

THE AGE-CATEGORY OF BOYS AT OLYMPIA

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE is to investigate the age-limits for contestants in the boys' events at Olympia. The view which is widely accepted is that boys were aged seventeen to nineteen inclusive,¹ but the evidence I believe indicates rather that the boys' class could admit competitors as young as twelve, but would exclude those who had attained the age of eighteen.

Proponents of the theory that the boys' class comprised athletes aged seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen rely heavily on an inscription from Olympia which refers to the arrangement of the Sebastan festival in Naples:

[. . . μὴ ἐξέστω δὲ νεώτερον μετέχειν τοῦ ἀγῶνος τῶν Ἰταλικῶν ἰσο]λυμπίων ἢ ἑπτακαί/[δ]εκέτη· [καὶ μετεχέτω]σα[ν ἀπὸ μὲν ἑπτακαίδεκα μέχρι τῆς εἴκοσιν ἐτῶν ἡλικίας παίδων ἀθλήσεως], μετὰ δὲ ταύτην ἀν/[δ]ρών. (*IvOl* 56.10–12)²

[. . . let no one younger] than seventeen [take part in the Italian Iso]lympic [Games. Let those athletes aged seventeen to twenty (i.e., to nineteen but not yet twenty) participate in the boys' events], those older in the men's events.

However, it should be noted that much of this passage is restored, and the relevant section on age-limits is completely restored. Even if the restoration of the ages is correct, we ought not to use the Sebasta as a parallel for Olympia, since it clearly was not Isolympic in all respects: there is, for example, evidence for musical, dramatic, and certain equestrian events at the Sebasta which are not found at Olympia.³ Moreover, it can be seen from the analogies of other "iso"-festivals, that unless games are said to be specifically equal to their models in age-limits, then they are equal only in honours

¹See, for example, E. N. Gardiner, *Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals* (London 1910; reprinted Dubuque, Iowa 1970) 271, *Athletics in the Ancient World* (London 1930; reprinted Chicago 1978) 41, W. W. Hyde, *Olympic Victor Monuments and Greek Athletic Art* (Washington 1921) 189, R. Knab, *Die Periodoniken* (diss., Giessen 1934; reprinted Chicago 1980) 8, H. A. Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics* (London 1964; reprinted Westport, Connecticut 1974) 154, J. Ebert, *Griechische Epigramme auf Sieger an gymnischen und hippischen Agonen* (Berlin 1972) 78.

²See W. Dittenberger, K. Purgold, *Die Inschriften von Olympia* (Berlin 1896; reprinted Amsterdam 1966) 117–126, R. Merkelbach, "Zu der Festordnung für die Sebasta in Neapel," *ZPE* 15 (1974) 192–193.

³For these events and others not found at Olympia, see R. M. Geer, "The Greek Games at Naples," *TAPA* 66 (1935) 210–220. There was even at the Sebasta a special race for boy citizens in the diaulos (*IvOl* 56.39–40).

received.⁴ We must consider, therefore, this inscription to be inconclusive in determining the ages for Olympic boyhood.

An epigram of Strato has also been cited as evidence to support the view that the age-limits for boys at Olympia were seventeen to nineteen:⁵

οὐδ' αὐτὴ σ' ἡ λέξις, ἀκοινώνητε, διδάσκει,
 ἐξ ἐτύμου φωνῆς ῥήμασιν ἐλκομένη;
 πᾶς φιλόπαις λέγεται, Διοιύσιε, κοῦ φιλοβούπαις.
 πρὸς τοῦτ' ἀντειπεῖν μὴ τι πάλιν δύνασαι;
 Πύθι' ἀγωνοθετῶ, σὺ δ' Ὀλύμπια· χοῦς ἀποβάλλων
 ἐκκρίνω, τοῦτους εἰς τὸν ἀγῶνα δέχη. *Anth. Pal.* 12.255

The last two verses of this poem are noteworthy: "I am president of the Pythian Games, you of the Olympic. You accept as contestants those athletes I reject and exclude."⁶ This does indeed appear to show that the upper age-limit for Olympic boys was higher than that for Pythian boys. Yet no specific age is given for the upper age-limit, nor is mention made of the lower.⁷

