

‘It Was the Jest for the Athletes’: Memory, Humor and Gender in Oral Testimonies about the Arkadian Races

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Abstract

The Arkadian races were institutionalized in 1936 as a commemorative initiative that pays homage to the people who died in November 1866 in the Arkadi Monastery, the headquarters of the Great Cretan Revolution (1866–1869). Employing oral testimonies of veteran athletes of the Arkadian races, the longest-lived sports institution in Rethymnon, Crete, the paper interrogates the interconnections between oral (sport) history and memory studies. The aim is to explore the polysemous nature of this sporting realm of memory. The analysis addresses three central issues. Firstly, the paper discusses the role of the Arkadian races in forging a community of memory in honor of both the Arkadian Holocaust heroes and the distinguished athletes who competed in the local sport races. Secondly, it reveals how the races constituted an alternative space of entertainment, satire, and humor. Lastly, it provides insight into how the sporting institution reinforced gendered inequalities that were widely manifested in popular sport. The paper concludes by discussing the nefarious uses of sports and the potential of sporting spaces to contribute to the construction of a more democratic public memory.

Keywords: oral history, realms of memory, Arkadian races, Arkadi, sporting spaces

1. Introduction

Sports studies and oral history have suffered from the same destiny for a prolonged period of time: they were both regarded as poor, if not completely illegitimate, fields of study. In light of the belief that oral sources were less objective and less reliable than written sources, historians and sports historians have been particularly reluctant to incorporate them into their methodological approaches (Portelli 1981; Skillen and Osborne, 2015). Respectively,

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dismissive and snobby views toward sports have predominated in the academic world, hindering the thorough study of one of the most intriguing and talked-about social, political, and economic phenomena (Bairner 2012; Koulouri 2010). Recently, though, some academics have criticized this egregious and conspicuous marginalization of oral history and sports studies and made an attempt to examine the intersections between these two areas of study. Remarkable examples of this recent trend in the international literature are the three special issues of *Sport and Oral History* (Adams and Cronin 2019), *Sport and Oral History II* (Adams and Cronin 2021), and *Athletes' Voice in History* (Wassong et al., 2021) published in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*.

Notably, the majority of this academic research has focused on large-scale sporting events like the Olympic Games (Kohe and Warren 2019; Koulouri, 2010) and the World Cup (Takahashi, 2011). However, the significance of small-scale sporting events for the social history and growth of provincial cities is still largely unexplored. Micro-scale sporting events have occasionally been contentiously linked to the growth of urban tourism (Gibson et al. 2003; Gozalova et al. 2014). Despite the encouraging expansion of the field of critical tourism studies (Ateljevic et al., 2012), the majority of these studies have ignored the interconnection between micro-sports events and social processes that are rather destructive, like gentrification, commodification, the depletion of natural resources, and over-tourism. To the best of our knowledge, no other study has thoroughly examined the social and cultural aspects of a sporting institution in a Greek provincial city, despite the numerous examples of micro-sports events in Greece like the Venizeleia in Chania and the Sacrifice Running Race of the Sacred Town of Messolonghi.

By investigating the worldviews and experiences of veteran athletes who competed in the Arkadian races, a sporting competition held yearly in Rethymnon, Crete, this study aims to fill this vacuum. The structure of the paper is as follows. The paper begins by examining the research literature on oral sport history and memory studies. The Holocaust that occurred in Arkadi in 1866 and the background of the Arkadian races are briefly discussed in the next section. A critical analysis of the oral testimonies ensues a summary of the paper's methodology in the fourth chapter. Finally, the study wraps up by exploring the nefarious uses of sports and how sporting spaces may help create a more democratic public memory.

2. Oral sport history and memory studies

A compelling argument advanced by oral sport historians is that oral history can resurrect the long-suppressed voices of marginalized and disenfranchised gendered subjectivities. One of the first academics to openly and critically consider the moral and methodological chal-

lenges of conducting research with lesbian athletes and examine the silenced voices of her interlocutors was Cahn (1994). The utter absence of black female athletes from various classic archival sources serves as another excellent illustration. This gap can be filled by their oral testimony, which will also show how class, gender, and race are all interconnected as axes of oppression (Nzindukiyimana and Wamsley 2019). Humor is a striking illustration of how these gendered identities are solidified and substantiated in sports and other social contexts (Kehily and Nayak 1997). Humor has been examined as an organized principle in a variety of social contexts, including kinship ties (Radcliffe-Brown 1940) and educational settings (Kehily and Nayak 1997), in addition to sports coaching (Edwards and Jones 2018). According to researchers, humor is Janus-faced: on the one hand, it possesses the power to challenge social norms, transgress established moral principles, and mock authoritative figures. On the other hand, it strengthens already-existing kinship links, establishes power hierarchies, and serves as the social glue that binds communities together (Edwards and Jones 2018; Kehily and Nayak 1997; Radcliffe-Brown 1940). Oral historians can learn more about gendered roles and the future of the field Evans (2016) has dubbed feminist oral sport history by examining how players joke about with one another.

