

# ANCIENT GREECE EXERCISE, PHYSICAL TRAINING AND HARMONIOUS PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT IMPROVEMENT PATTERN

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## **Abstract**

*Ancient Greece, in addition to its economic and administrative development, has shown that exercises are very important for a nation's health. Exercises performed both in the military training and as a mass sport led to a harmonious development of the human body. For 12 centuries, Olympics held regularly and in a particularly well organized system, proceeded by two millennia current competitive activity performance. Statues of that time, within important worldwide museums are today's witness to the beauty of the human body. We should attach particular importance to the mass analysis of these activities, and to the fact that they had precise destinations and guidelines for men, women or children. Literature of the time shows us the extent of these activities and arts celebrated them. Physical training had a national character, today becoming universal, gaining a proper terminology. The Greek conception about the human body evolved in three directions: hygienic, military and harmonious. The Greek example is followed worldwide today, being adapted to contemporary conditions and to nation's peculiarities.*

**Key Words:** *Ancient Greece Exercise / physical training and harmonious physical development / improvement pattern*

JEL Classification: [K39]

## **1. Introduction**

Improving health and harmonious physical development is found in the archaeological sources from several countries with an advanced ancient culture. In the Hebrew and Persian cultures, the only form which occupied an important place was "the dancing accompanying the religious processions and rituals in the temples".<sup>1</sup> The Persians would prepare for hunting and war using exercises with weapons, like the spear and the archery, horse riding being also very important. Hindus, from the fourth millennium BC, for religious and hygienic purposes, used torso, arms and legs, or respiratory movements. In Ancient China exercises were considered as a part of education that included the education of the mind and brain, the Chinese national gymnastics system (Yo Fei) being still practiced today. Handling weapons and the superiority of physical force has been highlighted in the education forms of Ancient Japan until today by specific forms of tangible

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<sup>1</sup> M. Cucu, *Elemente de profilaxie și terapie prin mișcare*, Suport de curs, 2012.

assets, kyudo (archery), jiu-jitsu, sumo, judo, and other forms that combine physical harmonious development with education, philosophy, etc. Ancient Greece was a model for the practice of exercises in many forms, which unfold beginning from school and the army. These physical exercises comprised large masses of population, culminating with the Olympics, whose model is followed nowadays, too, getting from their broad masses practice, to the great performances, unfold in a particularly well organized system. We will especially treat even the influence of these activities in art, culture, medicine and mass education that the ancient Greeks gave special importance.

## 2. Pre-Hellenic Greece and exercise

"Occupying a poor and arid territory at the Southern tip of the Balkan Peninsula, Ancient Greece was the cradle of an exceptional civilization and culture. The previous civilization to Ancient Greece loved movement, beauty and exercise; we can emphasize the frescoes, paintings, mosaics and sculptures".<sup>2</sup>

Historians have documented in their research by studying the abundance of existing historical sources on the present Greek territory. Thus, the works of art, literature, archaeological sources or scientific works, show the clear vision of the evolution of exercise in ancient Greece. "The Pre-Hellenic age, also known as Crete-Mycenaean, developed its own civilization, the Aegean civilization - different from that of Ancient Greece, so named because of the area in which it flourished in particular, meaning the Aegean Islands."<sup>3</sup>

It is remarkable that at that time women already had the freedom not only to attend but also to participate in the games, a remarkable fact also for the following millennia. From the ceramic works it can be observed that fighting competitions, especially boxing, bull fights and dancing, were practiced as early as 2000 BC. We note that from the beginnings of organized exercises, the public loved tough, barbarian games, in which opponent partners applied kicks to each other, bad habit inherited by certain individuals nowadays. "Homer's epics include two important passages on the practice of physical exercise by the ancient Greeks".<sup>4</sup> The ritual for the cult of the dead is described in these works with exercise, which included even a chariot contest. In the Homeric poems the contest winners are praised, Achilles "the fleet-footed ", "the brave" Kiiomede, Philoctetes "the wonderful archer". What is of a real interest is the fact that these physical qualities of the Homeric heroes are

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<sup>2</sup> D. Almășan, L. Lupu, *Apariția exercițiilor fizice, a educației fizice și a sportului*, Editura Accent, Cluj-Napoca, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> C. Kirișescu, *Palestrica*, Editura Uniunii de Cultură fizică și Sport, București 1964.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

projected not only in battle but also in the variety of games in these poems".<sup>5</sup> In Book VIII of the *Odyssey*, on the island of the Pheacians, Ulysses witnessed and was challenged to participate in the games. "Ulysses throws the disc further than the Pheacians but refuses to participate in the grips race and in the run contest, considering himself weakened due to age".<sup>6</sup> "We know that these people loved art, luxury, good life and partying".<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Classical Greece

The period of time between 1400 and 1200 BC was the pinnacle of Greek civilization. We note that "only aristocrats and free citizens could practice physical exercises because they had enough available time".<sup>8</sup>

A fundamental tenet of the time's concept was such that the health of the human body is a prerequisite of developed intellectual functions, which would confer special features to Greek exercises.