That boys at Olympia could be younger than seventeen is clear from Pausanias, from whom we know that boys as young as twelve could compete. Damiskos of Messene was victor in the boys' stade in 368 B.C. at age twelve (6.2.10–11).⁸ Some scholars have expressed doubt that Damiskos was actually aged twelve,⁹ but presumably Pausanias saw his age inscribed on his

⁴See Dittenberger *ad Syll.* ³ 402, n. 7, on the Soteria at Delphi as Isonemean, T. Klee, *Zur Geschichte der gymnischen Agone an griechischen Festen* (Leipzig and Berlin 1918; reprinted Chicago 1980) 49–51, P. J. Meier, "Agones," *RE* 1 (1894) 860, and especially H. Pomtow, "Delphische Neufunde," *Klio* 14 (1915) 278, n. 3.

⁵See J. Ebert, "Paides Pythikoi," *Philologus* 109 (1965) 152–156.

⁶Ebert (above, n. 5) 152–153 rightly rejects the old interpretation of Jacobs, that those boys rejected at Delphi set out for Olympia, where he believes the games were held later in the same year. This error is followed by W. R. Paton in the Loeb edition of *The Greek Anthology*.

⁷Ebert (above, n. 5), since he believes that Pythian boys were aged twelve to sixteen, concludes from the poem (and from *IvOl* 56) that Olympic boys were aged seventeen to nineteen. This is by no means the only interpretation of the epigram. If Pythian boys were aged twelve to sixteen, we may infer that Olympic boyhood, for example, extended to age seventeen. Ebert also cites a second epigram by Strato (*Anth. Pal.* 12.4) to support his views on age-limits. This poem, however, with its abstruse references (confusion of ordinal and cardinal) to ages of boys in whom Strato delights, is entirely of a pederastic nature and has no athletic relevance. If it could be used to interpret the first epigram of Strato, which I disbelieve, then the conclusion should be that Olympic boyhood started at age sixteen rather than seventeen.

⁸See L. Moretti, *Olympionikai. I vincitori negli antichi agoni olimpici* (Rome 1957)—hereafter Moretti—no. 417. Pausanias also relates that he was victorious later in the pentathlon at Nemea and Isthmia.

⁹See Gardiner, *Greek Athletic Sports* (above, n. 1) 271, M. I. Finley, H. W. Pleket, *The Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years* (London 1976) 35. See also Ebert (above, n. 1) 160.

statue in the Altis.¹⁰ This youthful age was no doubt specified to enhance the glory of Damiskos' victory. Pausanias may have wondered at the young age, since it would be an unlikely age for a victor, but does not remark on any technical irregularity. Since Pausanias makes no allusion to differences in the age-category at Olympia in his time and that of Damiskos, we may assume that as far as he was concerned none existed. Hence the case of Damiskos shows that in the fourth century B.C. and the second century A.D. twelve-year-olds might compete.

We may also deduce from Pausanias that the upper age-limit for boys at Olympia was seventeen. Nikasylos of Rhodes "being eighteen years old" was not allowed to compete in boys' wrestling, but entered the men's event and was victorious:¹¹ ὄγδοον γὰρ ἐπὶ τοῖς δέκα ἔτεσι γεγονώς μὴ παλαιῖσαι μὲν ἐν πασιῖν ὑπὸ Ἡλείων ἀπηλάθη, ἀνηγορεύθη δὲ ἐν ἀνδράσιν, ὥσπερ γε καὶ ἐνίκησεν (Paus. 6.14.2). Although there is much confusion over the Greek method of counting, perhaps even to the Greeks themselves, we may assume that the expression ὄγδοον γὰρ ἐπὶ τοῖς δέκα ἔτεσι γεγονώς means that Nikasylos was eighteen years old, not seventeen (i.e., in his eighteenth year).¹² If we consider the participle to be concessive rather than causal, then we must infer that Nikasylos was disqualified for size, even though he was of legal age.¹³ Yet this interpretation is unlikely, since Pausanias makes no mention of size as the criterion in this case, merely age.¹⁴

