

RECENSIONI

REVIEWS

Pietro Scudieri

J. Martínez-Pinna, *El nacimiento de la República romana* (ca. 509-486 a.C.) (2020) 259

Giuseppe Mercuri

L. Polverini, *Gaetano De Sanctis - Arnaldo Momigliano. Carteggio 1930-1955* (2022) 265

Mediating, Arbitrating, Crossing Borders Constantly*

Athletes as Envoys

Sebastian Scharff

DOI – <https://doi.org/10.7358/erga-2023-002-schs>

ABSTRACT – Starting from the observation that the role of former athletes as envoys has not been sufficiently analyzed yet, this article examines on what kind of diplomatic missions Hellenistic athletes were sent after their career. Of special interest are their functions as interstate arbitrators and mediators in political conflicts, roles which were often assumed in the context of political conflicts with or within federal states. It is striking that Eliaian victors mediated and arbitrated even in such disputes in which their hometown had been one of the conflicting parties. This is remarkable since it reveals what significant a role the prestige gained by an agonistic victory played for becoming appointed envoy. Another main reason for being nominated as ambassador consisted in the athletes' prior life realities as cross-border commuters which allowed them to build strong social and political networks from an early age. No doubt, former athletes, often 'heavy weights', served in many different capacities on diplomatic missions of the highest importance.

KEYWORDS – conflict resolution; envoys; 'federal' athletes; interstate arbitration; mediation – arbitrati interstatali; atleti 'federali'; inviati; mediazione; risoluzione dei conflitti.

1. INTRODUCTION

Angelos Chaniotis, in an important article published in 1988, pointed out that Hellenistic embassies frequently included poets, orators, actors, dancers, and musicians¹. The skills of these individuals were needed, as

* This article was made possible by generous financial support from the European Union (project: «Federalism and Border Management in Greek Antiquity», ERC 2021 COG PR. No. 101043954). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. I would also like to thank my colleagues Elena Franchi and Claudio Biagetti who discussed an earlier version of this paper with me. As the two anonymous reviewers of this article, they provided constructive comments that helped this article take shape.

¹ Chaniotis 1988.

«complex strategies of persuasion»² were required in Greek diplomacy which often did not take place «behind closed doors» like many modern interstate negotiations but in the public sphere of the people's assemblies, assemblies which could be very heterogeneous in composition³. In order to make sure that they were able to meet the specific needs of their hosts, envoys were carefully selected and prepared⁴. Their preparation sometimes even included elements of the specific cultural traditions of the city that received the embassy⁵. The level of attention that was paid to the preparation and later performance of the embassies is astonishing as the groups of people chosen as ambassadors are surprising from a modern point of view⁶. Another group of people one might not expect as envoys at first glance are the athletes. They constitute the subject of this article.

There is no comprehensive overview on Greek athletes as envoys⁷. This article takes the current (insufficient) state of research as an opportunity to provide an analysis of the different roles athletes played as envoys and ambassadors.

Athletes constituted promising candidates for becoming appointed envoys and ambassadors since they enjoyed considerable prestige⁸. Yet the motivation behind the appointment of athletes as envoys went beyond their social status⁹. It was not only their charisma as a champion,

² Chaniotis 2009, 159.

³ Chaniotis 2009, 156.

⁴ Probably even on a world-historical scale (see Jönsson - Hall 2005, 87).

⁵ Chaniotis 1988, 156: «Für die Organisation einer Gesandtschaft hatten gewiss die politischen Ziele den Vorrang; um sie zu erreichen und die Volksversammlung der fremden Stadt positiv zu beeinflussen, berücksichtigte man auch die kulturellen Traditionen und die Eigentümlichkeiten des Empfängers der Gesandtschaft».

⁶ We are rather used to the distinguished type of ambassador (cf. Chaniotis 2009, 156; Scharff 2016, 224).

⁷ A lot of work has recently been devoted to the question of how athletes contributed to the connectivity of the Greek world by traveling from festival to festival (cf. esp. the Groningen project «Connecting the Greeks» conducted under the direction of Onno van Nijf and Christina Williamson [<https://connectingthegreeks.com/>]). The official function of former athletes as envoys, however, has not been studied so far. For general overviews on the role of envoys and ambassadors in Greek diplomacy, see Kienast 1973, Mosley 1973, Piccirilli 2001, Gazzano 2006 and Osmer 2017. On the phenomenon of the accidental presence of Greek envoys in foreign cities, Scharff 2019.

