was the arrangement of the practical details – for example determining which officials had to be appointed or which civic groups would join in the procession. These details were planned by a small subcommittee of the council, which included Demosthenes' cousin, who was the future contest president (l.46–102). Their proposal was then submitted to the council for formal approval. Organizational details were not included in the formal decree as given on the inscription (l.102–14), however, as these were internal matters. Only the tax privileges proposed by the subcommittee could not be decided on the level of the city. As a final step in the foundation process, an embassy was dispatched to the governor. His official recognition of the privileges ends the inscription (l.115–17).

Although the text from Oenoanda is the only inscription illuminating the procedure in such detail, it gives a representative picture of the motives and procedures behind the introduction of new games, of the supervisory role of the emperor and of the finances of games. Other inscriptions confirm and enrich this picture. According to a letter by Hadrian, the formal establishment of a contest happened by an imperial ordinance, by a decree of the city council or by testament (νόμον ἢ ψήφισμα ἢ διαθήκας).[23] These categories refer to the authority that took the official decision, which cannot always be identified with the initiator who first proposed the contest. Whereas the *Demostheneia*, proposed by Demosthenes, were established by a decree of the city council, the *Lysimachea* in Aphrodisias were proposed and established by the will of Flavius Lysimachos.[24] Like Demosthenes, Lysimachos and other elite initiators stipulated how the contest should be organized and that the presidency of the games would go to their heirs, in order to promote the family's status.[25]

Only a limited number of contests were initiated by an emperor. These *agones* were typically held at a politically significant location, for example the *Aktia* at Nikopolis near Actium, the short-lived *Neroneia* or the more successful *Kapitolia* in Rome. There are a number of other contests named after emperors, but these should not be attributed to the initiative of the ruler – there are simply too many of them across the empire. Instead, most stemmed from the enthusiasm of the civic communities, which expressed loyalty with their choice of name. There could be many reasons for a city to want new games: because festivities helped shape the community,[26] because they wanted to outdo neighbouring cities in splendour[27] or to boost the local economy through the economic benefits of a tax-free market.[28]

[23] *SEG* LVI 1359, l.8–9.

[24] The will is mentioned in *IAph2007* 12.538, the *Lysimachea* in 12.31 and 12.325.

[25] There are other examples of practical stipulations in *IAph2007* 12.538 and 15.330, and of directions on the role of the heirs in *Digesta* 50.12.10. Such stipulations can also be expected in cases such as *TAM* II 301, where the *agonothetes* is obviously related to the founder.

[26] *Cf.* A. Zuiderhoek, *The Politics of Munificence in the Roman Empire. Citizens, Elites and Benefactors in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 2009) 71–112.

[27] A famous description of this rivalry is Aelius Aristides Εἰς Ῥώμην 97. A clear reflection of the competition between cities is the desire to have prestigious titles, such as *neokoros*. *Cf.* B. Burrell, *Neokoroi. Greek Cities and Roman Emperors* (Leiden and Boston 2004) 343–58.

[28] This is, for example, clear for Thyateira, where the wool merchants supported the introduction of a prestigious contest, from which they would also benefit. Hence, they honoured with a statue the ambassador who convinced the emperor: *IGRom* IV 1252 = *TAM* V 1019.

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In the epigraphic record, the best attested part of the organizational procedure for contests is the embassy to the imperial court. Because of the importance of the official recognition – or ‘grant’ (δωρεά) – for the success of a new contest, the ambassadors were chosen carefully. The ambassador for the *Traianeia Deiphileia* in Pergamum, for example, was Julius Quadratus, a local benefactor who, as a member of the Roman senate and an ex-consul, was probably the most influential man in the entire city.[29] The council of Thyateira sent the retired athlete G. Perelius Aurelius Alexander to Elagabalus as leader of an embassy; as *periodonikes* he had reached considerable fame across the whole agonistic circuit and after serving as an ambassador for Thyateira he even became the highest official of the international athletic association. Given the cost of travelling over long distances, letters often replaced embassies for minor contests. For the institution of ephebic games at Oxyrhynchus in Upper Egypt, for example, a letter was sent to Septimius Severus.[30] As in Oenoanda, the benefactor explicitly asked the emperor to forbid the city from confiscating this agonistic fund for any other purposes. Although the petition was sent in AD 201 or 202, the games seem to have started only in 210, which suggests that the preparation period could occasionally be very long.[31] The emperor was also asked for confirmation if a contest was reorganized with a different status. Miletus, for example, sent four prominent citizens to Marcus Aurelius and Commodus to seek eiselastic status for the *Didymeia*, an *agon* instituted around 200 BC. When the eiselastic status was granted by the emperor and confirmed by the senate, the games were renamed *Didymeia Kommodeia*, as a sign of gratitude to the emperor and his son, who had recently been promoted to *Augustus*.[32]

Once contests were established, the imperial administration maintained a supervisory role. As Greek competitive athletics was by definition an inter-city phenomenon, the Roman ruler was the only person with authority over the entire circuit. When cities organizing a contest came into dispute with another city, or when competitors, supported by their international professional associations, came into conflict with either an organizing city or their own city, they turned to the imperial administration to receive justice. Though occasional examples of such petitions have long been known from papyri, the mechanics of negotiation and regulation have recently become much clearer thanks to the letters of Hadrian found at Alexandria Troas.[33] Directed to the international association of artists, these letters summarize the imperial solutions for numerous problems brought to Hadrian’s attention when he attended the *Sebasta* at Naples. At the request of several cities, he rescheduled the major contests, to ensure that competitors were able to attend all of them. He also carefully considered how certain abuses by cities (for example last minute cancellations or the payment of prizes in kind) could be avoided by general rules, but at the same time took the particular circumstances of complaints, such as local crises, into account. Members of the administration were appointed to check such circumstances. A governor was, for example, asked to look into the finances of Corinth; in Aphrodisias agonistic funds were similarly inspected by a *curator*, an imperial official appointed when the civic finances were in trouble.[34]

Interventions by the emperor or his administration were limited to financial matters. Although their supervision was not continuous even in this field, the insistence that civic revenues should

[29] *IvP* 269.

[30] *P.Oxy.* IV 705, l.46–53.

[31] *SB* X 10493 from AD 227 mentions the 18th celebration of these annual games.

[32] Inscription published and discussed in P. Herrmann, ‘Eine Kaiserurkunde der Zeit Marc Aurels aus Milet’, *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 25 (1975) 149–66; ‘Fragment einer Senatsrede Marc Aurels aus Milet. Nachtrag zu *IstMitt* 25, 1975, 149 ff.’, *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 38 (1988) 309–13.

