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Roman Bikini-girls: Female Representation and Identity in Mosaics during Late Antiquity

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The representation of women in ancient Roman art has recently become a popular subject of scholarly interest, particularly concerning themes of identity, social status, and standards of beauty. One particularly compelling example is the mosaic from the *Sala delle Palestrite* at Villa Romana del Casale in Piazza Armerina, Sicily.[1] This mosaic, often referred to in popular discourse as depicting "bikini-dressed women", provides a unique visual narrative that, in many ways, might challenge modern interpretations of women during Late Antiquity.

The women portrayed are, however, not wearing swimsuits, but *strophium* and *subligaculum* – garments associated with athletic, or intimate, contexts in Roman culture.[2] The study aimed to explore how visual culture can serve as a medium for both reinforcing and challenging contemporary gender norms by analysing the mosaic's artistic stylisation, compositional structure, and broader historical context. By exploring these themes, I have aimed to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the intersection of art, gender, and social change in the Roman world.

Fig.1. Sala delle Palestrite, also known as the Chamber of the Ten Maidens, measures approximately 6.36 x 5.12 m. Villa Romana del Casale in Piazza Armerina, Sicily. Image source: Ludvig14 (2020). Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.

Research on ancient athletics has predominantly centred on male representations, reinforcing the prevailing Greek paradigm that equates athletic nudity with *areté* – an abstract concept of physical excellence and intellectuality, or *virtus* in a Roman context. Despite the significant impact of gender theory in art historical research since the 1970s, studies focusing on female imagery, particularly those examining gender and identity, remain quite underrepresented in mosaics. Consequently, it is essential to further explore this area, as female imagery in mosaics can offer a valuable perspective on gendered ideals and values.

Scholars such as Natalie Boymel Kampen, Eve D'Ambra, Elaine Fantham, and Barbara Levick, have together with Gillian Clark's influential work *Women in Late Antiquity* (1993), offered a foundational analysis of the status and roles of women in the ancient world. Clark argues that much of the scholarship on women in antiquity has traditionally been concentrated on the classical period, notably the late Republic and early Empire, with limited focus on the period from the third century CE onward. Perhaps due to the scarcity of primary source records, which has left a gap in the historical narrative, it is nonetheless crucial to understand the transition into the Christian Empire. One must, however, acknowledge that women's voices were rarely heard beyond their immediate familial circles, and most women who made intellectual or artistic contributions left little lasting trace. Works by women for public dissemination are exceedingly uncommon, resulting in a historical narrative that is primarily shaped by male viewpoints.[3]

The Elite and the Athlete: Social and Cultural Significances

Villa Romana del Casale has been under UNESCO protection since 1997 and is considered one of the most significant examples of a Roman state residence in the Western Empire.[4] The well-preserved mosaics that adorn numerous rooms, both of public and private function, were likely created by North African mosaic artists.[5] The present structure, whose construction can be traced to the first half of the fourth century CE, was built on top of an earlier villa dating back to the late second and early third centuries CE.[6] The villa, like most Roman estates, served a dual purpose. It functioned both as a public space for representation, acting as the *officium*, the administrative centre of a vast agricultural estate, and as a private residence, with designated areas for family gatherings and the owner's personal quarters.[7]

Extensive research has been conducted on Villa Romana del Casale, with a considerable body of scholarly material dedicated to its mosaics. Among the most influential scholars is Patrizio Pensabene, who has dedicated much of his career to the architectural and archaeological study of the site at Piazza Armerina, working on the solid foundation of Gino Vinicio Gentili, the villa's

principal archaeologist in the 1950s.[89] More recently, Pensabene has collaborated with Paolo Barresi on several topographies and research material.[10]

In line with other Roman villas, Pensabene highlights that the artistic repertoire of the mosaics encompasses a diverse collection of themes, reflecting the values and lifestyle of contemporary Roman society. The primary function of these mosaics was to honour the *dominus* (lord) and his family, often through symbolic, allegorical, and descriptive scenes.[11] While literary sources indicate that women were expected to fulfil roles as dutiful daughters, wives, and mothers, there is also evidence suggesting that Roman women were often seen as the cornerstone of the household and that both men and women participated in construction projects. As aristocratic men were frequently occupied with public service, architectural and artistic decisions were sometimes entrusted to their wives.[12]

Domina proceeded to the baths, accompanied by her two sons and servants, first half of the 4th century. Floor mosaic, Piazza Armerina, Villa Romana del Casale, Vestibulum of the Domina. Image source: Ilya Shurygin (2018). Retrieved from Ancient Rome.