⁸ Social reputation is marked by Chaniotis 1988, 155 as one of the main general reasons for being appointed as an envoy. Other preconditions of the position, however, were not shared by athletes. Poets, actors or dancers, for instance, were nominated in part because they helped embassies succeed by performing or conducting their art (Chaniotis 1988, 156). Athletes becoming envoys, in contrast, were not known to have engaged in agonistic activities in front of their hosts.

⁹ It is rather difficult to decide whether former athletes were selected as envoys because of social standing conferred by their background (*i.e.* ascribed status) or

the «talismanic power»¹⁰ of their victory, that made people think of them as future envoys. They also stood out because they had broad networks beyond their hometowns' borders which they had crossed on a regular basis from an early time in their lives. It is this connection between the life realities of athletes as cross-border commuters and their later role as envoys that is the focus of this article¹¹.

It will be asked whether the experience and relationships the athletes had acquired during their careers had an impact on the specific tasks they were assigned as envoys; in other words: on what kind of diplomatic missions were athletes sent? In order to answer this question, I will first focus on cases of athletes serving as mediators and arbitrators in political conflicts, which is followed by a more general overview on athletes who acted as envoys and ambassadors. The article concludes with an analysis of the reasons why athletes were chosen as external representatives of their hometowns. The chronological focus is on a period that provides rich evidence and changing political constellations including the heyday of the Greek leagues: the Hellenistic age. The main evidence stems from Pausanias' *Description of Greece* and agonistic inscriptions.

2. ATHLETES AS MEDIATORS AND ARBITRATORS

In Pausanias' description of the sanctuary of Olympia, we find the following passage:

Παντάρκην δὲ Ἡλεῖων Ἀχαιῶν ἀνάθημα εἶναι τὸ ἐπίγραμμα τὸ ἐπ' αὐτῷ φησιν: εἰρήνην τε γὰρ Ἀχαιοῖς ποιῆσαι καὶ Ἡλείοις αὐτόν, καὶ ὅσοι παρ' ἀμφοτέρων πολεμούντων ἐαλώκεσαν, ἄφεσιν καὶ τούτοις γενέσθαι καὶ δι' αὐτόν. Οὗτος ἀνεῖλετο καὶ κέλητι ἵππῳ νίκην ὁ Παντάρκης, καὶ οἱ καὶ τῆς νίκης ὑπόμνημά ἐστιν ἐν Ὀλυμπίᾳ.

because of their athletic victories (*i.e.* achieved status). It is not possible to resolve that conundrum here, but it should be noted that, whatever the status an individual possessed prior to a sporting career, his social standing was significantly elevated by athletic victories, which would in turn have certainly enhanced his attractiveness as a potential envoy.

¹⁰ Kurke 1993, 133.

¹¹ With regard to federal athletes, the issue of border crossing is relevant on different levels (internal and external borders). This is why a majority of the cases which will be discussed in what follows refers to athletes with a federal background. The basis of the Hellenistic cases is provided by the Mannheim «Database of Hellenistic Athletes» (<http://athletes.geschichte.uni-mannheim.de/>).

The inscription on the statue (*anathema*) of Pantarkes of Elis states that it was dedicated by Achaians, because he made peace between them and the Eleians, and procured the release of those who had been made prisoners by both sides during the war. This Pantarkes also won a victory with a race-horse, and there is a memorial (*hypomnema*) of his victory also at Olympia.¹²

Pantarkes' Olympic victory in horse racing has been tentatively dated to the year 228 BC¹³. Unfortunately, the date is uncertain as it is unclear which peace is meant that was concluded between the Achaian League and Elis¹⁴. What is clear, however, is that Pantarkes had two monuments at Olympia in his honor: an *anathema* dedicated by the Achaians for his successful peace-making initiative and a *hypomnema* honoring his sporting victory. We do not know for certain whether the mediation or the sporting victory came first, but it is quite plausible to assume that Pantarkes' successful mediation was based upon the prestige he had gained by a prior Olympic victory. The fact that he was honored by the Achaian *koinon*¹⁵ and not by his Eleian fellow citizens indicates that Pantarkes had a network beyond the borders of his hometown that helped to bring about the peace. At least his initiative must have been perceived as impartial by the Achaians. What we cannot say for sure is whether Pantarkes' network was bound by informal relations alone or if it also consisted of formal links between the athlete (or his family) and the Achaians¹⁶. Pantarkes' diplomatic role, however, is clearly described: he served as a mediator in a military conflict and was able to achieve a peace settlement that included a clause on the release of the prisoners of both sides. It is interesting to note that Pausanias continues his description of the sanctuary of Olympia with a short reference to a statue of another Eleian, this time dedicated by the Aitolian League¹⁷. Although the honorand was not

¹² Paus. VI 15, 2.

¹³ Moretti 1957, no. 577.