Despite these lofty promises to unearth the hidden voices of history, the democratic and radical potential of oral (sports) history is not self-evident. Oral history has not been associated only with progressive political traditions like the women's movement and history from below, but has also been interwoven with unsettling societal phenomena including therapy culture, hyperindividualism, neoliberal rationality, happiness industry and ethnocentric ideologies. On these grounds, Freund (2015) has persuasively claimed that oral historians run the risk of falling "under storytelling's spell", as common people become more and more accustomed to digesting and consuming repetitious narratives that depoliticize the social context and extol the triumphs and the resilience of isolated individuals. The crucial caveat for scholars is that oral testimonies can be devoid of political substance and replete with pomposity, jingoistic rhetoric, and nostalgic reminiscences. Furthermore, Passerini (2019: 161) argues that the dated idea of "giving voice to the voiceless" is an illusion and a platitude because it implicitly reinforces the populist and positivist belief that these voices grant access to a more authentic past. Another unfavorable effect of social scientists' unwavering commitment to advocating for the disadvantaged is that they have been deterred from "studying up" and grasping the world of those who hold and wield power (Shopes 2015).

In light of these advancements, conceptual tools from the field of memory studies are being effectively applied by oral sports historians. For instance, Pierre Nora's term of *lieux de mémoire* (realms of memory) has been widely used by scholars in the field of sport (Niehaus and Tagsold 2011; Pfister 2011). According to Nora, the authentic environments

of living memories are progressively dwindling. Modern societies, afflicted by a “commemorative bulimia” (Nora 1998: 609), have become fixated on preserving every single memory trace and generating an increasing number of lieux de mémoire (monuments, rituals, written documents, archives, public ceremonies, etc.) in an effort to buttress and enhance social cohesiveness (Nora 1989). Jan Assman has also made a substantial contribution to the conceptual framework of the subject by underscoring the significance of the distinction between communicative and cultural memory. Cultural memory is preserved by specialists, has an objectivized and institutionalized form, and contains cultural and social artefacts (texts, rituals, etc.) that mediate the processes of memory. Communicative memory refers to everyday oral interactions and has a more disorganized, lived, and fluid character and a short life span (Assmann 2008; Assmann and Czaplicka 1995). Against a backdrop of terminological cacophony in memory studies, Nora’s and Assman’s approaches have paved the way for a more rigorous reconsideration of the interfaces between memory and sports.

By theorizing the bicycle race Tour de France as a lieu de mémoire that encouraged the allegiance of citizens to the idea of the nation, Nora was one of the first scholars to acknowledge the popularity and allure of sports as an influential provider of collective memory (Nora 1989, 1995). A growing body of research has also investigated the social practices of memory that are prominent in sports. For instance, renowned athletes are constructed as polysemous and miscellaneous lieux de mémoire, with several national and international regimes competing for the athletes’ heritage and origins (Thompson 2011); soccer clubs adopt memory practices such as the minute’s silence and applause for their fallen heroes in order to draw rigid demarcation lines between the outsiders and insiders of this community (Foster and Woodthorpe 2016); and Modern Olympics serve as realms of memories that seek to connect modern nation-states with their imagined pasts and fictitious roots (Pfister 2011). This substantial corpus of scholarly work has demonstrated that sports is one of the most significant institutions of communal memory and has led other scholars to look into the intersections between these two fields of study.

In the Greek context, oral sport history projects are only a handful. In order to illustrate the social history of the Cretan soccer team Ergotelis in Heraklion, Zaimakis (2010) collected oral, written, and photographic material. The nine oral testimonials are from retired soccer players and former executives of Ergotelis. The analysis of these accounts revealed hitherto unknown perspectives and experiences, particularly those relating to the club’s political culture and rivalries with other local soccer clubs during socially volatile and turbulent periods like the Civil War (1943–1949) and the Axis Occupation (1941–1944). Two other studies have focused on Niki Volou, a soccer team in Volos, another provincial Greek city (Giossos 2008; Karastergiou 2016). Utilizing participant observation and oral testimonies, Karastergiou

(2016) conceptualized the soccer club as a “realm of memory”, whereas Giossos (2008) conducted interviews with key club figures and employed a variety of secondary sources. Both research projects pivoted on the club’s ties to the refugees who arrived in Volos following the Asia Minor Catastrophe in 1922. The narrators forged and reshaped the club’s identity in contrast to Olympiakos Volou, the local team that was mostly backed by native-born citizens. These examples illustrate that most oral sport history initiatives in Greece focus on soccer, are constrained to small study samples, and only occasionally include women as interlocutors.

