

Athletes, acclamations, and imagery from the end of antiquity

Katherine M. D. Dunbabin

In recent years there has been considerable scholarly interest in athletic contests in late antiquity and in the fate of the agonistic festivals that for many centuries constituted the principal occasion for them in the Greek world.¹ The old notion that the end of the games at Olympia, and, *a fortiori*, that of the other great festivals of the *periodos*, came with the banning of pagan sacrifice by Theodosius I in A.D. 392/393 is now acknowledged to be wrong; but the evidence for these and most other *agones* after the beginning of the 5th c. is scanty. Some may have vanished earlier, and most of those that survived then may not have lasted very long after this date.² In the West, *agones* of Greek type had always been very much rarer, but at Rome the Capitolia and Heliaeae are attested in the mid- to late 4th c. but similarly vanish from the record at least after the early 5th c.³ But the absence of later evidence for *agones* of the traditional Greek type should not be taken to imply the disappearance of athletic contests; there were other occasions on which they could be offered, which need to be more fully acknowledged.⁴

The visual evidence plays a significant rôle in the assessment of late-antique athletic contests, but it is not always easy to interpret. Athletic scenes and figures of athletes occur with some frequency in the visual art of the Late Empire, mostly on mosaics from the West. Most lack precise dates; some can undoubtedly be dated after the mid-4th c., but it is not clear how far beyond then they continue.⁵ In this paper I will examine two examples of athletic imagery from the Latin world that have become known in recent years; both date from the very end of antiquity, no earlier than the end of the 4th or beginning of the 5th c.⁶

1 See Remijsen 2015 and 2015a; Gutsfeld 2013, and the other contributions to Gutsfeld and Lehmann 2013. More generally on spectacles in late antiquity see Jiménez Sánchez 2010 and Puk 2014, but neither devotes a separate study to athletes or *agones*.

2 The evidence for the disappearance or survival of the various *agones* throughout the Graeco-Roman world is collected in Remijsen 2015, chaps. 1-7; for the games of the *periodos*, see *ibid.* 38-59. More briefly Remijsen 2015a; Gutsfeld 2013, with emphasis especially on references to *agones* in the law codes; Weiler 2004, on the Olympic Games and the supposed decree of Theodosius I. The last to be attested are the Olympic games at Antioch, banned by Justin I in (probably) 524: Remijsen 2015, 93-104 and 217-19; Gutsfeld 2013, 168-69; Hahn in Gutsfeld and Lehmann *ibid.* 75-92.

3 Capitolia, Heliaeae: Caldelli 1993, 50 and 112-20, suggesting a possible disappearance at the beginning of the 5th c. Remijsen (2015, 144-47) suggests, on the basis of the contorniates with images of athletes, that at least one *agon* may have continued until c.430-440; but these are not necessarily evidence for traditional *agones* (see below n.82).

4 Remijsen 2015 focuses on the end of Greek competitive athletics at the *agones*, as distinct from other athletic traditions (*ibid.* p. 2); for the distinction, and her treatment of it, see below n.70.

5 Bohne (2011, 14-15) ascribes 13 examples of athletic scenes (all but one on mosaics) to the period after 350. The mosaics from the Great Baths at Aquileia (*ibid.*, K 1a, b, c) are dated on the basis of a coin of 348-50 found beneath one of them; those of the Constantinian Villa at Antioch (*ibid.* K 83) similarly have a dating after 337-47; the dating of the rest is predominantly based on stylistic principles, especially the resemblance of several to the dated Aquileia mosaics. There is no clear evidence how long after the mid-4th c. terminus any of them should be placed; see further below n.79.

6 For the problems of dating the Privatulus vase discussed below, see n.39 and p. 170.