

**FEMALE MOTOR ACTIVITY IN ANCIENT TIMES**  
**METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS IN FEMALE ATHLETIC TRAINING**  
**IN ANCIENT TIMES**

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**Abstract**

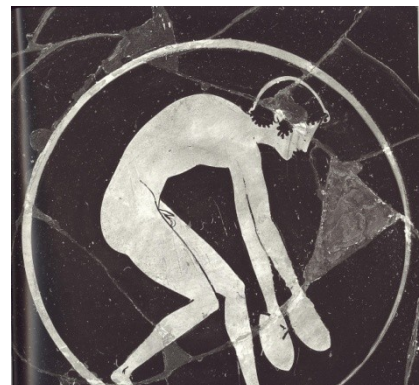
This article offers a contribution on athletic preparation of women in Ancient Time. This research aims at understanding certain techniques used in female sports in Ancient Time, with particular reference to the methodological aspects related to the jumping competition event, through the use of certain aids for the athletic preparation, until now considered a male sporting prerogative. Iconographic documents, in particular, the depiction of "Palestrite" in the famous late-ancient mosaic of the Villa in Piazza Armerina (Sicily, Italy), provide an image of women who practiced physical activities, which were traditionally considered male activities because of the use of certain aids (the *haltères*). These aids raise new questions about the relationship between their use and the athletic training systems, including the female ones, in Ancient Times.

**Key words:** *Greek World; Olympic Games; Mosaic in Piazza Armerina; Haltères; Female Athletic Training.*

**Preface**

In a research investigating on some aids used in sport during ancient times, analyzing features and functions related to the specificity of the discipline, it is necessary to take into account the importance of the literary sources and, above all, of the artistic documents and archeological finds related to the ancient sports history. To the scholars of sport activity methodologies and didactics, archeology can make, in fact, an important contribution, both through the iconographic sources (mostly pots and attic red figure pottery) both through the discovery of the archeological finds in context that can be historically rebuilt (fig. 1). If this kind of investigation about some technical aspects of male sport activity can be possible, because we have many sources to obtain important data (useful not only to the knowledge of sport techniques in ancient times, but also related to the present athletic training) the same investigation seems to be quite difficult for the studies on female sport activity. There are few known documents about female sport compared with the quantity and importance of the evidences about male sport: ancient sources are not only rare, but are (as we will see), very often, difficult to be interpreted.

In Greek world, first of all, it is important to take into account the distinction between the Ionic world and the Doric one, even though this dichotomy must not be emphasized. In the Ionic world, and in particular in Athens, the main woman's strength was her discretion, that is "*to be unnoticed*". Women are usually represented as forced to do few activities outside their home. On the contrary, in the Doric world, represented by Sparta, women, thanks to the freedom they had, could practice many activities which were unthinkable for the Athenians. Those activities included a complete athletic training, too. Furthermore, it seems that in Hellenistic and Roman ages there were more women in



**Figure 1.**

the sport field, both in terms of sports practice (enrollments with the name of female winners in different competitions), both in terms of responsibility tasks as it is evident by the names of the women listed in the different enrollments, mostly in Minor Asia (*Paro Lesbos*) (Angeli Bernardini, 1988, p. 176 - Ferrandini Troisi, 1997, p. 66). These women as well as men had the role of *Gymnasiarcha*: magistrate in charge as supervisors and managers of Gymnasiums.

Therefore it needs:

1. to understand in which way and proportion women of Ancient times practiced sports activities and eventually the proportion of women compared with men;
2. to analyze the use of some aids known from the sources for some male disciplines and to understand if women used them as well.

### Female Sport Activity in Ancient times

As regards to the first question from which our study starts, it is important to consider a reality as well as a known issue of the archeological literature, regarding the great fragmentary nature of the documents about the female sport activity due to several reasons. One of the recurrent problems is, for example, that the literary sources trace back to the finds produced by men and tend to privilege in many cases man's activity<sup>1</sup>. The same difference is found in the iconographic documents and must be related both to the purchasers and to the destination of materials (whose fruition was linked to the public life occasions that were denied to women), both linked to the nature of female sport that in Greece, at least in ancient times, was practiced by *parthenoi*, that were free and unmarried girls, not common as figurative subject. A frequent stereotype in iconographic testimonies is otherwise the representation of two kind of women: the *hetaera* and the *wife*. The wife is represented inside her home, engaged in domestic activities such as weaving and sewing or in religious celebrations. This female stereotype is reinforced also by the prohibition for married women to assist to the Olympic Games, with the only exception of the priestess Demetra, as we know by Pausanias (*Periegesi* 5.6.7.8). On the contrary this kind of prohibition was not for the *parhteno*<sup>2</sup>.

Besides the rarity of the documents there was another problem: the general indifference (in archeological field at least) in women's sport role, linked also to the presence of a dynamic between the male and female genders in classical societies. Differently from the Anglo-Saxon world that was mostly concerned with this problem since the sixties, in Italy only since the middle of the eighties we have had the first contributions, especially from Bernardini and Arrigoni, who collected the first iconographic finds on female activity and interpreted the known sources. These studies, if on the one hand have opened new research perspectives, on the other hand have highlighted the complexity, due to the great fragmentary nature of the documents and to the difficulties of interpretation.