¹⁴ Jacquemin 2002, 205 and Maddoli - Nafissi - Saladino 2013³, 283-284 refer to the Peace of Naupaktos of 217 BC and the early years of the reign of Demetrios II, *i.e.* 239-237 BC, as possible candidates.

¹⁵ Note that Paus. VI 15, 2 states explicitly that he had this information from the inscription (*epigramma*) on the statue.

¹⁶ One might think, for instance, of a proxeny relation as in the case of the boy wrestler Agenor of Thebes who was honored by the Phokian *koinon* with an Olympic victor statue since his father was a *proxenos* of their league (Paus. VI 6, 2; on Agenor see below).

¹⁷ Paus. VI 15, 2: Ὀλίδαν δὲ ἀνέθηκεν Ἡλεῖων τὸ ἔθνος τὸ Αἰτωλῶν, [...]. – «The statue of Olidas, of Elis, was dedicated by the Aitolian nation». For other examples of good relations between the Eleians and Aitolians, see Maddoli - Nafissi - Saladino 2013³, 279. These relations are also reflected in mythological narratives such as that of

an athlete¹⁸, his case is nevertheless significant for our analysis since it shows that Eleian citizens did not only successfully interact with different federal states, but were also seen as promising candidates for a mediatory role from the perspective of the leagues.

Another Eleian aristocrat of the Hellenistic period, Pantarkes' fellow citizen Pyttalos, a successful boy pugilist who became Olympic champion in the late fourth century BC, acted not as mediator but rather as an interstate arbitrator. The passage in Pausanias that refers to his victory reads as follows:

νίκην καὶ Πύτταλον Λάμπιδος πυγμῆ παῖδας κρατήσαντα [...]. ἐπὶ δὲ τῷ Πυττάλῳ καὶ τάδε ἐτι λέγουσιν, ὡς γενομένης πρὸς Ἀρκάδας Ἡλείοις ἀμφισβητήσεως περὶ γῆς ὄρων εἶπεν οὗτος ὁ Πύτταλος τὴν δίκην. ὁ δὲ οἱ ἀνδριάς ἔργον ἐστὶν Ὀλυθθίου Σθέννιδος.

Pyttalos the son of Lampis won the boys' boxing-match, [...]. About Pyttalos it is further related that, when a dispute about boundaries occurred between the Arkadians and the Eleians, he delivered judgment on the matter. His statue is the work of Sthennis the Olynthian.¹⁹

Again, the date and historical circumstances are not entirely clear, though the artistic prime of the sculptor Sthennis of Olynthos, who must have been born before 348 BC, belongs to the last quarter of the fourth/beginning of the third century BC²⁰. Luigi Moretti tentatively placed the victory in the year 320 BC²¹. Relations between Arkadia and Elis had not been very easy in the fourth century BC, tensions culminating in the war of 365 BC and the famous battle in the Altis of 364 BC²². In the course of the events, Elis had lost control over the areas of Akroreia and Pisatis which both became independent, though only for a very short period in time²³. However, this conflict cannot be meant by Pausanias for chronological reasons. If Moretti's date of the victory is correct, Pyttalos must have been between 12 and 18 years old in 320 BC and we arrive at a

Oxylos the Aitolian who was allegedly responsible for a first Eleian *synoikismos* (Paus. V 4, 3); on Oxylos: Strab. X 3, 2; Paus. V 3, 6-7; 4, 1-4; cf. Gehrke 2005, 29-34.

¹⁸ No victory is mentioned which is why Jacquemin 2002, 205 rightly observed: «La statue de l'Éléen Olydas [...] est également [sc. like that of the anathema of Pantarkes] liée à des activités politiques».

¹⁹ Paus. VI 16, 8.

²⁰ Plin. *HN* XXXIV 51 dates his *akmè* to the 113th Olympiad (= 328 BC), but Sthennis was still active in the 270s BC (Jacquemin 2002, 218-219). On this sculptor, see also Piccirilli 1972, 479-480 and esp. *DNO* 2272-2281.

²¹ Moretti 1957, no. 476.

²² Xen. *Hell.* VII 4, 28-32; see Pilz 2020, 23.

²³ Ruggeri 2004, 144-146, 178-207; Pilz 2020, 23.

late-fourth/early-third century date for the arbitration. Unfortunately, we cannot date the arbitration more precisely nor do we know on which territories Pyttalos delivered his judgement or how the arbitration came about²⁴.