Aristotle's recommendations on physical education confirm that the boys' category at Olympia was open to those sixteen years old and younger. The philosopher suggests that boys before the age of puberty (ἡβη) should practise only light exercises, so that growth be not impaired; that growth can be impaired by heavy exercise can be seen in the fact that only one or two athletes at Olympia won both as men and as boys:¹⁵

For up to the age of puberty, we should employ lighter exercises, forbidding a severe diet and forced athletic activity, so that nothing may stand in the way of growth. For there is substantial proof that strict athletic training at this time can stand in the way

¹⁰We may consider that Pausanias was accurate with regard to inscriptions; see C. Habicht, *Pausanias' Guide to Ancient Greece* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1985) 64–94.

¹¹See Moretti, no. 973, who considers him not far removed from the time-period of Pherias of Aegina in the fifth century (see below).

¹²On this problem of ages, see M. Golden, "Demosthenes and the Age of Majority at Athens," *Phoenix* 37 (1979) 25–38, especially 28, who counters the arguments of J. M. Carter, "Eighteen Years Old?," *BICS* 14 (1967) 51–57. See also C. M. Tazelaar, "*Paides kai Epheboi*: Some Notes on the Spartan Stages of Youth," *Mnemosyne* 20 (1967) 128.

¹³See, for example, Gardiner, *Greek Athletic Sports* (above, n. 1) 271, who presumably interprets it this way.

¹⁴For size as a criterion, see below.

¹⁵Aristotle should have been extremely familiar with the age-groups, as the author of the (now lost) *Olympionikai*. This passage seems to me to be important evidence for Olympic boyhood, but is not discussed in this connection by others cited in these notes.

of growth, for among Olympic victors one could find only two or three athletes who have been victorious both as men and boys. The reason for this is that when the young undertake athletic training, they are deprived of their strength by the stress of exercising. But when they have passed the three years after puberty in other pursuits, then it is appropriate for them to spend the next part of their lives in strict athletic training and severe diet. (*Pol.* 8.4.1–2)

Although the educational stages and divisions in the *Politics* have been much discussed and remain controversial, the key to this passage appears to lie in the previous book of the *Politics*: δύο δ' εἰσὶν ἡλικίαι πρὸς ἃς ἀναγκαῖον διηρησθαι τὴν παιδείαν, μετὰ τὴν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐπτά μέχρι ἡβῆς καὶ πάλιν μετὰ τὴν ἀφ' ἡβῆς μέχρι τῶν ἐνὸς καὶ εἴκοσιν ἐτῶν (7.15.11). Here Aristotle is dividing the educational process into two age-divisions extending from seven to twenty-one, and separated by ἡβη, the time of physical maturity. If Aristotle divides the process into two stages of equal length, as seems likely, then we can fix ἡβη at age fourteen.¹⁶ Hence in the eighth book of the *Politics* Aristotle is advocating lighter exercises for boys up to the age of fourteen, no athletic training for three years thereafter. We may deduce, therefore, from these passages that Olympic boyhood began before the age of fourteen and continued to approximately seventeen.

A passage from Pausanias on the career of Artemidoros of Tralles also fits well an age-category of seventeen and under for boys at Olympia. Pausanias relates that Artemidoros failed because of extreme youth in the boys' pancration at Olympia:¹⁷

Ἀρτεμιδώρῳ γὰρ ἀμαρτεῖν μὲν Ὀλυμπίων συνέβη παγκρατιάζοντι ἐν παισίν, αἰτία δέ οἱ ἐγένετο τῆς διαμαρτίας τὸ ἄγαν νέον· ὥς δὲ ἀφίκετο ἀγῶνος καιρὸς ὃν Σμυρναῖοι Ἰώνων ἄγουσιν, ἐς τοσοῦτο ἄρα αὐτῷ τὰ τῆς ῥώμης ἐπηύξητο ὥς κρατῆσαι παγκρατιάζοντα ἐπὶ ἡμέρας τῆς αὐτῆς τοὺς τε ἐξ Ὀλυμπίας ἀνταγωνιστὰς καὶ ἐπὶ τοῖς παισίν οὓς ἀγενεῖους καλοῦσι καὶ τρίτα δὴ ὁ τοῦ ἀριστον ἦν τῶν ἀνδρῶν. (6.14.2–3)