It is useful to underline the function and the differences between male and female sport for the development and the study of the research. Sports activities are in Ancient times a religious act, and an act of cult, and this link between sport and religion, is still stronger in the female world, because the social status of women probably has prevented the development of the sport as professional or paramilitary practice (with the consequent weakening of the link between sport and ritual activity). It happened quite early in the case of male sport. It is possible to notice that most of the testimonies, documenting female sport activity, can be referred to the initiation rites and have an aristocratic feature. The presence of female athletes in Greek world is testified in Crete - as we know from a painting coming from the east aisle of Cnossus palace (1400 AC) - in a scene in which young athletes were competing with bulls and a mate. In these scenes of the *taurocatapsie* girls and boys were portrayed while doing dangerous acrobatics on the back of the bulls. In Crete, therefore, girls used to compete with boys of the same age in these particular "bullfight" which, according to Evans (Ferrandini Troisi, 1997, p. 61), were for the upper class girls and had a religious meaning, probably identifiable with the priestess and with girls that begin to be part of the sacred circuit of the Great Minoic Goddess<sup>3</sup>. In the first millennium Greece, in the *Odyssey* we find for the first time women practising some physical exercises (ball game), in particular in the famous scene of Book VI that tells the meeting between Ulysses and the princess Nausicaa. While Homer describes a common male and female practice of his own time and also of centuries before<sup>4</sup>, we

cannot state the same about the myths in which women used to practice sports; in most cases they are extraordinary characters: human beings or semi-divinities or Goddess such as Artemis. It is the case of the nymph Cyrene, portrayed while fighting with a lion (according to Pindar description: Pyth 9) and in particular the greatest athlete of the Greek myth, Atalanta, taking part in the haunting of the wild pig, also defeating the hero Peleus.

Atalanta and Cyrene such as Danaides, are virgin female hauntings who despise both sex and men, always competing with men and behaving like men. According to Gentili (Gentili & Perusino, 2002, p. 12), Cyrene and Atalanta (as Braurôn girls) could represent the embodiment of the "escaping girl" motif, looking back to her persecutor, an action which would represent symbolically the aspect of the traumatic wedding experience. According to other scholars (Cantarella, 1985) is possible that Atalanta myth could represent a concrete aspect of female life in Greece and in particular it would refer to the Spartan world. The same myth can be read, therefore, from different point of view. The same Atalanta myth, in fact, could reflect an aspect of women life in Greece or in some areas of it.

If it is possible that there were women who practiced sport (competitive or not) such as Atalanta, if you want to speak about female sport, mostly related to struggle, it is necessary to start from Sparta and from the Athlete girls, so different for way of thinking and education from the girls of the same age coming from other Greek people. In ancient Greece, in fact, the testimonies about female sport activity come from Sparta. In Spartan educational system, as it is known, physical formation prevailed on the intellectual one. In women education is also present the athletic formation, the only characteristic with few examples in Greek world.

In classical and archaic ages the attitude towards female sport is ambivalent, as it is clear also in a passage by Plato (Repubblica, 451d - 457b) in which Socrates tells that female warriors must practice gymnastics (literally: thing done "naked" or "wearing few dresses" as well as male warriors), because it is important to follow nature as an attitude of the person and not only nature as biological sex expression. We know that in Sparta women used to train with men till they got married; obviously gymnastics was a method used to be strong mother of strong children<sup>5</sup>. In Athens and in many Greek areas, instead, women discrimination remained unchanged: they were never accepted neither as athlete or as spectators<sup>6</sup>. Women in fact were not allowed to take part in Olympic games, also as spectators, with the only exception of the *Quadrighe*, introduced at the end of the V century b.C. In this case the award was given not to the *auriga* but to the owner, as in all equestrian competitions, so that women were allowed to compete, even if without a direct participation in the competition.

A sort of minor competition (considered a rite more than a real competition), was reserved to women starting soon after the end of male games: the *Heraia*, which took place in Olympia in honour of Hera. It was a speed competition (female Stàdion) performed on the distance of the stàdion, corresponding to about 160 metres, 5/6 of a stàdion. Spartan women, as well as men, performed, instead, athletic practices and military exercises to be able to defend the town when men were far from it. The training was very often promiscuous and, not rarely, Spartan women were Olympic winners. It was not a pure chance that the first winner was a Spartan aristocratic woman, Cynisca the daughter of the king Archidamo who, in 396 BC won the quadriga competition, even if it seems that it was led by a male servant. Several literary testimonies (Euripides, *Andromaca*, vv. 595 segg. (419 AC); Plutarch, *Licurgo* 14,2; Propertius 3.14; Crizia, fr. 32.) tell that, in Lycurgus, girls were initiated to the physical exercise to celebrate Helen and to foster the birth of stronger children. The prescription of Lycurgus included also the phase of the Gymnastics training, as well as the competition one (running, discus throwing, javelin and fight). The Lacedemoni girls practiced running, fight<sup>7</sup>, discus throwing and javelin, that is the complete *pentathlon*, although lacking in the long jump (Arrigoni, 1985, p. 90). These competitions must have been widespread among girls in order to better tackle child birth, as we know by Plutarch<sup>8</sup>. Instead, women participation to the boxing and *pancratation* is unknown, even if it is probably attested by the poet Propertius (3, 14, 8-9).

