ISSN: 1989-9289
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.14516/fdp.2015.006.001.004

PERIODICITY, THE CANON AND SPORT

Periodicidad, el canon y el deporte

Thomas F. Scanlon
thomas.scanlon@ucr.edu
University of California Riverside

Fecha de recepción: 29-VI-2015
Fecha de aceptación: 17-VIII-2015

Resumen: El tema presentado bajo este título es ciertamente muy amplio, ya que abarca dos conceptos de tiempo y de valorización cultural de los productos artísticos muy generales. Ambos fenómenos son, en la visión actual, ampliamente construidos por sus culturas contemporáneas, y han recibido autoridad en gran medida a partir del prestigio del pasado. La antigüedad de la tradición trae con ella cierta distinción. Incluso aunque puede haber debates periféricos en cualquier sociedad dada que cuestionen las especificidades de la periodización o de la canonicidad, generalmente se acepta la designación consensuada de una secuencia de períodos históricos y se acepta igualmente una lista de trabajos artísticos de alto valor como canónica o con autoridad. Examinaremos primero algunos de los procesos de periodización y de formación de cánones, tras lo cual discutiremos algunos ejemplos específicos de cómo estos procesos han funcionado en el deporte de dos antiguas culturas, en concreto Grecia y Mesoamérica.

Palabras clave: periodización; canonicidad; deporte; antigua Grecia; Mesoamérica.

Abstract: The topic according to this title is admittedly a broad one, embracing two very general concepts of time and of the cultural valuation of artistic products. Both phenomena are, in the present view, largely constructed by their contemporary cultures, and given authority to a great extent from the prestige of the past. The antiquity of tradition brings with it a certain cachet. Even though there may be peripheral debates in any given society which question the specifics of periodization or canonicity, individuals generally accept the consensus designation of a sequence of historical periods and they accept a list of highly valued artistic

Cómo referenciar este artículo / How to reference this article:
Scanlon, T. F. (2015). Periodicity, the Canon and Sport. *El Futuro del Pasado, 6*, 113-125. http://dx.doi.org/10.14516/fdp.2015.006.001.004

works as canonical or authoritative. We will first examine some of the processes of periodization and of canon-formation, after which we will discuss some specific examples of how these processes have worked in the sport of two ancient cultures, namely Greece and Mesoamerica.

Keywords: periodization; canonicity; sport; Ancient Greece; Mesoamerica.

The topic according to this title is admittedly a broad one, embracing two very general concepts of time and of the cultural valuation of artistic products. Both phenomena are, in the present view, largely constructed by their contemporary cultures, and given authority to a great extent from the prestige of the past. The antiquity of tradition brings with it a certain cachet. Even though there may be peripheral debates in any given society which question the specifics of periodization or canonicity, individuals generally accept the consensus designation of a sequence of historical periods and they accept a list of highly valued artistic works as canonical or authoritative. We will first examine some of the processes of periodization and of canon-formation, after which we will discuss some specific examples of how these processes have worked in the sport of two ancient cultures, namely Greece and Mesoamerica.

Like much else, periodization is a problem of «epistemology», «how we know». We might say that, generally, «knowing» is a process of classifying, putting together like things; or it can be seen as «translation» of unfamiliar into the familiar. That which is absolutely unique cannot be known (or classified); it needs a new category. One way of making sense of time is to put it into periods, constructing privileged periods; then we give each period a value or a character.

Periodicity or periodization is the cultural construction of the phenomenon of time into distinct units. The term 'period' originally designated a 'circuit' or 'round trip', coming from the Greek *peri* and *hodos*, a 'way' or 'road around'. As applied to time, a period indicates either a general or specific historical length of time. So 'periodization' or the construction of a period of time can be seen as a somewhat arbitrary. As one recent commentator puts it: «Periodization distorts... when we draw lines through time, artificially dividing the continuous flow of lived experience, we may obscure as much as we reveal. So why do we do it? The obvious but facile answer is that it makes the practices of history easier. It gives us a shorthand; everyone knows what we mean when we talk about archaic and classical, early, middle and late, or phases I, II, and III...[But p]eriodization is also characterization...this block is qualitatively different from other blocks of time that can be identified before and after it» (Morris 1997, 96).