He later, therefore, competed successfully in the pancration for boys, ἀγένεοι, and men in Smyrna on the same day.¹⁸ Since there were three age-divisions for athletes at Smyrna, we can deduce with some degree of certainty that the boys' category there was not seventeen to nineteen, which is the usual age for the ἀγένεοι.¹⁹ We can also deduce from this passage that

¹⁶On ἡβη, see Thalheim, "Hebe," *RE* 7 (1912) 2583–2584, C. Pélékidis, *Histoire de l'éphébie attique* (Paris 1962) 16–17, 52–53, *EM* 359.17.

¹⁷He was later successful in the men's pancration at Olympia in A.D. 69; see Moretti, no. 799.

¹⁸Apparently it was not uncommon to compete in more than one age-category at some festivals (but not at Olympia), although one must have been at an age eligible for the youngest group.

¹⁹Although the actual age-limits for the ἀγένεοι at Smyrna are not known, we can argue on the analogy of the ages of this group at other festivals that "the beardless" there were approximately seventeen to nineteen; see Klee (above, n. 4) 46–48 for the evidence for the ages of the ἀγένεοι.

the age-category for boys at Olympia was not seventeen to nineteen, since Artemidoros competed in the boys' event at Smyrna against some of the competitors he had lost to in the boys' event at Olympia.²⁰

Exactly how age was calculated at Olympia is open to conjecture, but perhaps a boy's age was reckoned not from the day of birth, but from the year of the Olympiad in which he was born.²¹ Presumably the athlete had some proof of age from his city, or at least his word under oath to Zeus was accepted by the Hellanodikai. However, in cases of doubt or dispute it is evident that size could supersede age. For instance, in the fifth century Eualkes of Athens was in danger of being banned from the boys' stade "because of his size and hard muscularity," but was helped by Agesilaus, albeit with great difficulty (Plut. *Ages.* 13.3).²² Pythagoras of Samos was excluded from boys' boxing in 588, but entered and won the men's event.²³ Since Diogenes Laertius (8.47), quoting Eratosthenes, states that he was excluded "with ridicule," it is likely that Pythagoras was rejected on grounds of size rather than age.²⁴ Similarly, it appears that Pherias of Aegina in 468, who was excluded from Olympic competition because he was considered to be too young and unfit to wrestle, was rejected for his (small) size.²⁵

We may conclude, therefore, that contestants were eligible for the boys' events at Olympia at least as young as twelve, but were excluded at the age of eighteen. The Hellanodikai could expel the immature on the grounds of size.²⁶

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²⁰We may also consider here the statement of Philostratus (*Her.* 147.21) that Aurelius Helix of Phoenicia (see Moretti, nos. 911, 915) won the men's pancration when ἀνὴρ ἐκ παίδων. If indeed the term ἐκ παίδων was a standard expression for the age of majority at eighteen, then Helix competed in the men's pancration at eighteen; see Tazelaar (above, n. 12) 139, A. Diller, "A New Source on the Spartan 'Ephēbia'," *AJP* 62 (1941) 501. For other possible but inconclusive references to the ages of boys at Olympia, see J. Jüthner, *Philostratos über Gymnastik* (Leipzig and Berlin 1909; reprinted Amsterdam 1969) 237.

²¹As suggested by an anonymous referee. This would allow consistency among city states which used different calendars.

²²Cf. also Xenophon *Hell.* 4.1.40.

²³See Moretti, no. 88.

²⁴Yet Jacoby (*FGrHist ad* 241 F 11 p. 712 on Eratosthenes) suggests, without evidence, that Pythagoras was rejected because of age.

²⁵He was victorious in boys' wrestling four years later. See Moretti, no. 255, Ebert (above, n. 1) no. 19. For an example of an exclusion from a local festival at Marathon, see Pindar *Ol.* 9.89 on Epharmostos of Opus.

²⁶I am much indebted to comments and suggestions of the anonymous referees of *Phoenix*.