Girls from Sparta did different sports, among which there was the running, the sport at which Atlanta excelled. Of course, as all the other sports, running also had an eugenic and political aim. Slaves were not allowed to run; only unmarried and free-born girls (*parthenoi*) could run. Furthermore, in the Epithalamium of Helen (Idyll no. XVIII), Theocritus tells that every year there was a women race in the city which was dedicated to Helen, who was celebrated as a model of

bride<sup>9</sup>. Theocritus<sup>10</sup> gives us interesting information because he tells that the women gym was not a privilege only of women who lived in Sparta, but it was a prerogative of Lacedaemon women, that is to say, all the free-born women who lived in the area of Sparta (Perioeci). Especially the “political” gym was reserved to free women (in the archaic age, most probably only the aristocratic Spartan women) and it took place inside the city.

The ritual gym was performed by the Spartan women and by the Perioeci and it took place outside the city. The girls were naked (it refers to the tie of the cult of Elena with Menelaus from Terapne, on the Eurota's side). When they performed the public races, they had to wear the *chitonisque*, that was a short *chiton* whose lateral borders were not sewn, so it opened at every movement they made, so showing the legs. That is why Spartan girls were called “leg showers”: *phainomerides*<sup>11</sup>. We also have pictures which portray girls wearing shorts or bikini, sometimes they also had on knee-pads and caps. Anyway, all the elements we have make us exclude that it was a competitive race. It was, indeed, an initiatory rite. The winners did not get any material or symbolic award; the aim of the victory was to reach the winning post. To go over the winning post meant to go over the condition of *parthenos* and get the condition of married woman. So the race for Elena was an initiatory ritual race, which was part of the preparation rite for the marriage. So, Lacedaemon girls did not perform a competitive sport. These kind of female athletics competitions, that we may call ritual competitions, were performed outside the city and without a male audience. On the contrary, other female sports required the presence and even the participation of Spartan young men. They mainly were athletic activities which had an “erotic” and “political” aim; that is to say that the training of Spartan girls' in the gyms inside the city had the aim to erotically stimulate young men. In this way, the aim of the sport became the marriage and the reproduction. Some scholars, like Arrigoni and Patrucco, consider these last news reliable and they explain them as an example of female sport activities, whose aim was to erotically provoke young men. Other more sceptical scholars consider these information as gossip instead of reliable data on women doing sports (Harris, 1972).

Furthermore, Spartan girls were trained so that they could compete with men<sup>12</sup>; the existence of fights between women and men is documented by some sources<sup>13</sup>, as well as for Chio's island (so in an Ionic and not Doric environment)<sup>14</sup>. Anyway, even if we cannot be sure about the mixed fights which took place in Sparta, we can at least state that girls and boys shared the same spaces when training. The iconographic documents proves the existence of female races as initiation pre-marriage rites, which took place in the Shrine of Artemide and Brauròn, not so far from Athens. Actually, the iconography shows girls of different ages who are running, sometimes dressed and sometimes naked<sup>15</sup>, in the Shrine of Brauròn (the so called “bears”) or somewhere else in Attica, like Pyre, Salamis or Eleusis. So, the race was the most accessible sporting proof for the girls of the Hellenic world and it got the level of official competition in the most important athletic feast: the *Heraia*. *Heraia* was a female competition in honour of the Goddess Hera and it was performed in Olympia 14 days before or after the Olympic games<sup>16</sup>. It has been noted a big silence about it until the Second Century AC, when Pausanias gives important information<sup>17</sup> (fig. 2). The Jewish Games show a competitive organization, although the ritual significance of the race last. Actually, girls joined an initiation pre-marriage competition in honour of Hera, the Goddess who represents the model of perfect bride. The gym uniform of the athletes described by Pausanias was proved by the statues and the portrays of the running girls we found out.

The documents we have do not allow to establish if these games are so old as the Olympic games. It is clear that they had many points in common:

- both had a four-year recurrence;
- the races were the *stadion* (simple running) and the *diaulos* (double running);
- women run in the same stadium of men (even if they were one sixth less);
- girls were split accordingly to their age in three sectors, and on the analogy of the distinction among boys (*paides*) and men (*andres*) in the male sports ground in honour of Zeus;
- women, like men, got a crown of olive as award;
- women joined an animal sacrifice and winners had the right to make build a triumph memorial statue inside the Shrine (the right of the image);



Figure 2.

• the board of the sixteen women which presided over the competition seemed the female version of the judges who presided over the Olympic games<sup>18</sup> (Gardiner, 1971, p. 42).

Furthermore, Pausanias, referring to the mythical origin of the games in honour of Hera, states that they referred to the competitions organized by Hippodamia in honour of Hera for her marriage with Pelops. Pelops himself is linked to the myth of the origin of the Olympic games<sup>19</sup>. Anyway, compared to men, only few women drove carts, did acrobatics, exercises with balls, swum and perhaps they fought. In the I century after Christ and in the II Century, too, girls won the Olympic games and went on competing in Heraia of Olimpia. The first sure witness of female agonistic activity go back up to the Hellenic and Roman age (epigraph of the three girls from Tralles<sup>20</sup>). We do not know why the girls in the I Century after Christ performed the athletic competitions of (existence of running women at Patras, Corinth, at the Isthmian, Pythian and Nemean games), probably it was a consequence of to the greater freedom due to the social changes happened in the Hellenic age<sup>21</sup>.