The mosaic of the female athletes, located in the private part of the dominus and *domina's* villa, overlays an earlier geometric design. Recent research suggests that the room was given a new function, where the inclusion of female athletic activities could have been a way for patrons to assert their exceptional social status by portraying activities typically associated with the aristocracy. Similar iconographic motifs appear in other parts of the villa, highlighting the prominence of aristocratic athletic traditions. For example, the *Piccola Caccia* mosaic, as well as depictions of the dominus as a nude athlete in the villa's *frigidarium*, illustrate the centrality of physical strength and competition in elite Roman culture.[13]

Despite the abundance of scholarly attention devoted to Villa Romana del Casale, coverage of the female athlete mosaic has been relatively limited. Pensabene briefly acknowledges that the scene represents a Roman *palaestra* and focuses on the central moment of an athletic competition; the award ceremony.[14] The mosaic features depictions of palm fronds and crowns adorned with red flowers, as well as events such as discus throwing, *gioco del trigone*, running, and preparations for the long jump with *halteres* (weights used for jumping).[15] Additionally, a spinning wheel (*girandola*), originally mistaken for a parasol, has been identified as a type of wooden toy used in competitive games – a motif also present in mosaics from the Great Palace of Constantinople.[16]

Shifting the Arena: from Exclusion to Participation

Given the clear athletic theme of the mosaic, we must first examine the Greek heritage of the Olympic Games. Despite its societal prominence, women were permitted neither to compete nor, in most cases, to spectate. Only certain women, such as the priestess of *Demeter Chamyne* (The Goddess of Fertility) and certain maidens from the city, were granted access to the games. Over time, unmarried women, those of maiden status, were allowed limited access, while married women remained strictly forbidden from attending. It has been suggested that these restrictive rules may reflect an early association between women's participation in the games and local fertility rites.[17]

The social status of women in ancient Greek society, characterized by exclusion from political decision-making, religious rituals, early marriages, multiple childbirths, and domestic duties, was hardly conducive to athletic competition. However, Greek women did have their athletic festival dedicated to the goddess Hera, the *Heraean Games*, which were held every four years on a different cycle from the male Olympic Games. The Heraean Games took place in various cities across the Peloponnese, and their focus was perhaps less on female athletics, and more on fertility – even if foot races were held. The winners were awarded olive wreaths and honoured by having clay portraits placed in the Temple of Hera.[18]

Centuries later, during the late Republic and early Empire, the Romans adapted various athletic contests, although traditional Roman spectacles such as gladiator games remained popular.[19] Notably, the Roman world saw an expansion of female participation in sports, with performances by women becoming more common from the 1st century CE onwards. Roman women, as well as the *Vestal Virgins*, could attend chariot races and amphitheatre events, and young women were allowed to compete in the Capitoline Games[20]. They were also permitted to use bathhouses, which might not be that of a surprise considering the records of female gladiators in the Roman Empire.[21] Excavations at Olympia further reveal inscriptions detailing the participation of travelling athletes

who competed not only in the Olympic Games but also in other Greek-influenced competitions, such as the *Sebastà isolimpici* in Naples. The athletes would often participate in events across various cities, competing in festivals such as the Capitoline Games in Rome, Sebastà in Naples, and the Actian Games in Nicopolis.[22]

While women's participation in ancient sports was unusual, evidence suggests a shift from the exclusionary practices of the early Greek games. Roman women, by contrast, could not only attend these spectacles but could also compete in professional athletic events, marking a significant change from the times when women risked punishment merely for being present at the stadiums. One must also note the Roman fondness for public holidays; during the reign of Claudius, the Roman calendar included 159 days explicitly designated as *feriae* (public holidays), which often centred around themes of fertility, harvest, or desire.[23]