[33] These letters of Hadrian (*SEG* LVI 1359) were first published in G. Petzl and E. Schwertheim, *Hadrian und die dionysischen Künstler. Drei in Alexandria Troas neugefundene Briefe des Kaisers an die Künstler-Vereinigung* (Asia Minor Studien 58) (Bonn 2006). C.P. Jones, ‘Three new letters of the emperor Hadrian’, *ZPE* 161 (2007) 145–56 gives corrections to the edition and an English translation. See also J.-Y. Strasser, ‘“Qu’on fouette les concurrents…” À propos des lettres d’Hadrien retrouvées à Alexandrie de Troade’, *REG* 123 (2010) 585–622. Other examples of competitors applying to the emperor are *W.Chr.* 158 and *P.Oxy.* LI 3611.

[34] *SEG* LVI 1359, l.32–33; *IAph2007* 15.330.

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not be endangered, the occasional appointment of *curatores* and the expectation that government officials would supervise the counting of prize money imply that finances were a constant worry.[35] The reason for their concern is clear: *agones* were expensive. It was not only the prizes for the victors that cost money, but also the staff maintaining the infrastructure and keeping public order, the officials of the athletic association, the sacrifices and the banquet, the ceremonial garbs and the side shows, and occasionally appearance money had to be paid.[36]

The financial arrangements described in the Oenoanda inscription reflect the normal way of paying for *agones*: a budget was secured by earmarking an agonistic fund, which usually took the form of an estate. There are more examples of this practice. The *Olympia* of Ephesus were financed by the proceeds of a large estate donated by Claudius Nysios.[37] Local contests in Oenoanda and Termessos were paid for by the lease of pasture land and of numerous patches of land in different villages.[38] C. Iulius Eurycles Herculanus left properties to Sparta for the organization of the *Eurykleia*.[39] In some cases, this fund could be completely in cash, for example at Oxyrhynchus.[40] Here, the rich landowner Aurelius Horion donated a sum of at least 10,000 drachmae to the city, which was to be invested so that the annual interest could be used for the organization of a contest for ephebes. As with the original donations at Oenoanda, the cash was invested in loans procuring interest, but here the sum was donated on a single occasion; only the interest was used to pay for the games and the donation remained untouched to ensure the continuity of the contest.

In the Oenoanda inscription, the estate is clearly described as remaining in the hands of Demosthenes' family, even though earmarked for games and therefore administered by the city. This implies that, at least in the imperial period, agonistic land was a specific category of land, different from civic land and temple land. As both civic and agonistic funds were administered by the city, however, the distinction between the two was not always respected, and the use of agonistic funds for civic use therefore had to be explicitly forbidden by law.[41] In those cases where the city, and not a private benefactor, had designated an estate, it would have been even harder to distinguish agonistic from civic land. Certainly in the third century, when the rate of new games was at its highest, a scenario in which all these contests with high international aspirations can be linked to extensive private estates seems unlikely.

The separation between agonistic land and temple land, on the other, seems clearer. There is no evidence that agonistic funds still belonged to temples in the second and third centuries AD. That was certainly a normal procedure in the Hellenistic period, but after the first century AD, there are no more sources for a link between games and temple property.[42] The majority of imperial-age contests were clearly established and administered by cities. Also for the (relatively few) cases of contests going back to the Hellenistic period or before, where the temples could conceivably have maintained a role, private benefactors and the city seem to have gained a larger respon-

[35] For example *SEG* LVI 1359, l.22–23, XXXVIII 1462, l.115–17.

[36] An interesting, though polemical, source is Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 66 (a critique of men pursuing popularity) 8–11 on the expenses of the ambitious *agonothetes*. Dio suggests that such ambitious men wanted to hire an Olympic victor for a fee of five talents. Although the amount is no doubt exaggerated, the suggestion that the greatest champions could attract starting fees is not.

[37] *SEG* LVI 1359, l.41–42. Long after his death, Nysios was mentioned as eternal *agonothetes* on victory monuments erected with money from his fund: *IK Ephesos* 1114–18, 1120, 4413.

[38] *OGIS* 566; *SEG* XLVII 1771.

[39] Evidence collected in F. Camia, 'Spending on the *agones*: the financing of festivals in the cities of Roman Greece', *Tyche* 26 (2011) 41–76, at 58–59.

[40] For example *IAph2007* 12.538, l.16–19 (120,000 *denarii* on loan and 31,839 interest); *P.Oxy.* IV 705, l.46–49 (the interest on no less than 10,000 Attic drachmae); *Digesta* 50.12.10 (the interest on a capital of 30,000 drachmae).

[41] *SEG* LVI 1359, l.8–13: forbidden by Hadrian; *Cod. Iust.* 11.42.1: request for exemption in the reign of Diocletian.

[42] Camia (n.39) 52–57 discusses many examples of festivals with sacred funds, but all from the Hellenistic and early Roman period. The examples of agonistic funds (57–63) also include early cases, but second- and third-century examples prevail, indicating a growing preference for this type of financing.

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sibility. The games at Olympia certainly benefited from large donations by sponsors, most famously by Herodes of Judea.[43] In Delphi the *polis* took over the role of the amphictyony.[44] In several cities, most importantly Athens, a sacred *gerousia* was established under imperial supervision in the second century AD as a civic institution to manage the estates that funded religious festivals.[45]

The proceeds of estates or cash funds were not the only means of financing games, however. Expenses could also be paid directly out of the city treasury, which was filled with income from estates and other city property, by the lease of several types of taxes and by the collection of fines. A memorandum from AD 317 concerns expenses for the *Kapitolia* of Oxyrhynchus, which were founded in AD 273.[46] Although the brevity and lacunose character of the document make it hard to interpret, it suggests that the *Kapitolia* were financed from mixed sources: 527 talents and 500 *denarii* were budgeted, of which 427 talents and 500 *denarii* came from an unspecific fund (either agonistic land or less clearly earmarked civic land), and in addition 100 talents were contributed by the councillors. Of these 100, only 60 talents were available, however, leaving an actual budget of only 487 talents and 500 *denarii*. The budgeted costs were then exceeded. At least 115 talents – there might have been other costs that are not discussed in this memorandum – were paid directly out of the city treasury. It would be naive to assume that this situation, in which the regular income did not suffice for the actual costs, was exceptional. A shortage of funds was a recurring problem,[47] and in many cases the solution would have been the same as at Oxyrhynchus: the deficit was met with money from the city treasury. It is possible, though unlikely, that cities were hoping for a return on investment, as the stream of local and regional visitors temporarily raised the supply and demand in a region. Exemption from commercial taxes was often granted for the duration of the festival, however, which immediately removed most of the potential income for the treasury. The sale of entrance tickets, moreover, is not attested.[48]

Another significant source of money for games was sponsorship. The budgeted contribution of 100 *denarii* by the councillors of Oxyrhynchus was an attempt – in this case unsuccessful – to make sponsorship part of the regular income. Another structural form of sponsorship was liturgies: for each edition of the festival, citizens were appointed to bear specific costs or tasks. The banquet, for example, was usually paid for by the contest president.[49] In the Oenoanda inscription, the presidency is not described as being a liturgy: here the contest president simply administered the available budget. There was, however, often a discrepancy between theory and practice. The ambition to outdo previous presidents stimulated many *agonothetai* to incur extra costs, for example by renovating the sporting infrastructure.[50] In this way, the local elite helped to sustain the growth of the agonistic circuit.

