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"The Only Woman in All of Greece": Kyniska, Money, and Arete in Greek Athletics

The first, and the most renowned, of the women to have won a crown at Olympia was Kyniska, sister of the Spartan King Agesilaos. This victory (either in one or in two separate Olympic cycles) seems to have taken place in the 390s BCE, and it is recorded in several-though contradictory-sources. Among these is Plutarch's assertion (derived from two passages in Xenophon's Agesilaos and Hiero) that the King urged his sister to enter her horses in the Olympic chariot race, but only in order to prove a general truth, i.e. that, as wealth is the only criterion necessary for victory, even a woman, presumed to be without *aretē*, could triumph in the contest. The passage reads, "...*boulomenos endeixasthai tois Hellēsin hōs oudemias estin aretēs, alla ploutou kai dapanēs hē nikē.*" (Ag. 20.1)

Previous commentaries on these texts have connected this episode with Agesilaos' political motives. However, I believe that no one has yet drawn attention to the similarity of wording between this passage and Pausanias' description of the "*Zanes*", a collection of bronze statues of Zeus offered at Olympia in recompense for cheating. Explaining the presence of these objects in the Altis, Pausanias (5.21.2-4) relates the story of an instance of cheating that was discovered in the Olympics of 388, after which all six implicated athletes were enjoined to offer statues to Zeus. Pausanias adds that four of these statues contained elegiac epigrams, and, while he does not quote them in their entirety, he does provide a basic summary of the sentiment of each text. Particularly illuminating are the first and sixth of these, which echo the basic principles of Agesilaos' opinion. The first inscription, in his characterization, made clear "that an Olympic victory is not to be gained by payment, but rather by swiftness of foot and strength of body" ["*hōs ou khrēmasin alla ōkutēti tōn podōn kai hupo iskhuos sōmatos Olumpikēn estin heuresthai nikēn*"]. The claim on the sixth Zane is that "the statues are intended to be a lesson to all the Greeks that no money is to be offered for an Olympic victory" ["...*didaskalian pasin Hellēsin einai ta agalmata mēdena epi Olumpikēi nikēi didonai khrēmata.*"]

This paper will suggest that all of these statements, relating to events that were close in time, are adapted from the ritual language of oaths sworn by athletes in Zeus' presence. Agesilaos may have commented that one of the central tenets of the Greek athletic ethos-the inability to "buy victory"-an idea enshrined in the very oath sworn by the athletes, had been flouted by his sister's success. Moreover, the coincidence of wording between these descriptions of the events of 396/392 and 388 may signal a fundamental re-examination of ethical values in regard to sport at a crucial moment. Each of the Olympic celebrations of 400, 396, 392, and 388 was marred by one or more scandals, and this paper recasts these as a series of related events.