And yet, all comes together in this episode: a boundary dispute including a federal state, an arbitration managed by an informal agent, and an athlete's network reaching beyond the borders of the hometown which must have been part of Pyttalos' main qualifications to be nominated as an arbitrator. No doubt, his authority as an arbitrator was based to a great extent on the prestige he had gained by his Olympic victory as a boy²⁵. It is important to note that this is one of the very rare occasions where an arbitrator was chosen from among one of the conflicting parties. Note that the same is true for Pantarkes' role as a mediator. This clearly is very good evidence for the credit which Olympic champions enjoyed beyond the borders of their hometowns.

However, in order to be able to make good use of this authority, knowledge and experience were needed, especially in the field of interstate arbitration, for which the earlier travels and existing networks of former athletes ranging beyond *polis* borders were certainly also advantageous. In the case of Eleian athletes, this aspect is further strengthened by the impact the Olympic training period must have had on their social networks: every four years, the best athletes in the Greek world assembled in Elis and practiced their disciplines at the local gymnasia of the city for thirty days²⁶.

What is more, Elis itself was a contested space between the Achaian and Aitolian Leagues. Although situated in the Peloponnese, Elis had closer contacts to the Aitolians in the third century BC²⁷. The city probably never became an official member of the Aitolian League²⁸, but joined the Roman-Aitolian symmarchy in 209 BC. In 191 BC, Elis was forcibly integrated into the Achaian League. From the perspective of the Aitolians and Achaians, *i.e.* from a 'federal' point of view, the Eleian territory constituted a border region and it was from this region that both

²⁴ The brief description in Paus. VI 16, 8 is all the ancient evidence we have with regard to this arbitration. This may also be the reason why it is not included in the volumes of Piccirilli 1973, Ager 1996, and Magnetto 1997, but cf. Piccirilli 1972.

²⁵ Jacquemin 2002, 219.

²⁶ On the Olympic training period, Crowther 1991.

²⁷ Bourke 2017, 211-214; Pilz 2020, 24.

²⁸ Yet this is controversial. Whereas Jacquemin 2002, 205 believes that the Eleians joined the Aitolian League in 245 BC, recent research on Elis (Bourke 2017, 211-214; Pilz 2020, 24) emphasized that Elis never became a member of the League.

leagues appointed former athletes as mediators and arbitrators even in conflicts in which Elis was the other party.

This may have to do with the reputation of Olympia as a sanctuary open to all Greeks – and it is especially the role of the Hellenodikai that comes to mind in this regard. Although the Eleian authorities were not always perceived as impartial, it seems widely accepted that the Hellenic judges did not flagrantly abuse their monopoly on a regular basis²⁹. Thus Olympia's reputation probably constituted an additional factor for the appointment of Eleian arbitrators.

But let us turn to the more common cases now in which athletes or former sporting victors did not mediate or arbitrate but 'simply' participated in a diplomatic mission of some sort.

3. ATHLETES AS ENVOYS

Like Elis, another city-state from the Peloponnese that attracted the territorial interest of a federal state was Messene. In Messene, the most prominent of all athletic victors probably was Gorgos son of Eukletos. He won his Olympic crown in the pentathlon in about 232 BC³⁰. According to Polybius, he was «second to none of the Messenians in wealth and birth»³¹ and «the most renowned of all those who sought wreaths in the games»³². Gorgos' vita seems to reflect a regular feature of the athletic careers of aristocratic competitors. As Polybius describes it, Gorgos' athletic activities took place «in his youth»³³, when he must have won at other festivals as well, whereas his political career set in at a later stage of his life³⁴. His career thus constitutes a textbook example of a successful athlete who later made good use of his victories to foster his political ambitions. For him, part of those ambitions was to serve on diplomatic missions. And indeed, when Messene was under intense military pressure from the Spartans in 218 BC, his fellow citizens sent him as envoy to Philip V of Macedon³⁵. Although his mission was not successful, the

²⁹ See e.g. Finley - Pleket 1976, 44-45: «By and large, however, the Olympic Games were free from partisan excesses»; cf. Romano 2007.

³⁰ Moretti 1957, no. 573. Paus. VI 14, 11 saw Gorgos' victor statue in Olympia.

³¹ Polyb. VII 10: οὐδενὸς ἦν δεύτερος Μεσσηνίων πλοῦτῳ καὶ γένει; cf. Finley - Pleket 1976, 45.

³² *Ibid.*: πάντων ἐνδοξότατος ἐγγόνει τῶν περὶ τοὺς γυμνικοὺς ἀγῶνας φιλοστεφανούτων.

³³ Polyb. VII 10: κατὰ τὴν ἀκμὴν.

³⁴ Interpreting Gorgos' victory «as a statement of friendly disposition towards Elis» (Kralli 2017, 412) would mean to push the evidence too far, though.

