

Athletic exercises in ancient Rome. When Julius Caesar went swimming

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Roman *ludi circenses* are well known, especially chariot-racing, which was extremely popular during the Roman Empire. In many aspects, this competition even foreshadows modern sport seen as show business (the Circus Maximus could accommodate about 150,000 spectators). One could not say the same thing about the athletic exercises of Roman citizens: the common view is that Romans had a negative attitude towards athletics, which were not regarded as useful and were sometimes considered as scandalous. But Roman citizens did, in fact, practise much sport, for instance in the Campus Martius in Rome, and in the *palaestrae* of public baths. They were particularly fond of ball-games and of swimming in very large cold pools.

Nowadays, people could easily think that Romans did not play sport: the idea of the austere *civis romanus*, both a soldier and a peasant, and of the *togatus vir*, the senator speaking in the Curia, seems unlike the vision of an undressed young man, who would enjoy playing athletic – that is to say futile – games in the dust of the stadium. Or, when a citizen is *nudus* (a term which, in Latin, is equivalent to the Greek adjective *gymnos*, and means ‘lightly dressed, with a loincloth or a simple tunic’), is it in order to handle the plough, like Cincinnatus for example? And the latter must wear a *toga* to be able to receive dictatorship, which is an official function in the Roman Empire. In summary, one makes oneself *nudus* only for a very serious, and not frivolous, activity. This idea points out the traditional opposition between Greece and Rome, and more precisely between Hellenic education and Roman behaviour. Romans did not have Olympic Games – even if the Games were preserved for a long time in the Empire, and even perpetuated by the so-called Isolympic games, all around the Mediterranean.

The Romans, sportsmen without a gymnasium

What is even more serious, is that Romans did not make use of gymnasia, the institution for which ‘those little Greeks have a weakness’, according to Trajan’s

scornful word to Pliny the Younger about the hellenized oriental people the latter governed;¹ the gymnasium, that old Romans considered as a place of lust and especially of ‘shameful loves’, and which still exists with a double life: intellectual with the German *Gymnasium* and the Italian *ginnasio*, and sporting with the French *gymnase*. Although the cultural dimension of the Greek gymnasium should not be underestimated, this monument is also, indeed mainly, at least for the most ancient times, linked to physical training; and it is also fundamental, since it accompanied hoplitic reform, and, in a certain way, the progress of democracy. This Roman rejection is very well illustrated by the comments on Scipio’s behaviour, who qualified as ‘Greek’, during his stay in Sicily, in 204 BC, while he prepared his departure for Africa at the end of the second Punic war: ‘... the personal appearance of the general-in-chief, as not even soldierly, not to say unRoman; wearing a Greek mantle and sandals as he strolled about in the gymnasium, giving his attention to books (in Greek) and physical exercise...’.² But this rejection was perhaps more superficial than real, and anyway Roman mentality was to change. Nevertheless, it is true that this critical vision is embedded in the even more violent rejection of nakedness: ‘To strip in public is the beginning of evil-doing’ said Ennius, one of the first Roman poets, quoted by Cicero.³ And a text of Tacitus, where the historian makes traditionalists speak, perfectly sums up the situation. ‘What remained’ say these old Romans, appalled by the decay of morals ‘but to strip to the skin as well, put on the gloves, and practise that mode of conflict instead of the profession of arms?’⁴ Thus, sport would be the open door to all vices and, in the best case, a futile activity, useless for the country.

Romans probably helped shape the image we now have of them: by insisting complacently on people’s total fascination for circus games, by always saying that places of spectacle and their seats, more or less comfortable, were the only places that inhabitants of the ancient Rome and of the whole Empire sought. Latin writers – and not only Juvenal and his famous ‘*panem et circenses*’ – inclined one to see Romans as spectators and not as athletes; they drew the image of ‘people sitting around in slippers’ – the reader will forgive this expression for a time when television did not exist, but some descriptions, like Dio Chrysostom’s one in his *Oratio* to Alexandrians, make one irresistibly think of our ‘sportsmen’, with their eyes fixed on the screen. Raising or dropping one’s thumb during gladiators *munera*, shaking one’s *toga* so that the chariot race will begin again, clapping one’s hand (*movere manus*) for applause in the theatres or in the circus, while staying seated all day long; these are the major muscular efforts that ancient sources seem to concede to citizens.