Periodization, as some have described it, divides time into periods according to various general, common configurations, which can and do overlap, two of which we review here. First there is a strictly chronological method, which is based on lunar and/or solar cycles of years, and proceeds by counting a linear sequence fixed around a certain

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 6, 2015, pp. 113-125
ISSN: 1989-9289

communally important marker. For Christians of course the marker which has become the world standard is the date set for the birth of Jesus, or at least the point at which early Christian chronographers fixed it. Early Christians posited prior to Christ a series of five or six «ages» or *aetates*, each of 500 to 600 years, counted *ab exordio mundi*, «from the creation of the world». For Islamic, Judaic and a host of other cultures, the common points differ from one another but offer a shared, usually sacred reference point for each. For the ancient Greeks of the fifth century B.C. and later, the common point was the foundation of the quadrennial Olympic games in 776 B.C., after which each year was identified by its place within its Olympiad. For the ancient Romans, the starting point was the founding of Rome, most commonly in 753 B.C., after which each year was given a designation AUC *or ab urbe condita*, «from the foundation of Rome». And this bit of «millenialia» is in L. Robin *Fox's Pagans and Christians* (1987): «In 248 the Emperor Phillip had celebrated a spectacular millenium of Rome with lavish pagan honours». And for the Maya, a mythological zero date can be correlated to the date of cosmic creation in 2 August, 3114 B.C. in our notation (Miller & Taube, 1993, 50: s.v. «Calendar»). The current substitution of B.C.E. and C.E. for B.C. and A.D. points up both our acceptance of the Christian timeline and our desire to ecumenize or objectify it, though the practice has not yet gained popular favor.

Secondly, there is an evolutionary scheme of time, which traces phases of development through growth, acme and decline, i.e. cycles based roughly on a biological model, with each period dominated by a civilization or social system which eventually wanes and yields to another. Here we might cite Hesiod's 8th century B.C. model of the five races of men, golden, silver, bronze, heroic and iron, each one populated by a powerful race of men whom the gods eventually destroy, each one in some respects more or less inferior to the last. Also in this system is the Indian cycle of four ages or *yugas*, beginning with the first, «perfection», and ending with the fourth, the worst or *kali yuga*, namely the present. Likewise, Plato's or Polybius' cycle of constitutions fall into this world view of time in which a degenerating cycle of monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny tend to occur in a repetitive sequence, which for Polybius is halted only by the establishment of Rome's superior, mixed constitution.

These organization of times are frequently described by a time line. This line with a beginning and end point implies «moments» along the way, «direction», and «connection».

x->__|__|__|__|__|__|__|__|__|__|__|__|__|__|__|__|__|__->y

So space is used to describe time. We cannot help but interpret and try to make sense of things by using spatial or physical metaphors to understand the non-physical. Our ordering of time by century, Latin *centuria*, German *Jahrhundert*, is a relatively

recent phenomenon, first broadly adopted in the 18th century, not coincidentally the age of the birth of modern science. Thus the widespread popular modern tendency to christen neatly divided centuries, and even decades and millennia, each with their own special character is a practice fostered by the modern, linear notion of time. Periods are forced into a base-ten grid system analogous to the way space is measured and matter weighed. Quantification equals the bestowal of meaning.

