

The Diet of Classical Athletes and the Opinions of Ancient Writers, Philosophers, and Doctors Concerning It

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Introduction

The aim of the poster presentation is to scientifically highlight an issue that has so far almost been undetected or little researched: the nutrition of the athletes during the Classical era, era of great prosperity for the four Great Panhellenic Sports and Music (performing arts) Games (that is the Olympic Games, held in the Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia, the Pythian Games, held in the Sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, the Isthmian Games, held in the Sanctuary of Poseidon at Isthmia and the Nemean Games, held in the Sanctuary of Zeus at Nemea). The views (positive and negative) of ancient philosophers (e.g. Plato, Aristotle), writers (i.e. Euripides) and even doctors (Hippocrates, Galen) on the diet and generally on the lifestyle of ancient athletes will be examined here.

Information about the athletes' nutrition

The evidence we have regarding the nutrition of athletes is written, found in ancient literate sources from Classical to Roman times. The iconography of sports is plentiful, depicting many representations of athletes in action, but there is a lack of illustrations of e.g. crowned young people consuming food.

In the early years of sports, from the 8th to the 5th century BC, there was a preference for dried figs.¹ Also soft (fresh) cheese, barley bread, unleavened loaves of non-sifted wheat were consumed.²

The Classical era marked a new phase in the dietary habits of athletes: the consumption of vegetable carbohydrates was replaced by meat, thus the consumption of animal protein, especially before the race. This diet was conducive to improvement of performance, acceleration of recovery from injuries and intense workouts.

As Pausanias refers, the first who had this pioneering idea was himself an athlete, Dromeus from Stymphalus of Arcadia, who was twice Olympic champion – probably during the 74th and 75th Olympiad (484 and 480 BC) – in a foot-race called “dolichos dromos”.³ According to other authors this habit was first introduced by a gymnast named Pythagoras⁴ or by the Samian philosopher of the 6th century BC Pythagoras,⁵ who recommended a meat diet to the athlete Eurymenes of Samos.⁶

After this, the athletes preferred the meat of goats,⁷ oxen, bulls, and deer.⁸ However, all these kinds of meat were expensive, so it was practically impossible to be consumed frequently.⁹

The diet of Classical athletes also included olive oil and wine, which was mixed with water.

Other natural substances, which increased the strength and durability of athletes, were herbs and some types of mushrooms. Honey, consumed by athletes in 400 BC, provided them with energy.¹⁰

The viewpoints of ancient writers, philosophers and physicians

The special diet of athletes with the preference for protein is interpreted by some ancient writers as eclectic without elements of exaggeration. There are others who criticize this diet, considering it to be extreme and compulsive, as this extravagance is displayed in the training of the athletes and their unilateral involvement in sports, which distances them from the implementation of the principle “a healthy mind in a healthy body”.

Plato considers the diet of martial athletes “dormant” and inappropriate for health. He remarks that athletes sleep throughout their lives and if they break their diet they get crucially sick.¹¹

Aristotle argues that “health is a virtue of the body”.¹²

Flavius Philostratus in his work *Gymnastics* (ch. 43–51) compares the diet favored by athletes of “older times” with that of his contemporary athletes, with whom doctors were lenient, recommending white bread made from ground meal sprinkled with poppy seeds, pork, copious quantities of fish and other “fancy food”, in effect turning athletes into “gluttons with insatiable stomachs”. He criticizes saying that the older athletes were great, while those of his time not so good.¹³ He believes that the diet of the first athletes was natural and their way of living simple and points out that they did not fall ill, they could participate in war, they took part in many Olympiads and old age caught up with them much later in life.¹⁴

Athenaeus presents in his work *Deipnosophists* various stories about the extreme diets that distinguished athletes. He names specific athletes who teetered on the brink of overeating. He does not consider the fact that these athletes were greedy, because anyone involved in gymnastics was also taught to eat a lot. Two examples of athletes he mentions are the following: Milo from Croton in southern Italy, a very famous wrestler of the 6th–5th century BC, ate 20 “mnes” (pounds) of meat, 20 “mnes” (pounds) of bread and drank three wine “hoes” (pints). When he was in Olympia he loaded on his shoulders a four-year-old bull and carried it to the Stadium of Olympia. Under the astonishment of the spectators, he butchered and ate it by himself in a day.¹⁵ The wrestler Damippos was called “Thunderbolt” not only because of his prowess, but also because of his insatiable need to devour anything set on the table before others had had any chance of enjoying a meal!¹⁶

Hippocrates recommends that one’s diet, and therefore the athlete’s, should be determined by age, time of year, weather conditions and temperament of the individual.¹⁷ He

defines a measure of food and similar exercise, suggesting a code of healthy living and the need to preserve the measure, which can lead to a timely avoidance of unpleasant diseases.¹⁸

Galen notes that the diet of athletes, especially of wrestlers, leads to obesity through its exaggeration. He argues that athletes are obliged to eat necessarily, thus they are compelled to follow a diet,¹⁹ that is why their life is worse than that of pigs, since the latter do not need to eat by force. He writes: “Even those who wrestle are led to obesity rather than to the practice of virtue. Many of them are so fat that they breathe with difficulty.”²⁰ “Such people are not appropriate to become generals in war or administrators of royal or political matters.”²¹ The physician blames athletes because they live recklessly laboring and filling themselves up like Coroebus of Elis,²² their physical beauty being distorted because of the demands of their trainers and their excessive stoutness,²³ so that they neither take pleasure of their own body because of excess body toil and compulsive eating, from which they suffer.²⁴

Notes

¹ Thermou 2017, 52.

² Swaddling 1984, 47.

³ Paus., VI, 7, 10.

⁴ Swaddling 1984, 47.

⁵ D. L., VIII, 12.

⁶ Dalby 2003, 38 s. v. Athletes; Grandjean 1997, 875S; Grivetti – Applegate 1997, 862S.

⁷ Ath., IX, 402c, where he refers to the unbeaten athlete Cleitomachus from Carthage who used to eat only the meat of goat.

⁸ Swaddling 1984, 47.

⁹ Swaddling 1984, 47.

¹⁰ Papagelopoulos et al. 2004, 1226.

¹¹ Pl., R. III, 404A.

¹² Arist., Ph. I, V, 10.

¹³ Jüthner 1909, 168, par. 43, 3–9.

¹⁴ Jüthner 1909, 168, 170, par. 43,17–26; Grivetti – Applegate 1997, 862Sf.

¹⁵ Ath., X, 412e–f; Simopoulos 1989, 924.

¹⁶ Ath., X, 416f–417a.

¹⁷ Joly – Byl 2003, 124, ch. A,2, 18–25.

¹⁸ Joly – Byl 2003, 124, ch. A,2, 33–43.

¹⁹ Kühn 1964, 37, ch. 14,5.

²⁰ Kühn 1965, 905, l. 12–14.

²¹ Kühn 1964, 905, l. 14–16.

²² Kühn 1964, 28, ch. 11,18–20.

²³ Kühn 1964, 32, ch. 12,5–16.

²⁴ Kühn 1964, 37, ch. 14,1–7.

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