We know that, in Rome, Roman girls occasionally run in the stadium and it happened in Naples, too, inside the *Sebastà*; although the absence of the thermal baths inside the female section would rather testify a reduced spread of the agonistic sport among women. The *Sebastà* were founded in Naples in 2 after Christ in honour of August and they included gym and horse competitions; then musical and dramatic competitions have been added (IG XIV, 748 = IGRom, I, 449; Miranda, 1982, pp. 165-181). Only one married woman joined it (although it is possible that she got married only after the competition). She was *Seia Spes*, an athletic woman from the Magna Greece, and she won the race of the 154 AC. So in Magna Greece the competitive sports were for the elite, too, and only women from a very good status could compete. Actually, *Seia Spes* was the daughter of a man who held an administrative office. It comes out an interesting and unexpected datum from the inscriptions of the winners: women participation to the competitions seemed to be almost the same of men's one and it couldn't be reserved only to the daughters of the judges.

In the Roman world, it must be given particular attention to the spread (and to the size, too) of the phenomenon of women performing the *ars gladiatoria* (Ricci, 2006, pp. 77-108), in the Augustan age. It is not by chance that women went more and more to the theatre, where women often played completely naked. With regard to the women gladiator fights, the historical and literary sources offers clear marks<sup>22</sup>. Women participation to *munera* and *venationes* surely caused a scandal, but obviously, the audience considered it an amazing show. The phenomenon had a significant importance and it is testified by the fact that in 200 AC Septimius Severus promulgated an edict which forbid women to fight<sup>23</sup>.

The very famous Mosaic of Palestrite at "Villa del Casale" of Piazza Armerina is of the IV Century. It is a very important iconographic source for female sport in ancient times, because it portrays the female pentathlon, (otherwise unknown), which included the free running, the running with wheels, jumping, javelin throwing, and games with the ball. They took place in a circus or in a stadium. The reading of this mosaic offers many allegoric- symbolic interpretations, as all the other mosaic that are in this villa of the ancient world.

As we have seen, the information about women sports given by the ancient sources are not only rare, but very often they are difficult to interpret. This is valid also for this mosaic which nowadays might be the only iconographic portrayal of a female pentathlon in ancient times.

The same difficulty regards the following sources, too:

- 1) the portrayal of Atalanta fighting against Peleus refers to female fights testified by the sources for Chio and, most of all, Sparta
- 2) the epigraphic sources of the Hellenic Age gives us the names of (aristocratic) women who won races; and they make us suppose that ritual races were performed in the previous age, too
- 3) the testimony explaining the women's presence also implied that men made use of some aids.

Particularly, the portrayal of the "Palestrite" ("The Athletes"), in the famous late-ancient mosaic in Piazza Armerina, offers us an image of women doing male activities and using some tools (the *halteres*) which lead to new questions about the relationship between their use and the female



Figure 3.

athletic training methods in ancient times (Fig. 3). The portrayal, inside the mosaic, of a female athlete using the *haltères* (a typically male tool used in the long jump) is a testimony which contrasts with the image given by the iconographic sources of the Classic age and by the following literary sources (mainly, Philostratus) and which deals with the topic from a male point of view.

Actually, the great quantity of iconographic documents, although from a male point of view, testifies all the technical development of the sporting exercise, the dynamics of the jump, its development time after time, and the development of the same tools which must be related to the pentathlon. The *pèntathlon*, introduced during the Olympia games of the XVIII Olympic games (708 before Christ), was performed on the second day of the games<sup>24</sup> and it was made up of five different sports: the discus throwing, the long jump, the javelin, the running, and the wrestling. The last two events existed as a competition in their own right but the other three were not found outside the pentathlon. We do not know for sure their order, we only know that the wrestling was the last one. We don't know how they established who was the winner, almost all we know from ancient evidence is that three victories were required to win (Gardiner, 1903, p. 69). The running and the fight (and originally the other ones, too: either the jump) were the only sports also performed singly<sup>25</sup>. The jump (*hàlma*) was regarded as a very strenuous exercise and as the most typical event of the *pèntathlon*<sup>26</sup>. Anyway, the fame of the jump is linked to the pentathlon's one; in fact, this exercise became an element of judgement of the pentathlon athlete's value because of its



Figure 4.

feature of sport completeness. There are many portrayals of the jump, especially on the Attic potteries with red figures (Fig. 4).

The statement of some scholars (Patrucco, 1972, p. 80; Gardiner, 1904, pp. 189-190; Gardiner, 1910, p. 306) is that the Greek jump was a jump with a short run-up, perhaps only while training, so to separately learn the different stages of the exercise. They did the standing jump, too. The pentathlon jump, according to the eminent German scholar Joachim Ebert (1963, pp. 2-34) consisted of a series of five standing jumps along the jumping

pit. The ground in front of the take-off was dug up and levelled to a certain distance. This was called the *skamma*. The ground of the *skamma* was soft so as to take the impress of the feet. Two weights were a typical tool of the athlete, although they were not compulsory (Aristotle, 3, 705 a; Gardiner, 1904, p. 193); they were called *haltères*<sup>27</sup>, (from about 1,5 to 4,5 kgs), and they were made of stone or metal. They were swung while running and jumping and they were dropped before falling inside the *skamma*, to avoid the loss of balance<sup>28</sup>.