In addition to their participation in athletic festivals, women in ancient Rome also engaged in a variety of recreational activities that combined physical movement, socialisation, and cultural expression. One such activity was *trigon*, a ball game that was played particularly in the context of bathing establishments such as public thermal baths. Female players wore clothes like the ones portrayed in the *Palestrite*-mosaic, as three players would throw one or more balls to one another. Given the game's leisure setting, it indicates that women were involved in both physical activities and semi-public events. Another example of women's participation in performance-based activities comes from the early forms of synchronized swimming, which were performed in Roman amphitheatres. Roman girls would perform water spectacles, often accompanied by music, showcasing an early version of what we now recognise as modern artistic swimming. The combination of athletic skill and artistic expression further highlights the evolving roles of women in public performances and the cultural blend of physicality and spectacle in Roman society. [24] [25]

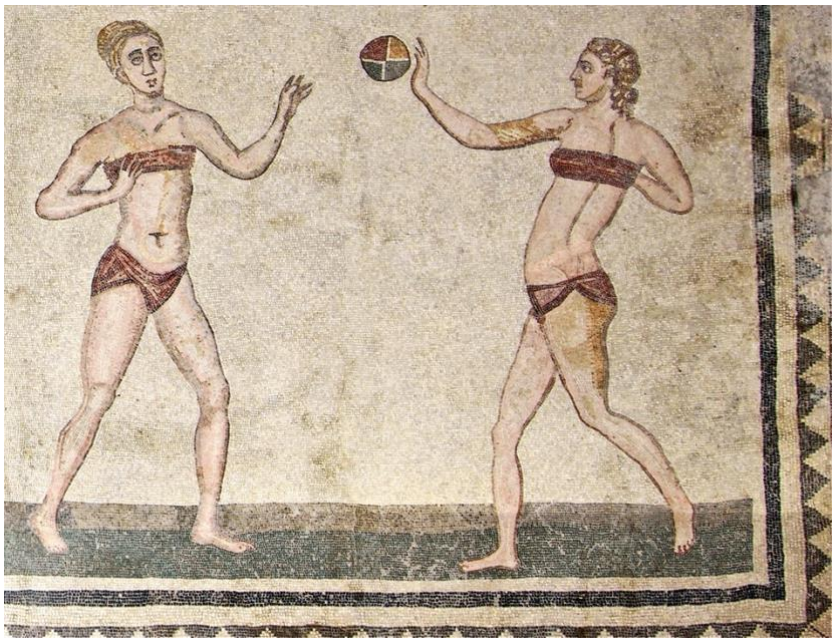

Fig. 3. Detail from the mosaic in the Sala delle Palestrite, Villa Romana del Casale, Piazza Armerina, Sicily. Image source: Ludvig14 (2020). Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.

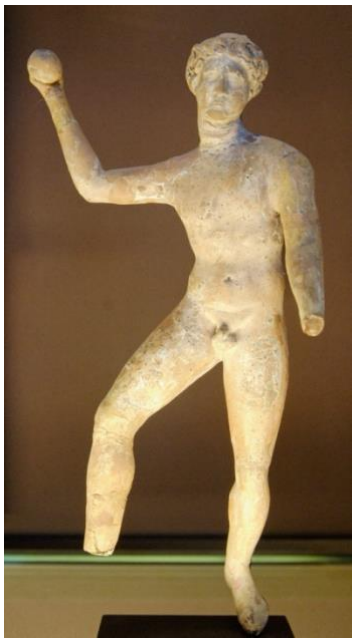

Fig. 4. Ball player. Terracotta figurine, made in Corinth, from the 4th century BCE, Corinth. Louvre Museum, Paris (MNC 335). Image source: Jastrow (2008). Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.

The Aesthetics of Areté

The significance of physical activity, both for recreation and competition, is well-documented in various artistic forms and motifs. While literary sources indicate a degree of restraint in fully embracing Greek traditions, visual material suggests the contrary – that athletics and athletic themes were widely appreciated in Rome. Most literary references to athletics stem from approximately 100 BCE to 200 CE, whereas mosaics depicting athletic themes are generally later, dating from Hadrian's period to the late third century CE. This temporal gap allows for an examination of Greek athletic reception in later periods when the Capitoline Games were well established. The location of these mosaics, particularly in public bath complexes, suggests that athletics were appreciated by a broader audience beyond the aristocracy. Rome also became the central *officum* for a plethora of athletic organisations, dedicated solely to supporting athletes and actors.[26] [27]

