Stephen G. Miller, *Ancient Greek Athletics* (2004) and J. Swaddling, *The Ancient Olympic Games* 3rd ed. (2004) in *History Today* (September 2004) 56.

Ancient Greek Athletics

Stephen G. Miller

Yale University Press ix + 288pp £25

ISBN 0 300 10083 3

The Ancient Olympic Games

Judith Swaddling

British Museum Press (3rd Edition)

120 pp £9.99 ISBN 07 1412 002 2

THE OLYMPICS RETURN to the land of their birth (in 776 BC) and rebirth (in AD 1896), and they bring the true spirit of ancient Greece with them. One reminder. Greek prime minister Konstantinos Karamanlis met with American president George Bush in late May to discuss anti-terrorist security at the Athens Games. Afterwards a Greek satirical political pamphlet calling itself *The Stylobate* (or column 'foundation') *of Peace* ran a cover showing a claymation-style image of President Bush with his pants pulled down around his legs and a probing device inserted in his rectum. He says in a cartoon bubble, 'Kostakis [the Greek prime minister's nickname] is prodding me to guarantee [literally 'underwrite'] the security of the Olympic Games. Now where did I put that *colostylo* [rectal pencil] of mine?'

The Greeks have always understood that life, sex and politics are about power and competition, and that all five are inextricably intertwined. From well before the comic poet Aristophanes, they never shied from speaking frankly about various permutations of this reality. Nor, to his great credit, does Steve Miller. If you want to experience the upcoming Olympic Games with a good grasp of the place of athletic competition in ancient Greek culture, Miller's and Swaddling's books will do the trick.

In *Ancient Greek Athletics*, Miller proves that a good scholar can write clearly and engagingly about specialised research, without prostituting scholarship to entertainment. In sixteen well-conceived chapters he covers everything from the prehistoric antecedents for athletic competition discernible in Greek Bronze Age iconography and in Sumerian and Hittite-Anatolian cultures, to the connections between athletic competition and money, politics, women and society. Each chapter has a bibliographical guide to further expert treatments of topics as diverse as nudity in athletics and the many forms of *agon* (prize competition) held at communal festivals: footracing, boxing, wrestling, all-out fighting (the *pankration*), equestrian racing, and flute-playing. The eleven-page glossary is a model of useful erudition. Illustrations, including maps, are well-chosen and well-placed.

Miller's perspectives on Greek athletics are grounded in his firsthand knowledge of the physical realia, derived from his years of directing excavations at Nemea, which along with Delphi, Isthmia and Olympia, was one of the four panhellenic sanctuary sites. But Miller has also thought deeply about the agonistic ('prize-competition') spirit of the Greeks and its relationship to the fundamental cultural notion of *areté*, originally excellence in the male-defining sphere of warfare (i.e, life-or-death competition in the offensive or defensive interests of the city-state or polis), and how both were incorporated into the fabric of life in the Greek city-states. Competition in choral performances, in dramatic productions and in athletics prepared young Greek citizens-to-be successfully to take up their essential military duties. It also redirected energies that, if given free rein, would have led to something the Greeks had more than enough of: *stasis* or 'civil war' and all its vicious symptoms.

The closest thing the Greeks had to an Old Testament prophet, their epic poet Hesiod, made clear in his *Works and Days* that there are two kind of *eris* or competitive conflict. One is equivalent to the capitalist work ethic. The other sets citizen against citizen in destructive ways. Both have to be harnessed. Miller's discussion of the social setting and implications of the funeral games of Patroclus in *Iliad* Book 23 rightly emphasises its purpose in conferring immortality on Patroclus (through the *athla* or 'prizes'). He uses it as a paradigm of Greek physical, mental and emotional *joie de vivre*. But the games also reintegrate, or re-harness, Achilles into the society of warrior commanders, bringing him back from his extended alienation and bloody berserker rage (Books 19-22) and preparing him to grasp, in his meeting with Priam in Book 24, the full pathos of the human condition.

Politics is often shoved to the side in *Chariots of Fire*–style treatments of the ancient Olympic Games and the fabled Olympic truce. Miller doesn't quite write with a *colostylo*, but he does let us know that we are getting things straight, no chaser. I don't know how many professional classicists are aware that in 480 BC, while King Leonidas and his small Spartan and allied contingents were fighting to certain death against the Persians at Thermopylae and Athens was subsequently occupied and burned, the Olympic Games were held. Sixty-four years later Alcibiades, the golden *roué* of Athenian politics, made an extravagant show by entering seven four-horse teams at Olympia and winning first, second and fourth. As Miller shows, this won him both political capital and the kind of hatred from conservative elements not seen again until the Clinton presidency and now post-presidency.

Swaddling's guidebook-style treatment focuses on the site of Olympia and the Olympic Games *per se*. Its final two chapters tell us about the rebirth of the games and their history from Athens in 1896 until Salt Lake City in 2002. Re-established by a French nobleman who was worried about the low morale of his countrymen and admired the emphasis in British education on both intellectual training and the physical 'sporting disciplines', the Games have now been professionalised and marred by doping scandals and other forms of win-at-all-cost perversion. But the demise of upper-class amateurism was already witnessed in antiquity, when, as Miller discusses, the *polis* of Kroton produced approximately 28 per cent of known Olympic victors. Swaddling conveys what these athletes must have felt as they competed in the environs of Olympia and its monumental temple and statue of Zeus. But Miller tells us they were rewarded by their home towns with 'more than vegetable matter', i.e., more than wreaths of olive. He also reports that a successful trainer in the sixth century BC pulled down, after a bidding war for his services, over $250,000 per year. For more about the corruption of the spirit of the ancient games, read Mary Renault's *The Last of the Wine*.

Tom Palaima