The *haltères* had a double aim: to support the jump and to give balance when falling on the ground (Philostratus, *Gymn*, 55)<sup>29</sup>. The jump started from the *batèr* (Gardiner, 1904, p. 72; Patrucco, 1972, pp. 76-77) (that was the outer edge of the hard ground) and it ended inside the *skamma* (that was a hole dug to offer the jumper a quite soft landing point)<sup>30</sup>. The jump inside the *skamma* was marked on the ground by a small furrow to give the athletes a point of reference and to allow the measurement (Gardiner, 1904, p. 76-77; Patrucco, 1972, pp. 77)<sup>31</sup>. It was valid only if done without crossing the edge of the *batèr* (just like nowadays) and if the mark on the ground was enough definite. The athlete went near the *batèr* doing some very fast steps, he did the beat with a foot and at the same time he hurled his arms ahead and high with firmness and strength in order to make the most of the push of the *haltères*. When falling down, with his feet tied together, he did a last jump with his legs tied together and at the same time he threw back his arms.

The long jump with weights involves most carefully timed movement, and we cannot doubt that the various movements were taught as a sort of drill. It is perhaps for this reason that the long jump was practiced to the accompaniment of the flute (Gardiner, 1971, p. 148)

The stages were methodologically three. They were:

- 1) beat and throw
- 2) flight stage
- 3) landing stage throwing back the arms.



Figure 5.

pre-athletic exercise. They were also used as a preliminary tool while training in order to tone up the muscles of the arms and the shoulders, as the philosopher Philostratus tells. This kind of training, usually suggested by a doctor, is known as *alterobolia* (Philostratus, *Gymn.* 55; Lucian, *Lexiph.* 5, Galen, II, 9,11), and it particularly spread during the Imperial age, although it was already portrayed on the pots of the VI Century (Fig. 5).

At this point, in spite of the uniqueness of the source, it is possible to make the following considerations:

- literary sources could refer to the female world too, even if not explicitly, (as it happened with the Strigile that, as we know from the archeological findings, was used also by women): sources do not exclude explicitly women;
- iconographic sources sometimes document, also for women, some activities such as swimming<sup>33</sup>, horse riding<sup>34</sup>, ball games (very common in Rome), not present in competition programs;
- iconographic sources may be interpreted from a symbolic or realistic point of view: so even some representations of the Greek world could refer to female sport activities mentioned by the sources (joint fight, Spartan *pèntatlon*). In particular we should remember the girls portrayed while running, in a very similar pose to the one of the athletes engaged in *stadion* and *diaulos*. A lanciata running that cannot let think to a dancing;
- the function of the *haltères* in male long jump (that is the one to facilitate the movement of the arms during the run-up and to extend the trajectory of the jump in the moment of the break, and to reinforce the muscles of the upper limbs) for the same technique reason would be applied in female sport activities (Fig. 6);

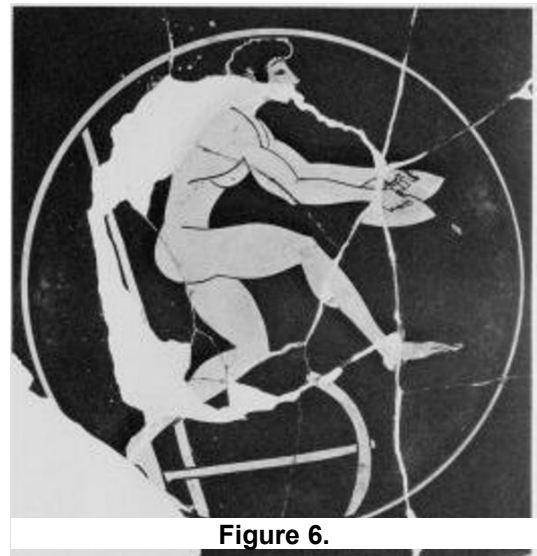


Figure 6.



Figure 7.

- some phases of the long jump exercise (beat and throwing in landing phase hurling his arms back) and of the running show many similarities with pottery representation of running girls who keep in their hand an object similar to a *haltères* (dumbbell). These images, according to a point of view coming from sports science observational contributions, could portray women, that such as men, performed long jump (*pèntatlon* or the only long jump) (fig.7);

- *Haltères*, documented in Piazza Armerina mosaic (see fig.4), would present cylindrical shape as the sources of the Roman Age show although we are not allowed to state more for the uniqueness of the evidence.

### Perspectives

The re-reading of a very famous mosaic as well as of some testimonies related to the Classical Age, has opened an interesting research perspective on the real women's participation to the sports activities in ancient times. Female sport activity, despite the fragmentary nature of the documents, can be seen not only as a prerogative of men. Despite the controversial issues about the topic, the depiction of "Palestrite", in the famous mosaic of the Villa in Piazza Armerina, even if unique, has offered to scholars who carry out research useful suggestions in the study of the sources. The image is very strong also because suggests a direct contiguity with Hellenic world when, as it is known, women practiced competitive and laconic gymnastics activities (see enrollments) about what it is documented the existence of a female *pentatlon* practiced by Spartan girls.