An example of this can be found in the *Terme Marittime* mosaic, which shows a victorious athlete wearing a distinctive crown with five protrusions. This stylized crown bears similarities to those worn by athletes depicted in mosaics from the *Baths of Caracalla* in Rome, as well as mosaics from *Gafsa* in Tunisia, which portray victorious competitors. The protrusions on these crowns appear to

represent floral decorations, with variations in the number of extensions; three in the Caracalla mosaics, and five in the Terme Marittime and Gafsa example. These floral crowns may further be linked to the Capitoline Games, as Domitian is recorded to have worn a crown adorned with similar projections representing the *Capitoline Triad*. Although floral crowns differ from the more conventional laurel wreaths, they do still align with Greek traditions.[28]

Fig. 5. Detail from the mosaic showing the prize ceremony with flower crowns (also note the visible scar on the knee of the woman receiving the crown), in the Sala delle Palestrite, Villa Romana del Casale, Piazza Armerina, Sicily. Image source: Ludvig14 (2020). Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.

Fig. 6. Detail from the mosaic of athletes at a sporting event, the winner wearing a similar crown. Oases of the Maghreb, circa 4th century CE, Gafsa, Tunisia. Gafsa Archaeological Museum. Image source: FAO of the UN (2012). Retrieved from Flickr.

With the emergence of aesthetics as a formal discipline in the mid-18th century, beauty was re-established as a central focus of intellectual inquiry. To understand the classical Greek ideals of athletic beauty, Heather Reid suggests that we first need to ask ourselves what "appeared" to the Greeks when they viewed an ideal athletic naked form. Even the ancient Greeks had their preferences, which undoubtedly varied over time and in different geographical regions – just as the Romans did.[29] The most popular subject for athletic sculptures was the *pentathlon-athlete*, which according to Aristotle's ethics, exemplifies an athlete's natural adaptation to bodily exertion, swiftness, and virtue. The beauty of the pentathlon-athlete is therefore not just about the physical form, but also about reflecting a mental and philosophical harmony, expressing a philosophical view of victory in a religious context.[30]

In contrast, female athletes in visual art were typically depicted clothed. However, the mythological figure Atalanta was occasionally shown nude, while statues of athletic goddesses such as Artemis and Athena during the Classical period remained clothed. Although the goddess Venus was commonly portrayed nude, these representations hardly conveyed any association with athleticism. According to Reid, this discrepancy could be due to artists having limited knowledge of the female athletic form, as they rarely had the opportunity to observe female athletes in the nude for inspiration.[31]

An alternative explanation for the depiction of female athletes as clothed may lie in the notion that their appeal was not perceived in their physical bodies, but rather in their mental and moral qualities – what Greeks referred to as *areté*. While male nudity was often seen as a symbol of both physical and intellectual excellence, the clothed representation of female athletes could suggest that their areté was understood to be expressed through attributes beyond the physical form.[32] Notably, *female* areté held a distinct connotation compared to its male counterpart; whereas men were evaluated based on their physical strength and intellectual abilities, *female* areté was predominantly valued in terms of beauty, purity, and their capacity to manage domestic responsibilities, reflecting the prevailing social norms of the time.[33]

Despite the absence of female athletes in art and the emphasis on modesty concerning female *areté*, Reid does not argue that athletic women completely lacked erotic appeal. On the contrary, it is suggested that their athleticism may have enhanced their allure, presenting a more complex and multifaceted portrayal of female sexuality. Competitions for girls at the Hera and Artemis sanctuaries were likely part of the transition from childhood to marriage – from Artemis to Aphrodite. Erotic features surrounding athletic women are, therefore, more closely linked to marriage and reproduction.[34] Spartan girls did however train naked, but this was seen as a process for reproduction and health, not for the sexualisation or exploitation of women's bodies.[35] That being said, how likely that reflects reality is not known.

Fertility, Femininity, and… Freedom?

