

Conference:

Olympia, Agōnes, Spectacula.

Sport in Antiquity: History and Traditions

Organized by:

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin

Date and venue:

November 20th – 21st, 2025*

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin

(Institute of History, Lublin Centre for Documentatio of Sport History)

Organizing Committee:

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Patrons:

Polish Olympic Academy

Museum of Sports and Tourism in Warsaw

Polish Society for Ancient Studies

Lublin Sports History Documentation Center



Our premises and goals

The phenomenon which the world today calls sport was a vital element in the life of ancient Greeks. The modern designation fails to fully convey the meaning of the Greek *agon* which, to put it in simplified terms, denoted the Hellenes' unique proclivity for competition and rivalry. It was in the mutual contest that one's primacy was proven in every area of life, the superiority that brought fame which in a sense substituted for immortality. Such sublimation of the *agon*, also in the sense of a gathering, a celebration (of the games) as a forum for experiencing one's physical dominance and perfection, seems indispensable in order to appreciate its religious dimension and connection to an extraordinarily rich value system.

It is mainly for those reasons that the ancients considered physical prowess and corporeal perfection—in conjunction with the highest civic virtues—to be one of the foundations of Hellenic culture and, in particular, civic education. Therefore, the Panhellenic games, during which all conflicts were said to diminish, the *agons* that were most likely attended by participants from all over the *oikumene / orbis terrarum*, constituted an important integrating element in the spirit of noble competition. Hence the contemporary fascination with ancient agonistics, the admiration reified in the idea of modern Olympism. Pierre de Coubertin's revival of the Olympiads, which he accomplished despite major odds, may have idealized the vision of the Greek games, yet it ennobled sport, it lent the contest dignity, endowed it with a system of values and provided the seemingly trivial physical rivalry with intellectual substance. De Coubertin approached the role of antiquity in the games he envisaged very prudently. In 1894, he wrote that *the restored Olympic Games shall be modern, very modern. There is no question of resurrecting the ancient costumes and running around a cardboard stadium [...] Only the idea embodied in them may come to life, and it must be adapted to the needs and tastes of the modern age.* Even though the legacy of antiquity was supposed to be alive mainly in "his Olympics", one can hardly ignore the fact that ancient sport had an impact on the entire physical culture of the 19th and 20th century. After all, the Hellenic tradition of agonistics was a lodestar for those convinced that sport without a system of values would become a mere spectacle, a sheer display of the skill of "professional actors" in athletic performances.

However, one must not forget that the apologists who saw sport as a spectacular and profitable show would also take advantage of the ancient tradition. After all, the sporting life of the antique world was not confined to the noble Greek *agōnes* and the Panhellenic Games that celebrated value, with the Sacred Olympic Games at the fore. There were also the notorious Roman *spectacula: circenses, munera gladiatoria, naumachiae* and *venationes*. Albeit originally associated with funeral rites, their links with politics (*panem et circenses*) quickly caused them to evolve into Hollywood-scale, almost thoroughly secular pageants. As such, they validate the claims of those for whom sport is a spectacle of power, a tool of money-making and a way of satisfying the mundane needs of the unthinking crowd. For a long time, “Roman sports” (the aforementioned gladiator fights in the amphitheatres, wild animal hunts, and circus chariot races) were long considered an aberration of the Roman civilization, an epitome of dehumanization, contempt for life, and an apology of death.

Much has changed in how the Roman spectacles are perceived today (as we understand and know them better, though it is not tantamount to approval) but, given the current condition and directions of evolution in modern sport, this very briefly outlined duality of ancient sport becomes particularly significant. In a nutshell, it had something of a Janus face: it was subject to change, the Greek one was not exclusively beautiful, and the Roman one exclusively worthy of contempt. All historical analogies warrant the conclusion that contemporary sport clearly stands on two legs, Greek and Roman. We appear to have the greatest affinity and preference for the Hellenic pillar/model—still alive in the idea of Olympism—and find it worrisome that sport is treated instrumentally, which manifests in its growing spectacularity and simultaneous absence of ideals. This is a real dilemma of contemporary sport. The history of its antique predecessor shows that, over more than a thousand years, it inexorably evolved from a religious ritual and competition based on noble principles to a pure spectacle in which human life was expendable. If the past is indeed a life’s teacher, such a conclusion should prompt reflection among those involved in humanities, especially—though not only—historians. Hence, a multifaceted discussion seems very much called for, so as to delve into ancient sport and beyond: into its often distinct traditions and the actual reception of its character, role and meaning.