The inquiry about the archeological evidences, also enriched by sport-methodological evaluations, according to a qualitative perspective associated to a re-examination of the published as well as unpublished iconographic materials<sup>35</sup>, (such as museum collections and excavation finds) might, in the future, help us to reconsider and analyze, in a more complete and interdisciplinary way, many opened issues about sport techniques in ancient times and about female athletic training which must be connected to the woman's role of the ancient times.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>There are many different reasons for the lack of the sources. First of all, women's sport is an *ex silentio* subject. Galen does not mention any woman physical activity and Philostratus (author of *Sulla ginnastica – About Gym* - II-III century AD), makes no to the female sport except in a passage about Spartan women.

<sup>2</sup>The decision was made when Orrhippos, athlete of Megara, while running in the "stadium" lost his loincloth (wore by the athletes during the races), tied round his hips, during the sprint and, so feeling more free in the movement, won the race. From that day, the *ellanodici* decided, to avoid troubles, to make the athletes compete naked, forbidding women to attend sporting events. Women who broke this rule, would have been thrown from a cliff on the river Alpheus which, since then, marked the border for all those women who took their relatives and friends to the "Olympic Village". During the XCVI Olympics (404 BC) Kallipateira, the daughter of the famous Olympic boxer Diagoras of Rhodes, in spite of the prohibition, came in the stadium disguised as a coach to see his son Peisirrodos fighting. Kallipateira, exulting for the victory of his son, jumped the fence of the arena, but her dress got caught on the fence and the woman got naked. The judges should have sentenced her to death but they did not do that in order to not offend the memory of the great Diagoras, who died in Olympia, while watching two relatives of him winning two crowns. Since then, however, it was established that even the coaches had to go into the stadium naked. Kyniska was the first woman who won the Olympic games. She succeeded in making the horses of her stable to take part in the race, and they won (XCVI Olympics, 396 BC).

<sup>3</sup>The nature of these jumps has been the subject of various and controversial interpretations. It has been discussed if the athletes were professional acrobats, if they were "profane" games or if (as it seems most plausible) they originated from a ritual cult that was still present during the times when the iconographic evidences have been found. With regard to the presence of women in the studied pictures, Evans has linked them to the cult of the Cretan Great Mother, while according to other scholars (Willetts, Arrigoni, Scanlon) it was an initiation ceremony in which women could participate.

<sup>4</sup>Athenaeus states (14 d) that the learned Agálide of Corcira, a hypothetical Nausicaa's compatriot, ascribed the invention of the ball to the princess, according to the typical Greek custom of looking for a "first inventor" of any human activity or achievement. This scholar of Corcira was no doubt in good faith, for local patriotism, but some girls are portrayed while playing with the ball in the Egyptian fresco by Beni Hassan, in 2000 BC (on the other hand, in ancient sports the games with the ball, were considered particularly suitable for women; and they will also be some of the favourite exercises of Roman women).



<sup>5</sup> Xenophon tells that female athletic activities were encouraged by Lycurgus, who first ordered women to exercise the body “no less than males used to do” and he established running and strength races for women, considering that “stronger children would be born from two stronger people” (Constitution of the Spartans, 1, 3-4). Plutarch wrote: “Lycurgus made young women train their body with the running, the fight, the launch of the disc and the javelin, so that the seed of man, finding a good origin in very strong bodies, would develop better and women would bravely bear the birth’s pains, struggling with force and without effort against labour pains” (Life of Lycurgus, 14).

<sup>6</sup> Probably, despite the prohibition, due to some deceit, there was some sporadic participation of women in the Olympic games, that seemed to have aroused a lot of noise, as it appears from some reports in the official historiography.

<sup>7</sup> The wrestling was frequently used in Latin-Greek world as a metaphor of sexual relationships (Sweet, W.E. & Segal, E., 1987, p. 141).

<sup>8</sup> Plutarch, *lyc.*, 14, 2: Lycurgus made young women train their body with the running, the fight, the launch of the disc and the javelin, so that the seed of man, finding a good origin inside very strong bodies, would develop better and women would bravely bear the birth’s pains, struggling with force and without effort against labour pains (Life of Lycurgus, 14).

<sup>9</sup> The story (perhaps surprisingly for those who remember the most famous version of the story of Helen) that describes her as an adulterer and the cause of the Trojan War, is more understandable for those who remember another version: the one that her flight with Paris would have been a slander of Stesichorus, who was so punished with the loss of his sight He got his sight back only after having admitted his guilt and written the Palinodia which rehabilitated the wife of Menelaus. So, at Sparta, girls ran for Helen, considered as a model of ideal wife.

<sup>10</sup> Again, accordingly to Theocritus, the runners were “four times sixty”, and his old commentator tells that the use of practising gym exercises and male races was common to the Lacedaemonian women, both Spartiatidi and Perieicidi; they were free born girls living in the surrounding area: the number indicated by Theocritus then leads us to think that they also took part in the race.

<sup>11</sup> With this title the poet Ibycus of Rhegion marks them out in the sixth century BC.