The mosaic in *Sala delle Palestrite* has undoubtedly an apparent ceremonial nature in its depiction of an event that can be associated with either a public holiday or a celebration. The Roman enthusiasm for performances and competitions, deeply intertwined with religious ceremonies, is evident in the numerous public festivals and sacred games embedded in the Roman calendar. Furthermore, the mosaic's symbolic element is tied to the prize-giving, the most important moment of an athletic competition, embodying not just physical strength, but also the *areté* of the athlete. The neutral, but alluring, expressions of the female figures in the mosaic suggest that their portrayal is rooted in the dual focus of physical and moral intellectuality.

The room's likely repurposing, marked by the covering of the geometric mosaic, suggests that the renovation may have been an opportunity to align with the broader social and cultural shifts occurring within the Roman Empire at the time. These shifts included a growing fascination with Olympia, which, a century later, would culminate in the blending of Greek and Roman cultures through Domitian's Capitoline Games. In contrast, the athletes' attire, hairstyles, and gestures

reflect traditional notions of femininity, even though their participation in athletic endeavours challenges the stereotypical representation of Roman women.

While Roman women were largely confined to the domestic sphere, the athletes depicted in the mosaic represent a departure from this norm, indicating a shift in societal expectations concerning women's roles. The mosaic from Piazza Armerina therefore provides exceptional insight into the inclusion of women in athletic pursuits, both in private and public domains. However, the representation of female athletes was so rare that any depiction of sport-like activities serves as an indication of its exceptional nature.

The female athletes in the mosaic thus reflect a shifting perception of women in public life. The portrayal of women engaged in athletic competitions suggests an increasing acceptance of female autonomy, diverging from the Greek tradition where women's roles were largely reduced to those of mothers, wives, and sisters. However, this newfound freedom was not to last indefinitely; with the rise of Christianity, many of the public celebrations and festivals that included women's participation gradually diminished. Despite this, the representation of women in sports during this period underscores a moment of expanded social independence that would not be replicated for centuries.

It is also noteworthy that the representation of female athletes in the mosaic might be intertwined with themes of fertility, a recurring motif in both Greek and Roman art. Women in Olympia were initially barred from participating in athletic events, a clear reflection of their exclusion from competitive sports. This exclusion emphasised the notion of women's roles in reproduction and the family, in contrast to the competitive, male-dominated athletic world. In the mosaic, the athleticism of the female figures is not only a testament to physical training but also presented alongside bodily attributes traditionally associated with fertility, such as wide hips and narrow waists. These features align with the Roman ideal of femininity, linking athleticism to reproductive capabilities, thereby reinforcing the intersection of physicality and fertility in the representation of women.

A symbolism of such kind resonates with the broader Roman cultural context, where fertility was not just a biological function, but also a significant ceremonial and social theme, as seen in the numerous festivals celebrating fertility, harvest, and lust. Furthermore, the illustration of these women in athletic poses could be seen as part of the wider Roman tradition of idealised female beauty. The artistic rendering reflects societal ideals more than it attempts to accurately depict the

physicality of real women, aligning with how both male and female figures were idealised in art, whether for their athletic ability or physical beauty.

Conclusion

While the mosaics from Villa Romana present a progressive view of women in athletic contexts, they also highlight the enduring tension between progressing social roles for women and the persistence of traditional gender expectations. The dual themes of physical excellence and fertility reinforce the complex ways in which Roman society viewed and represented women, as both capable of physical achievement and attraction, while simultaneously, as integral to reproductive and familial ideals. The portrayal of the loin-clothed female athletes introduces a paradox, suggesting that while the female body was idealised, its representation was bound by distinct societal norms and gender roles.

Nevertheless, the mosaic inevitably highlights the significance of mosaics in reflecting the shifting social status of women during the transitional period of the late Roman Empire. The women depicted may concurrently embody both the progressive values of increased female autonomy, and more traditional notions of femininity and fertility. These contradictions suggest a complex interplay between cultural shifts and the continued influence of patriarchal values. In conclusion, the mosaics in *Sala delle Palestrite* offer a unique lens into the evolving perception of women in late antiquity, highlighting both the progressive potential of their social roles and the persistence of traditional ideals. As such, these mosaics stand as essential evidence of the early stages of female liberation, while also reflecting the complexities of social identity in this highly transformative period.