### 4. Hygiene, harmonic and military concepts

"The most famous of the centaurs, Chiron, considered one of the creators of medicine and pharmacy, at the time, conducted Achilles's, Castor's and Pollux's, education etc., teaching them the art of hunting and preserving their health. In Aesculapius's and Pythagoras's medicine there are recommendations on diet, exercise, baths and body anointing".<sup>9</sup>

There were several personalities of the time whose legacy for the world were their remarkable conceptions about the need for harmonious combination of all the aspects maintaining human health in the long term, such as: Galen, Herodikos (precursor of Hippocrates), Hippocrates himself (the most important physician of antiquity), Philostratus, Antilus (considered the true founder of therapeutic gymnastics), Theon (who developed the theory and applications of massage). "The first applications of massage related to sport emerged from the Greeks and Romans, constituting an important method for athletes care ... who knew even self-massage".<sup>10</sup>

The human being is regarded as a complex personality that depends on several qualities from the amount of which must necessarily result the perfection

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> D. Almășan, L. Lupu, *Apariția exercițiilor fizice, a educației fizice și a sportului*, Editura Accent, Cluj-Napoca, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> C. Kirișescu, *Palestrica*, Editura Uniunii de Cultură fizică și Sport, București 1964.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> A. Ionescu, *Masajul*, Editura Stadion, București, 1970.

of the human ideal embodied in the famous Kalos kai agatos (beautiful and good man). "From the body worthiness ---- would develop moral qualities: courage, energy, self-control", while developing spiritual qualities. "In the Republic and the Laws, Plato imagine his ideal state, which in terms of social order keeps the slave system (division into fixed classes: masters and subjects), reckoning it as something natural. In his teaching system gymnastics is considered as the most important element of the harmonious education".<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the military concept, we mention that in old Sparta, the military camp spirit determined the socio-political structure of society which did not exclude the moral and intellectual citizens' element. "The purpose of Spartan citizens' education was to create strong, healthy, viable citizens, able to dominate the majority slave population, distinguishing themselves in battle. Debilitated individuals, who showed signs of degeneration, were suppressed at birth, being thrown from a cliff of the Taygetos Mountains. This practice is called euthanasia".<sup>12</sup>

## 5. Gymnastics

The term comes from Ancient Athens, ghimnos-naked, gymnastics being the art practiced by the naked man, hence also deriving the terms of gymnasium and gymnast.

Slaves and foreigners were excluded from this practice reserved only for free Greek citizens. Alexander the Great's revenue officer, the one that founded the philosophical school in Athens, Aristoteles, in his work Politics, brings elements of the concept of unity between the body and the soul at a material level both with dialectical correlation elements between physical, intellectual and moral education. "The body must be formed before the spirit ... it is necessary to give special attention to children games ... chosen with care".<sup>13</sup>

"Physicians in Ancient Greece supervised both therapy through exercise and some diseases prophylaxis using them. Herodikos of Selimbria, Hippocrates's forerunner and the Greek parent of therapeutic gymnastics, was the first to conceive the rules of this discipline "... Hippocrates noted the beneficial importance of gymnastic exercises, of massages, baths ... Galen, physician of the gladiators. His books deal with pathology, therapy, pharmacology, physiology and exercise topics".<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> C. Kirişescu, *Palestrica*, Editura Uniunii de Cultură fizică și Sport, București 1964.

<sup>12</sup> D. Almășan, L. Lupu, *Apariția exercițiilor fizice, a educației fizice și a sportului*, Editura Accent, Cluj-Napoca, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> C. Kirişescu, *Palestrica*, Editura Uniunii de Cultură fizică și Sport, București 1964.

<sup>14</sup> D. Almășan, L. Lupu, *Apariția exercițiilor fizice, a educației fizice și a sportului*, Editura Accent, Cluj-Napoca, 2001.

