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**Athletics, Nudity and Politics in Archaic Greece**

The importance of the nude athlete in ancient Greek art and ancient Greek life is so well known to both specialists and non-specialists alike that it can at times appear to be a phenomenon that requires no explanation. Yet it has long been clear that the distinctive form of athletic nudity practiced in ancient Greece did not appear until the late seventh or early sixth century BCE. The origins of athletic nudity thus permit and merit careful examination, and the purpose of this paper is to outline a new explanation for the emergence and widespread acceptance of this practice in ancient Greece. While there are rich and sophisticated bodies of scholarship on the nude athlete in art and on the general subject of Greek athletics, only intermittent attention has been paid to the reasons why Greeks began to exercise nude in the first place. A fundamental shift in the field occurred approximately fifteen years ago with the appearance of a seminal article by Larissa Bonfante that identified a number of functionally and contextually differentiated strands of ancient Greek male nudity. Bonfante introduced the term civic nudity to describe a peculiarly Greek form of male nudity, defining civic nudity as regular, nude exercise that signified strength, courage, high status and inclusion in the male citizen body.

This paper begins by establishing the relevant terminology and then proceeds to argue that civic nudity came into being when the Spartans transformed a pre-existing tradition of daily, clothed athletic activity by imposing a special costume in the form of nudity. The imposition of the nudity helped build cohesion among the members of the phalanx and focused competition among Spartiates on physical fitness. The subsequent dissemination and widespread acceptance of this innovative custom can only be understood when Greek athletics is seen as a form of collective activity-i.e., as an iterated form of group interaction that delimits the boundaries of communities, that expresses the realities of the contemporary social order, and that has the potential to express and reify competing visions of what that social order ought be.

Although the primary function of civic nudity in Sparta was directly related to military effectiveness, its adoption in other communities was driven largely by its usefulness in establishing and maintaining categories of inclusion and exclusion, particularly in regard to the numerous, inter-related strands of sociopolitical struggle that characterized many Greek communities during the Archaic period. Elites used civic nudity as a means of articulating and imposing a strongly hierarchical, exclusive sociopolitical system. Non-elites were attracted to civic nudity for a variety of reasons, not least because it could provide the opportunity to emphasize their participation in the hoplite phalanx, in and of itself a powerful claim to status and privilege, while accentuating the distinction between male citizen-soldiers and all other members of each community. While most of the argumentation in this paper focuses on explaining the origins of civic nudity by situating this practice in its original social and historical context, the paper closes with a very brief glance forward to the fifth century, when civic nudity became a primary means of gender and ethnic differentiation.

As stated above the seminal work is found in Bonfante's "Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art" (AJA 93 (1989): 543-70). A wide range of evidence and ideas is drawn upon to support and illustrate this argument, including passages from Thucydides, Aristotle, Aeschines, and Iamblichus, studies of athletic scenes in Athenian Black- and Red-Figure pottery, symbolic anthropology, and military sociology.