3. The Holocaust of Arkadi and the commemorative events

The Cretan Revolt (1866–1869) sought to free Crete from the Ottoman Occupation and unite the island with Greece, which had already gained its independence in 1830. One of its key moments was the Holocaust of Arkadi on November 8, 1866. The revolt broke out initially in Chania, where the rebels demanded more political and religious liberties as well as a more equitable taxation system for the island’s Christian population. Sultan rejected the list of demands, and the local authorities repressed the ongoing revolt as the revolutionaries disobeyed Ismail Selim Pasha’s commands. The main conflict took place in the Arkadi Monastery, which is 23 kilometers southeast of Rethymnon. The Arkadi Monastery was besieged for two days beginning on November 6 and served as the Cretan Revolutionary Committee’s headquarters.

The Holocaust was a dramatic and unequal collision between Mustafa Nailli Pasha’s large troop of 15,000 soldiers of Albanian, Egyptian, Turkish, and Cretan Turkish origins, who had heavy equipment and canons at their disposal, and the 966 citizens (of whom only 259 armed men) who were trapped in the Monastery. Instead of surrendering, the rebels performed a valiant act by blowing up the ammunition storage room, killing numerous Cretans and Ottoman soldiers. Only three or four Cretans were able to flee, and 114 people were captured; the rest were killed in the explosion or on the battlefield. The courageous self-sacrifice of the Cretans captured the attention of the world, and many influential personalities, including the Italian general and revolutionary Giuseppe Maria Garibaldi and the American physician Samuel Gridley Howe, supported the Cretan cause. Victor Hugo was one of them, condemning the Great Powers for their impartial stance and deafening silence while supporting the Cretans’ quest for freedom and liberty (Veneris 1938).

The Holocaust was quickly elevated to a sacred moment of history with heavy symbolic meaning. The first commemoration of the event in Rethymnon took place in November 1886, and it was accompanied by memorial and church services, recitals of poems and music, and triumphant speeches. The Arkadi Holocaust commemorative ceremonies were

particularly splendid and spectacular in 1899 when Prince George of Greece and Denmark toured the island and in 1930 when the centennial of the Greek Revolution of 1821 was commemorated. The festivities would occur yearly on the three days in November when the Holocaust took place, but it wasn't until the early 1930s that the event was declared an official feast of the Greek state. Numerous significant political figures have attended the annual remembrance celebrations over the years, including the dictator Ioannis Metaxas and Greek Prime Ministers Eleftherios Venizelos and Nikolaos Plastiras (Deredakis 2016).

The celebrations included the Arkadian races, which were formalized in 1936. In the early years, only male competitors from Cretan sports clubs competed in sports including the 100-meter dash, 200-meter dash, javelin, discus throw, and high jump. Two regional sports that stand out are the Cretan shot put (*kritiko voli*) and the Arkadi Run (*Arkadios dromos*), both of which are a part of the program for the Arkadian races. The Cretan shot put is a variation of shot put that is practiced throughout the island. Under Ottoman domination, it was purportedly a sport that senior Cretans engaged in on special occasions. In order to highlight the cultural origins of this sport and to honor Cretan valor, athletes in the Cretan shot put frequently on traditional Cretan garb. The Arkadi Run is a 22.4-kilometer-long event. It is a sport that is exclusive to the Arkadian races and was invented as a tribute to the Holocaust heroes. The Arkadi Monastery serves as the starting point, and the Sohora stadium typically serves as the finish line.

The races drew several national sportsmen in the 1950s, including the accomplished runner Stavros Karres and the Greek long-distance champion Athanasios Ragazos. Women started taking part at the end of the 1940s and more frequently in the 1980s. The local authorities have been making an effort over the years to revive the races and introduce sports for children, veterans, and athletes with disabilities. The opening ceremony for the athletic events usually begins with a torch relay that involves runners carrying the flame on foot from the Arkadi Monastery to the Sohora stadium. Following a procession of the sports clubs, a chosen athlete recites the vow of the athlete. The races kick off after hoisting the Greek flag (Zaimakis 2021).

4. Methodology

The work described in the paper is part of a larger work published in Vavvos (2021). This paper draws on twelve interviews with veteran athletes of the Arkadian races. The interviews lasted between half an hour and an hour. Three of them were phone interviews, while the other nine took place in three Cretan cities (Rethymnon, Heraklion, and Chania), as well as Athens and Piraeus. The author and two other research team members conducted ten in-

interviews between July and September 2019 and the remaining two in May 2021. A younger athlete who participated actively in the yearly commemorative events and was a highly respected member of the community served as the main gatekeeper. In order to protect confidentiality and anonymity, the names of the interlocutors in this paper are pseudonyms. The research team was particularly interested in the voices of women athletes, and, after persistent efforts, three women (Sofia, Maria, and Despoina) participated in the study. Additionally, because there were so few written and oral sources for the first decades of the races (the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s), it was essential to approach athletes (such as Sofia, Thodoris, etc.) who had taken part in this early phase of the races. Last but not least, the research team recruited athletes who were not very well-known on an international or national level in addition to Olympic athletes like Hector and Nikitas. Table 1 contains information about the interlocutors’ biographical and demographic characteristics.