"Hippocrates, father of medicine, noted that the athlete should not be deformed by excessive development of certain muscle groups over others".<sup>15</sup>

## 6. Ancient Greek art

"Vatican Gallery has among the masterpieces of ancient sculpture, the Doric Runner, a girl of great strength and feminine grace, dressed in a simple chiton clothing".<sup>16</sup>

The beauty cult in Ancient Greece idealizes human body perfection and throughout the incomparable Parthenon with its priceless statues and marble reliefs which raise beauty to the rank of virtue that celebrates moral superiority and power as elements of perfection. In the Iliad, Homer portrays "sports competitions, wrestling, running, pugilat, archery, discus throw and javelin, horse racing, horse riding and more about gymnastics, Plato is the first philosopher who says that it has no mythological origin, but it is born from the physiological impulses of the individual".<sup>17</sup> "Plato in his works *The Laws* and *Republic*, developed an education system where physical education is present as the most important element of the harmonious education ...he recommended pugilat even in children's education."<sup>18</sup>

Ceramics presented a great diversity both in terms of destination, materials or colors used. All the works stood out for the ornamentation and design perfection. Exercises are less represented in these ceramics.

Statuary art is represented by gables, statues and reliefs. We mention here some outstanding works such as: Miron's Discobolus, the Doric Runner, the Dorifor, Apollo, Hermes and Cnidis. All these works represent humans in dynamic activities with sporty character.

## 7. Institutions

The particular type of education was determined by the purpose of the educational process. Thus, everything was oriented towards the military training that began at the age of 7, boys being supervised by an elderly slave named pedagog (teacher), girls staying at home. "Slaves and women did not belong to the category of citizens ... Athens became the state with the most democratic constitution from the entire Greek world ... Through education health was primarily achieved"<sup>19</sup> Exercises unfolded in Palestra (school institutions).

Palestra were inside complexes which included: ephbeum (meeting and exercise room, especially for wrestling), coryceum (hall for ball games), Loutrón

<sup>15</sup> L. Szekely, *Dezvoltare, armonie, frumusețe*, Editura Sport Turism, București, 1988.

<sup>16</sup> C. Kirițescu, *Palestrica*, Editura Uniunii de Cultură fizică și Sport, București 1964

<sup>17</sup> D. Almășan, L. Lupu, *Apariția exercițiilor fizice, a educației fizice și a sportului*, Editura Accent, Cluj-Napoca, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> F. Rusu, *Educația fizică și sportul în istoria omenirii*, Editura Napoca Star, Cluj-Napoca, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

(cold water bath), hot water baths, massage and lubrication rooms, a central court where the exercises unfold outdoors (ball games, pugilat, wrestling).

Palestra was near the gymnasium, where masters and their students carried on the teaching process, then came the stadium that "had a central arena and banks located in amphitheater, for spectators, during the festivities. Beyond the walls there were blank places arranged for the archery or spear exercises, there were staff houses, etc."<sup>20</sup> Diet and food, massage, and anointing with massage oil were supervised, these practices having perpetuated to this day.

In his work, *The State*, Plato believes "that due to the lack of culture and education, as well as due to improper state organization, crimes can be committed".<sup>21</sup>

### **8. Exercises practice modalities**

In Ancient Greece, the diversity of expression forms was embodied in gymnastics, orchestrica and agnostica.

They practiced gymnastic exercises, such as: throwing the javelin or disc, pugilatul, pancratio, free jumping, fighting and running. Among the athletes, the legendary Hercules stood out.

Pentathlon was already practiced at that time, being the forerunner of today's combined practices, initiated during the Olympics in 798 BC, of which running was the oldest, the simplest, the most important and the best war exercise of all pentathlon practices. There were also races of armed people.

Among the important modalities for exercises practice we also mention the disc and javelin throwing, jumping or fighting, this last one being considered the most difficult and cherished exercise of the pentathlon. Pugilat (fighting with the fists), a brutal exercise, is the old form of modern boxing.

We note the persistence up to now of these practices, which constituted a model for the entire ancient world, being upgraded and used both as exercise and competition.

We mention here also the complexity of the ball games, very loved and recommended by doctors. Thus, "Galen wrote a small treatise that glorifies the outcomes of this game that brings: health to body, symmetry to limbs and virtue to soul".<sup>22</sup>

Horse and chariot competitions, sling throwing, chariot running and archery were also important.

Swimming was practised by both sexes in gymnasiums and palestra pools supplied by the extensive network of aqueduct water systems that constitute the

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<sup>20</sup> C. Kirişescu, *Palestrica*, Editura Uniunii de Cultură fizică și Sport, București 1964.