Mircea Eliade proposed an alternate and useful, though perhaps overly rigid, schema for understanding time, namely a dichotomy between «historical (or secular or linear) time» and «mythic (or sacred or cyclical) time». Eliade's schema supercedes the problem of periodization, by focusing on the two fundamental modes in which people conceptualize time. A modern, western, and more or less secular world see linear, teleological progress of completely singularized events, perhaps causally linked but each distinguishable from others in the past. The premodern concept of time was, on the other hand, generally «cyclical», with no beginning or end. Secular time, in this dichotomized formulation, has the characteristics of being linear, ever changing, human-centered, and continually unique; sacred time conversely is retrievable, repeatable, paradigmatic and foundational.

Eliade's model of mythic time can be used to show how periodization connects with canonical narratives. In traditional religious cultures, meaning is ascribed or authority given to the activity of a people by recourse to a «mythic time», *in illo tempore*, to which sacred writing, rituals and places make constant reference. Mythic time is the time of origins, describing what gods, heroes, or ancestors did, and it is accessible, *inter alia*, through rituals or the reading of canonical texts. For Jews it refers to the narrative of the Hebrew Bible, for Christians to the life of Jesus, for the classical Greeks to the events of the heroic age such as in the Homeric epics, for ancient Mesoamerican cultures to the events in their creation text, *Popul Vuh*, and so on. The foundational periods described in each culture's canon is paradigmatic, repeatable in and retrievable through communal representations and celebrations of the mythic time.

CANONS

A canon is essentially a list, usually of written texts but possibly extended to visual and other products of culture, a list which is given special status and authority by a group. The list includes or selects certain items and excludes others. Canons are almost always comprised of old or ancient texts, and the paradigmatic sets of texts are perhaps the sacred books of various world religions canonized on the basis of being the inspired word of divine authority. The choice for inclusion of texts in the canon is usually made initially by a few members of the culture, and is continually ratified or changed over

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 6, 2015, pp. 113-125
ISSN: 1989-9289

time. The list of the canon is closed at the time of its adoption, but this finite closure is given openness by the process of interpretation or commentary. Interpretations allow the canonical text to be taken as a generic and metaphorical document which successive generations open up by linking the specifics of their contemporary situation to what is taken as the «deeper meaning» of the text. In sacred contexts, divination and other processes or interpretation can be used to extract significance from the text. But canonical secular texts also make claims to greater metaphysical import by citing the very survival of the text as a sign of its universal validity, aesthetic superiority, and authority bestowed by the generations who bestow on the texts their approval. Yet despite these claims of transnational and diachronic authority, we can observe how any given group or individual who performs an exegesis of the text seeks new and different meanings from it, hence its openness. Claims of aesthetic superiority can also be problematic. One could argue, as I have heard done, that the New Testament gospels are the stylistic equivalents of classic comic books for early Christians. And one could imagine that some future generation could canonize Superman comics, writing extensive commentaries on the universal lessons gleamed from that narrative. How, then, is a canon used? In one sense at least, it is crucial for the formation of the identity of a group, for example in the variations between Catholic and Protestant translations of the Bible, or in the use of the Veda which is arguably the only thing which gives unity to what we call Hinduism.

EXAMPLES

To illustrate the principle of how periods can be constructed and how literary texts, or indeed oral narratives of myths and legends, can directly affect later cultures, we turn now to our examples from Mesoamerican culture and from archaic Greece. In both cases, we will look at how the canonical narratives are used to validate and to invest meaning into cultural practice, in particular how the sports of each culture is constructed through traditional «legends». By «legends» I mean narratives of the past which have become canonical for a particular public, and can be appropriated by that public to inform their cultural identity.

Sports are also by definition public events, events of the stadium, and thus events which in some ways serve as a mirror for activity in the public sphere of society outside the circumscribed space of the competition. Sports involve public performance, carried out by the bodies of participants. In their public and physical displays before spectators or an audience, sporting competitions are comparable to religious rituals, to the recitation or singing of stories, and to performances of drama in ancient, traditional, and even modern cultures. The actions of sports, like analogous performances, often describe a complex interplay of tensions from which the audience can derive implicit or explicit messages to apply to their lives. Thus the activity of the stadium may constitute a dialo-

gue between a contemporary culture and the mythic time of its canonical referent. One major difference, however, between sports and most other public performances is that rituals, songs, and dramas are scripted while sporting competitions admit risk or chance in the outcome. Hence in Mayan thought, sport is closely associated with divination and the casting of lots, and among the Greeks the outcome of a contest was thought to depend greatly on the favor of the gods.

