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THE *ELEUTHERIA* (LIBERATION GAMES) OF PLATAEA IN ANCIENT GREECE

Key words: Plataea, *Eleutheria* games, ancient games, *hoplitodromia*.

ABSTRACT

The *Eleutheria* games of ancient Greece were held in memory of a special event connected with the liberation of a town, victory against a foreign enemy or liberation from a tyrant. Posterior philological sources provide some evidence that ancient Greeks supposedly founded Pan-Hellenic games called the *Eleutheria* in Plataea in memory of the final Greek liberation from and victory against the Persians. However, the analysis of the sources revealed that the games were founded during the last three decades of the 4th century B.C. in support of Philip II. The *Eleutheria* games were set to play a unifying role among all the Greeks as a recollection of their past successes. The programme of the games included athletic and cultural events, the most famous of which was the *hoplitodromia*. There was a peculiar law regulating this race. If a former winner wanted to participate for the second time he ought to have presented guarantors who would guarantee his victory with their lives, because if the athlete had not won, he would have been executed. It seems that the significance of this law was to prevent victory from turning into a bad omen.

INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that ancient Greeks adored physical exercise and competition more than any other people. They used to practice every day in the *gymnasia* and the *palaistras* and they used to test their skills by participating in many athletic events with the hope of victory. They founded the Olympic Games and many other Pan-Hellenic or local athletic events to which they would not attach a meaning but also an important political character. That is the reason why many times the athletic fields meant to be places where the Greeks' national conscience would grow, a place of memory of important historical events, a place where important political actions would be announced. The most typical example of such politically oriented games were the *Eleutheria* (liberation games) of Plataea.

The *Eleutheria* were held in memory of a special event connected with the liberation of a town, victory against a foreign enemy, liberation from a tyrant, etc. The *Eleutheria* were held in Larissa after 196 B.C. to commemorate the liberation from the Macedonians [4, pp. 217-235], in Syracuse in memory of the liberation from Thrasybulos' tyranny [15, pp. 276-280] and in Plataea in memory of the great victory of the Greeks against the Persians in 479 B.C. It was a festival in which the spirit of togetherness and cooperation among the Greeks, which had resulted in the victory against the Persians, was emphasized. According to Plutarch (*Aristeides*, 19), this spirit was clearly declared on the altar which was put up by the Greeks to honor *Eleutherios Zeus* (Zeus the Liberator). Zeus was considered to be the savior of the town [6, VII, 1668].

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With the use of philological and inscriptive texts the authors attempted to search for the origins of the *Eleutheria* of Plataea and study the development of the games' athletic programme as well as define their special characteristics.

THE GAMES' FOUNDATION

According to Herodotus (9.85. 1-3), after the battle of Plataea the Greeks buried the their dead from every town in a different grave. According to Thucydides (2.71. 2-4 & 3.59.2), after the successful end of the battle, Pausanias, after he had made sacrifice in honor of *Eleutherios Zeus* in the forum of Plataea, suggested that the Greeks should come every year to that small town to honor their dead. He also asked all the Greeks to keep Plataea inviolable and protect the town from future attacks [11, pp. 128-129]. Herodotus and Thucydides made no reference to these games.

According to posterior philological sources from the early Christian age, the Greeks founded the Pan-Hellenic *Eleutheria* in memory of the final Greek liberation and the victory against the Persians. According to Plutarch (*Aristeides*, 19), who lived five centuries after the battle of Plataea (50-120 A.D.), Aristeides was the founder of the Games. As he mentions, after the Greeks had won in Plataea, the Delphic Oracle told the Greeks to erect an altar in honor of *Eleutherios Zeus* to whom they would offer a sacrifice with the condition that the fire for the sacrifice should be transported from Delphi because all the fires in the area had been infected by the enemies and the slaughter. The people of Plataea put out the fires in the town and sent a runner by the name of Euhidas to bring the fire. After he had purified his body and been crowned with a laurel wreath, he took the fire from Delphi and went back to Plataea. He ran 1.000 stadia (almost 190 kilometers) in one day. People took the pure fire and made their sacrifice on the altar of *Eleutherios Zeus*. Plutarch (*Aristeides*, 19-20) marks that the people of Plataea, even in his days, continued to honor every year the dead with holy deeds, which included a procession, sacrifice of a black bull, offers to the dead as well as food and festive speeches. Moreover, Aristeides issued a decree which determined not only the annual meeting of the Greeks and the sending of messengers (*'provoulon ke theoron'*) but also the

foundation of the *Eleutheria* games every four years (*Aristeides*, 21).