<sup>12</sup> It is possible to draw this conclusion reading a famous passage from *Andromache* by Euripides (vv. 595 ff.) in which Peleus speaks to an Athenian who indignantly says that “even if she wanted, a Spartan girl, could never be honest since, having left her home and with her peplum free, she has in common racetracks and gyms with young people, which is unbearable for me”. Six centuries later Philostratus (*On Gymnastics*, 27) tells that men and women from Sparta practiced the sport together.

<sup>13</sup> The Giovenale handed on the news that the noble Roman Palfurio Sura was involved in a sports competition fighting against a Spartan girl.

<sup>14</sup> Athenaeus (*Deiphnosophistai*, 566 e): “it is a real pleasure to see young men fighting against girls”.

<sup>15</sup> According to some scholars (Kahili, Sourvinou-Inwood), the girls running with a short tunic are those of the first opening stage of the race while girls running naked are those who conclude that ritual. Anyway, according to some other scholars it was the contrary: first the naked ones run first, then the dressed ones, as to symbol the “rebirth”, as a condition of a new phase of life: the adult life that girls were starting. According to others (Scanlon), the nudity was not related to a specific age, but the ritual included a part when the girls were naked and a part when they were dressed, perhaps a symbol (such as Pierre Vidal Naquet thinks) of the transition from a “savage” stage (represented by nudity) to the “civilized” one (represented by the dress).

<sup>16</sup> Note on the organization of Erei games wanted by Hippodamia to thank Hera at the same time of those organized by her husband Pelops in honour of Zeus. The historical tradition tells that the Olympic games were born or as funeral games in honour of the hero Pelops or as real competitive matches, linked to the myth of Heracles, who was considered the founder of the Olympics by the common imaginary, and who would have brought the first olive tree on the Altis, a plant used to crown the winner of the Games. Heracles is the cultural hero above all the others, the one that normalizes an older practice because the first sports activities went back to Pelops. In this way the Greeks made a deal between an ancient memory linked to the eponymous of Peloponnese (Pelops) and Heracles, considered the founder hero par excellence. We know for sure that at the center of the sanctuary of Olympia there was the Heroon of Pelops, close to which recent excavations have shown traces of ritual activity, witnessed by flint objects from the Bronze Age.

The fact that the games were held in a period coinciding with the break of farming seemed to be a sign of an original fertility rite intended to celebrate the harvest and to propitiate the new agricultural cycle. It is likely that only the inhabitants of the Peloponnese were allowed to take part in the first Olympic competitions while it is certain that from XL the Olympic Games became "*Panhellenics*", that is opened to all citizens of Greek origin.

<sup>17</sup> Pausanias, *Periegesi*, V, 16,2-4 "Every four years sixteen women weave a *peplo* for Hera and then organize games called Erei: they consist of a race run between girls who are all the same age, so the youngest run before and the oldest at last. They run like this: the hair is loose, the *chitone* ends slightly above the knee, the right shoulder is bare up to the breast. The Olympic stadium is reserved to them for the race, but for them the length of the run is reduced of a sixth. According to Pausanias, therefore the girls ran divided into three age groups, on a path of a stadium reduced of one-sixth compared to that of the men, they wore a short chitone and their hair were untied. This race had the function of a premarital ritual and took place in secret, without public: Arrigoni said that it was a Panhellenic race while Bernardini stated that it was a local one.

<sup>18</sup> The scholar states that the Erei games were contemporary to the Olympic ones, with a different view from some other scholars (Deubner) claiming that the Heraia were prior to the Olympics, according to the dating of the temple of Hera.

<sup>19</sup> Pausanias handed down the historical version of the origin of the competition (Pausanias 5, 126, 5-7) Demofonte and the sixteen cities of Elide. The mythological tradition, however, is more complex. See the above note 15.

<sup>20</sup> Epigraph of Tralles and two epigraphs as regards as two married women: one, of Damodika, from eolica Cumae dating back to the I century B.C., the second of SEIA SPES that in 154 A.C. shows a victory in the race during the Sebaste, so far the only evidence of women's athletics from the Magna Graecia. For *iscrptiones* of Tralles, Damodika, see Kynisca (Ferrandini Troisi, 2000, pp. 85-100).

<sup>21</sup> Iscription of women winning the race with the *quadriga*, the Spartan *Eurileonide*, the Macedonian Belistiche, and Teodora Timareta of Elide, *Habris* of Cuma wind (Ferrandini Troisi, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Cassius Dio and Tacitus recall how, during the *Iudi* in honour of his mother, Nerone made men and women, not only of equestrian but also of senatorial rank, (both *bestiarii* and *gladiatrici*) fight in the circus (Cassius Dio, LXII, 17, 3 -4; Tacitus, *Annales*, XV, 32. Nerone, during a *munus* in Pozzuoli, made coloured women fight : Cassius Dio, LXVII,8). Svetonius recalls that Domitiano, made some women go down from the arena to offer original shows. (Suet. *Domitianus* 4; Cass. Dio LXVII, 8, 3-4).

<sup>23</sup> Cass. Dio, LXXVI, 16, 1. However, previously, with a *Senato consulto* of 11 AC, and with this of 19 AC, subsequently, putting a specific ban to embark the practice of the performances of well born 'gladiator women'. In these texts the exact references to female individuals clearly testify that the prohibited activities were not only practiced by men and thus offer an explicit confirmation of the fact that women are engaged, even renouncing their origin, the *gladiatura* as well as the theater.