Co-organized by the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University and the Adam Mickiewicz University, this conference is intended as a forum to explore the broadly understood ancient (Greco-Roman) sport and its tradition in later times, from the Middle Ages—which are usually overlooked in this discourse—through the modern era’s celebration of antiquity, to the somewhat “confused” contemporary times. Finally, it may be worthwhile to determine how this complex path of reception affected how sport is viewed nowadays. Antiquity is invoked almost automatically in the reflection on the origins of sport, yet the form we have inherited is anything but pure and unadulterated. It is conceivable that in every period following the decline of the ancient world it was Greek agonistics in particular which provided the ideological foundation of sport, regardless of the direction in which it evolved at the time. However, the extent and the manner in which it was drawn upon or esteemed varied, aligning invariably with particular needs and goals. Is this still the case today?

This conference is thus open to all who would wish to contribute in this discourse, whether by way of synthetic appraisals or detailed studies that add to the overall picture. We value both the synchronic and the diachronic method, with particular emphasis on comparative research. At the same time, our approach is not limited to the methods and methodologies of history. We would like the conference to be an inter- and transdisciplinary event, which is why representatives of such fields as history of antiquity, history of sport, art history, classical philology, cultural studies, political sciences, cultural anthropology, sociology, or legal history are all most welcome. We address this invitation to academics, sport researchers and doctoral students. The participation of practitioners—athletes, coaches, members of the coaching staff, etc.—may prove a particular asset of the conference.

Suggested research areas

A. Sport in the Greco-Roman world and its peripheries

- Sources for the history of sport in the Greek and Roman world (traditional and new evidence, their topography and chronology)
- Ancient sport in the social and political life of the Greeks and Romans (spectacle and instrument of power, tool of promoting ideas, civic education, spectators – pilgrims)



– fans, sport – health, leisure, recreation, the role of the gymnasium, *panem et circenses*)

- Cultural and religious contexts of sport in antiquity (the elevation of the agones, apology and criticism of agonistics and Roman spectacles, secularization, *ludi publici*, funeral games, Christian attitude towards Greek games and Roman spectacles)
- Sport in the context of war and military needs of the Greek *poleis* and the Roman state
- Ancient sporting events, their organization and facilities (sports facilities and spaces, logistics, safety, training, diet, ancient sport disciplines, local games, sport on the peripheries of the ancient metropolises)
- Ancient athletes, their status, social and symbolic roles (provenance, prosopography – sporting careers, athletes as idols-celebrities, losers in ancient sport, women in sport)
- Greek agonistics and Roman spectacles vs “sport” in other civilizations of the ancient world

B. Traditions and reception of ancient sport

- Greek Olympics and Roman spectacles in Old Polish culture (motifs in literature and publicism of the era)
- Invoking antiquity to legitimize sport in the 18th – 19th century (ancient tradition vs Western models and domestic traditions)
- The modern Olympic Games and their ancient roots in Polish newspapers and publicism at the turn of the 20th century
- Criticism/apology of sport in the interwar period and its antique inspirations
- Modern and contemporary Olympism in the context of antique tradition (amateur vs professional sport, value system, antiquity in P. de Coubertin and his successors, interpretations, idealization...)
- The ancient and the present-day athlete (models, rise to fame, celebrities and celebrity culture)
- Ancient sport as a symbol (e.g. onomastics, toponymy)

- Ancient sport in modern and contemporary culture (literature, film, theatre, visual arts)
- Ancient and contemporary disciplines (training methods, logistics, rules and regulations)

Organizational information

The conference will be held at the Institute of History, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University and/or at the Center for Sport History in Lublin in a stationary form (with the possibility of joining online). Papers delivered by the participants will be subsequently included in a monograph released by a publisher from the list of peer-reviewed scientific publishers. There is also a possibility of having the papers published in a ranked journal (70 pts).

Participation in the conference in a stationary form may involve a small fee (approx. 150 PLN, doctoral students are exempt from the fee!). Participants bear the costs of travel and possible accommodation (if the number of speakers will require the conference to be extended beyond one day).

Please send the completed application form to the following e-mail addresses: oaconference2025@gmail.com and emitwa@amu.edu.pl by September 15, 2025. The conference will be held in two languages: English and Polish. Therefore, we accept applications in either Polish or English. The organizers will send additional organizational information after accepting the application.

*** The duration and the date of the conference may be subject to minor alterations**