The athletic games of *Eleutheria* were also held in the same place. Strabo (9.2.31) informed us that these games included nude events, and the prize was not money but a symbolic wreath, probably made of myrtle [15, p. 34]. The frequency of these games is mentioned in a text from Pausanias (IX. 2. 6-7). Pausanias also notes the games' special characteristic, i.e. *hoplitodromia* (race in armour).

Based on the available data the following question can be posed: Since the games were founded by Aristeides immediately after the battle, why are they not mentioned by Herodotus (484-426 B.C.) and Thucydides (460-396 B.C) who were temporally closer to the events? In fact, Plutarch's notes must be accepted with precaution as these events were described by him almost five centuries later.

Philological and inscriptive sources contain information about *Eleutheria* and the revival of the worship of *Eleutherios Zeus* at the turn of the 4th cent. B.C. The first ascertained evidence about the *Eleutheria* is a text by Poseidipos (the turn of the 4th and 3rd cent. B.C) which includes a description of the town of Plataea, where the games of *Eleutheria* were held. The next evidence comes from the mid-3rd century B.C. (261-246 B.C.) [11, pp. 134-135] and mentions a decree in honor of Glaukon the Armenian, who spent his own money to decorate the sacred temple of *Eleutherios Zeus* and Goddess *Homonoia* (amity, concord) of the Greeks and bore the expenses of the *Eleutheria*. In return he was given the presidency of the games [2, pp. 51-75]. Judging from the above sources we can say that the foundation of the games must have taken place between the destruction of Plataea in 373 B.C. and the times of Poseidipos (late 4th cent. B.C), i.e. during the era of the Macedonian dominion.

The *Koenon* (Federation) of the Greeks must have transformed and replaced the annual ceremonies in honor of the dead with quadrennial games in honor of *Eleutherios Zeus* and *Homonoia* [11, pp. 134-135]. However, the *Koenon* did not seem to have any political power. Plataea never became a political centre and the revival of the games had only a symbolic and political significance as they were held during the time that the Macedonians were trying to unite all the Greeks against the Persians. It can be assumed, according

to the commentators of Glaukon's inscription, that the games were founded during the last three decades of the 4th century, following a request from the people of Plataea in the Corinth congress (337 B.C) and the support of Philip II [2, p. 68]. Thus, the *Eleutheria* were founded in order to play a unifying role, reminding all Greeks of their past successes. The role of the *Koelon* of the Greeks in the foundation of the games is also clear from an inscription from Miletus from around 20 B.C. [9, pp. 117-125]. The *Eleutheria* were also taking place during the Roman times and were interwoven with the Emperor's worship, since they are referred to as the *Eleutheria Caesaria*, especially during the reign of Nero who was assimilated with *Eleutherios Zeus* [6, vol. II, 6-7].

THE ATHLETIC PROGRAMME

The glory associated with the *Eleutheria* can be also proven by inscriptions acknowledging the winners of *Eleutheria* games from the 3rd cent. B.C. till the 3rd cent. A.D. that have been excavated all around the Greek world (Table 1). The athletic content of the games, as shown by the inscriptions, greatly differed from the widely known Olympic athletic programme. For instance, in contrast to the Olympic programme, the *Eleutheria* also employed a category of *ephebi* (adolescents) apart from the men and boys' categories. In addition, the children taking part in the games competed in *dolichos* (running over a distance of 7-24 stadia) – an athletic event unknown in ancient Olympia. An inscription from the 1st cent. B.C. points to the inclusion of hippic races into the programme; while another inscription from the same period mentions some men's nude events (*pankration*, *stadion*, *diaulos*, *dolichos*), epehebi's events (*stadion*) and boys' events (*dolichos*). Another inscription from the 1st cent. B.C. mentions the event of *hoplitodromia* with the start of the race at the monument dedicated to the fallen soldiers.

After the 1st century A.D. it seems that the athletic programme alongside the changing habits was enriched with poetic, trumpet and heraldic events, and in the 2nd cent. A.D. pantomime also made its appearance. The most famous event of all was the *hoplitodromia*.