³⁵ For his diplomatic mission to Philip, see Polyb. V 5, 4.

leading position in this delegation may have constituted the summit of his political career. It is interesting to note that, with the Achaian *strategos* Aratos of Sikyon, another sporting victor participated in the negotiations. It would be tempting to take Moretti's tentative dates for Gorgos' and Aratos' Olympic victories at face value. If the dates were true, this would mean that they both had won in the same year so that the games of 232 BC constituted a very special agonistic event. The two prominent politicians could have met there and establish some sort of relationship during the games, although this is an unprovable supposition³⁶.

Further examples of Hellenistic athletes becoming envoys include three cases from Athens³⁷. Without going too much into detail here, it is important to note that former athletes like the victorious pankratiast Kallias son of Sosikrates were sent on important embassies like that to Hellenistic kings such as Ptolemy VI and Antiochos IV³⁸. The relevance of the phenomenon of former athletes as envoys is further demonstrated by the fact that sometimes more than one agonistic victor participated in one and the same diplomatic mission³⁹. In consequence, one may even state that there was not only the famous Athenian philosophers' legation of 155 BC, but also one of sporting victors some ten years later, though this was not sent to Rome but «only» to Delos⁴⁰. Epigraphical evidence from Asia Minor, however, shows that athletes were deemed worthy to be sent to Rome as well: the former boy-wrestler and pankratiast Hippolochos of Pergamon, for instance, was honored by his fellow citizens not only for his agonistic successes but also for the fact that he had negotiated with the Roman authorities⁴¹.

³⁶ However, at least for Aratos' success in the four-horse chariot race there are not so many free spaces left in the Olympic victor list of the third century.

³⁷ Kallias son of Sosikrates: victorious in the Panathenaic men's pankration of 182/1 BC and 178/7 BC (*IG* IP 2314, col. I, ll. 32-33; 64-65), sent as leading member of the embassy to Ptolemy VI and Antiochos IV in 169 BC (Polyb. XXVIII 19, 4); cf. Tracy - Habicht 1991, 227. Euagion son of Alketes: victor in an equestrian discipline at the Panathenaia of 162/1 BC (Tracy - Habicht 1991, col. III, ll. 5-6), sent on a diplomatic mission in 144/3 BC (*I.Délos* 1507, ll. 36; 52); cf. Tracy - Habicht 1991, 207. And Philantes son of Xenon: Panathenaic victor in 162/1 BC in an equestrian discipline (Tracy - Habicht 1991, col. III, ll. 7-8), part of the same diplomatic mission of 144/3 BC as was Euagion son of Alketes (*I.Délos* 1507, ll. 35-36; 52); cf. Tracy - Habicht 1991, 212.

³⁸ Polyb. XXVIII 19, 4.

³⁹ See n. 37.

⁴⁰ *I.Délos* 1507.

⁴¹ *IoP* II 536 (Pergamon, first century BC); see Mathys 2016, 141-142 (with further references). Greek embassies to Roman authorities became a characteristic feature of the diplomatic activities of Hellenic communities in the Roman Imperial period. For an

The case of another boy pankratiast from Asia Minor known from a recently published inscription is even more relevant to this article: M. Antonius Idagras son of Antipatros⁴² from Patara had succeeded at Nemea, the Heraia of Argos and other festivals in his youth. He later became general (*strategos*) of the Lycian League, negotiated with Roman civil-war generals and «received privileges to the advantage of the League»⁴³. It is interesting to note that the main diplomatic achievement of Idagras is similar to that of Pantarkes of Elis: he obtained the release of soldiers, though it was not hostages in his case but a contingent of 600 soldiers who had served in a Roman army during the Civil Wars. Clearly, Idagras who had travelled to the Peloponnese as a boy acted far beyond the borders of his hometown, in his athletic as well as in his diplomatic career.

The case of Philios son of Thrasyboulos from Priene, then, reminds us that former athletes not only served as ‘classical’ envoys from time to time, but were also perfectly equipped to become sacred ambassadors (*theoroi*) as well. Philios had been successful in the boy’s *pankration* at the Naia of Dodona in the first half of the second century BC (*I.Priene* 238). In about 150 BC, he was among the sacred ambassadors (*theoroi*) of Priene in Samothrake (*IG XII 8, 165, l. 5*). Another field of interstate diplomacy which was closely connected to that of athletics can be found in the area of Greek proxyeny. The Theban boy wrestler Agenor of Thebes, for instance, was honored by the Phokian *koinon* for his victory in 360 BC, since «the father of Agenor was a state friend (*proxenos*) of their nation»⁴⁴. No doubt, athletes often hailed from aristocratic fami-

example of a third-century AD athlete becoming envoy who was sent to the emperor Elagabalus and later honored for his activity as «undefeated ambassador» (ἀλειπτον πρεσβευτήν; *TAM V 2, 1019, ll. 9-10*), see Papakonstantinou 2019, 145-146.