[43] Flavius Josephus *Antiquitates Judaicae* 16.149; *De Bello Judaico* 1.426–27. *Euergetai* from Rhodes (G. Pugliese Carratelli, 'Epigrafi rodie inedite', *Parola del Passato* 5 (1950) 76, no. 1) and Smyrna (*IK Smyrna* 595) similarly received the honorary title of *agonothetes*.

[44] R. Weir, *Roman Delphi and its Pythian Games* (Oxford 2004) 50–58.

[45] J.H. Oliver, *The Sacred Gerusia* (Hesperia Supplement 6) (Princeton 1941) 1–50.

[46] *P.Oxy.* LXIII 4357.

[47] This is shown by the discussions between the associations of competitors and the cities on the payment of prizes (for example *SEG* LVI 1359 I) or the need for supervision by a *curator* in Aphrodisias (for example *IAph2007* 15.330).

[48] See C. Chandezon, 'Foires et panégyries dans le monde grec classique et hellénistique', *REG* 113 (2000) 70–100 for the economic functions of festivals. Camia (n.39) 43 suggests that cities could still make money with the lease of booths, but the examples he refers to concern permanent booths in the commercial area of the city, not stalls set up for a fair. Entrance fees are attested for dramatic festivals in Classical Athens, but not for the imperial period. The earlier organizers did not collect the entrance fees themselves, but leased the theatre. *Cf.* P. Wilson, 'How did the Athenian demes fund their theatre?' in B. Le Guen (ed.), *L'argent dans les concours du monde grec* (Paris 2010) 59–71; see also, in the same volume, L. Migeotte, 'Le financement des concours dans les cités hellénistiques: essai de typologie', 142.

[49] For example *SEG* LVI 1359, l.87–88; Libanius *Or*. 53. H. Pleket, 'Olympic benefactors', *ZPE* 20 (1976) 1–18, especially 2–4 examines how expenses were divided between public revenues and contributions of the appointed president.

[50] There are many examples of sponsorship by the *agonothetes* in Camia (n.39) 64–70.

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III. Financing *agones* in late antiquity

Although the different types of financing described in the previous section supported the growth of the agonistic circuit in the early imperial period, the financial balance remained precarious. The lively urban culture of the ancient cities required many expenditures such as constructing public buildings, heating the baths, etc. Illegal attempts to divert money earmarked for games and difficulties in finding sponsors were not uncommon even during the period of exponential growth.[51] An extra problem was the increasing number of games with sacred and sometimes eiselastic status. The victors of sacred games were for the rest of their lives exempted from various taxes, including liturgies, and those of eiselastic games even received monthly pensions from their own cities. While in the politically stable second century these top statuses were reserved for actual top games, third-century soldier emperors in urgent need of help from the cities were more prone to award these statuses even to minor contests, thus decreasing the pool of potential liturgists across the empire and undermining the financial strength of the cities.[52] Although this did not cause the end of Greek athletics – Diocletian mitigated the problem by limiting the exemption of liturgies to triple sacred victors[53] – it shows that the limits of expansion had been reached in the later third century. There was indeed a maximum amount of money that could be pulled away from other civic purposes. It is telling in this respect that in the third century, when the circuit was expanding at an ever faster rate, the construction of buildings decreased.[54] If the success of the agonistic circuit was precarious, what late antique change tipped the balance? As discussed in the previous section, the normal way of financing an *agon* in the Roman imperial period was an agonistic fund in cash or land administered by the city. This main source of income was supplemented by sponsorship, and deficits were met from the city treasury. To determine if the reasons for the decline of *agones* were financial, we have to investigate whether changes in late antiquity would have affected the cash funds, agonistic estates, civic possessions and/or sponsorship.

An obvious threat to the cash funds was the hyperinflation of the late third and early fourth centuries. Silver prices more or less doubled between AD 250 and 274 and increased tenfold between AD 275 and 301. In the fourth century, they continued to rise fast, doubling every few years.[55] A contest endowed with a cash fund of which the revenues would, in AD 250, cover about two-thirds of the expenses would cost twice as much in AD 274, and the fund would therefore cover only one-third. In other words, if this contest cost a hypothetical 300 monetary units in AD 250, the cash fund would contribute 200 units and 100 had to be found elsewhere. In AD 274, the contest would cost 600 units, but the cash fund would still only contribute 200, so 400 units had to be contributed by sponsors. Another 25 years later, when prices had increased by a factor of ten, this contest would cost 6,000 units, of which 5,800 were not structurally provided. Less than 5% of the costs could at that point be paid from the revenues of the fund. By this time, the contest had probably already been abandoned.

Cash funds, however, do not seem to have been as common as funds consisting of land. The financial arrangement set up by Demosthenes in Oenoanda, because no estate was at the time available, was presented as only temporary. This shows that land was perceived as the better investment.[56] Even if the mechanisms of inflation were not well understood at the time, land was still

[51] See the examples of various financial problems in *SEG* LVI 1359 I. Difficulties in finding a sponsor can be assumed when several men shared the expenses of the presidency, as no candidate was found to carry them by himself: for example *I.Didyma* 183; *IK Side* 134.

[52] For example Ziegler (n.15) 67–119.

[53] *Cod.Iust.* 10.54.1; *P.Lips.* I 44.

[54] Mitchell (n.22) 189–91.

[55] A. Wassink, 'Inflation and financial policy under the Roman Empire to the Price Edict of 301 AD', *Historia* 40 (1991) 465–67; D. Rathbone, 'Monetisation, not price-inflation, in third-century AD Egypt?', in C.A. King and D.G. Wigg (eds), *Coin Finds and Coin Use in the Roman World* (Berlin 1996) 329–33; R.S. Bagnall, *Currency and Inflation in Fourth Century Egypt* (Missoula 1985) 61–72.

[56] On land as a preferred investment see, for example, M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (London 1973) 115–22.

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considered a safer long-term investment than cash, if only because it was less vulnerable to theft or embezzlement. Even in the heyday of Greek athletics, games known to have been funded by cash, and minor games in general, can rarely be followed over more than a few decades. New minor contests established in the same manner quickly filled the gaps in the local circuits. It is likely that inflation stopped the further expansion of the agonistic circuit, since by the reign of Diocletian the now obvious defects of cash funds would have discouraged potential benefactors from instituting new games in this manner. Because of the ancient predilection for land, however, the effect of the hyperinflation should not be overestimated. Unfortunately, the actual effect cannot be quantified, due to a source-related problem. Most games fall off the radar circa AD 270 because they are only known from epigraphic and numismatic evidence. Around this period, the epigraphic habit is characterized by a striking decline in honorary inscriptions for local notables (including athletes) and at the same time the cities exchanged their provincial *drachmae*, which often depicted local competitions, for Roman *denarii*, which never depict such local motifs.[57] The resulting lack of references to contests, especially minor contests, after circa AD 270 does not mean that these games were gone, only that our sources are. As there is no explicit evidence for the disappearance of contests, there are no objective signs for a steep decline of the contests from the late third century onwards.