Table 1. The testimonies of the athletic content of the *Eleutheria* games throughout the centuries

CENTURY	EVENTS	SOURCE
3 rd cent. B.C.	Men's wrestling	IG. VII. 530
2 nd cent. B.C.	Wrestling, <i>pankration</i>	SEG. XXII. 350
2 nd cent. B.C.	Boys' <i>dolichos</i> Men's <i>diaulos</i>	IG. VII. 1711 SEG. IXX. 570
1 st cent. B.C.	Hippic races	IG. IV2. 1. 629
1 st cent. B.C.	<i>Stadion</i> , <i>diaulos</i> , men's <i>hoplitodromia</i>	L. Robert, <i>Hellenica</i> 7 (1949) 117 ff.
1 st cent. B.C.	Men: <i>pankration</i> , <i>dolichos</i> , <i>stadion</i> Boys: <i>dolichos</i> , <i>stadion</i> Ephebi: <i>stadion</i>	IG. VII. 1666
1 st cent. B.C.	Boxing, wrestling, <i>pankration</i>	IMagn. 119.149b
1 st cent. A.D.	Boxing	Lucillius, <i>Anth. Palat.</i> 11.81
1 st cent. A.D.	Rhetoric, poetic and heraldic events	IG. II2.3158
1 st cent. A.D.	Trumpeters and heralds events	IG. VII. 1667
1 st cent. A.D.	Ephebi's pentathlon	BCH. XXXVII (1913) 240.47
2 nd cent. A.D.	Heraldic events	IDel. 2552
2 nd cent. A.D.	Pantomime competition	FD. III.1. 551

THE HOPLITODROMIA (RACING IN ARMOUR)

In the *hoplitodromia* the athletes were running in full armour. It was included in the Olympic athletic programme in 520 B.C. [1, pp. 136-137] According to Philostratus (*Gymnasticos*, 8), the *hoplitodromia* included in the *Eleutheria*, was the most famous event in Greece for reasons: It was different from other races in terms of its distance; the racers carried the Boeotian shield and wore armour covering the whole body down the athlete's shanks; and finally, the event was founded in memory of the Greeks' victory against the Persians. The rules of the race stipulated that if a former winner wanted to participate for a second time he ought to present guarantors who would guarantee his victory with their lives, because if the athlete had not won, he would have been executed.

Philostratus' extracts point to the uniqueness of this race. According to Pausanias (IX. 2. 6-7) the athletes started the race from the altar and were probably running a distance of about a double diaulos (*hippios dromos*) like the one in Nemea, as Philostratus believed (*Gymnasticos*, 7). The athletes were not carrying circular shields, as it is usually depicted on various ancient vessels (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, F 2307), but large Boeotian shields, and were probably wearing a helmet, a breastplate and knee pads even during the Roman times [14, p. 42, note 90b].

It is worth noticing that the Boeotian shield was a remnant of the past from before the battle of Plataea, as these kinds of shields were not used during the battle [12, p. 55]. It can be thus concluded that the *Eleutheria* games most likely revived an ancient habit or ceremony which had been held in the area before the battle of Plataea.

As far as Philostratus' remark about the execution of the loser is concerned, it is clearly unique and it is neither mentioned in any other original source. In another text, Philostratus (*Gymnasticos*, 24) mentions a trainer who guaranteed with his life the attempt of Opoiatos the Egyptian to win for a second time in the *hoplitodromia* of the *Eleutheria*.

It is certain that the *hoplitodromia* was approved of by the event organizers, because the inscriptions inform us that the winner held the title *aristos of Hellenes (accomplished, the best of all Greeks)* [13, XI, 338. 9, pp. 117-125]. Is it possible that this title was so glorious that the winners were willing to compete and win for the second time risking their lives? Surely, we cannot judge it by present-day standards. One can expect that it might have been forbidden to the athletes to participate for a second time. Nevertheless, it is probable that some of them dared to take part in the race more than once. Particularly interesting is an inscription from 20 B.C. including a reference to an athlete from Miletus, who won many times in the Pan-Hellenic games and twice in the *hoplitodromia* of the *Eleutheria* games [8, no. 59, pp. 151-156]. Thus the law was not a hindrance for the Milesian athlete to compete for the second victory, as it was also the case with Opoiatos.

There are many views concerning the law of the race. Harris believes that it is not true and qualifies the text as a legend [5, p. 75]. According to him, this law was most likely a fairy tale told in the athletes' changing rooms. Jüthner believes that

the law is original and that it goes back to the years when the athletics and human sacrifices or the symbolic forms of human sacrifices were closely interrelated [7, p. 201]. Sansone relies on the use of the Boeotian shields as supporting the revival of an ancient custom [10, pp. 115-117].

It seems that the significance of the law was to prevent the victory from turning into a bad omen. It would be a bad omen for Greece, if a former winner of this race held in commemoration of the Greeks' victory against the Persians was defeated [16, pp. 112-113].

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