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Ancient and Modern Olympics

The Olympic dominance of the city of Kroton

11 - Friday - MAY 2012

POSTED BY JK3 IN FUNDING, RECORDING VICTORY

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Is there any ancient evidence for individual cities or regions dominating the Olympics in the ancient world?

Runners from Kroton

Here are some extracts from the *Olympic Victor List* of Eusebius (dating from the early fourth century AD) which help with that question.

- In the 48th Olympiad (i.e. 588 B.C.), the victor in the stadion race (i.e. 200 metres approx.) was **Glykon of Kroton**. Pythagoras of Samos, having been excluded from the boys' boxing contest [i.e. presumably for being too old], and being mocked for his effeminacy, entered the men's contest instead, and defeated all of his opponents in turn.
- In the 49th Olympiad (i.e. 584 B.C.), the victor in the stadion race was **Lykinos of Kroton**.
- In the 50th, Epitelidas of Sparta. In this Olympiad the seven wise men were identified.
- In the 51st **Eratosthenes of Kroton**.
- In the 52nd, Agis of Elis.
- In the 53rd, Hagnon of Peparethos.
- In the 54th, **Hippostratos of Kroton**. Arrichion of Phigaleia was strangled while winning the pankration for the third time, and died, and was crowned as victor despite being a corpse, since his opponent had already given in, having had his leg broken by Arrichion.
- In the 55th **the same Hippostratos for the second time**.....
- In the 62nd (532 B.C.), Eryxias of Chalkis. **Milon of Kroton** won the wrestling; he won at the Olympic festival six times, at the Pythian festival six times, at the Isthmian festival ten times, at the Nemean festival nine times.....
- In the 68th (508 B.C.), **Isomachos of Kroton**.
- In the 69th **the same athlete for the second time**.
- In the 70th, Nikasias of Opous.
- In the 71st **Tisikrates of Kroton**.
- In the 72nd **the same athlete for the second time**.
- In the 73rd, **Astyalos of Kroton**.
- In the 74th (484 B.C.), **the same athlete for the second time**.

Explaining Olympic victor lists

That kind of list was very common in the ancient world. Aristotle wrote one. Many other later writers researched and compiled their own versions right into the Christian era (Eusebius was a Christian writer), often with minor variations. Writing Olympic victor lists was clearly prestigious—it wasn't just an act of functional record-keeping.

How do we explain that fascination?

One of the attractions must have been the way in which these lists celebrated the connections between past and present: each new victor was just the latest in a long line stretching back for many centuries into the earliest days of Greek history (and maybe it's not so different for us today, as we look back at the Olympic history of the 20th century).

It was also useful for dating. In ancient Greek culture different cities had their own dating systems. The list of Olympic victors was an important common resource which made it possible to translate between different local systems—each city could calibrate its own dating system against the Olympic lists. The name of the Olympic *stadion* victor in particular was important. If you won the *stadion* (the most prestigious of the sprint races—so rather like our 100m race, even though it was nearly twice as long), your name would quite literally go down in history, used as a marker for identifying that four-year period for centuries afterwards.

Finally, even though the *stadion* winner is the main focus, you can see how the genre also leaves room for good stories—classic moments from Olympic history which were retold for centuries afterwards, just as famous victories from the modern Olympic history are relived today: for example [here](#)).

Why Kroton?

But the main reason for quoting these texts is just to demonstrate the extraordinary dominance of the city of Kroton (in South Italy). Between 588 and 484, Kroton won 12 of the 27 possible victories in the *stadion*—an astonishing 44%. It dominated many of the other events too, with the famous Krotoniate wrestler Milon single-handedly carrying off 6 successive Olympic victories, in a career which stretched for more than 20 years.

This is the most famous example of the dominance of a single city, although there are others too. It's hard to explain.

Generally speaking ancient cities didn't use public money to fund athletic training directly. David Pritchard has made that point in a recent [newspaper piece](#). An ancient observer might even be initially puzzled by how much we spend on our Olympic teams. It clearly is right that self-funding was the norm for the training costs of ancient athletes.

Nevertheless it seems likely that the use of public resources did have something to do with it. For example, David Young has suggested that Kroton used public funds, during a period of economic dominance, to buy up athletes from other cities (see his 1984 book *The Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics*, p. 140: 'Croton recruited its athletes from other cities, rewarding them or somehow supporting them from the state treasury'). That may be right—although it's hard to prove.

But even if Young's thesis is not the right one, it must still be the case that the continuing dominance of Kroton would have been viewed as a matter of public, civic significance. Ancient Greek cities prided themselves on victory. They *did* use public funds to reward victors after the event, even if they didn't pay for training and travel expenses in advance. And they *did* undeniably have mechanisms for encouraging athletic activity by handing out *honours* to benefactors who were willing to give funding (as in the [citizenship grants from Ephesus](#) I mentioned last week), rather than paying directly themselves. It's hard to believe that there wouldn't have been lots of influential people in Kroton desperate to hang on to the city's dominance once it was established.

Maybe they knew too how precarious Olympic glory could be. In 480, their star runner Astyalos (or Astylos) switched his citizenship (see [here](#) on citizenship changes by ancient athletes) and dedicated his third successive stadion victory to the city of Sparta. From then on, for the 700 years following, Kroton never won anything at Olympia again.



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