Table 1.*Demographic and biographical data of the interlocutors*

Interlocutors	Gender	Year of birth	Occupation	Sports	Years of participation in the Arkadian races
Thodoris	Man	1929	Merchandizer	Triple jump, high jump, long jump	1947–1954
Sofia	Woman	1932	Accountant	Short-distance running, high jump, long jump	1948–1954
Daniel	Man	1932	Civil servant and sports coach, pensioner	Triple jump, high jump, long jump	1950–1953
Nikitas	Man	1939	Civil servant, pensioner	Javelin	1955, 1956, 1958, and 1959
Philippe	Man	1939	Civil servant	Shot put, Cretan shot put (kritiko voli), javelin, discus throw	1956–1968
Manolis	Man	1943	Civil servant, pensioner	Shot put, Cretan shot put (kritiko voli)	1966–1972
Kostas	Man	1948	Civil servant, pensioner	Shot put, Cretan shot put (kritiko voli), discus throw	1966–1985
Hector	Man	1953	Civil servant, pensione	Race walking	1973–1986

Despoina	Woman	1967	Physical Education Teacher	Shot put, discus throw	1980–1989
Maria	Woman	1959	Civil servant	Long-distance running	1980–1985
Stavros	Man	1958	Civil servant	Long-distance running	1979–1998
Giorgos	Man	1954	Craftsman of sporting products, pensioner	Shot put, Cretan shot put (kritiko voli), veterans' Cretan shot put	1979–2020

The interlocutors were informed about the aims of the study and the usage of their real names in published materials, were given the opportunity to ask questions and signed the consent form. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first opening interview question was the following:

Describe to me how and why you got involved in sports and the difficulties you initially encountered. Your firsthand account of the Arkadian races and how the community felt are both things I would be very interested in hearing about. You have as much time as you need at your disposal. I won't ask you any more questions right now.

The questions that ensued usually centered on how the interlocutors understood the connections between the sporting event and the Holocaust of Arkadi, on memorable events that still etch in their memories, on gendered aspects of their experiences as athletes, and on political facets of the races. These oral testimonies are not treated as impartial and objective descriptions of past events, but rather as subjective accounts that may be colored by sentimental feelings, romanticized memories, distorted recollections, the narrator's current positionality, and the intersubjective dialogue with the researchers. Furthermore, considering that most of the study's participants are renowned and accomplished athletes who have granted several interviews and expressed their opinions in public, they are not typical examples of hidden voices that have been repressed.

5. Results

The analysis outlines three central themes. Firstly, the paper discusses the role of the Arkadian races in forging a community of memory in honor of both the Arkadian Holocaust heroes and the distinguished athletes who competed in the local sport races. This is not a close-knit and solid community of individuals based on strong social bonds and daily encounters, but an imaginary, symbolic and fluid one, as most its members might have met in-person a few times and dwell in different cities (for the notion of community in liquid modernity see Bauman 2000). Secondly, it reveals how the races constituted an alternative space of entertainment, satire, and humor. Lastly, it sheds light on how the sporting institution reinforced

gendered inequalities that were widely manifested in popular sport. The argument proposed here is that the oral testimonies brought up recreational and gendered aspects of the races that are rather sidestepped by an institutionalized cultural memory that overemphasizes the commemorative facets of the event.

5.1 The Arkadian races as a *lieu de mémoire*

The youth in Cretan cities were continually exposed to the sacredness assigned to the symbol of Arkadi through chants, theatrical performances, school visits to the Arkadi Monastery, lectures, and the recitation of poems. The festive atmosphere of the three-day annual memorial activities in November—which included everything from religious services to motorcycle shows—instilled a sense of pride in one’s country, praised Cretan bravery, and disrupted the mundane routine of the urban population in Rethymnon. Numerous dictatorial and nationalistic regimes have appropriated Arkadi’s memory. For instance, as illustrated in Figure 1, the military regime of 1967–1974 deployed propaganda banners in the context of the Arkadian races in order to cement continuity between the Holocaust of Arkadi and the Regime of the Colonels (1967-1974). Several interlocutors, primarily Cretans like Despoina, Thodoris, and Nikitas, reported that, through their athletic accomplishments, they felt like members of the national body as they helped pass down the memory of this momentous event in modern Greek history to future generations. Nikitas’ reminiscence reveals how the Arkadian races and Arkadi were constructed as *lieux de mémoire* that perpetuated the notion of the historical continuity of the Greek nation:

Aside from the fact that it was a sporting event, the main thing is the pride we had for Arkadi. I mean, I felt like we were people with fighting spirit, full of life. There were many happenings at school. Arkadi at school was a big event. There were performances, many happenings. How am I supposed to tell you? Arkadi is national pride for us. We were saying Arkadi and we were feeling...nowadays, the symbol of Arkadi has lost its significance. It was the so-called “heroic exodus”. We were taught about Arkadi, love of the nation, and freedom. Even though I rarely did my homework, I was also the one who recited all the poems in class while I was in primary school.

