

Sports & Media in Ancient Mediterranean

Media

- Media defined as “a means of mass communication, such as newspapers, magazines or television.”
- All media is a form of **rhetoric**, which is the art of effective persuasion and persuasive use of language in writing or speaking.

Mass Media

- Can include non-verbal communication, such as visual and performing arts.
- Can include literature, inscriptions, architecture, art (vases), and sculpture

Contemporary audiences

- Must look at how media communicate to the contemporary audience, using that audience's primary media.
- Obviously, media today is vastly different

Sports

- Cultural values preserved and transmitted through its sports
- Values of society understood through assessing its sports
- *How do sports define our current values?*

Role sports play in cultures

- Egypt -- sports
 - Sumerians -- athletics
 - Greece -- contests
 - Rome -- games
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- *Which term most closely represents our ideals?*

Sports play many roles

- Entertainment
- Political power
- Social status
- Religious authority
- *What role do sports play in our society?*

Media's role

- “Media are used as a tool that is a direct reflection of socio-political realities in the culture in question.” (p.4)
- “Media are not the message, but they are fundamental aspects of that message.” (p.4)

Egyptian/Near Eastern Sports

- 2950 B.C. to 30 B.C.
- Sports are more of a ritual (for example, a royal run is used politically to show renewal of the pharaoh after 30 years in power.)
- Not a competition (b/c, after all, nobody can really compete with pharaoh)

Egyption/Near Eastern cont'd

- Sculptures are the **primary media**. But also have statuettes, temple decorations and tomb paintings. They show strength (pharoah shooting arrow through thick copper plates)
- Some sculptures (media) underline king's patronage and ultimate social authority, esp. those where he is watching over wrestlers competing before him.

Sumerian

- 2371 B.C. to 2004 B.C.
- Wrestling, boxing & footraces shown in media
- Sports shown as ritual, symbolic act

Assyrians, Babylonians

- Cylinders worn around the neck are media
- Wrestling, armed combat, boxing
- Took place during festivals before royals (political, religious aspects)

Hittites

- 1800 to 1600 B.C.
- Clay tablets (cuneiform) are primary media
- Footraces, archery, armed combat, weight throwing, boxing, wrestling
- Performed before king; bodyguards participants. Sports used to preserve activities/events with religious, political or commercial importance. King as patron of people and host of games. Not intended to portray selves as sportsmen.

Early Greeks

- Bull leaping, boxing, wrestling, armed combat
- Funeral games performed for person buried

Greeks

- 800 to 500 B.C.
- 1st Olympics in 776 B.C.
- Homeric poetry helped validate and fuel Olympics (epic as media)
- Broader heroic ethos (values)
- Olympics fueled by civic enthusiasm
- “The Greek use of heroic epic as a mythic foundation for the games is arguably the most famous manifestation of sport given meaning by a dominant media presentation of the ultimate champions, Homeric heroes who competed as toughly as they fought in battle.”

Famous literary media

- **Epic poems.** Homer's Iliad and Odyssey
- **Victory odes** (*epinikia*) - - songs commissioned by the victor's family written by poets like Pindar & Euripedes. In odes, victors became "new-age heroes," considered greater than most mortals. Enhanced status in society.
- *How is this similar to today's American sport media or to the articles by Grantland Rice and writers in 1920s?*

Famous literary media cont'd

- **Sacred envoys** (or truce bearers) sent out to invite participants to the Olympics. Allowed safe passage throughout Greece under protection of the gods. Sophisticated public relations machine.
- **Inscriptions** (in stone). Sometimes, noted individual's victory or listed compete winners. Often, enshrined talented (but lowborn) individual like heroes, nobles, generals and gods. Started democratization of sports.

Famous literary media cont'd

- **Statues.** Common medium to memorialize Greek rulers, generals, politicians, philosophers. Rise of statues for athletes coincides with democratic values. Contrast sharply to previous societies. Reflects rule of law over elite hierarchies. Ethos shown.
- Is this similar to modern sports media?

Sports reflecting society

- “... the sixth century athletic revolution certainly reinforced and reflected the tide of the times toward greater individual liberty and an emphasis on merit over birth.” (p. 11)

Hellenistic Greece

- 4th century B.C.
- Games spread, gain popularity. Emergence of spectators as part of sports. Greeks built stadiums to attract them (much like today's high-tech arenas with Jumbotrons, etc.) Start of competition for popularity contests and packaging of sports.
- “Today, we share with the ancients a collective weakness for the spectacular, theatrical elements of sports...” (p. 12)

Stadiums and fans

- Tunneled entrances (340 B.C.) refined and elevated drama to events. Suddenly, the athletes emerge from nowhere.
- Mechanized starting gates (4th C B.C.)
- 2nd Century B.C. -- stone pillars framed starting lanes, ornate columns, among other upgrades

Romans

- Did not love sports like the Greeks
- Games (gladiator events) and chariot races
- Games were offered by benefactors for the people as gifts
- Games did not attract most skilled Romans
- Games were really big business of entertainment. “Arguably every aspect of the Roman games and circuses was a medium aimed to capture the attention and favor of the audience.” (p. 15)

Roman media

- No elevated literary works
- Media did not claim contests fulfilled a socially redeeming function.
- Graffiti used like modern posters and billboards
- Monuments to gladiators (trifling souvenirs sold -- sound familiar?)
- Not much written, literary media probably b/c sports functioned differently for the Romans than it had for the Greeks.

Rome's most visible media

- **Amphitheaters** and circus structures that communicated the games' importance and existence. Roman Coliseum.
- Amphitheaters allowed fans to see around the arena to one another, cultivating group spirit.
- Amphitheaters were the badges of local pride more than the accomplishments of those competing within them.

Overview

- Media a tool of society
- Media a means of transmitting messages (primarily from rulers to the world). Glory of game sponsors.
- Eventually reflects society's shift to egalitarian values, that the individual matters. Glory of individual.
- Sports as entertainment for the Romans. Back to idea that audience is meant to be impressed by patronage of rulers.