Agonistic estates were safe from inflation. As long as they were clearly earmarked as separate from civic land and as long as the managers avoided depleting the land's potential through overcropping, these estates could theoretically survive indefinitely. Some factors were not under human control, however. During a drought, the land would produce too little to allow for a celebration of the *agon* with customary pomp. This problem was, however, only temporary. Destruction by an earthquake could lead cities to divert revenues from agonistic land to the rebuilding of public buildings. As this already endangered contests in the second century, Hadrian decreed that the use of agonistic funds for any other purpose was forbidden without imperial permission. Petitions by the cities would only be considered in case of necessity, and not for any luxury projects.[58] A constitution by Diocletian and Maximian contains such an imperial permission, apparently requested *post factum* by the governor of Caria, to use the revenues of an agonistic fund for rebuilding the city walls.[59] As only the revenues were diverted, and the estate was not sold, the consequences of these diversions were short-term as well. In this way, contests financed mostly from the income of agonistic land could survive the fourth century. The Olympics of Ephesus, for example, financed by the estate of Nysios, continued until circa AD 420.[60] This shows that agonistic land had no role in the decline of the agonistic circuit in the fourth century, and may even have slowed down this evolution.

Changes to agonistic estates cannot even be held responsible for the collapse of the last strongholds of the circuit in the early fifth century, as several estates in fact survived the games they were created for, as can be deduced from two laws of the second half of the fifth century. In a law of AD 451, agonistic estates are still distinguishable from civic land and temple land, and referred to by the legal term of 'agonothetic (*agonotheticus*) land'. The problem addressed in this law is that cities were losing money because some people cultivating land or occupying real estate belonging to the city did not pay rents, as the possessions had been granted to them rent-free. The emperors decreed that all who had acquired such possessions rent-free since AD 379 now had to pay rent to the city.[61] This is consistent with the situation of the early empire, when the city likewise administered the civic as well as the agonothetic land. A law of AD 491 similarly deals with the

[57] R. MacMullen, 'The epigraphic habit in the Roman Empire', *AJPh* 103 (1982) 233–46; B. Borg and C. Witschel, 'Veränderungen im Repräsentationsverhalten der römischen Eliten während des 3. Jhs. n.Chr.', in G. Alföldy and S. Panciera (eds), *Inschriftliche Denkmäler als Medien der Selbstdarstellung in der römischen Welt* (Stuttgart 2001) 45–120; K.W. Harl, *Civic Coins and Civic Politics in the Roman East AD 180–275* (Berkeley 1987) especially 107.

[58] *SEG* LVI 1359, l.8–13.

[59] *Cod. Iust.* 11.42.1.

[60] *Cf.* nn. 20 and 37.

[61] *Cod. Iust.* 11.70.5.

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ownership of different types of land (patrimonial land, temple land, agonothetic land and tax-free land). People who had held land of these types continuously for 40 years became rightful owners, and as long as they paid the rent established for each type, they were safe from other claims. If the land was given to them rent-free, they could keep this privilege.[62]

Of special interest in these laws is the continued use of the categories of 'temple land' and 'agonistic land', although the rents associated with the categories were obviously no longer used for the purposes for which they were originally earmarked. In AD 491, revenues of temple land had not been used for the pagan cult for more than a century.[63] Practically all *agones*, moreover, were gone by the mid fifth century, including major contests that were certainly financed by such an estate, such as the Olympics of Ephesus. The continuity of the agonistic estates shows clearly that this part of the income of the games was never endangered, and was not a factor in their end. This can help to explain how Antioch was able to continue its Olympics for a century after the collapse of the agonistic circuit.

Neither law mentions what the proceeds of agonistic estates were used for after the disappearance of the games. One possibility that has been suggested[64] is that the resources of agonothetic estates were diverted to other games, since, at the time the *agones* disappeared, the expenses for Roman-style games were on the rise. The system of using land to fund games was certainly not limited to athletic games. In Antioch, for example, Julian exempted 3,000 lots of land from taxes, so that the revenues could instead be used by the *hippotrophoi*, the liturgists paying for horse races.[65] In the fifth and sixth centuries, however, only part of the public entertainment was still paid by the cities and this money seems to have come directly from the *curiales*.[66] The proceeds of the agonistic estates were certainly not consistently diverted to Roman-style games, first, because a general measure would mostly likely have resulted in a change of name for the category of land – the *agonothetai* referred to in the term *agonotheticae possessiones* were specifically presidents of a traditional *agon*, and not of Roman-style games[67] – and, second, because the law of AD 451 shows that, in certain cases, the revenues of these lands were not collected at all.

The existence of agonistic estates may have slowed down the decline of the agonistic circuit, but could not save it. As discussed above, civic lands and money from the city treasury also had a role in the finances of many games. The finances of the cities were not as stable as the agonistic estates, as they were affected by empire-wide administrative changes. The central administration grew quickly in the fourth century, and so did its costs. The imperial administration, therefore, tightened its grip on the cities: it controlled more strictly than before how cities spent money and diverted civic funds to the central level. A first series of occasional confiscations of civic funds seems to have taken place under Constantine and his sons, but under Julian properties were restored.[68] Valentinian and Valens decreed that two-thirds of the income of the cities were to go to

[62] *Cod. Iust.* 11.62.14.

[63] After unsystematic confiscations from the reign of Constantine onwards, Gratian (AD 375–383) gave all temple property to the fisc. Cf. *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.20.1, from AD 415, but with reference to an earlier constitution by Gratian. *Cf.* G. Bonamente, 'Einziehung und Nutzung von Tempelgut durch Staat und Stadt in der Spätantike', in J. Hahn (ed.), *Spätantiker Staat und religiöser Konflikt* (Berlin and New York 2011) 55–92.

[64] This suggestion is made implicitly by the translation of *agonotheticae possessiones* in *Cod. Iust.* 11.70.5 as 'possessions, the income of which is devoted to games' by F.H. Blume (between 1920 and 1952; from the online *Annotated Justinian Code*: http://www.uwyo.edu/lawlib/blume-justinian/ajc-edition-1/).

[65] Julian *Misopogon* 43 (nr. Budé).

[66] A. Cameron, *Circus Factions. Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Oxford 1976) 218–19; C. Roueché, *Performers and Partisans at Aphrodisias in the Roman and Late Roman Periods* (JRS Monographs 6) (London 1993) 9. Cameron gives the example of Alexandria, where a quarter of the costs of circus games was contributed by the councillors.