Figure 1.

The athlete Ioanna Blavaki, second in the shot put in the Arkadian races in 1971



Note. In the background, a propaganda banner presents the self-sacrifice of Arkadi in 1866 and the Greek coup d'état of 1967 as two key events of the Greek national history. Source: Giorgos Lemonis.

Along with the ethnocentric remembrance of the historical occurrence, a vibrant and fluid community of memory has been formed over the past three decades, paying homage to the outstanding members of the Arkadian races. Local authorities organize more frequently ceremonies prior or during the races to pay tribute to accomplished coaches and athletes, presidents and executives of local sports teams; the blog <https://arcadiahistory.blogspot.com/> serves as a digital realm of memory and displays photographic material and the results of the races; and a photographic exhibition with candid shots from the races was launched in October 2020 by a veteran athlete in the building of the Region of Crete in Rethymnon. The

interlocutors touched upon these commemorative components and were very emotional as they recalled the award ceremonies, the heroes of this community, and the memory mediators. Despoina expressed her heartfelt gratitude to organizations like the Region of Crete and other veteran athletes who “keep the history of the races alive”. Manolis recounted receiving an honorable award at a ceremony hosted by the Region of Crete and a veteran athlete in the context of the 150th anniversary of the Arkadian self-sacrifice in 2016, and how deeply affected he was to meet fellow veteran athletes in person. In a similar spirit, Thodoris remembered the youth of the 1940s who were full of admiration for their sports coach, a prominent character in the races, who could throw the javelin extraordinarily far. Thodoris praised his coach throughout the discussion, saying “may his memory be eternal” numerous times.

For these veteran athletes, the Arkadian races are no longer a *milieu de mémoire*, an authentic setting of living memories as it once was. Considering the dramatic transformation of the Arkadian races, they continuously reiterated that, “after the 80s, the Arkadian races are falling into precipitous decline”. It’s a complex matter to grasp why this institution struggles to thrive in a world where sports are becoming more professionalized and commercialized. Due to the harsh weather or the fact that it is typically the season leading up to other sporting events, November is a unfavorable month. In addition, Rethymnon’s lack of sporting amenities and economic resources are some of the factors contributing to the institution’s sharp decline over the past few decades. The gradual decline of this institution and of modern sport, in general, prompted our interlocutors to reconstruct the Arkadian races of the first fifty years as the quintessential representation of the pure love of sport and amateur sports ideals. For them, the exultant ambience and the big crowds of the past Arkadian races stood in sharp contrast to modern sport that is intricately interwoven with individualistic and utilitarian ethos, a cut-throat competition, the overwhelming dominance of a profit-oriented ideology, the excessive use of anabolic steroids and the notable absence of fans in the stands. Hector, a talented athlete who excelled in both international and domestic contests, wistfully admitted, “sporting events like the Arkadian races had certain romantic elements that made me fall in love with sports”.

5.2. The Arkadian races as a recreational space

The Arkadian races were also portrayed as a social space where athletes established rapport and socialized in light-hearted atmosphere. In many oral testimonies, these recreational and entertaining aspects trumped and overshadowed the ideological ones; “it was the jest for the athletes”, Philippe, a multi-sport athlete of the Arkadian races and a famous satirical poet, replied solemnly to my question about the underlying meaning of the races for

the athletes. In fact, a few participants appeared to be largely unaware of and apathetic to the political and memorial aspects of the races. However, because of our research interest in how patriotic, nationalistic, and authoritarian regimes use sport and body cultures as props, we brought up politics in our discussions with the athletes. Hector claimed that throughout the Junta period (1967–1974), his intense training as a race-walking athlete prevented him from having access to information regarding political developments. Even Daniel, an anti-dictatorship activist, dissociated his political deeds and his sporting career, stating that as athletes, coaches and executives they would not engage in politics. Philippe acknowledged that he was similarly cut off from politics and observed that he could not have known the political figures who were invited to the Arkadian races as a youngster because his life was confined to going to school and working on the ranch.

Contrary to this reticence and taciturnity regarding the ideological underpinnings of the races, garrulousness was evident whenever the conversation steered towards more personal experiences that evoked potent affective resonance. For example, Hector and Maria narrated that they became acquainted with each other at the end of the Arkadian races in 1981 and got married after some time. Both of them recalled with intense sentimentalism the incident of their acquaintanceship and Hector described the sporting institution as a dazzling lighthouse, a landmark in his biographical trajectory. Along the same lines, Manolis met up with his future wife Amalia, a Cretan shot putter, during the sporting competition, and they used to voyage frequently from Athens to Crete to partake in the races. Athletes like Manolis, Amalia, Hector and Maria, who travelled from other parts of the country, reported being captivated by the hospitality of Cretan people, the breathtaking natural scenery at the Arkadi Monastery, and the exotic setting of the Sohora stadium across from the sea.