Of course, however, this is a caricature. Romans always used to play sport on their own. How could we imagine that the soldier-citizen, this legionnaire who, at least during the Republic, served in the armies who were to conquer the major

part of the inhabited and known world, could have neglected a physical and athletic training that Greek hoplites considered necessary? Military preparation was, for young Romans, the first reason to play sport. One literary source at least deals with this: Vegetius, depicts the exercises imposed on recruits, and naturally he mentions races, jumps and throwing ('le parcours du combattant'). And if one can object that Vegetius is a late source (fourth century AD), one can also find allusions, in Vegetius' work, to the Republican era, to the training of Pompey, whose military glory was huge, and of his troops, and one can see that the exercises were the same.⁵ Moreover, there is another account, third century BC. Cato the elder refused to let anybody other than himself – and especially a slave, as was commonplace – educate his son: thus, he was his son's athletic trainer and 'he taught his son not merely to hurl the javelin and fight in armour and ride a horse, but also to box, to endure heat and cold, and to swim lustily through the eddies and billows of the Tiber'.⁶ In a typical Roman education: horse riding, boxing and swimming have major places, whereas the 'Greek' sports, like the throwing of discus, do not seem to have received the censor's agreement!

Military training, however, important as it was, especially during the early centuries of Rome, is not the only reason to play sport: we should not neglect simple relaxation and health care, and, in that way, Romans are not so different from us. One only has to read *Aeneid* or Ovid's *Fasti* to realize that, already during the mythic times, the companions of Aeneas or Romulus practised various physical exercises (races, boxing, wrestling), which existed all along the history of the *Urbs* – but it was also the case for the Achean troops between two battles in the *Iliad*, or for *Odyssey's* Pheacians, so perhaps one will guess that these mythic sports were simply copied from Homer, and that they do not prove anything about the sporting reality in early Rome. This is an objection that is also valuable for the account of the funeral games in *Aeneid's* fifth book, a *topos* that we find in every ancient epic – even if it remains that many details deal with local *realia*. But if we really study history, we discover, for example, during the Samnite wars, an important man, Papirius Cursor, whose name came surely from his running speed and we learn that during a *ludus militaris*, young Roman soldiers competed in sporting tests, although these ones were not official, since Romans would not appear in public in regular competitions. Here is a break with Greek mentality, which certainly plays an important part in the vision we have of Romans.⁷

The *Campus Martius*

It is at the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire that we have most information about sporting activities, especially in the City itself. The military aspect disappears, even if the privileged place remains the *Campus Martius*, which

is sometimes called simply the Campus: indeed this single word evokes sporting activities, as we can see in Ovid or in Persius. But Vegetius did not forget to remind us of the military origin of these physical exercises on the Campus: ‘Therefore the ancient Romans, who were trained in the whole art of warfare through so many wars and continual crises, selected the *Campus Martius* next to the Tiber in which the youth might wash off sweat and dust after training in arms, and lose their fatigue from running in the exercise of swimming.’⁸ Horace, who is perhaps the essential source on this matter, also presents this double aspect of sport, when in the second book of *Satires*, he distinguishes between the *militia Romana*, which seems to include hunting and horse-riding, and the Greek games, like the ball (*pila*) and the throwing of discus.⁹ And if both of these sports are often mentioned by the poet, we must not forget hoop-bowling (*trochus*), which was then a male activity – for example, the ‘toy’ figures on the mosaics of public baths representing athletic scenes – as well as other instruments used by adult and confirmed sportsmen (strigils, dumb-bells, etc). The Greek geographer Strabo, wrote a beautiful description of the *Campus Martius* during the Augustan era, which includes the ball and the hoop among Romans’ favourite exercises in this place: but he does not forget the various horse shows or the fighting sports like wrestling that were included in this *ludus campestris*.¹⁰ It is easy to find in these sources the signs of the great activity existing on the *Campus Martius* at the end of the Republic. Strabo talks of a ‘considerable crowd’, and Horace depicts the crown frequently formed by spectators in order to admire the strongest ones or to boo the weakest. But these shows were improvised: Roman citizens, as we said, did not make an exhibition of themselves in official competitions.