[67] Only in poetry is the word occasionally used for presidents of other games, for example *Anthologia Planudea* 371, which deals with circus races about AD 500, but uses a vocabulary reminiscent of athletic victories.

[68] On the restitution by Julian, see *Cod. Theod.* 10.3.1; Amm. Marc. 25.4.15. Earlier confiscations are implied by the restitution. Amm. Marc. 22.11 suggests that Constantius confiscated public buildings in Alexandria.

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the fisc, and only one-third would be left for use by the cities.[69] The extent and effect of the confiscations is not clear, in particular for the earlier phase,[70] but even modest confiscations, or stricter control on finances, would have made it harder for the cities to pitch in for the *agones*. In the aforementioned case of the *Kapitolia* of Oxyrhynchus, the games would already be in danger if it was no longer possible to contribute a sixth of the total expenses directly from the city treasury. The councillors were not able to increase their portion from their personal fortunes, as in AD 317 they were not even able to raise the amount of money that was already required from them.

The last reference to the *Kapitolia* appears in a letter dated 3 May 328, which deals with the appointment of an assistant to the *agonothetes* of the contest of AD 329.[71] As a considerable number of papyri from after AD 330 have been found at Oxyrhynchus, the lack of evidence for *agones* after this date is significant. The end of the contest should therefore probably be placed in the second quarter of the fourth century, which coincides with the first encroachments on the civic finances under the Constantinian dynasty. In Nikopolis near Actium, the early confiscations interrupted even the famous Actian games before Julian's restorations.[72] In Carthage, athletic games were temporarily abandoned too, but re-established in AD 376.[73] The renewed games were financed solely by the *curiales*, which suggests that a more permanent form of financing had disappeared, most likely because two-thirds of the income from city property was now under the control of the imperial fisc. In Constantinople, a contest was abandoned and re-established around the same time.[74] These few cases misrepresent the severity of the situation: only reinstitutions leave explicit evidence, definitive abandonments rarely leave traces.

IV. Administering and sponsoring *agones* in late antiquity

The evaporation of cash funds, improper use of land that was too vaguely earmarked for games and partial confiscations of civic income all put extra responsibility on sponsors. The survival of the *agones* therefore depended to a large extent on their ability and willingness to contribute. Without accounts from games, it is hard to say whether sponsors contributed more or less than before. One can, however, ask the more general question whether the elite could and would still sponsor *agones*, as liturgists or as voluntary sponsors.

The scattered evidence paints a mixed picture. In AD 299, the appointment of an *agonothetes* was on the agenda of the Oxyrhynchite city council. Several candidates had been named and at this point one of them had to be urged to accept.[75] The lack of volunteers might suggest local difficulties at this particular time, but it cannot be used as an indicator of overall decline. As noted above, occasional difficulties in appointing suitable liturgists were nothing new. About 30 years later, an administrative letter from Oxyrhynchus contains a measure to make the office of contest president less burdensome: the *agonothetes* received an assistant.[76] In other cities there are no signs of difficulties. Libanius describes the competition between consecutive presidents of the Antiochene Olympics in the mid fourth century to give a grander banquet than their predecessors

[69] *Cod. Theod.* 4.13.7, 15.1.18.

[70] S. Schmidt-Hofner, 'Die städtische Finanzautonomie im spätrömischen Reich', in H.-U. Wiemer (ed.), *Staatlichkeit und politisches Handel in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Berlin and New York 2006) 209–48 convincingly shows that the traditional view of global confiscations is not supported by the evidence.

[71] *P.Oxy.* LX 4079 (and duplicate 4080).

[72] Panegyrici Latini 3.9.2–4: Cl. Mamertinus describes the ruin of Greece in exaggerated terms. The situation in the small city of Nikopolis serves as an example for the ruin of Greece in general. The most concrete detail in this account – unparalleled and hence presumably historical – is that the *certamen* (an *agon*, not Roman-style *ludi*) that was held every five years (the Latin way of saying quadrennial) had been interrupted (*intermiserat*). The *Actia* were the only quadrennial *agon* attested for Nikopolis. The revival of this contest is suggested by his choice of words (*intermitto* implies an interval) and by the end of the paragraph, which claims that due to Julian's restitutions the gymnasia were crowded again, and old and new feasts were again held in honour of the emperor.

[73] *Cod. Theod.* 15.7.3.

[74] Jerome *Eusebii Caesariensis Chronicon. Hieronymi continuato* (ed. Helm) A. 369.

[75] *P.Oxy.* XII 1416, l.5.

[76] *P.Oxy.* LX 4079 (and 4080).

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or to spend more on the athletic infrastructure (for example providing extra rows of stone seats for spectators).[77] In the AD 370s, members of the elite were volunteering to sponsor the *agones* of Carthage and Ephesus. In the latter city there were even candidates from other cities.[78] Again, however, difficulties did occur elsewhere, for in AD 385 the emperor was asked whether it was legal to force a *curialis* to become an *agonothetes*. It was decreed that this was possible, but only if a *curialis* was rich enough and had fulfilled all compulsory duties he owed to his city.[79] Even in the fifth century, willingness to sponsor *agones* had not completely disappeared. An early fifth century inscription honours the sophist Ploutarchos for thrice sponsoring the procession of the *Panathenaia*.[80] About AD 435, that is, either shortly before or, more likely, shortly after the end of the traditional Olympics and other top games, the *praefectus urbi* of Constantinople proposed to introduce Olympic games in Chalcedon.[81] Though the plan was never realized because of a furious reaction by radical local monks, a high ranking official found such a plan conceivable and was apparently willing to pay for it. In Antioch, where the local Olympics had survived the collapse of the international circuit, Antiochus Chouzon, *praefectus praetorio Orientis* and distinguished member of the city's elite, sponsored the games as late as AD 448.[82]

On the basis of this evidence, the decline of Greek athletics cannot be explained by a decline in euergetism. Even though sponsors of games are less well attested than before, euergetism had not disappeared. The reason for involvement in *agones* was no different in late antiquity than before. Euergetism was an effective way to create social capital: the entire community enjoyed the games and out of gratitude acknowledged the benefactor with acclamations. In this way, the benefactor secured his status as a leading member of the community. Whereas moral critics of worldly ambition (*philotimia*) denounced the enjoyment of popular enthusiasm and acclamations as a common sign of vanity among the late antique elite,[83] occasional honorary inscriptions – still erected for high-ranking imperial officials but no longer for the local elite – continued to honour benefactors for their generosity.[84] Obviously, some could and would still sponsor *agones*. For a more nuanced explanation, we need to determine in which elite groups these sponsors could be found.

