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SPORTS IN LITERATURE FROM ANTIQUITY TO CLASSICAL GREECE

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ABSTRACT

Literature about sport is a literary variety that finds its representative-expressive medium in the word, covering the practice of sports in all periods of history by means of epic, poetry and drama as well as their respective genres. Studies in the subject indicate the existence of a long tradition of literary works about sports. The following paper is the first one in a series of articles on the history of sports in literature. It focuses on the literary period extending from antiquity to Classical Greece.

INTRODUCTION

Literature about sport is a literary variety that finds its representative-expressive medium in the word, covering the practice of sports in all periods of history by means of epic, poetry and drama as well as their respective genres. Literature is a multifaceted reflection of reality and it acts as an agent in instructing and educating athletes and specialists. According to Miguel de Unamuno, as quoted in Checa and Merino [5, p. 7], “What is most conducive to healthy, selfless, pure sports is, without a shadow of doubt, literature.”

The use of historical and literary references encourages learning of the reality they describe and reconstructing a given social period or moment in history chosen by the author as an argument for his or her artistic expression.

The relationship between sports literature and reality extends into the study of aesthetic education through sports, which encourages expression, perception, understanding, feeling and enjoyment of artistic beauty beyond the abstract and subjective message an author imposes on his or her work. This argument confirms the potential of literature about sport to fulfill its most meaningful objective: contribution to the all-round training of athletes and sports specialists in any geographical area, thanks to the universal nature of mankind’s heritage lacking a marked geographical or territorial nature.

Study of literature points to a long sports literary tradition which, according to Córdova [4], had originated in Ancient Greece with Pindar [7]. The following paper is the first one in a series of articles on the history of sports in literature. It focuses on the literary period from antiquity to Classical Greece.

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PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES IN HISTORICAL WORK SONGS

Since the time of primitive human communities physical activity has been a subject to artistic manifestations, passed on to the modern era as the tradition of *specialized art*, which illustrates the long life of the world of athletics.

It was the pressing need to obtain the vital means for subsistence that led man to undertake physical activities as illustrated in the first primitive cave paintings depicting hunters and archers. These motives appeared also in the first work songs.

According to Ovsiannikov [11, p. 335]: “The second element in the labour theory of the origin of art entails a work song easily becoming a spell or a myth [...] and the spell is always built as an ornamental repetition [...]. This force becomes manifest in songs, dances, impetuous orgies, slow circles, and in prayers and spells.”

This theory can be used to analyze the text of a work song entitled *Hunter, pick up your bow* [14]:

*In the woods where only you venture
Hunter, be valiant: make speed, run, jump,
hasten!
The viands are before you, enormous amounts of
viands,
Viands that walk like a hillside
Viands that lighten the heart,
Viands to be roasted in your home,
Viands in which you will sink your teeth,
Red viands, and steaming blood to be imbibed!
Elephant hunter, pick up your bow!*

In another early work song *The song of the oarsmen* [14], an early poet describes a rowing action with characteristic exclamations:

*Dip the oars well in.
Even more!
A long pull!
That's it!
A push!
Dip in the oar!*

These manifestations defined by some scholars as the origins of literature are the starting point of the process of chronicling the association between history, sports and literature, which itself is a separate research field.

SPORTS AND GAMES IN THE LITERATURE OF EASTERN CIVILIZATIONS

The references to sports as a literary theme in ancient Egypt predate the existence of written literary texts. Rodríguez [12, p. 17] corroborates the existence of epigraphic information on the walls of ancient burial chambers and places of worship in Egypt such as one found “... in the tomb of Prince Kheti of Sint, from the first inter-regnum, a text that expresses his predilection for swimming lessons.”

Papyri also yield such information, but due to its scarcity, it is difficult to classify it as sports literature. Rodríguez [12, p. 17] confirms the existence of two such papyrus sources “... involving hunting outings”. Mandell [9] also notes that papyrus depictions of sports were extremely few, concerning an informal ball game – a banal pastime not worthy of being included in literary texts.

Unlike in ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia, Hindu literature serves as the main indication of the existence of sports activities in truly literary works. Martínez de Osaba [10, p. 69] points out that in “... the *Code of Manu* or *Book of the Laws of Manu* [...] the organization of physical activities appears [...], main military exercises with and without weapons, including throwing of the lance and archery, fights, races, jumping and dances related to religious ceremonies.”