The campus: a military and sporting complex

Even if it was the largest and the most frequented, the *Campus Martius* was not the only campus of the *Urbs*. Indeed, a ‘Little Campus’ seems to have existed on the border of the *Campus Martius*, unless it was the other name for the ‘Martial Campus’, situated on the Caelius Mount and used for some religious feasts’ games, when the *Campus Martius* was flooded. At the end of the Republic, there also existed the *Campus Agrippae*, which must have been simply a part of the *Campus Martius*, on the eastside of the Via Lata, the present via del Corso.¹¹ But Rome was not the whole Roman Empire – even if the city of Rome was a real ‘monster’, an exception in antiquity, with near to one million inhabitants at the beginning of the Empire, not all of whom were citizens for sure. In Italy and in the occidental provinces, there often existed reduced *Campi*, which seem like empty places, probably planted with some trees, sometimes equipped with portics and a swimming-pool, generally provided with latrines and surrounded with an enclosing wall. This provincial *campus* with multiple functions, was intended for

the *juventus* of the local upper class, but it was certainly also used by gladiators or by simple sportsmen. While it is a ‘monument as important as the forum, the baths, the theatre and the amphitheatre’, it was neglected in the later years, ‘because it was only little material tracks’.¹²

A *campus* is attested by inscriptions in several cities which show the interest of local *evergetes*: not only do they build or restore (Alatri), but they also arrange to distribute oil for citizens on the *campus*, as in public baths, or in Greece in a gymnasium (for example on the occasion of the Neptunalia in Como, where the *campus* was probably on the side of the lake, favourable for swimming).¹³ Archaeological surveys seem to restore a *campus*’s place in the ancient urban landscape, even if it was generally situated rather in the periphery than in the centre. We can quote, without being exhaustive, the Italian or Spanish examples of Pompeii, Herculaneum, Alba Fucens, Ortona, Urbisaglia, Corfinium or Ampurias, and in Narbonnese Gaul, Narbonne, Cimiez, Fréjus, Marigny-Saint-Marcel (*vicus Albinnum*, near Seyssel), which all probably had a *campus*. Some archaeologists even talk of an ‘omnisports complex’ or a ‘gymnasium complex’ in Nîmes, Orange and Vienne: in that sense, these cities had no reason to envy oriental cities such as Aphrodisias. Lastly, there existed, in addition to the civil *campus* – ‘*ubei ludunt*’, as the Alatri inscription says nicely in archaic Latin – a military *campus*, where the soldiers were trained by a *campidoctor*.

The baths: the Roman’s gymnasium

However, from the beginning of the Empire, the place where sport was most practised was the *thermae*. It is not that the *Campus Martius* or the Italian *campi* are abandoned or closed: the non-built part of the *Campus Martius* was always used by sportsmen, as literary sources show without ambiguity, and the beautiful Como inscription indicates that the distribution of oil will take place in the city ‘*in campo, in thermis et balineis omnibus ...*’: these buildings were considered in the same way and coexisted as entertainment places in the urban scenery of this little city. Anyway, instead of comparing, in a sterile way, the Greek gymnasium and the Roman baths in order to establish differences of ‘nature’ between these two civilizations, one simply has to write, as Yvon Thébert does it in his thesis about the north-African Roman baths, that public baths are actually ‘the Roman era’s *gymnasia*’.¹⁴ The importance of physical and sporting activities in these establishments has been too long underestimated. Indeed, what is the use of *palaestrae*, those courts surrounded with porticoes which are so numerous in baths, and not only in the largest and most prestigious of them, the so-called imperial monuments? In addition to examples from Rome itself, the Cluny baths in Paris-*Lutetia*, and the more recently excavated ones in the site of the Collège de France, had such a *palaestra*. Carthage’s Antonine Baths, the biggest ones in

the provincial Roman part, were endowed not only with two squared palaestrae, themselves accompanied by two rooms which must be considered as covered gymnasia, but also with an esplanade that surrounded the bathing complex and was certainly used by sportsmen, particularly when the baths were occupied by women.

