

## SPORTS IN ANCIENT APHRODISIAS

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### SUMMARY

The ancient city of Aphrodisias is one of the most important archaeological sites of the Greek and Roman periods in Turkey. The history of the city can be traced back to the early Bronze Age and there is even clear evidence of a chalcolithic culture prior to the 3rd millennium BC. Aphrodisias was one of the foremost cities of its time and is known for its highly developed commercial, political, religious and cultural institutions, a very fine tradition of arts and crafts, and world-famous schools of philosophy and sculpture. One of the most impressive structures in Aphrodisias, and certainly one of the best preserved in the world, is the stadium. Measuring 262 meters long and 59 meters wide, it has a seating capacity of 30,000. It was specifically designed for athletic contests. Competitions in the province of Asia Minor were modeled on the Olympic and Pythian games in Greece. Competitions included boxing, wrestling, chariot racing, riding, running, pankration and pentathlon (discus, javelin, jump, running, and wrestling). Winners won prize money, the more violent events commanding huge purses. This phenomenon reflects Roman influence upon Aphrodisias' culture and sport.

**Key words:** Aphrodisias, ancient, athletic, competitions

### ÖZET

#### ANTİK AFRODİSİAS'DA SPOR

*Antik Afrodisias kenti Anadolu'da Yunan ve Roma dönemlerinin en önemli arkeolojik yerleşimlerinden biridir. Kentin tarihi erken Bronz Çağına uzanır ve MÖ 3000'lere uzanan kültür izleri bulunur. Afrodisias çağının en önde gelen kentlerinden biri olup çok gelişmiş ticari, siyasi, dinsel ve kültürel kurumlarıyla, ince bir sanat ve zanaat geleneğiyle ve dünyaca ünlü felsefe ve heykeltıraşlık okullarıyla bilinmektedir. Afrodisias'ın en*

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*görkemli yapılarından ve dünyada en iyi korunmuş olanlarından biri stadyumudur. Boyutları 262 metre boya 59 metre ende olup 30,000 kişilik oturma kapasitesi vardı. Özellikle spor müsabakaları için tasarlanmıştı. Küçük Asya eyaletinde yarışmalar Yunan Olimpus ve Pitya oyunlarını örnek almıştı. Boks, güreş, araba yarışı, binicilik, koşu, pankration ve pentatlon (disk, cirit, atlama, koşu ve güreş) yarışmaları vardı. Kazananlar, daha şiddetli branşlar daha yüksek olmak üzere, para ödülleri alıyordu. Bu olgu Afrodiasias kültür ve sporuna Roma etkisini yansıtmaktadır.*

**Anahtar sözcükler:** *Afrodiasias, antik çağ, spor, yarışma*

## INTRODUCTION

Athletics have held a special place in culture since the beginning of time. This was especially true in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. The city of Aphrodisias, now in modern Turkey, was a model for sports development as evidenced by her stadium which still attracts thousands of visitors every year. Research, recorded from 19th century visitors, revealed that the stadium, located in the northern region of the ancient site, had a beautiful auditorium made with marble from the Baba Dağı region and noted its remarkable condition (7).

**The city of Aphrodisias:** The history of this city is a very rich one. Aphrodisias (Fig. 1) was one of the foremost cities of its time, surrounded by fertile fields yielding a wide variety of crops. It also possessed a flourishing wool and cotton industry. It was known for its highly developed commercial, political, religious and cultural institutions, a very fine tradition of arts and crafts, and world-famous schools of philosophy and sculpture. Sports also played an important role in its history (3). Athletes traveled from modern-day Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Libya, Spain and the Black Sea region to participate in sporting events centered in and around the stadium.

**The stadium at Aphrodisias:** It is the single, best preserved stadium of its type in the world with 30 tiers of seating providing space for 30,000 people, with dimensions 262 meters long and 59 meters wide (Fig. 2). As Welch and her associates (9) noted: "...although the Stadium at Aphrodisias has been above ground since antiquity, it has suffered surprisingly little damage. Unlike many monuments at the site with more complicated histories, the Stadium is virtually untouched, making it an ideal candidate for a comprehensive study that will be useful for subsequent analyses of other stadiums of the Roman period."



**Fig. 1:** View from the city of Aphrodisias.



**Fig. 2:** The Stadium at Aphrodisias.

The purpose of the ancient stadiums was to provide place for athletic competitions and allow easy viewing for spectators. The ends of the Aphrodisias stadium are slightly convex, giving it an elliptical shape ensuring that spectators seated in the middle of the edifice would not

block the views of others, allowing them to see the whole of the arena. The stadium built at ground level, without monumental facade allows us to estimate that it was built before the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, as contrasted to more developed stadiums of the next century. Since it had no vaulting, spectators climbed up entering from the top and went down to their seats. There are about five mounds still evident today, where the earth was built up, allowing spectators enter the stadium (2,9).