<sup>24</sup> Till 468 BC, the Olympic games lasted only one day. After this date, according to Lee (2001, p. 102-103) five days were devoted to the following holidays:

468 BC

1<sup>st</sup> day: - Oath

- Dokimasia

2<sup>nd</sup> day: - Equestrian events

- Pentathlon

3<sup>rd</sup> day: - Rites for Pelops

- Great sacrifice

4<sup>th</sup> day: - Running (boys and men)

- Heavy events (boys and men)

- Hoplite race

5<sup>th</sup> day: - Banquet for the victors

200 BC

- 1<sup>st</sup> day: - Oath  
 - Dokimasia  
 - Trumpeters and heralds (introduced 396)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> day: - Equestrian events  
 - Pentathlon
- 3<sup>rd</sup> day: - Rites for Pelops  
 - Great sacrifice  
 - Boys' contests
- 4<sup>th</sup> day: - Running  
 - Heavy events  
 - Hoplite race
- 5<sup>th</sup> day: - Banquet for the victors.

FIRST CENTURY CE (?)

- 1<sup>st</sup> day: - Oath  
 - Dokimasia  
 - Trumpeters and heralds
- 2<sup>nd</sup> day: - Pentathlon
- 3<sup>rd</sup> day: - Equestrian events
- 4<sup>th</sup> day: - Rites for Pelops  
 - Great sacrifice  
 - Boys' contests
- 5<sup>th</sup> day: - Running  
 - Heavy events  
 - Hoplite race
- 6<sup>th</sup> day: - Banquet for the victors.

<sup>25</sup> Philostratus (author of the II-III century AC) gives the only explicit testimony of the existence of the jump, before as autonomous competition and subsequently as component of the pentathlon “before Peleo the competition of the jump and that of the disk were awarded with separate crowns” (Philostratus, 3).

<sup>26</sup> There are no certain testimonies of the existence of a precedent autonomous competition of the jump: the only explicit proof is contained in the words of Philostratus. Humerus confirms the news of Philostratus; he recalls this athletic exercise in the *Odyssey*, when he describes the competitions that took place in Feacis island (*Odyssey*, IX 129) and where the competition of the jump appears at the same level of the boxing or the fight. It is also possible to add two *Iscriptiones* coming from Eleusi and dated back the beginning of the VI century B.C. to these two news, one of them was carved on an halter devoted to Epaineto, in memory of his victory. (Patrucco, 1972, p. 72.)

<sup>27</sup> The widespread use of the *haltères* is in contrast with the theory of multiple jump. Indeed, the purpose of this tool was to increase the jump of the body. This purpose could be fulfilled only with a simple long jump but not in the case the athlete had to take up the run for a new jump.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle also concludes that the use of the *haltères* allows a better jump.

<sup>29</sup> The greatest *haltères* trained the shoulders and the hands; those which had a spherical shape trained fingers, too. (Lucian, *Anach* 27). Juthner deeply studied this subject, too (*Ant, Turn*, pp. 3-18; Gardiner, 1904, pp. 181-182; Patrucco, 1972, pp. 80-88).

<sup>30</sup> In Greece, the length of the *Skamma* was different from stadium to stadium and the 50 feet size had no absolute value.

<sup>31</sup> The measuring was done using a small bar (*Kanon*), soon after digging some small holes on the *skamma*'s soft ground to indicated the jump of each competitor.

<sup>32</sup> The oldest form is that of the lead halter of Epainetos (see above and note no. 36), which has a rough and unhandy shape. In the most ancient images the form of the *haltères* reminds an iron or a club shape

(attested in the VI Century but not after the V Century, when a new spheroid shape was introduced. It had a crack for the fingers or it was similar to a telephone receiver. The main aim was to help the movement of the arms while running and to extend the trajectory of the jump during the takeoff. The *haltères* were stone or metal made; their weight was from 1 to 4 grams; the shape was not always the same and its clefts allowed a firm hold. A short run-up, starting with the arms very close to the body, and then the takeoff from a line called *batèr*, which was placed on a small raised takeoff board. The arms are casted ahead during the trajectory and they are first parallel, then, just before the falling, they are moved back. The barefoot end takes place in the *skamma*, where the sands is very smooth to make more remarkable the footprint of the jumpers. The hole was digged using picks, whose used was suggested to the boxers and the fighters. The jump was measured starting from the takeoff board till the closest takeoff point where the athlete fell. The measuring was done using a small bar called *kanon*.

<sup>33</sup> There is no literary or epigraphic evidence about the swimming competitions. The few vase paintings of while swimming women are not supposed to belong to the competitive sports. A fragment ascribed to Accio makes us think that Spartan women used to swim (hunting painter, laconic couple of 560-555 b. C.).

<sup>34</sup> The excavation of Menelaion (the archaic shrine of Helen and Menelaus at Terapne), late archaic terracotta portraying figures riding on horseback, mostly women who will probably have different origins, portraying competitors in honour of Helen or Menelaus or Orthia.

<sup>35</sup> So far we have consulted the catalogues published by Boardman and Richter (about 1000 red figure vases).

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