The fact that the major part of athletic writing concentrates on baths is not without meaning. It has always been in these buildings, and even sometimes precisely in the palaestrae, that representations of athletes were found, first of all on the numerous black and white or coloured mosaics visible in Ostia and mostly perhaps in Africa. It is also the case for the Stabia and Pompeii stuccoes, for Mactar's bas-reliefs (Tunisia), and for paintings like the Boscoreale or Pompeii ones, or for the recently found ones in Saint-Romain-en-Gal (this time in the latrines of a bathing establishment). This habit of decorating the grounds and the walls of thermal buildings with athletic scenes must have lasted a long time, as is suggested in a letter from Sidonius Apollinaris dated 465. While describing the baths of his villa situated at *Avitacum* (Aydut, near Clermont-Ferrand), the bishop evokes the *frigidarium*'s paintings: 'There are no athletes slipping and twisting in their blows and grips. Why, even in real life the chaste rod of the gymnasiarch promptly breaks off the bouts of such people if they get mixed up in an unseemly way!'¹⁵ The allusion refers to wrestlers or pancratiasts, and indeed, on some mosaics or frescoes, certain athletes are shown in an equivocal attitude. The allusion to this villa at Aydat reminds us that private palaestrae also were decorated; indeed, in his long account of painting, Pliny the elder says precisely that 'the same people decorate even their wrestling-ring and their anointing-rooms with portraits of athletes ...'.¹⁶

Literary sources on this matter are very interesting but not numerous: is that surprising? Thébert comments with some justice that it is perhaps because these activities were so commonplace that they are not much commented on in textual sources. Anyway, Petronius, Seneca, Martial or Apuleius are good witnesses of sportive practices. The first shows us Trimalchio lazily involved in a ball game in the baths; the second, in a letter written from Baiae, complains about the noise made by the bath's customers practising their favourite physical activities, dumb-bell handling and ball sports. Martial depicts an actor, Menophilus, who is victim of the following misadventure; while he trained in the baths, in the middle of the palaestra, before the crowd's very eyes: his sheath (*fibula*) slips to the ground and reveals to everybody his circumcision. On his own, Apuleius is so vigorous in his sportive effort (*in palaestra*) that he seriously hurts his ankle. And these habits last, since in this respect we can point out an anecdote extracted from the *Story of Apollonios, King of Tyr* – a third-century AD Greek novel rewritten by a cultured Roman – of a scene taking place near *Cyrene*, when the main character goes to the *lavacrum* in order to play a high level ball game; now,

lavacrum refers to public baths, as we know thanks to several African inscriptions.

The existence of one or sometimes two palaestrae in baths is a main feature of the structure: for Thébert, it is even the characteristic that distinguishes between summer *thermae* and winter *thermae*. It is necessary to except the particular category of baths-gymnasia which would have existed in Asia minor: these had no specific plan and were only ‘normal’ baths; that is, buildings almost always offering sportsmen services and spaces. Two physical activities practised in public baths probably deserve further development: swimming and ball games.

Swimming-pools and swimmers

If palaestrae played an essential part in most of the *thermae*, swimming-pools (*natatio*, *piscina*) also had a major place. The Antonine Baths, in Carthage, offer, at the seaside, a *natatio* that could be said to be Olympic, since it was almost 50 m long, even if it not very large. In addition, there were also the four swimming-pools of the *frigidarium*, almost 10 m long, two warm swimming-pools between the cloakroom and the *detractarium*, 17.50 m long and 13.50 m wide; and finally, not including the *caldarium*’s basins, two more little swimming-pools, linked to the exit *tepidarium*. The Antonine Baths evidently constitute an exceptional example because of their extent and size, but the simple description of these swimming-pools shows the importance of water and swimming for Romans, all the more so in an African country where things were not easy in this respect. Anyway, even the smallest baths had their own *natatio*. Thébert remarks that the swimming-pool disappeared from Arab medieval baths. And this habit also concerns great private villas, like Pliny the Younger’s Laurentine famous villa, situated near Ostia: in this luxurious and wonderful warmed swimming-pool (*calida piscina mirifica*), swimmers (*natantes*) could swim while contemplating the sea!