In Mesoamerican ballgames, sports not only have recourse to divine causation, but depend upon the notion of canonical legend alluding to mythic time. Quiché Maya myth collected in the sixteenth century C.E. in the *Popul Vuh* text tells the story of two ball-players and gamblers, Hun-Hunahpu and Vucub-Hunahpu, who anger the underworld gods, are challenged to a competition by a messenger, accept, and are killed before the contest. Their contest took place in the ballcourt of Xibalba, the Otherworld «Place of Fright», in short, the underworld; the brothers were sacrificed and buried at Pucbal Chaah, «The Place of Ballgame Sacrifice». The twin sons of Hun-Hunahpu, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, take up the challenge to compete, compete, and survive several contests until Hunahpu is decapitated. His brother overpowers the underworld opponents and avenges his predecessors. Thus he triumphs over the Lords of Death and establishes the cosmic relationship between eternally dead gods and regenerative human beings. To this ball court those human beings «of the light born, the light engendered» would return, the Lords of the Maya. The ballgame was the pivot of the cycle of creation. The victorious brother retrieved his father, the Lord of Maize, the Underworld and from the corn human beings were shaped and created; all agricultural abundance subsequently flows from this event (Schele, Freidel & Parker, 1993, 308; see also De la Garza, 2012; Aguilar, 2015).

Besides the textual version of this myth, it is portrayed on several Mesoamerican ballcourts themselves to remind viewers of the constant human confrontation with death, the need to beware of hostile cosmic forces, and the ability to master one's own fate. It also recalls the essential similarity between playful sports and serious antagonisms. The ballgames also show the need for family members to maintain solidarity and to even the score with enemies.

The actual historical ball game was popular among many Mesoamerican peoples, who played on courts of a basically uniform shape with a rubber ball aimed at a ring or markers. Rules varied, but two teams of two or three players each vied on the court, touching the ball in play only with the upper arm or thigh, never the hands. Many understood the ball game as a metaphor for the movements of heavenly bodies, particularly the sun, the moon and Venus. The ball itself may have been understood as the sun journeying in and out of the underworld with a cartouch of an Underworld opening frequently marking the ball court. Thus the metaphorical reading of these games connects

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 6, 2015, pp. 113-125
ISSN: 1989-9289

them with celestial and temporal cycles, as well as with the process of creation at the beginning of temporal periods, hence grounding the game as a ritual and the ballcourt as a place of power where even kings sometime wore the regalia of ballplayers to display their authority.

Human sacrifice was notoriously incorporated into the game, with the victors sometimes decapitating the losers. Among the Classic Maya, defeated players, usually captives of war, were bound and trussed to be used as the ball itself in a ritual paralleling the game. In the final act of the game, the captive-as-ball was bounced down a flight of stairs. (Miller *et al.*, 1993, 42-44) The historical games replicate the game in which the king, like the Ancestral Hero Twins, will triumph, and will bring forth abundance and prosperity from the Land of Death into his realm. The game was correlative to the deadly game of war where the king was a farmer of his people, as his people were farmers of corn (Schele *et al.*, 1993, 309-310).

We turn now to our example from Greek culture, and to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Are there connections between the rise of actual Greek athletic festivals, particularly the Olympics which began in 776 B.C.E., and the spread of early Greek heroic legend, in particular of the Homeric epics, which were written down arguably between 750-725? *Prima facie*, the answer would seem to be «no»: Homer does not mention the Olympics, and, after the eighth century, the Olympics do not claim explicit connections with Homeric heroes. Yet closer inspection reveals less direct connections.