The composition, wealth and ambitions of the elite were affected by institutional changes and shifting responsibilities. In the early empire, governors travelled between the cities of large provinces, exerting only superficial control over the area. When Diocletian reorganized the provinces into smaller, more manageable units, governors came to reside permanently in a provincial capital. At the same time, the administration grew in size and power at this provincial level, as it did at the level of the dioceses, of the praefectures and of the empire. This expansion of the bureaucracy led to a shift from 'soft' to 'hard' government in the course of the fourth century. Although cities remained the administrative building blocks of the Roman Empire, the city councils gradually had to cede their role as policy makers to the provincial governors.[85] The *curia*, and later

[77] *Or.* 10 on the addition of extra seats to the Plethrion; *Or.* 53 on the banquet.

[78] *Cod. Theod.* 15.7.3; *IK Ephesos* 43, l.7–8, l.21–22.

[79] *Cod. Theod.* 12.1.109.

[80] *IG* II^2 3818.

[81] Callinicus *Vita Hypatii* (SC 177) 33. *Cf. PLRE* II, 669 (Leontius 9) for the *praefectus urbi*.

[82] Malalas 14.362. For the year when he was *praefectus*, see *PLRE* II, 104.

[83] John Chrysostom *De inami gloria et de educandis liberis* (SC 188) 4–6; Basil *Homilia in illud: Destruam horrea mea* (ed. Courtonne) 3.

[84] For example *IG* II^2 3818. For more examples, see P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity. AD 150–750* (London 1971) 43–44.

[85] For example A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602. A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey* (Oxford 1964) 712–66; J.H.G.W. Liebeschuetz, 'Government and administration in the late empire (to AD 476)', in J. Wacher (ed.), *The Roman World* 1 (London 1987) 455–69; B. Ward-Perkins, 'The cities', in A. Cameron and P. Garnsey (eds), *The Late Empire, AD 337–425* (CAH 13) (Cambridge 1998) 371–410; A. Laniado, *Recherches sur les notables municipaux dans l'Empire protobyzantin* (Paris 2002) especially chapter ix; J.-M. Carrié, 'Developments in provincial and local administration', in A. Bowman, P. Garnsey and A. Cameron (eds), *The Crisis of Empire, AD 193–337* (CAH 12) (Cambridge 2005) 269–312; D. Slootjes, *The Governor and his Subjects in the Later Roman Empire*

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the council of *principales* that gradually replaced it in the fifth century, was now in the first place a fiscal institution, primarily occupied in filling the various liturgies. It would still have appointed *agonothetai*, but could no longer take care of the range of organizational decisions it had taken in the second or third century. As the cities used to be the traditional driving force behind the *agones*, this could not but affect the administration of the contests. The cities' administration of the accounts of the games now fell under the permanent control of *curatores* and decisions with financial implications had to pass through the governor's office. Because of this shift in responsibilities, the accounts of the Oxyrhynchite *Kapitolia* from AD 317 are addressed to the *curator* and the letter from AD 328 concerning the appointment of an assistant to the *agonothetes* refers to the authority of the governor.[86] The diminished autonomy also led to the financial challenges discussed in the previous section.

As a result, cities could not take new initiatives as easily as before. The procedure certainly became more elaborate, and perhaps excessively so. Adding athletic competitions to games which previously only had an artistic competition, applying for sacred status for an existing contest, establishing a new contest and other projects with financial consequences could less easily be pushed through by the local elite. The introduction of new contests was, moreover, thwarted by a change in atmosphere. For cities there were now fewer reasons than before to want a contest. Previously they had invested in local games to display themselves as proud and successful *poleis* that could outdo their neighbours, but the designation of provincial capitals created a hierarchy between cities in the same province that mitigated this earlier atmosphere of constant competition. This may not have affected existing games, but it does help to explain why the games that disappeared were not as easily replaced by new contests in the fourth century as they had been before.

The competitive drive and autonomy of the cities form only one part of the picture, though. The institutional changes also had effects on the level of the individual benefactors. Because of the partial confiscation of city property, more burdens fell on the *curiales*. Therefore, the average *curialis* had a harder time in the fourth century than before. There was great diversity among the elite in the *curia*, however, which included everyone from modest property owners to international magnates. Not all members of this elite came under great financial pressure. Those who held a position in the imperial service, such as a governorship, were exempted from liturgies on the lower level. The difference between the local and supra-local elite grew, with the latter becoming ever richer. The supreme ambition of a young member of the elite was no longer to become a respected *curialis*, although this was still considered honourable and people remained proud of their own city, but to become an *honoratus* by getting a high post in the imperial administration.[87] Their supra-local ambition in turn affected euergetism, as being a benefactor to the local community was good, but being a benefactor to the province or empire at large was even better. In practice this meant that the layer of moderately wealthy local notables in the many smaller cities, who had for a considerable part supported the agonistic circuit in the previous period, were still appointed as liturgical officials, but were not always able and happy to do this. The supra-local elite was, on the other hand, still capable of acting as sponsors, and even enthusiastic to do this as long as the honour they gained was not strictly local. In a decree published on stone in Ephesus, the emperors acknowledge the interest of Asian *curiales* in becoming *euergetai* in the capital by presiding over the Olympics and other games in Ephesus rather than sponsoring events in their home towns.[88]

(Mnemosyne Supplements 275) (Leiden and Boston 2006) 16–45. The language of 'soft' and 'hard' government comes from C. Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge MA and London 2004) 1.

[86] *P.Oxy.* LXIII 4357, LX 4079 (and 4080).

[87] Jones (n.85) 535–542, 737–57; Ward-Perkins (n.85) 376–79; M.R. Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy. Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire* (Cambridge MA and London 2002) 107–37.

[88] *IK Ephesos* 43, l.7–8, l.21–22.

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This tendency explains why *agones* in provincial capitals generally lived longer than games in minor towns. That Carthage could find sponsors to fund the entire organization of a contest, and could continue organizing it in this way for several cycles, can likewise be explained by its status as provincial capital.[89]

Those who could and would sponsor *agones* in the fourth century were members of a select and extremely rich empire-wide elite. Foremost among them were governors and other (ex-)officials of the imperial administration. The governors were in a position to control the contests, and when governors did indeed support the games with their initiative and financial help, the local elite reacted enthusiastically.[90] Whether and how governors used their new position of power seems, however, to have depended on their ambitions and, occasionally, their stinginess. The more ambitious the governor, the more he wanted to control the *agones* (and other games held in his province) and use them to elevate his own position. Technically, the acting governor was never the benefactor, as the city still appointed a *curialis* as liturgist. Therefore, some governors tried to gain status by association. They could put themselves in the limelight by being present at the games and awarding the crowns to the victors.[91] Sometimes games organized and hence financed by liturgists of a particular city were even moved by the governor to the capital so he could take the honour of being the president. An imperial decree addressed this misuse of power.[92] In other cases (ex-)imperial officials actually sponsored the games. They could, for example, pay for extras not covered by the liturgist, as the *comes Orientis* Proklos did when he proposed to pay for extra rows of seats in the Plethron, the gymnasium at Antioch where the preliminary contests for the local Olympics were held.[93] Although it is unclear how often this happened, active officials were also in a position to divert public means to the games.