The use of monikers is another long-standing practice in this community. Nathan, who took the reins of the Arkadian races for decades, was a prominent figure in Rethymnon and executive in local soccer teams since the 1950s. He went by the nickname “Venizelos” owing to the fact that his pioneering dress style and impressive whiskers resembled those of Eleftherios Venizelos (1864-1936), a Cretan statesman and former Prime Minister of Greece. In like manner, Nikitas’ brother, who was a soccer player, was known in the local community as “Maria” due to his platonic love with a young lady called Maria. In a similar vein, chuckling sarcastically over my question about memories and incidents from the Arkadian races that are still lingering in his mind, Philippe took his hat off to reveal his grey hair and elaborated on how other athletes were jesting about the fact that he had grown grey hair at such a young age; hence his own nickname “old man”.

This tone of wry humor largely dominated the interactions between the athletes over the course of the races; an apt illustration of this atmosphere is one of Stavros’ opponents’

remarks and a brief acrimonious exchange between the runners at the starting line of the Arkadi Run in 1992. Stavros engaged in competitive teasing and disapproved of the other contestant's ostentatious assertiveness that he could effortlessly come first. He recounted that it was his cunningness and accumulated experience that played a pivotal role in disproving the prediction of the other runner. Stavros eventually prevailed in the race, and his primary rivals gave the victor well-deserved recognition since he was adept at spotting the telltale signs of his rivals' exhaustion and knew when to accelerate and when to slow down.

Other comical incidents and inclusionary putdowns were mentioned by Philippe. He harnessed his natural comedy talent and narrated a humorous incident that referred to the interaction of athletes with the political authorities that were present in the Arkadian races. A minister of the government who was present in the Arkadian races in the 60s was mocked by Philippe because he naively believed that the youth in the stadium were there to honor him, but they were actually trailing behind Philippe in order to peer at his medals. He also narrated how Manolis was teased for being a corpulent shot putter and described an incidence, wherein Manolis had been given a kick by other athletes, fell into a lake, and struggled with taking his hands out of his tight trousers' pockets and staying afloat, while other athletes were giggling and roaring. His testimony demonstrates how the Arkadian races afforded the athletes exceptional opportunities to spend their leisure time amusing themselves and engaging in creative pursuits, as the dearth of entertainment options and recreational activities in Rethymnon during the 1950s and 1960s was appalling. As Philippe put it:

And when we got together in the Arkadian races, it was like encountering beloved friends. There were no entertainment options available to us. We used to pass the time with improvised humorous phrases, rhymes and mantinades (Cretan rhyming couplets). There were too many spectators. They had no other amusement, I assure you. They had no other way out... they had no other... there were 6,000 people living in Rethymnon, and they had nothing to do. Amusement and recreation services did not exist. Until 1965, 1966, there was no entertainment. There were no taverns, restaurants and bars.

Manolis, throughout his narrative, also forged his identity as a prankster, and boasted that he impressed the audience with his physical prowess and athletic achievements as well as with his dance moves, music skills and humorous quips in events that took place after the end of the races (see also Figure 2). On one of these occasions, on November, 7, 1950, in the night after the commemorative events, young dancers with Cretan outfit and notorious Cretan musicians who were skillful and dexterous in the Cretan laouto and lyre dazzled the audience ("Yesterday's celebration", 1950). On November 8, 1957, the local athletic club of Atromitos that staged the races this year arranged a dance night at the conservatory in

Rethymnon, inviting a music band and a renowned lyre player and offering a lavish buffet (“Dancing night”, 1957). These social gatherings, which were held in a variety of entertainment venues and went along with the races, were ostensibly a rare opportunity for the athletes to engage in horseplay and get to experience the Cretan culture.

Figure 2.

In the aftermath of the Arkadian races of 1971, the athlete Giorgos Lemonis with his hand in his pocket sings and cracks jokes in the night recreation center Deligiorgis in Rethymnon



Note. Source: Vasilis Manousakis.

5.3 The Arkadian races as a gendered institution

In 1947, women made their debut in the Arkadian races. The athletes were high school students from Rethymnon and Chania and competed in three sports: high jump, long jump and the 60m sprint race. As figure 3 illustrates, women participated in the Arkadi Run in the 1980s. Against the backdrop of the tardy participation of women in this sporting institution

Figure 3.

The athlete Pope Papatzane in the Arkadi Run in 1983



Note. The audience claps as Papatzane, one of the first women athletes from Crete who participated in the Arkadi Run, is ready to pass the winning line. Source: Pope Papatzane.

the oral testimonies of the three women interlocutors shed light on gendered inequalities not thoroughly discussed by other athletes. Maria, the winner of the first Marathon Peach March in memory of Grigoris Lambrakis on October 8, 1983, recounted how traditional gender ideologies decisively shaped her sporting biography. As she was training to become a marathon runner and jogging on the streets of Athens, onlookers and passers-by would make humiliating and sexist remarks and car drivers would honk their horns. She was consequently forced to refrain from exercising alone and to accompany other male athletes who were forming a human wall to shield her from disparaging remarks. Maria was the first and only woman to participate in the Arkadi Run in 1980 and competed with men athletes. Her participation in the Arkadian races was repeatedly reported in local and national television broadcasts and newspapers as a unique occasion. With expressive body language and a gripping and engaging narrative, she recollected her experience from the Arkadi Run in 1980. She detailed how, as a woman runner, she was treated as an exotic and outlandish

being that captured the attention of the penetrating human (or male) gaze and astounded the local inhabitants of the small provincial city of Rethymnon. She expounded her own experience in 1980:

The other runners were saying to me, “Maria, don’t give up. We are screwed” [...]. Old women were yelling, “Look! And the woman runs! And the woman runs!”. They had never beholden a woman running. Back then in the 1980s there was no long-distance races for women. In the mountainous villages up there the women were acting like crazy with what they faced. Anyway. I enter the stadium and finish the race [...]. A throng of fans! The audience swept the national team athletes and champions aside and directed attention to the Arkadi Run and the young woman. I finish and arrive inside the stadium. It was a total blast. I lie down on the grass. The audience wanted to inspect my legs, my hands, and so on.

Similar to Maria whose confidence and self-esteem were boosted by this special treatment, Sofia, a multi-sport athlete and the woman with the most victories in the history of the Arkadian races, also stressed that her athletic achievements were a means of acquiring symbolic capital and gaining reputation. Nonetheless, she bemoaned the lack of institutional support for women’s athletics in the 1940s and 1950s that coerced them into dropping out of sport and looking for other employment opportunities. The fact that Maria and Sofia both had relatively limited careers—the former because of family commitments and the birth of her first son, and the latter because of her full-time employment—is another commonality in their biographical trajectories. Despoina’s oral testimony was equally bleak and vivid, as she mulled over her participation in two sports with male preponderance, shot put and discus throw. She mentioned that other athletes in the Arkadian races and other competitions were spreading unsubstantiated rumors that pushing the spherical ball, lifting weights and throwing the discus could harm women’s bodies and impair their capacity to have children. “These rumors were making us furious”, she remarked. These three testimonies reveal how the three women were subjected to an inquisitive and intrusive gaze that converted them both to objects of adulation and to recipients of demeaning remarks.

6. Discussion

The argument presented in the paper is that the Arkadian races served as a commemorative site, a recreational activity, and a conduit for the spread of particular beliefs regarding gendered bodies. The athletes presented themselves as conveyors of collective memory that contributed to the preservation of the national identity and the glorification of Cretan heroism.

In parallel, a liquid sporting community of memory has emerged over the past thirty years that through public ceremonies, photography exhibitions, media coverages etc. pays homage to the prominent figures that played a leading part in the races in the first five decades. The interlocutors interpreted their participation in these commemorative initiatives and the reunion with other members of this community as deeply touching experiences. This nostalgic recollection of the past of brute strength and athletic achievements is a recurrent topic in the oral testimonies of veteran athletes (Reinisch 2019). These testimonies summarize and express present predicaments and preoccupations rather than being precise accounts of past events. Namely, now that the living memory and the real environments of memory are gradually retreating, the members of the community of the Arkadian races are plunged in the throes of "the commemorative zeal of the past two or three decades" (Nora 1998: 614).

Additionally, the interlocutors reconstructed the Arkadian races as a recreational sporting event that was filled with raillery and sarcasm. These communicative memories that pivoted on sarcastic and caustic remarks had a deep personal and affective meaning for the interlocutors and stirred up intense feelings of wistfulness. Benevolent humor and friendly joshing operated as glue that held the community together, enhanced social cohesiveness and facilitated the establishment of solid emotional bonds. The spontaneity of these jokes broke up the tediousness of daily living, disrupted the standardized form and ritual script of the commemorative ceremonies and dominated the interactions of athletes with political leaders, tycoons, military and church officers. However, humor proved to be a double-edged sword, as this amusing and cheery atmosphere that mainly men athletes portrayed stood in marked contrast to the frustrating and adverse experiences that the three women reported. This assertion does not indicate that the women in this study constitute a homogeneous group of people and that their individual differences are negligible. Nevertheless, these three narratives brought to the fore previously sidelined viewpoints about this sporting event and directed attention to the fact that women have always been active agents in the history of sport and subjected to oppressive gender ideologies (Evans 2016; Nzindukiyimana and Wamsley, 2019). To fully comprehend how these humorous relationships were formed among athletes in the Arkadian races, further ethnographic work with women and other gendered subjects is required before more firm conclusions about this sporting space can be generated.

The role of this sporting event in promoting ethnocentric ideologies has been considerable, as, throughout the 20th century, it has been assigned with the mission of honoring the heroes of the homeland (Zaimakis 2021). Other mass-sporting spectacles in Greece have also been widely exploited by dictatorial regimes and disseminated androcentric and nationalistic worldviews (Van Steen 2010) and a national history of Greek sports has relied heavily on a framework of continuity of the Greek nation from antiquity to the modern Greek state (Kou-

louri 2010). The interlocutors in this study neither called into question these ethnocentric and dominant discourses about the Arkadian races nor attempted to present themselves as agents of a counter-memory, notwithstanding the fact that more and more new social movements in the crisis-ridden country fight against these oppressive structural arrangements in modern sports (Zaimakis 2022).