⁴² The name obviously constitutes a characteristic combination of Roman (Marcus Antonius), local Lycian (Idagras) and Greek (son of Antipatros) elements.

⁴³ Schuler - Zimmermann 2012, no. 4 (Patara, 30s BC): Παταρέων ὁ δῆμος ἐτείμη-
σεν | εἰσγραψαμένου τοῦ δήμου τὰς | ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ τειμὰς Μάρκον Αντώνιον Αντιπάτρου υἱὸν
Ἰδαγραν Ρωμαίων καὶ Παταρέα, στραταγήσαντα | Λυκίων τοῦ κοινοῦ ἐκ πάντων Λυκίων καὶ
πρεσβεύσαντα ὑπὲρ τε | τοῦ δήμου καὶ ὑπὲρ Λυκίων πρὸς | τοὺς αὐτοκράτορας καὶ δωρεὰς
| λαβόντα ἐπὶ συνφέρωντι τῷ ἔθνει | καὶ ἐξακοσίους πολεῖτας ἐξαιτησάμενον ἀπὸ στρα-
τείας, νεκρήσαντα δὲ | Νέμεα καὶ Ἡραῖα τὰ ἐν Ἄργει παῖδας πανκράτιον πρῶτον Λυκίων
καὶ τὰ τιθέμενα Ρωμῆα ὑπὸ τοῦ κοινοῦ τῶν Λυκίων κατὰ πενταετηρίδα εἰσολύμπια παῖδας
πανκράτιον καὶ ἀγνεῖους καὶ Λητῶα τὰ τιθέμενα ὑπὸ τοῦ κοινοῦ τῶν Λυκίων καὶ Ρωμῆα
τὰ ἐν Ρόδῳ παῖδας πανκράτιον, νεκρήσαντα δὲ καὶ ἄλλους ἱεροὺς καὶ | στεφανείτας ἀγῶνας,
χρυσῶ στεφάνῳ καὶ εἰκόνι χαλκῆ, ἄνδρα καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν ὑπάρχοντα διὰ προγόνων.

⁴⁴ Paus. VI 6, 2: ἀνετέθη δὲ ἡ εἰκὼν ὑπὸ τοῦ Φωκέων κοινοῦ. Θεόπομπος γὰρ ὁ πατὴρ
τοῦ Ἀγίνωρος πρόξενος τοῦ ἔθνους ἦν αὐτῶν. – «The statue was dedicated by the Phokian
Commonwealth, for Theopompos, the father of Agenor, was a state friend of their
nation».

lies who maintained good relations with other noble families across the borders of their hometowns. As Agenor's case reveals, Greek federal states made good use of interstate practices and institutions like that of proxeny in order to maintain friendly relations to important players in the field. However, not only the athletes' fathers are known to have been *proxenoi* but also the athletes themselves⁴⁵. There can be no doubt that both the institution of proxeny and the field of athletics had a clear focus on cross-border relations.

4. CONCLUSION: ATHLETES AS CROSS-BORDER COMMUTERS

To put it in a nutshell, former athletes from all parts of the Greek world were sent as ambassadors to other Hellenic city-states, negotiated with federal bodies, and met representatives of the most important powers of the day such as Hellenistic kings or Roman authorities. Athletes mediated and arbitrated, served as envoys, sacred ambassadors, and *proxenoi* alike. The fact that sporting victors were so popular when it came to the appointment of diplomatic missions had to do with the other fact that they had been very mobile people from an early age of their lives⁴⁶. They were born travelers and knew the world beyond the borders of their hometowns. Their regular travels provided them with the necessary networks and experiences they could make good use of as envoys. What is more, former athletes must have known the role of acting as representatives of their hometowns very well since they were used to it from the active phase of their careers: by an agonistic success, an athlete also crowned his city of origin which participated in the fame of the victor. Thus athletes, although they were not officially appointed representatives, acted as informal agents on behalf of their hometowns. As envoys, they could well continue this representative function under different auspices.

It is interesting to note that the cases of envoy-athletes analyzed in this article were restricted to horse owners and competitors in heavy events. This is no coincidence and probably has to do with the fact that the majority of agonistic inscriptions refer to those two groups of victors. And yet, it is striking that we find so many pankratiasts, pugilists and wrestlers among the diplomatic personnel because they represent exactly

⁴⁵ Paus. VI 16, 7.