Homer is of course the earliest testimony for Greek sports, with the Games for Patroclus in *Iliad* XXIII and the «after dinner games» at Phaeacia in *Odyssey* VIII. These games are in many aspects different from those of later historical festivals, for example the wearing of loincloths by athletes, the inclusion of a duel in armor which is unparalleled in later practice. Whether these are conscious archaisms or true relics of earlier customs cannot be decided, but it does indicate that Homer's games are not precise templates for later contests. Still, it seems more than coincidental that the rise of the popularity of heroic epic was contemporaneous with the increasing popularity of athletic festivals.

Current consensus about the date of the writing down of the Homeric poems mostly as we have them is that the texts were fixed in writing in the eighth century, with some arguing for both epics being written down in the early eighth century, while most put the *Iliad* at about 750 B.C. and the *Odyssey* at about 725[1]. The earliest preserved allusion to the poet Homer himself comes in the *Hymn to Apollo* (172-73), dated approximately to the first third of the sixth century (Kirk, 1985, 114-115; Strauss Clay, 1997, 501). Xenophanes ca. 550 B.C. takes issue with Homer's representation of the gods (frs. 11, 14, 15, 16 DK). Pindar, writing from about 500 to 446 B.C., names Homer

[1] Early 8th century: Powell, 1997, 31; 750 and 725: Wilcock, 1996.

three times and constructs an extensive intertextuality with Homeric epic (Nagy, 1990). As one scholar recently summarizes: «If non-Homeric early Greek lyric only gradually became distinct and distinguishable from the Homeric corpus, and the two centuries of archaic lyric (650-450) constitute in their own way a development incorporating and appropriating Homeric poetry, tragedy notoriously began with Aeschylus' self-styled 'chops from Homer's banquet'». (Lamberton, 1997, 40). In this literary assessment, we should keep firmly in mind, however, that well into the fifth century B.C. and beyond Homeric authorship was commonly attached to the entire epic cycle, not just the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. (Lamberton, 1997, 38-39).

The archeological artifacts of Iron Age Greece, i.e. from the eighth century B.C., evidence a growing interest in the heroic past. This interest is, however, not necessarily inspired by Homer's works, which were Ionian products and probably took some decades to have a great impact on the Greek mainland. So in the eighth century itself, the age of the earliest Olympics, the newly written and therefore fixed versions of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* probably had minimal impact on the way in which Olympic participants viewed the recently formed games (Morgan, 1990, 59-60). More likely there was a «single expression of an heroic ethos which emerged in the late Geometric/Early Archaic times», of which epic poetry, artifacts illustrating heroic scenes, and the earliest Olympics themselves were individual products.

From the period of Homer to 600 B.C., «only a small fraction of the probable mythological scenes take their subject from the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*– between 10% and 16%, according to the degree of optimism of the person counting» (Snodgrass, 1997, 573). Yet other myths in the Homeric cycle are recorded in art of this period, and probably non-Homeric versions of Homer's subject matter, which suggests only that Homeric texts were known but had not yet become the exclusive or widely accepted canonical versions of the legends. Judging from heroic scenes in Greek art, then, it was not until the period between the late seventh century and the mid-sixth century that canonical versions of the epics of Homer and others in the cycle seem to become widely known in the Greek world.

We now turn from the dates and early spread of the Homeric texts to the origins and growth of the ancient Olympic festival. The traditional date for the founding of the Olympics, derived from the fifth century B.C. victor list of Hippias, is 776 B.C., though several ancient sources put the beginning back to the early ninth century or even earlier and call the eight century date a point of the restoration of the festival. Most importantly for present purposes, ancient commentators name the 776 date as the year in which the games were re-instituted on the occasion of a treaty between local warring states; the important date was not therefore that of any legendary founding by famous heroes of the Bronze Age three centuries earlier (Rutter, 2014). Notably the 776 date later became so

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 6, 2015, pp. 113-125
ISSN: 1989-9289

important that it was the most widely used common date from which later ancient historians dated all events. Like the Maya culture, the foundation of a communal sporting became the basis for periodization, but unlike that New World model, the Greeks fixed on an historical and political event, and not a mythic one, associated with the games. Even so, it seems more significant that the Greeks, like the Maya, chose for their periodic ground zero a festival contest shared widely among their independent states, and a contest moreover heavily invested with mythic foundation tales.