<sup>21</sup> H. Oprean, P. Popovici, G. Labo, *Introducere în Criminologie*, Editura Napoca Star, Cluj-Napoca, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> C. Kirişescu, *Palestrica*, Editura Uniunii de Cultură fizică și Sport, București 1964.

starting point for the nowadays Athenian hydrologic system, supported also by the fact that Greece was surrounded by sea.

Being an art dance, orchestrica, was very loved and developed by the ancient Greeks (about 200 dances), varying considering the praised divinity and the dance genders.

"Getting together music and exercise was a prerequisite for achieving a harmonious development for humans".<sup>23</sup>

Regarding agnostica (the sacredness of the games), we mention that Apollo was an archer, a boxer, a discobolus and the God of music.

### **9. Olympia and the Olympics**

In the former kingdom of Ellada there was the goddess Hera's sanctuary, the Greek symbol of life, Olympia, the sacred arena or the home of the Olympics, the entire Ellada's attention and interest center.

Unfold during five days, the Olympic Games were held once every four years, and the interval between them was called the Olympics. Unlike today, during the ancient Olympics armed confrontations were suspended. During 12 centuries there were held over 293 editions of the ancient Olympics.

The presentation to the Olympics of the admitted competitors was made after very strict admission criteria (moral, technical, ethnic and social criteria), two months before the starting date. Due to good roads, the travel of the competitors was made within two months considering the most distant cities of the empire, the furthest city being Tomis. Within the Olympics, competitions were held for the following: pentathlon, jumping, throwing, fighting, pugilat and pancratio, horse and chariot races. Competitions were supervised, technically and morally, by referees.

"If, in addition to participation, competitors could get a prize, this became a very serious source of pride. Pythagoras, the most famous philosopher and mathematician of Ancient Greece, managed to obtain a title of champion in pugilat in the Olympic Games held in Olympia".<sup>24</sup>

Winners' reward was generous, they were generally granted numerous and important gifts such as: slaves, horses, cups, clothes and cash prizes. Winners enjoyed great respect, their entry back home, after the arrival from the Olympic Games was made triumphantly through the broken wall of the fortress, then, not through the gateway of their city. They also received other honors such as exemption from taxes, odes were written or statues were raised for them.

Apart from the Olympic Games in Ancient Greece, many competitions were held regularly, with local character. Nemean Games were held in Nemea every

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> F. Rusu., *Educația fizică și sportul în istoria omenirii*, Editura Napoca Star, Cluj-Napoca, 2008.

two years and were held in the fourth year of the Summer Olympics. Isthmic Games were held in the spring in the second and fourth year of the Olympics. Dwarf Games were held at Delphi in honor of Apollo, along with music competitions. Panathenaic Games were held locally, with dancing and body beauty contests .

All the Olympic Games held in Ancient Greece are a model for the nowadays competitions. In 1896, Baron Pierre de Coubertain initiated the modern Olympics, and the development, the awards and the honours of the ancient ones are done alike, nowadays.

### **10. Conclusions**

From all presented above, within the limits of a teaching staff conference, we can easily see that the similarities between the unfold of Ancient Greece physical activities and those nowadays are obvious.

The substantial difference consists in the fact that only free citizens had the right to practice organized exercises, this being a contradiction for the modern days, on this ancient territory where democracy emerged.

As today, exercises were represented in art, one can find multiple examples. Physical activities were held in institutions, starting the age of 7, their aim being the creation of a fund for military training that became compulsory after the age of 18. Doctors of that time discovered and recommended exercise to strengthen the body and to develop harmonious physical health. They also made the first prescriptions on optimal dosage of exercise, noting that exaggerations do not lead to any performance, or to a harmonious physical development. In the field of competitive activity, it is noted the fact that there were rigorously scheduled regional competitions, culminating with the Olympic Games, taken as a model for the entire world, since 1896, being organized today after the model of antiquity.

As nowadays, the ancient Greek champions were rewarded very well reaching to the point of tax exemption for life. Tough sports (pugilat and pancratio) were particularly loved by a specific audience.

It may be noted in particular that scientists of the time (Olympic champion Pythagoras, Aristotles, Hippocrates, Plato and others) practised performance sports. From modern times we mention one example: the famous scientist Henri Coanda was the greatest Romanian multi-athlete who practiced, at performance level, 16 sports of which we mention swimming, skating, French and English rugby leagues, riding, horse racing in France and England, volleyball, etc. He was a good cellist, too. Therefore, performance sport has been compatible with both high-level science and arts ever since the ancient times.

This paper highlights the fact that exercises practiced in Ancient Greece represent a model for the physical activities or the athletic performances of today.

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