The tendency toward increased involvement by high officials continued in the fifth century. All known contest presidents in the fifth century are imperial officials.[94] While in AD 372, imperial policy still aimed to stop governors from stealing the *curiales*' thunder, in the fifth century their role was acknowledged. A law issued in AD 409 put a maximum price of 2 solidi on games, to avoid the possibility of high officials, with their 'imprudent and insane craving for applause', draining the resources of the *curiales* who were actually paying. This law concerned games in general. *Agones* and provincial beast fights were exempted from the limitation, probably because they were less frequent.[95] This could have made the *agones* the governors' preferred euergetic showcases, but in practice this did not happen. The last known law on the presidency of an *agon* structurally embeds the role of high officials: the presidency of the Antioch Olympics became the official responsibility of the *comes Orientis* in AD 465.[96] If this law had come sooner, for example by the third quarter of the fourth century, it would have offered a certain form of financing to several struggling contests. In the mid fifth century, however, the only surviving athletic contest was that of Antioch.[97]

[89] The games were re-established in AD 376 (*Cod. Theod.* 15.7.3). Presumably they can be identified with the games in Augustine *Confessiones* 4.2–3 (AD 380). The restoration of the *odeon* in AD 383–395 stemmed from the same enthusiasm for games among the Carthaginian elite. *Cf.* C. Hugoniot, *Les spectacles de l'Afrique romaine* (Ph.D. Diss. Paris 1996) 671–76

[90] In *IvO* 481 (fourth-century Olympia) and *IAph2007* 4.202 (fifth-century Aphrodisias) governors are honoured for their help.

[91] For example Augustine *Confessiones* 4.3: the proconsul awards Augustine (at the time still a pagan teacher) a crown for his victory in the competition for poets.

[92] *Cod. Theod.* 15.5.1 attempts to solve this problem by insisting on control by the *curiales*.

[93] Libanius, *Or*. 10.

[94] *IAph2007* 4.202, 8.273; Malalas 14.362.

[95] *Cod. Theod.* 15.9.2.

[96] *Cod.Iust.* 1.36.1.

[97] *IAph2007* 8.273 is also from the late fifth century. This honorary inscription celebrates an *agonothetes* in the theatre, which suggests that it was a contest for performing artists. The stadium of Aphrodisias could no longer be used for athletics after its conversion into an amphitheatre *ca*. AD 400. *Cf.* K. Welch, 'The stadium at Aphrodisias', *AJA* 102 (1998) 547–69.

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V. Epilogue: beyond the institutional explanation

Due to changes in epigraphic and numismatic practices, the number of sources for Greek athletics steeply declines in the late third century. Although the limits of the expansion of the contest circuit had been reached around this time, and hyperinflation may have caused a stagnation or even a decrease in the number of contests, there are no reasons to assume that the contest circuit was already in decline *ca*. AD 300. By the mid fourth century, however, there are explicit signs of decline. In the 100 years between *ca*. AD 330 and 430 several hundred contests met their end. The first victims were local circuits of games in minor towns. Contests in provincial capitals or prestigious locations such as Olympia and Athens continued until the late fourth or even the early fifth century.

This paper set out to show that the end of the athletic contests was set in motion by the institutional changes of Diocletian and his successors. The driving forces behind imperial-age athletics were the cities. The shift of power to a centralized bureaucracy limited the cities in their administration of the games: because the council had been curtailed, and some properties confiscated, they could no longer flexibly change elements in the programme or meet occasional deficits in the budget. As a result, the responsibility for the *agones* shifted to the elite sponsors. As the average *curiales* were already burdened by considerable financial pressure, it was the supra-local elite that held the key to the survival of the contests. The millionaires of late antiquity had few ambitions in minor towns, however. Therefore, it was in the smaller towns that institutional change first led to the abandonment of contests. Because these contests were connected in local circuits, even contests in less affected cities were vulnerable to a domino effect as soon as some of the contests in the region were gone. The disappearance of these local circuits took place in the mid and later fourth century.

Around AD 400 only the top contests that had earlier connected all these local circuits in one international circuit still remained. Most of these were backed by the income of a large estate, which fell under the legal category of 'agonothetic land'. Because they were located in major cities, or in some cases, such as the Olympics, because of their symbolic value, they attracted the attention of the international elite, who used them to showcase their generosity. If the evolution towards provincial games under the control of government officials had been completed, the collapse of the circuit could have been avoided. From a purely institutional point of view, the eventual disappearance of these strongholds of Greek athletics therefore remains difficult to understand. But disappear they did. The few fifth-century *euergetai* who chose to support athletic games were exceptions.

There is another side to the end of Greek athletics that has thus far been neglected in this paper: people had gradually lost interest. The broad urban elite that had in the previous centuries financially supported the agonistic circuit had also visited the gymnasia, had watched the *agones* knowing all the rules and techniques, and had sent their sons to athletic training, so that they could hopefully achieve the ideals of a muscular male elite body, of self-control and perception, of cultural Greekness and of a strong ambition to stand out, which this elite was socialized to appreciate and to associate with athletics. Around the time that the *agones* experienced several institutional setbacks, this active participation and positive perception of athletics seems to have declined as well.

Already in the third century, training courts were no longer a priority for the architects of bath complexes, as apparently fewer people were using these for their original athletic purpose. In the fourth century, the palaistra was therefore often replaced by a smaller, paved courtyard.[98] The ephebate, the widespread institutionalized civic education programme focused on athletics, disap-

[98] F.K. Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge MA and London 1992).

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peared probably in the second quarter of the fourth century.[99] The disappearance of the institutionalized programme shows that athletics was no longer widely felt to be the logical way for young men to develop values such as self-control and perseverance. As a result of the decline of athletic education, by the mid fourth century a large group of spectators could no longer appreciate the highly technical character of the Greek sports in the way their ancestors had done.

Nevertheless, fourth- and fifth-century sources do not express explicitly negative perceptions of athletics and *agones*. In fact, a positive image of the glory of an athletic victory survived in the popular Christian metaphor comparing a good Christian en route to heaven to an athlete winning a crown.[100] The popularity of this image goes back to the Christian adaptation of long-established agonistic imaginary by Paul.[101] While the metaphorical athlete had a long life in Christian literature, positive depictions of actual athletes became rare. Some of the few late antique texts that portray actual athletes as virtuous, admirable individuals need to explain to their surprised audience explicitly that this is so, quite unlike earlier imperial texts where critical intellectuals instead had real trouble convincing their audience that athletics was overvalued.[102] Even without strong societal critique, practising athletics became uninteresting as an identity marker for the urban elites. A new value set was under construction, in which beauty created artificially (i.e. through training) was increasingly associated with vanity and showing ambition to become the best in a public competition could be interpreted as displaying a lack of humility. Without all the positive connotations athletics had traditionally enjoyed, athletic exercises and competitions were nothing but a set of superfluous activities with only very limited practical use.