We also know that the four Vedas (*Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda*), describing the Hindu mythology, religion, cosmogony and life of heroes in the poetic form, make references to fighting as the exercise most preferred by the Hindus, who practiced it naked, covering only their lower body parts for protection against the opponent's blows. The young men as part of their military preparation would practice spear throwing, archery, running, jumping and swimming.

Mandell [9, p. 20] acknowledges that “The oldest manual on breaking horses harks back to around 1360 B.C. The tablets known as the “Kikkulis Text” describe with a good deal of detail the feed and training required for horses as well as how they are to be prepared for races.”

References to sports and physical activities can be found in such ancient sources as *The Bible*, *The Talmud*, *The Code of Manu*, or *The Book of the Dead*. Betancour and Vilanou [1, p. 101] refer to the process of “Hellenization of the customs of the

Israelites”, as illustrated in a quote from the *First Book of the Maccabees*, from the 2nd century B.C.:

In those days lawless men came forth from Israel and misled many, saying: Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles round about us [...] This proposal pleased them [...] So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom.

Referring to this Biblical report, Vilanou quoted in Rodríguez [13, p. 66], explains how “... in view of this, the Maccabean uprising was unleashed against the Hellenizing winds that reached their peak when the priest, Jason, in order to introduce Hellenism, opened a gymnasium at the foot of the citadel of Jerusalem”.

The references to sports activities in these ancient civilizations are very scarce – a fact proven by a number of sports historians. These observations, however, have led us to continue delving into this issue to seek further confirmation of sports practices in ancient nations.

Van Tieghen [15] acknowledges works of Arab poets prior to Mohammed, describing epic and warlike events. We also know of a number of prose writers, scientists, storytellers and historians from the times of *the Koran* who offer us valuable references on the practice of different sports of the day.

The same observations can be made about the literary works of ancient India and China such as *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana* and *The Bhagavata* or *The King Books*. They are mentioned as historical research sources but unlike *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* are not considered to be extremely useful in the study of sports in literature.

SPORTS IN GREEK LITERATURE

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* are the most important ancient Greek literary monuments describing competitive events, so that it is usually stated that sports reporting began with them.

These epic poems present evidence on the practice of games by armies and peoples, occasionally organized by their leaders or connected with the deaths of outstanding warriors, anniversaries of famous events or presence of famous personages.

Ancient games presided over by a hero commenced with an animal sacrifice to the gods, followed by the presentation of trophies to the

Olympian deities. Tamayo and Esquivel give the following quote from *The Iliad* [14, p. 53]:

The first prize he offered was for the chariot races – a woman skilled in all useful arts, and a three-legged cauldron that had ears for handles, and would hold twenty-two measures. This was for the man who came in first. For the second there was a six-year old mare, unbroken, and in foal to a he-ass; the third was to have a goodly cauldron that had never yet been on the fire; it was still bright as when it left the maker, and would hold four measures. The fourth prize was two talents of gold, and the fifth a two-handled urn as yet unsoiled by smoke.

The Iliad acknowledges the existence of other prizes such as bronze cauldrons, tripods, silver cups, shining iron, pikes, helmets, horses, bulls, oxen and mules.

The voice of Nestor tells us of some of the practiced sports events, e.g. boxing, races, lance hurling, chariot races and wrestling, quoted in Tamayo and Esquivel [14, p. 59].

Their backbones cracked as they tugged at one another with their mighty arms and sweat rained from them in torrents. Many a bloody weal sprang up on their sides and shoulders, but they kept on striving with might and main for victory and to win the tripod.

Nestor’s narration is followed by others on speed racing, combat with arms, impelling weights, archery and lance hurling.

The Odyssey includes scenes depicting games held during Odysseus’s stay among the Phaeacians, where he threw a rough, heavy disc used by his hosts and fought against Iris in a boxing match at the banquet of Penelope’s suitors.

Homer’s focus on sports also extends to other Greek literary genres, for example, Pindar’s lyric poetry. Pindar was the first and most renowned singer about athletes and sports, who drew inspiration for his profuse work from the ancient Olympic Games. Pindar’s four surviving books of epinikia, or victory odes, correspond to each of the four major festivals of the Panhellenic Games: Olympian, Pythian, Isthmian, and Nemean. He was admired and respected by his contemporaries, and it is told that Alexander the Great

destroyed Thebes but respected the house where the poet had lived.