⁴⁶ This is especially evident in the case of Idagras (see n. 43).

the type of heavy, muscular athletes on which most of the ancient criticism on athletics focuses⁴⁷. Obviously, a former career as heavy athlete was no obstacle to being nominated as a member of an embassy by your fellow citizens. The prestige gained as a successful pankratiast was more important than stereotypes of stupidity and laziness commonly connected with heavy athletes. This implies that those stereotypes did not necessarily have much impact on the ground and were largely part of an intellectual discourse.

But let us return to the reasons for the nomination of athletes as envoys and arbitrators. The cases of some Eleian athletes are especially illuminating in this regard since these victors assumed the roles of interstate arbitrators and mediators even in those conflicts in which their hometown had been one of the conflicting parties. This is as unusual as it is striking since it reveals what significant a role the prestige gained by an agonistic victory played for becoming nominated arbitrator. What is more, athletes had been cross-border commuters during their careers: not in the formal sense the term is applied to people working beyond state borders today, but in the broader sense of people simply crossing borders on a regular basis. Athletes met at important societal events and often used them to build powerful social and political networks. This process was further strengthened by the fact that the vast majority of Greek athletes stemmed from noble families which meant that they had relations beyond the borders of their city-states from birth⁴⁸.

But there is more to it than that. Athletes were not only cross-border commuters during their careers, but also decided on boundary conflicts afterwards. In this sense, they helped determine and sometimes stabilize the borders of Greek states.

SEBASTIAN SCHARFF
Università di Trento
sebastian.scharff@unitn.it

⁴⁷ On ancient critics of Greek athletics, see Finley - Pleket 1976, 113-127; Müller 1995; Mann 2001, 295-296 and Papakonstantinou 2014.

⁴⁸ On cross-border cooperation of Greek aristocrats already in the Archaic period, Scharff 2022, 290-291.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ager 1996

S. Ager, *Interstate Arbitrations in the Greek World, 337-90 B.C.*, Berkeley, CA - Los Angeles, CA - London 1996.

Bourke 2017

G. Bourke, *Elis: Internal Politics and External Policy in Ancient Greece*, London 2017.

Chaniotis 1988

A. Chaniotis, Als die Diplomaten noch tanzten und sangen. Zu zwei Dekreten kretischer Städte in Mylasa, *ZPE* 71 (1988), 154-156.

Chaniotis 2009

A. Chaniotis, Überzeugungsstrategien in der griechischen Diplomatie. Geschichte als Argument, in A. Chaniotis - A. Kropp - C. Steinhoff (hrsgg.), *Überzeugungsstrategien*, Berlin 2009, 147-165.

Crowther 1991

N.B. Crowther, The Olympic Training Period, *Nikephoros* 4 (1991), 161-166.

Finley - Pleket 1976

M.I. Finley - H.W. Pleket, *The Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years*, London 1976.

Gazzano 2006

F. Gazzano, Ambasciatori greci in viaggio, in M.G. Angeli Bertinelli - A. Donati (a cura di), *Le vie della storia. Migrazioni di popoli, viaggi di individui, circolazione di idee nel Mediterraneo antico. Atti del II Incontro Internazionale di Storia Antica (Genova, 6-8 ottobre 2004)*, Roma 2006, 103-125.

Gehrke 2005

H.-J. Gehrke, Zur elischen Ethnizität, in T. Schmitt - W. Schmitz - A. Winterling (hrsgg.), *Gegenwärtige Antike - antike Gegenwart. Kolloquium zum 60. Geburtstag von Rolf Rilinger*, München 2005, 17-48.

Jacquemin 2002

A. Jacquemin, Commentaire, in *Pausanias. Description de la Grèce, livre VI, L'Élide (II)*, Paris 2002, 83-31.

Jönsson - Hall 2005

C. Jönsson - M. Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy*, New York 2005.

Kalli 2017

I. Kralli, *The Hellenistic Peloponnese. Interstate Relations: A Narrative and Analytic History, 371-146 BC*, Swansea 2017.

Kurke 1993

L. Kurke, The Economy of Kudos, in C. Dougherty - L. Kurke (eds.), *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece: Cult, Performance, Politics*, Cambridge 1993, 131-163.

Maddoli - Nafissi - Saladino 2013³

G. Maddoli - M. Nafissi - V. Saladino, *Pausania. Guida della Grecia. Libro VI: L'Elide e Olimpia*, Milano 2013³.

Magnetto 1997

A. Magnetto, *Gli arbitrati interstatali greci. Introduzione, testo critico, traduzione, commento e indici, II, Dal 337 al 196 a.C.*, Pisa 1997.