Over the course of this research, it became obvious that the formal cultural memory has overemphasized this commemorative and ideological importance of the Arkadian races. The analysis of the oral testimonies revealed bleak and mischievous issues that have not been integrated into the official narrative framework about the Arkadian races. The local church and political authorities, as well as the mainstream media, have mostly eschewed reporting on these hidden aspects of the races since doing could jeopardize the sacrosanct mission of the Arkadian races as an institution that reinforces entrenched assumptions and ideologies. A one-sided, monolithic, and repetitious portrayal of the Arkadian races has prevailed, to the neglect of the complex, elaborate and polysemous character of this realm of memory. Amateur sports historians have played a significant part in perpetuating these political and ideological beliefs regarding the Arkadian races. The prominent figures of the local sporting community in Rethymnon have produced a handful of books about the Arkadian races that were immensely helpful to our endeavor. This sporting community usually dives into issues such as the placement and the records of athletes, but tends to be utterly oblivious to other ideological, social, and structural issues (for this approach in the history of sport in Greece see Koulouri 2010). Local sports historians have theorized sports as a social practice that is poorly connected with issues of power inequalities, poverty, gendered perceptions of the body, class identities, and jingoistic patriotism. A comprehensive research agenda that encompasses oral testimonies along with archival sources and photographic material can place sporting practices and institutions in their socio-political context and provide a more critical reconsideration of the history of the Arkadian races.

Approaching these nefarious uses of sports from a rather pessimistic standpoint, Butterworth (2014) has also worked at the intersection of sport and memory studies and elaborated on sports practices and discourses in the commemoration for the 10th anniversary of the September 11 attacks in the USA in 2011. He concluded that the sporting world that commemorates this historical event comprises an illusion of democracy, as it fosters a sense of artificial national unity in turbulent times and deflects attention from pressing contemporary challenges. These remarks imply that sporting institutions could play a decisive role in forging a more participatory and democratic public memory (Butterworth 2014: 219–220). Similarly, our ethnographic work suggests that the potential of sporting spaces, like the Arkadian races, to sharpen the critical interpretation of past landmark events comprises an unexplored territory.

Disclosure Statement

The Social Analysis and Applied Social Research Laboratory (Department of Sociology, University of Crete) carried out this research with funding provided by the Region of Crete. The program’s principal investigator was Yiannis Zaimakis. The study’s design, data collection and analysis, and paper preparation were all done independently of the sponsoring organization. The findings and conclusions in this publication are those of the author.

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Περίληψη

Οι Αρκαδικοί αγώνες θεσμοθετήθηκαν το 1936 ως μια πρωτοβουλία που αποτίει φόρο τιμής στους ανθρώπους που πέθαναν τον Νοέμβριο του 1866 στη Μονή Αρκαδίου, έδρα της Μεγάλης Κρητικής Επανάστασης (1866–1869). Αξιοποιώντας προφορικές μαρτυρίες βετεράνων αθλητών των Αρκαδίων αγώνων, του μακροβιότερου αθλητικού θεσμού στο Ρέθυμνο της Κρήτης, το κείμενο διερευνά τις διασυνδέσεις μεταξύ προφορικής (αθλητικής) ιστορίας και σπουδών μνήμης. Σκοπός του άρθρου είναι να εξερευνήσει την πολυσημία αυτού του αθλητικού τύπου μνήμης. Η ανάλυση εξετάζει τρία κεντρικά ζητήματα. Πρώτον, συζητά τον ρόλο των Αρκαδίων αγώνων στη σφυρηλάτηση μιας κοινότητας μνήμης προς τιμήν τόσο των ηρώων του Αρκαδικού Ολοκαυτώματος όσο και των διακεκριμένων αθλητών που συμμετείχαν στους τοπικούς αθλητικούς αγώνες. Δεύτερον, αναδεικνύει ότι οι αγώνες αποτελούσαν έναν εναλλακτικό χώρο διασκέδασης, σάτιρας και χιούμορ. Τέλος, αναλύει το πώς αυτός ο αθλητικός θεσμός ενίσχυσε τις έμφυλες ανισότητες που εκδηλώθηκαν ευρέως στον αθλητισμό. Το άρθρο ολοκληρώνεται συζητώντας τις ζοφερές χρήσεις του αθλητισμού και τις δυνατότητες των αθλητικών γεγονότων να συμβάλλουν στην οικοδόμηση μιας πιο δημοκρατικής δημόσιας μνήμης.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: προφορική ιστορία, τόποι μνήμης, Αρκαδικοί αγώνες, Αρκαδί, αθλητικοί θεσμοί