Athletic competitions in the province of Asia were modeled on the Olympic and Pythian games in Greece, and had the same name and organization as their Greek counterparts. These contests were held with the permission of Rome and getting permission was a great honor (6). The Gordinea festivals held in honor of the Emperor complemented the games held in Aphrodisias. Competitions included boxing, wrestling, chariot racing, riding, running, pankration and pentathlon (discus, javelin, jump, running, and wrestling).

An incredible archaeological finding that has survived from the first century A.D. is a prize money list for specific athletic events. The inscriptions tell us that winners won the following prizes: the pentathlon garnered a prize of 500 dinars, 750 dinars for the *dolichos* (two lengths of the running course), 1000 for the *diaulos*, 1250 for the *stade* (one length sprint), 2000 each for boxing and wrestling, and 3000 for the brutal pankration. Since the wage of a common laborer was approximately one dinar per day, one can see the prudence of pursuing athletics as a profession. The less violent events garnered smaller rewards, while the more violent events commanded huge purses. This approach seems to reflect Roman influence in Greek culture and sport (8).

We hear of the simple olive wreath being given to the victor of events held at Olympia, a laurel wreath at Delphi, pine at Isthmia, and celery at Nemea, but these were merely symbolic awards. What might be bestowed on the victorious athlete when he returned home was certainly more than the term symbolic connotes. We also hear of such gratuities to the victorious athlete as immunity from paying taxes, honored seats at civic and religious functions, free repasts at the civic messes, glorious statues struck in his honor, poetry composed, and orations delivered on his behalf (5).

Athletes trained strenuously and used sports trainers and coaches. They had a public following and were rewarded well for their efforts. Olympic athletes had to be Greek citizens, but this restriction

may have become less strict in later times as the Greek world spread, to include competitors of different ethnicities (4). Prizes for victories at athletic festivals increased proportionately with the increase of wealth and Greek influence in the Mediterranean area. As it does for high-level athletes of today, recognition, prestige, status and high salaries motivated ancient Greek athletes (8).

Combative events were very popular. Wrestling was performed in upright fashion, much like modern Greco-Roman wrestling. The pankration was an event often misunderstood to be like wrestling or boxing. It was very brutal, and pankratists did not wear boxing thongs on their fists. Rules permitted violence. The aim of the pankratist was to force his opponent to give up or even render him unconscious. Boxing was simpler. Boxers could protect their hands with leather thongs, which later developed into boxing gloves. Boxing opponents fought until knockout, or when one gave up. Competitors in wrestling, pankration, and boxing competed in a draw system to get into the finals.

“The pentathlon event consisted of five components: i.e. the jump, hurling the discus, the javelin throw, the “stade” run and wrestling. The javelin was thrown with the aid of an “ankule”, a thong looped around the shaft near the center of gravity, which added a slinging action to the spear. The pentathlon jump has prompted argument among scholars of Greek athletic events, but the thesis that appears to best satisfy the ancient evidence supports a multiple jumping exercise of five successive leaps along the jumping pit, “skamma”. We know that small weights (between 3 and 10 pounds), called “halteres”, were gripped in both hands of the jumper throughout the exercise. Scholars believe that the swinging action of the “halteres” added distance to the jump over what might be accomplished if they were not used. If competitions produced two or three different winners, then those competitors proceeded to run and wrestle in order to determine a pentathlon champion.” (5)

In modern athletics we expect participation by women, in all types of sports. This was not true in antiquity. Generally women were excluded from competition and even from watching athletic events. Some thought it would adversely affect power and strength if women were present particularly at events associated with Heracles. There was one religious festival reserved only for girls, named the Heraia. This festival celebrated the goddess Hera, sister and wife of Zeus. At the

Heraia there was a single running race for unmarried girls. Women were generally encouraged to pursue domestic roles. Fortunately, athletic opportunities for women have improved in Aphrodisias, modern Turkey, and all over the world (1).

Some things change and some things remain the same, but the quest for excellence in all areas of life is evident, especially in sports. Those who learn about or visit the stadium in Aphrodisias will marvel at the care taken in its construction and its remarkable condition even today. The well-preserved buildings and inscriptions remind all that sports played an important role in Aphrodisias' culture nearly 2000 years ago, just as sports are so important to culture today.

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