Mann 2001

C. Mann, *Athlet und Polis im archaischen und frühklassischen Griechenland*, Göttingen 2001.

Mathys 2016

M. Mathys, Athleten im Gymnasion von Pergamon, in C. Mann - S. Remijnsen - S. Scharff (eds.), *Athletics in the Hellenistic World*, Stuttgart 2016, 131-152.

Moretti 1957

L. Moretti, *Olympionikai, i vincitori negli antichi agoni olimpici*, Roma 1957.

Mosley 1973

D.J. Mosley, *Envoys and Diplomacy in Ancient Greece*, Wiesbaden 1973.

Müller 1995

S. Müller, *Das Volk der Athleten. Untersuchungen zur Ideologie und Kritik des Sports in der griechisch-römischen Antike*, Trier 1995.

Osmers 2017

M. Osmers, Polisübergreifende Beziehungen im Wandel. Akteure und Medien der griechischen Außenpolitik in klassischer Zeit, in P. Hoeres - A. Tischer (hrsgg.), *Medien der Außenbeziehungen*, Wien 2017, 28-47.

Papakonstantinou 2014

Z. Papakonstantinou, Ancient Critics of Greek Sport, in P. Christesen - D.G. Kyle (eds.), *Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, Malden, MA - Oxford 2014, 320-331.

Papakonstantinou 2019

Z. Papakonstantinou, *Sport and Identity in Ancient Greece*, London - New York 2019.

Piccirilli 1972

L. Piccirilli, Pyttalos di Elide olimpionico e arbitro (Paus. 6, 16, 8), *ASNP* n.s. 2 (1972), 479-484.

Piccirilli 1973

L. Piccirilli, *Gli arbitrati interstatali greci, I, Dalle origini al 338 a.C.*, Pisa 1973.

Piccirilli 2001

L. Piccirilli, La diplomazia nella Grecia antica. Temi del linguaggio e caratteristiche degli ambasciatori, in M.G. Angeli Bertinelli - L. Piccirilli (a cura di), *Linguaggio e terminologia diplomatica dall'Antico Oriente all'Impero Bizantino, Atti del Convegno Nazionale, Genova, 19 novembre 1998*, Roma 2001, 1-31.

Pilz 2020

O. Pilz, *Kulte und Heiligtümer in Elis und Triphylien. Untersuchungen zur Sakraltopographie der westlichen Peloponnes*, Berlin - Boston, MA 2020.

Romano 2007

D.G. Romano, Judges and Judging at the Ancient Olympic Games, in G.P. Schaus - S.R. Wenn (eds.), *Onward to the Olympics: Historical Perspectives on the Olympic Games*, Waterloo, ON 2007, 95-113.

Ruggeri 2004

C. Ruggeri, *Gli stati intorno a Olimpia: storia e costituzione dell'Elide e degli stati formati dai perieci elei (400-362 a.C.)*, Stuttgart 2004.

Scharff 2016

S. Scharff, *Eid und Außenpolitik. Studien zur religiösen Fundierung der Akzeptanz zwischenstaatlicher Vereinbarungen im vorrömischen Griechenland*, Stuttgart 2016.

Scharff 2019

S. Scharff, Ἐτυχον παρόντες πρέσβεις. Zum Phänomen der zufälligen Anwesenheit griechischer Gesandter in fremden Poleis der klassischen Zeit, in C. Henrich-Franke u.a. (hrsg.), *Grenzüberschreitende institutionalisierte Zusammenarbeit von der Antike bis in die Gegenwart. Strukturen und Prozesse*, Köln 2019, 193-214.

Scharff 2022

S. Scharff, Against the Rules. Plurality of Oikists and New Perspectives on the Greek 'Colonisation', in M. Canevaro - J. Bernhardt (eds.), *From Homer to Solon: Continuity and Change in Archaic Greece*, Leiden - Boston, MA 2022, 265-300.

Schuler - Zimmermann 2012

C. Schuler - K. Zimmermann, Neue Inschriften aus Patara I. Zur Elite der Stadt in Hellenismus und früher Kaiserzeit, *Chiron* 42 (2012), 567-626.

Tracy - Habicht 1991

S. Tracy - C. Habicht, New and Old Panathenaic Victor Lists, *Hesperia* 60 (1991), 187-236.

Copyright (©) 2023 Sebastian Scharff

Editorial format and graphical layout: copyright (©) LED Edizioni Universitarie



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives – 4.0 International License

How to cite this paper: S. Scharff, Mediating, Arbitrating, Crossing Borders Constantly: Athletes as Envoys, *Erga-Logoi* 11.2 (2023), 77-90. doi: <https://doi.org/10.7358/erga-2023-002-schs>