The question of why the value set changed lies far outside the scope of this article, which aims to explain the institutional side of the decline of the *agones*. It cannot be solved by a simple reference to the rise of Christianity; although this obviously contributed to the creation of new ideals, one should nevertheless be very careful not to overstate its importance. As has been amply discussed by Peter Brown and others, the rising popularity of late antique ideals such as asceticism can be observed among pagans as well as Christians.[103] *Agones*, moreover, were not unacceptable for all Christians. By the AD 350s, a series of prohibitions against pagan sacrifices had been issued.[104] Around the same time, the traditional Christian objection[105] that *agones* were celebrated

[99] On the popularity of the ephebate in the Roman Empire, see N.M. Kennell, *Ephebeia. A Register of Greek Cities with Citizen Training Systems in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Hildesheim 2006); H.-U. Wiemer, 'Von der Bürgerschule zum aristokratischen Klub?', *Chiron* 41 (2011) 487–537. There is barely any evidence for the late third and early fourth centuries, because of the changed epigraphic habit, but the young men of Oxyrhynchus were still competing in ephebic games in AD 323 (*P.Oxy.* I 42). The last evidence for the ephebate is a *kosmetes* at Antinoupolis in AD 347 (*P.Ant.* I 31).

[100] John Chrysostom's agonistic images, for example, are listed in A. Koch, *Johannes Chrysostomus und seine Kenntnisse der antiken Agonistik im Spiegel der in seinen Schriften verwendeten Bilder und Vergleiche* (Hildesheim 2007).

[101] For a full discussion of Paul's agonistic metaphors, see U. Poplutz, *Athlet des Evangeliums: eine motivgeschichtliche Studie zur Wettkampfmetaphorik bei Paulus* (Freiburg 2004).

[102] König (n.13) discusses several literary texts (from the Second Sophistic) containing intellectual criticisms of athletics. The best example of the exaggerated stress in late antiquity on the moral lifestyle of the participants in athletic games is Malalas 12.287–89. See also John Cassian *Instituta* (SC 109) 5.12, who explains to his audience of monks what actually happened at games *ca*. AD 400: it was checked that they were not tainted by *infamia*.

[103] For example Brown (n.84).

[104] The earliest law against pagan sacrifices recorded in the late antique law codices was issued by Constantius II and Constans in AD 341: *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.2. Possibly, their father Constantine had already taken some anti-pagan initiatives before. *Cf.* P. Chuvin, *Chronique des derniers païens. La disparition du paganisme dans l'Empire romain, du règne de Constantin à celui de Justinien* (Paris 1990) 37–39. Several laws repeated the prohibition in the AD 350s: *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.3–6. Even if these rules did not find immediate acceptance, we can safely assume on the basis of the absence of specific Christian criticisms in the well-attested polemics against games that at least at the public games this law was respected – with the probable exception of the short reign of Julian. It is also striking that even in Himerius *Or*. 47, a pagan description of the Panathenaic procession, no one went up to the Acropolis.

[105] In Tertullian *De Spectaculis* 11 and Novatian *De Spectaculis* 4–5 sacrifices are still identified as a problematic pagan element of the games.

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with bloody sacrifices disappears from the Christian discourse against games. This suggests that in most cities the public sacrifices had indeed been removed from the agonistic programme. While for some pagans the *agones* certainly continued to have religious significance,[106] and also Christian polemicists continued to see pagan danger in other elements, such as the procession,[107] the absence of public sacrifices did make it possible for many other Christians to accept the *agones* as secular. There is indeed evidence for Christian participants as well as Christian organizers.[108] Of course, this does not mean that the Christianization of the Roman Empire had no role in the decline of athletics whatsoever. The late fourth and early fifth century generally witnessed more outbursts of Christian violence and stricter anti-pagan laws.[109] An aggressive reaction by Christian fanatics against athletic games is only attested for the games planned, but never realized, in Chalcedon in AD 435,[110] but similar events may have taken place elsewhere as well. The Christian role should therefore not be denied, but differentiated by a careful analysis that connects the negative discourse with the reality of the historical practices. Another angle that needs closer investigation, in order to understand better the changing perceptions of *agones*, is the spread of circus games and their concomitant ideology in the eastern half of the empire, as direct competitors with the *agones* for elite attention and money.[111]

None of these factors would have represented the direct cause of the abandonment of a contest. They do explain, however, why the leading citizens of late antique cities would not have shown much enthusiasm for reinstituting a contest which had been temporarily abandoned due to momentary difficulties. By AD 400, a handful of *agones* survived, the majority of them in provincial capitals. As before, these competitions formed one connected circuit, depending on the willingness of top competitors to travel to each of the contests consecutively. Only in a wealthy metropolis such as Antioch could a contest survive on its own. A rural contest such as the Olympics or contests in smaller and less financially stable provincial capitals could not. This international circuit was, in other words, as vulnerable to a domino effect as the minor regional circuits had been. With each contest falling out, the circuit weakened. We may never know what set the first domino into motion in the early reign of Theodosius II: perhaps the decision of one governor to use temporarily the income of an agonistic estate for the construction of a wall against invading barbarians or a local lack of notables to preside over the *agon* because all were more attracted by circus games or a local religious raid or, as one Byzantine source may suggest, a fire at Olympia.[112] It need not have been a major event or a deliberate event. *Agones* had become an anachronism to which few were deeply devoted. Even a relatively small event could make the first domino fall.

[106] For example Himerius *Or*. 47.13; Libanius *Or.* 11.269; *Ep*. 843.

[107] For example John Chrysostom *Hom. 32 in Joannem* (PG 59) 188: traditional festivals and games are 'satanical feasts'; Basil of Seleucia *Hom*. 27: Εἰς τὰ Ὀλύμπια (PG 85) 308–16; Severus of Antioch *Hom*. 95 (PO 25), 94.

[108] The athlete John of Smyrna (*CIL* VI 10153) probably came from a Christian family, given his name. The contest president of the Olympics of Ephesus in the early fifth century uses the Christian chi-rho (*IK Ephesos* 447). Callinicus *Vita Hypatii* (SC 177) 33 mentions both a Christian imperial official wanting to organize games and a bishop condoning this plan.

[109] *Cf.* Chuvin (n.104) 43–103.

[110] The episode is described in Callinicus *Vita Hypatii* (SC 177) 33.

[111] For a more detailed analysis of these aspects, see S. Remijsen, *The End of Greek Athletics in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge 2015) especially 169–71, 181–97, 252–88, 321–42.

[112] *Scholia in Lucianum* 41.9.9–11, 41–46.

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