Before we look at the legends themselves, we pause to look briefly at the first two centuries of the Olympics and ask when Greeks generally began to link the games with the heroic tales. As we saw above, it was not until about 600 B.C. that heroic epic is widely depicted in Greek art. As it happens, this date coincides very closely with the point when the Olympics and other athletic festivals became very popular throughout the Greek world. In recent years the controversy has continued with one prominent German excavator at Olympia placing the beginning of the games to about 700 B.C., though this seems too late for reasons I will not go into here. I propose we accept for argument's sake the date of 776, which seems most plausible to me; Catherine Morgan also supports this date, though the precise starting date of 776 is not supported by a perceivable shift in archeological finds at that period; more certain is the relative increase in dedicatory activity at the sanctuary during the last quarter of the eighth century. Prior to 700, Hippias' list shows athletic victors almost exclusively from the western Peloponnese or Laconia. Thus the early games were by custom, by explicit restriction, or simply according to popular interest, local in character in comparison with the more properly panhellenic games of later periods[2].

Known Olympic victors in the seventh century came from a bit wider afield, but in no great numbers: of a total of 59, the greatest number, 39, still came from the Peloponnese with 33 of these from Sparta, followed by 7 from the ascending state of Athens, and the remaining 13 from the far west, Italy and Sicily, from Ionia on the eastern edge of the Greek world, and from central Greece.[3] In short, so far as our fragmentary records can tell, the games were still fairly parochial, greatly dominated by Spartan athletes whose polis aggressively sought political capital from the conspicuous success. The seventh century is remarkable by the absence of any other periodic athletic festival along the Olympic model. That century is one in which athletics had still not reached

[2] Morgan (1990, 92), assessing material evidence and following Pausanias's dating, supports the date of 776 as one which «may relate to the refoundation of the Olympic games after some earlier contest had lapsed». For a collection of the primary sources (in English translation) on the legendary origins of the Olympics, see Robinson, 1979, 32-55. Discussion of the founding date: Golden, 1998, 63-65. Origin in 700: Mallwitz, 1988. Last quarter of eighth century: Morgan, 1990, 48-49. Local participation in Olympics pre 700: Morgan, 1990, 102.

[3] The reckoning of regional affiliations of victors from the 696 to the 588 Olympics is based on Moretti, 1957.

its acme of civic and popular appeal. This was before the age of gymnasia and training processes. There were certainly some regional festivals with games and occasionally secular athletic or equestrian contests, but they were much fewer and of smaller scale than in later centuries[4].

With the first quarter of the sixth century, the picture changed entirely. In 582/1 (or 586/5) the first major prize games were held at Delphi at the Pythian festival for Apollo which became a quadrennial fixture thereafter[5]. Two biennial games also began at this time, in 582/1 the Isthmian games for Poseidon at the Isthmus of Corinth, and in 573 the Nemean games in honor of Zeus. These three festivals, along with the Olympics, constituted a circuit or *periodos*, at which athletes thereafter aspired to become *periodonikai*, «circuit victors», though the term first appears only in the second century A.D. With the first quarter of the sixth century, the picture changed entirely. Between 586 and 573, three other major panhellenic games were instituted in Greece, and there were joined by the first local games at Athens, the Panathenaia in or near 566. The early sixth century, then, was marked by an intense institutionalization of athletic festivals, the very period when the Homeric epics and other heroic legends also became more widely known in Greece.