Notes

[1] *Sala delle Palestrite,* also known as Sala delle Dieci Ragazze (English: Chamber of the Ten Maidens), approximately 6.36 x 5.12 m, Villa Romana del Casale, Piazza Armerina, Sicily.
[2] Symons, D. J., *Costumes of Ancient Rome* (New York: Chelsea House Publications, 1987), p. 23.
[3] Clark, G., *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 105.
[4] UNESCO World Heritage Centre. (n.d.) *Villa Romana del Casale*, available at: https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/832/ [accessed 17 April 2025].
[5] Villa Romana del Casale. (2012). *Villa Romana del Casale*, available at: https://www.villaromanadelcasale.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/guida_042012_ITA.pdf [Brochure] [accessed 9 May 2024].
[6] Villa Romana del Casale. (n.d.). *Villa Romana del Casale di Piazza Armerina*, available at: https://www.villaromanadelcasale.it/villa-romana-del-casale-piazza-armerina [accessed 16 May 2024].
[7] Patti, A., *La Villa Romana del Casale di Piazza Armerina* [unpublished article] (Università di Palermo, n.d.), pp. 2–3.
[8] Pensabene, P., "Mosaici della Villa Romana del Casale: Distribuzioni, programmi iconografici, maestranze", in *Mosaici Mediterranei*, ed. M. C. Lentini, (Caltanissetta: [publisher not indicated], 2009).
[9] Gentili, G. V., *La Villa Imperiale di Piazza Armerina*, 3rd edn (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato, 1956).
[10] Pensabene, P., P. Barresi & D. P. Augusto, *Piazza Armerina. Villa del Casale: Scavi e Studi nel Decennio 2004–2014*, eds. P. Pensabene & P. Barresi (Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2019).
[11] Pensabene 2009, p. 69.
[12] Silberberg-Peirce, S., "The Muse Restored: Images of Women in Roman Painting", *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1993), p. 29.
[13] Pensabene 2009, pp. 69, 83.
[14] Pensabene, Barresi & Augusto 2019, p. 335.
[15] Gardiner, N., *Athletics in the Ancient World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 153.
[16] Carandini, A., A. Ricci & M. de Vos, *Filosofiana. La villa di Piazza Armerina* (Palermo: Flaccovio, 1982), p. 156.
[17] Gates, C., *Ancient Cities: The Archaeology of Urban Life in the Ancient Near East and Egypt, Greece and Rome*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 251.
[18] The Olympic Museum Educational & Cultural Services, *The Olympic Games in Antiquity*, 3rd ed. (Lausanne: IOC, The Olympic Museum, 2013), p. 11.
[19] Kyle, D., *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 279.
[20] KU Leuven. (2012). *Ancient Olympics: The Capitolia,* available at: http://ancientolympics.arts.kuleuven.be/eng/TB005EN.html [accessed 13 May 2024]. In 86 CE, Emperor Domitian organised the first Capitolia, games held in honour of Jupiter Capitolinus, the most important Roman god. They were held every four years, always the year after the Olympic Games, and included athletic competitions, horse races, and musical contests.
[21] Kyle 2007, pp. 226–227.
[22] Mancioli, D., *Vita e Costumi dei Romani Antichi: Giochi e spettacoli* (Rome: Edizioni Quasa di Seveino Tognon, 1987), p. 75.
[23] White, D. (1985) "Roman Athletics", *Expedition*, 27(2), p. 31.
[24] Rostkowska 2007, p. 170.
[25] Kyle 2007, p. 257.
[26] Newby, Z. (2002) "Greek Athletics as Roman Spectacle: The Mosaics from Ostia and Rome", *Papers of the British School at Rome*, vol. 70, pp. 177–178.
[27] Newby 2002, pp. 177–178.
[28] Newby 2002, p. 188.
[29] Reid, H., "Athletic Beauty in Classical Greece: A Philosophical View*", Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2012), pp. 281–297.
[30] Reid 2012, pp. 283–284.
[31] Reid 2012, p. 291.
[32] Reid 2012, p. 291.
[33] Hatzichronoglou, H., "The Ideal of 'Arete' and its Treatment in Euripides" [PhD thesis, The Johns Hopkins University, 1985], p. 25.
[34] Reid 2012, p. 292.
[35] Reese, A. C., *Athletics: The Untold History of Ancient Greek Women Athletes* (Costa Mesa: Nightowl Publications, 2002), p. 98.

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