This presence of water in Rome constitutes an innovation compared with hellenistic examples, and Grimal wondered if it did not correspond to ‘a transformation in the sporting habits, swimming taking over from racing or wrestling’. Only Romans, and not Greeks, practised swimming, and swimming for them does not mean taking a bath, as we can see when Seneca distinguishes between *lavari* and *natare*. Recent excavations, for instance at Astigi in Baetica, lead to the same conclusion: ‘The shape of the basin suggests that it should be related to swimming as a sport or athletic exercise, rather than to the traditional concept of hygiene’.¹⁷ Some authors even identify the major types of swimming, particularly Manilius in his *Astronomica* (Vol. 5, p. 422): breaststroke, crawl, underwater swimming. Examples of illustrious Romans succeeding in a sporting performance or, at least, showing swimming qualities, are not lacking. The most

famous exploit is probably Caesar's during the siege of Alexandria: '... The Egyptians sailed up against him from every side, so that he threw himself into the sea and with great difficulty escaped by swimming. At this time, too, it is said that he was holding many papers in his hand and would not let them go, though missiles were flying at him but held them above water with one hand and swam with the other.'¹⁸ This anecdote has been frequently quoted for centuries, but did not convince Voltaire: 'Ne croyez pas un mot de ce conte que vous fait Plutarque; croyez plutôt César, qui n'en dit mot dans ses Commentaires, et soyez bien sûr que quand on se jette dans la mer, et qu'on tient des papiers à la main, on les mouille ...'

Swimming would also have been practised by Roman women – if we believe Cloelia's legend which, very likely, had elements of reality, as Livy's and Plutarch's accounts suggest: 'After these stipulations had been carried out, and when Porsenna had already remitted all his warlike preparations through his confidence in the treaty, these Roman maidens went down to the river to bathe, at a place where the curving bank formed a bay and kept the water especially still and free from waves. As they saw no guard near, nor any one else passing by or crossing the stream, they were seized with a desire to swim away, notwithstanding the depth and whirl of the strong current.'¹⁹ In the historical era, we can quote another deserving swimmer: Agrippina, who survived drowning in Baiae thanks to her swimming ability, despite Nero's plot.

Ball games

Balls, and especially collective ball games, with teams of players, were not as important as in our contemporary societies, but they were not neglected during antiquity, as one can see in Egypt where the Beni-Hassan paintings (also famous for their hundreds of wrestlers) show young ladies perched on their companions' backs, trying to catch a ball thrown by one of them. Numerous balls, made of leather strips sewn around a straw or horsehair core, have been found in ancient Egyptian tombs. When a ball appears in Greece, it is also used as a feminine entertainment: in the *Odyssey*, princess Nausicaa plays *sphaira* with her friends, but men were also concerned, and texts, figured documents, paintings on vases and bas-reliefs, show many ball games. They are the favourite physical exercise of young or older Romans, men and women. In baths, sometimes special rooms were dedicated to this activity. Many authors evoke ball games, which could be a devouring passion; many famous historical or fabulous characters, like Trimalchio in the *Satiricon*, refer to this entertainment. If our current politicians often show themselves playing tennis or golf, Pompey the Great had his own gymnastic trainer, Atticus of Naples, who was said to be the inventor of the *folliculus*, a particular ball. A funerary inscription of the beginning of the first

century AD depicts in Urbisaglia, in the middle of Italy, a freedman, P. Petronius, who presents himself as *lusor ... folliculator*: probably he was a professional who worked as a 'footballer' in Urbs Salvia's baths or campus, and who trained this little city's notables.²⁰ Indeed, in some large public baths, there were perhaps real shows and historians wondered if the athletic mosaic found in the Thermae of Caracalla did not simply represent the professional sportsmen's team which would have practised in this huge building.

Horace often makes allusions to ball games on the *Campus Martius*, and he reminds us that Maecenas, Augustus's special counsellor, relaxed by playing ball games, for example during his journey to Brindisi. Perhaps Martial is the most interesting source on this subject. The poet born in Bilbilis says that there were several types of ball, and therefore many ways of playing with it: one could play with the common *pila*, a full, rather strong ball which bounced on floor, but also with a *follis*, which was a skin ball blown up with air, an innovation which disappears until revived in the 15th century. It was light, and even soft. In the 47th epigram of Martial's 14th book: 'A *follis* is for children and old men to play with'. Between these two balls, at least regarding strength, there existed another called a 'peasant ball', *pila paganica*, probably because it was full of farmyard's feathers. An African inscription says that some baths had a *paganicum*, likely a room dedicated to sports played with this ball.