The canonical legends, I argue, added impetus to the spread of athletics in the early 500's. The public monuments of Olympia itself yield the most famous examples. In one story of the origins of the Olympic games, a foreign hero, Pelops defeated and caused the death of the brutal King Oenomaus in a chariot race, winning the king's daughter, Hippodameia, in marriage (Lacroix, 1976; Weiler, 1974, 209-217; Murray, 2014, 309-319). A funeral mound for Pelops and an altar for Zeus were central features of the Olympic sanctuary from its founding. In addition, the sculpture of the east pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia from the second quarter of the fifth century showed Pelops and his bride together on one side of the central figure, Zeus, the patron of the race. Finally, on the metopes of that temple are depicted the labors of Herakles, the hero also seen as a legendary founder of the games. The Olympic space thus explicitly alludes to its origins in mythic time, and evidences the growing popularity of both the heroic ethos and athletics. Other games of the early sixth century similarly connected their games to their legendary heroic founders through architecture and sculpture. Like the Maya ballgame, the Olympics seek validation from a supposed mythic time. The juxtaposition of Pelops and Zeus in the sanctuary and on the temple underscores a crucial theme for Olympic athletes, the opposition of death and life, mortality and immortality, defeat and victory.

---

4 There is a inscription from about 580 B.C. by a victor probably in the local Eleusinian games for a vicotry in the pentathlon or possibly in the long jump as a separate event: Moretti, 1953, 1-5.

5 Dates for the origin of the Pythia: Morgan, 1990, 136; for the Pythia, Isthmia and Nemea: Golden, 1998, 10.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 6, 2015, pp. 113-125
ISSN: 1989-9289

When we step back and examine the total socio-historical contexts of festival games in Mesoamerica and in Greece, we are confronted with broader questions. First a political question. How at any given time and place in those cultures was the appeal to origins from canonical legends used by kings or the ruling élite to solidify their hold on power? Architecture, ritual, costumes, claims to genealogy, and so on were invoked during the occasion of the festivals themselves to score political capital, to gain popular favor, to establish individual or civic identity, in short to use a constructed memory of the past as a basis for authority in the present.

Secondly, a question of whether the sports-and-legends phenomenon is unique to Greece and Mesoamerica, or has broader, even contemporary importance. If the canonical legends had not existed, would the games not have became as popular? This is too complex to address here of course, but quick reference to cultures like ancient India, China, the Hittite empire, and Egypt, where there are scattered traces of games but no coalescence into important regular festivals, suggests that legends can serve as a catalyst for or invest meaning into sports. But the immense popularity of gladiatorial and other contests in Rome without seminal foundation myths suggests that sometimes forces other than canonical legends can also promulgate such contests.

In the present day United States, sports seem to have spread more along the lines of ancient Rome, for extraneous social reasons like the rise of a leisured class in the nineteenth century. We seem to lack a dominant single legend perhaps mainly because our proliferation of media results in a multiplicity of legends. Still we can identify in modern sports a thread of canonical legend around which media images cluster. Our most popular sports are team sports. Do team sports represent a high valuation of community and individual sports of the individual? How can we reconcile the American tradition of praise for the individual and the loner with the love of team sports? One commentator attributes this to the nature of modern life in which our notions of freedom often include elements both of autonomous effort and of cooperation towards common goals. The team element connects the fan with the team representing a region or a school. Yet the cowboy or the loner Rambo image simultaneously feeds the complementary image of the individual star player seeking to get into the hall of fame. Films, novels, and television all reinforce this paradox of the solo individual alongside a collective deeply dependent upon him or her.

Our survey of periodization and canon formation seen in one sphere of activity then demonstrates the importance of these phenomena in construction of a culture's identity. The games in the Greek stadium, the Maya ballcourt, and the modern sports venue provide a public arena for re-enactment of mythic aetiologies. Both participants, spectators, and the social élite can vicariously, or ritually speaking even actually, become the founding heroes who perform acts of death and rebirth. And the seemingly fixed

canons and the mythic time to which these performances make reference are constantly re-constructed and given new meaning by the dominant culture of the time.