Gallego [7, p. 22] recognizes Pindar for "... safeguarding all poetic chronicles of what the ancient Olympics were". His works highlight the triumphs of such victorious athletes as Hieron of Syracuse, Theron of Acragante, Psamis of Camarina, Aguerrias of Syracuse, Diagoras of Rhodes, Alcimedonte of Egina, Epharmoste of Opunte, Hagesidame of Locros, Engoteles of Himera, Xenophon of Corinth and Asopice of Orcome. Apart from Pindar, also Bacchylides, Simonides of Ceos and Archilochos of Alcaeus dedicated their verses to the victors of the games.

In Sicily, at the turn of the 3rd century B.C., Theocritus, a bucolic poet, wrote a collection of mythological stories entitled *The Challenge of Amycus*, in which he evoked a boxing contest between Amycus, the son of Poseidon, and Pollux, the son of Zeus.

The reality of the world of sports was also covered in two well-known tragic plays. Sophocles, quoted in Betancor and Vilanou [1, p. 79], notes in *Elektra* the death of Orestes in a chariot race. The text also denotes the importance of the Olympic Games as "... famous contest, pride of Greece." According to Mandell [9, p. 71-72], in the 5th century BC Euripides wrote a critique of the history of Hellenic athletics. He harshly criticized the professionalism of the winners of the games stating that: "Among the countless evils afflicting our country, none is worse than the breed of athletes. Firstly, they do not know how to lead a decent life, and are not even capable of learning how. [...] Better to honour and bestow prizes on the wise, on the just, on the politicians and on men of sound council, able to steer the life of the town and ward off the spectre of hunger and war." This stance denotes a criticism of the followers of the purity of sports in the face of the end of an era marking the twilight of Classical Greece, where sports were an element that went beyond the Roman, modern and contemporary world.

The philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, as exponents of Greek thought were considered by all historians as promoters of the idea of the practice of sports as a means of educating people.

In *The Republic* Plato acknowledges the values of educating the body through gymnastics and the soul through music in a combination that leads to a "more perfect, spirited" being [13, p. 44].

Plato, who wrote twenty-five works known as the *Dialogues* including *The Republic*, was the most brilliant of the followers of Socrates. Rodríguez [12, p. 57] notes that "... painting, mathematics, music and literature knew no secrets for him", so that it is easy to understand why he made them into contents for educating the body and the soul.

According to Hernández [8, p. 153] "Plato, in *The Republic*, notes that within the rich diversity of life, the man who only knows sports becomes so exclusive that he loses all connection with life, becoming incapable of existence, despite his turgid muscles that lose all their capacity as life goes on". Durántez [6, p. 15] observes that "He is known by his nickname as a sportsman [plato, meaning "broad-shouldered"] due to his well developed chest and back since he would regularly be at the gymnasium and in the arena. One version has it that he became an Olympic champion, although there is no doubt about the fact that he was in Olympia where he publicly aired his ideas."

Plato's pupil, Aristotle, at that time the private tutor of Alexander the Great, also expressed his educational theory in *Philosophical Dialogues*. His ideas were based on gymnastics, games and leisure, and encompassed references to training and sports values. Aristotle's most outstanding works included *Politics*, *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. He noted that "It is an admitted principle that gymnastic exercises should be employed in education, and that for children they should be of a lighter kind, avoiding severe diet or painful toil, lest the growth of the body be impaired" [1, p. 100].

Herodotus of Helicarnassus, regarded as the "Father of History", described in *The Histories* the emergence of some sports and attributed the paternity of various games such as dice, knucklebones and ball games to the Lydians. Herodotus was classified by Van Thieghem [15, p. 22] as the "first [known] Greek historian to raise history to the rank of a literary genre." He also quoted Xenophon, who touched on the theme of sports in his works *The Republic of the Lacedaemonians*, *The Education of the Spartans* [1, p. 81] and *On hunting*, where he "makes a harsh criticism of the sophistic tendencies and defends the old style of education" [13, p. 21].

Finally, the comic playwright Aristophanes in his work *The Clouds*, one of his eleven surviving comedies [15], "advised youth to pay more attention to physical exercise than to rhetoric" [13, p. 21].

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