Not many texts allow us to know precisely the rules and the course of the various games, but again Martial makes a curious observation. For example, concerning *pila trigonalis* which, as indicated by its name, was probably played by three partners disposed in a triangle; and in his poem, one of which is supposed to talk: 'If you know how to drive me with swift left-handers, I am yours. You cannot? Then, you rabbit, give up the game'.²¹ Therefore, the left-hand's skill is underlined, and perhaps it was even an obligation to play with it. Romans could not ignore the benefit from being left-handed in some sports, and still nowadays, one must beware of 'false guard' in boxing, and left-handed tennis players seem to be very successful. Roman gladiators, in their 'curriculum vitae', sometimes point out that they are *scaevae*, left-handed. Actually in ball games, or in any case for *trigonalis*, a rule, or at least, a preference for left-hand strokes seem to have existed. Martial's epigrams, once more: 'So may the oiled circle's favouring judgement give you a victor's palm from the nude trigon, nor praise Polybius' left-handers more'. In another poem, Martial complains about a parasite eager for being invited at a dinner party: 'To escape Menogenes in the public baths and around the private baths is not possible, try what device you will. He will grab at the warm trigon with right and left so that he can often score a point on the balls he catches. He'll collect it from the dust and bring back the loose follis, even he has already bathed and already put on his slippers'.²²

In addition to *trigon*, which frequently appears in texts, the *harpastum* is also

mentioned: the origin of the word is again Greek, and indicates both the ball and the game. Martial says that, like *follis*, it took place on a light, powdery ground. But Martial and literary texts are not the only information source, there were inscriptions on stuccoes, mosaics and paintings. Stuccoes found in the Porta Maggiore ‘basilica’ show, on the vault of the principal nave, children playing ball, another example is the paintings on a tomb said to be of via Portuense, dated the middle of the second century AD. They represent four characters, two men wearing tunics, and two women wearing long dresses, attempting to catch a little ball thrown in the air, perhaps more an evocation of the after life or a representation of a ritual of initiation, but it is probably simpler to suppose that we have here an allusion to a joyful but commonplace moment of Roman everyday life.

On the very remarkable athletic mosaic of Porta Marina Baths in Ostia (AD 120–130), one can see, at the bottom, a table of the prizes (palm and crown) and various sports instruments, such as a ring with three *strigils* or a hoop, a wonderful ball, apparently leather and very similar to the balls of the last Football World Cup – however, it presents two adjacent hexagonal faces, certainly an error of the representation for the pentagons.²³ There is also a regular dodecahedron similar to this ball described by Plato as a model of the Earth seen from heaven: ‘... the earth, when seen from above, is said to look like those balls that are covered with twelve pieces of leather.’²⁴ The presence of this ball, this *follis*, does not imply the existence of regular competitions, as for example in boxing or in the throwing of discus; as is common in this type of document, the point is only to show some objects used by athletes in their training.

But was it different for women, whom we have already seen playing ball on a Roman painting? On the Piazza Armerina’s mosaic, dated the beginning of the fourth century AD, the young ladies in bikinis are athletes who throw the discus, practise the long jump, compete in a race and in a ball game, we may even wonder if they are not pentathletes.²⁵ In that case, the throwing of javelin would be missed, and the ball would have taken the place of wrestling, perhaps considered as too brutal for girls. As a referee-arbitrator comes to award the palm and the crown to a victorious athlete, one feels to be in the world of official competition. Surely, Ovid advised *puellae* against the quick ball (*pilae celeres*), as he advised them against going to the *Campus Martius*, or swimming in the *Aqua Virgo* aqueduct or in the Tiber: he reserved these physical activities to men. But ball games were various, and women probably had no difficulty in finding a convenient sport, all the more as we see real female athletes on the Piazza Armerina’s mosaic. Anyway, the two female ‘volleyball’ players use a little ball, made of pieces of various colours, like Plato’s Earth, or like those green *pilae* used by *Satiricon*’s Trimalchio, and not without a certain nonchalance. But most surprising is that the two athletes play with their left hand: once again, and this time in a picture. Perhaps

they are playing *trigon*, but the too restricted space did not allow the third partner to be represented!

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