In sum, festival contests give social context a greater role, virtually a ritual function, demonstrating how fame and glory may be won in peaceful competitions which parallel more serious activities. Here the prize-givers are like the rulers in society, setting and bending the rules to accommodate human circumstances. Societies which staged sports festivals in later times probably took inspiration from the courage and skill of their legendary ancestors, putting themselves in the place of legendary heroes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aguilar, M. (2015). Ulama: Pasado, presente y futuro del juego de pelota mesoamericano. *Anales de Antropología. Revista del Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas*, vol. 49, nº 1. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Garza, M. de la (2012). *El legado escrito de los mayas*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, México.

Golden, M. (1998). *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge.

Kirk, G. S. (1985). In Easterling, P. E. and Knox, B. M. W. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature, I. Greek Literature*. Cambridge.

Kyle, D. G. (2007). *Sport and spectacle in the Ancient World*. Malden & Oxford.

Lacroix, L. (1976). La Légende de Pélops et son Iconographie, *BCH,* 100, pp. 327-341.

Lamberton, R. (1997): In Morris, I. and Powell, B. B. (eds.). *A New Companion to Homer*. Leiden, New York and Cologne.

Mallwitz, A. (1988). In Raschke, W. (ed.), *The Archeology of the Olympics*. Madison.

Miller, M. and Taube, K. (1993). *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya*. London.

Moretti, L. (1953). *Iscrizioni Agonistiche Greche*. Rome.

Moretti, L. (1957). *Olympionikai, i Vincitori negli Antichi Agoni Olimpici*. Rome.

Morgan, C. (1990). *Athletes and Oracles*. Cambridge.

Morris, I. (1997). Periodization and the Heroes: Inventing a Dark Age. In Golden, M. and Toohey, P. (eds.), *Inventing Ancient Culture: Historicism, Periodization and the Ancient World*. London and New York, pp. 96-131.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 6, 2015, pp. 113-125
ISSN: 1989-9289

Morris, I. and Powell, B. B. (eds.) (1997). *A New Companion to Homer*. Leiden, New York and Cologne.

Murray, S. C. (2014). The role of religion in Greek sport, en Christesen, P. & Kyle, D.G. (eds.), *A companion to Sport and spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity*. Malden & Oxford, pp. 309-319.

Nagy, G., (1990). *Pindar's Homer: The Lyrics Possession of an Epic Past*. Baltimore.

Powell, B. B. (1997). In Morris, I. and Powell, B. B. (eds.). *A New Companion to Homer*. Leiden, New York and Cologne.

Robin, L. (1987). *Fox's Pagans and Christians*. Knopf.

Robinson, R. S. (1979). *Sources for the History of Greek Athletics*. Chicago (repr. of 1955 edition).

Rutter, J. (2014). Sport in the Aegean Bronze Age, en Christesen, P. & Kyle, D.G. (eds.), *A companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity*. Malden & Oxford, pp. 36-52.

Scanlon, T. F. (ed.) (2014). *Sport in the Greek and Roman Worlds*. Oxford.

Schele, L., Freidel, D. and Parker, J. (1993). *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years On The Shaman's Path*. New York.

Snodgrass, A. (1997). In Morris, I. and Powell, B. B. (eds.) (1997). *A New Companion to Homer*. Leiden, New York and Cologne.

Strauss Clay, J. (1997). In Morris, I. and Powell, B. B. (eds.) (1997). *A New Companion to Homer*. Leiden, New York and Cologne.

Weiler, I. (1974). *Der Agon im Mythos: Zur Einstellung der Griechen zum Wettkampf*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Wilcock, M. (1996³). s.v. «Homer» in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford and New York.

Página intencionadamente en blanco