

## The Celibate Athlete

*Athletic Metaphors, Medical Thought, and Sexual Abstinence in the Second and Third Centuries CE*

---

**ABSTRACT** In this article, I propose a new way of interpreting athletic metaphors in early Christian literature. I argue that the metaphorical figure of the athlete would have evoked for ancient readers not simply the ideas of competitive struggle, but also the idea of sexual abstinence, a lifestyle choice closely associated with athletes in the Greco-Roman world. The article collects and discusses evidence for the practice of athletic celibacy, drawing together a disparate collection of medical and philosophical literature, with Christian sources, from the second and third centuries CE. It demonstrates that athletic celibacy was a familiar concept in this period, and that many observers were interested in the methods that athletes used to control their sexual urges, including applying lead plates to their loin muscles. The treatment of this evidence suggests that there was greater interest in sexual abstinence among non-Christians than has previously been understood, and that athletes were implicated in controversies about whether or not total abstention from sex was a healthy lifestyle choice. As such, I argue that it is plausible to regard the athletic imagery of early Christians not only as a metaphorical comparison between two kinds of strident individuals, but also as advocacy for the celibate life as the most healthful lifestyle. **KEYWORDS** Ancient Medicine, Sexual Abstinence, Greco-Roman Athletics, Asceticism, Metaphor

---

### INTRODUCTION

Athletic metaphors appear with some frequency in early Christian literature, especially in contexts relating to martyrdom and asceticism. Metaphors of this sort have been duly acknowledged by scholars, who have demonstrated that they served as a way to evoke the struggles of martyrs and ascetics to achieve

Early drafts of this paper were improved immensely thanks to the careful and generous comments of Kristi Upson-Saia and Julie Kelto Lillis, and Julie's students in her "Virgins and Virginity in Early Christianity" seminar at the University of Virginia. I am also grateful for the comments and suggestions of the two anonymous readers for the journal, and the audience at the 2016 annual meeting of the North American Patristics Society, where I delivered a draft of the paper.

---

*Studies in Late Antiquity*, Vol. 2, Number 4, pps. 464–490. electronic ISSN 2470-2048. © 2018 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, [www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints](http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/sla.2018.2.4.464>.

a “crown,” much like victors in the Olympics and other athletic competitions.<sup>1</sup> Athletic metaphors, however, would have called to mind other associations in antiquity that have received little scholarly attention. These relate to sexual restraint. For, though athletes in Greco-Roman antiquity were often associated with excess in all areas of their lives, a certain number of them became famous for renouncing sex completely, in keeping with a belief that athletic performance might be improved by abstaining from sex.<sup>2</sup> This belief was influential and well-known, especially in the second and third centuries CE, a period when athletic competition in the Roman Empire was booming.<sup>3</sup> For ancient readers, athletic metaphors in early Christian literature, therefore, may well have evoked ideas about total sexual renunciation.

Athletic metaphors, moreover, may also have connoted for some readers the idea of good health. Athletes were at the center of a debate in the second and third centuries about whether sexual activity was necessary for a healthy life.<sup>4</sup> The view that sexual abstinence was healthy seems to have been advocated especially by athletic trainers, who presented themselves as authorities on questions pertaining to regimen and fitness.<sup>5</sup> Their claims were challenged by

1. See especially Victor C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature*, Supplements to *NT* 16 (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 193; R. Merkelbach, “Der griechische Wortschatz und die Christen,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 18 (1975): 101–48, at 108–36; and Zeph Stewart, “Greek Crowns and Christian Martyrs,” in *Mémorial André-Jean Festugière: Antiquité païenne et chrétienne*, ed. E. Lucchesi and H. D. Saffrey (Genève: P. Cramer, 1984), 119–24.

2. For the ancient belief, see W. Fielder, “Sexuelle Enthaltbarkeit griechischer Athleten und ihre medizinische Begründung,” *Stadion* 11 (1985): 137–75. Gloria J. Fischer, “Abstention from Sex and Other Pre-Game Rituals Used by College Male Varsity Athletes,” *Journal of Sport Behavior* 20.2 (1997): 176–84 provides evidence of the beliefs continuing influence in modern athletics. On the excesses typically associated with athletes in Greco-Roman antiquity, see Pierre Villard, “Le régime des athlètes: vivre avec une santé excessive,” in *Thérapies, médecine et démographie antiques*, ed. Christine Didier, Jean-Nicolas Corvisier, and Martine Valdher (Arras: Artois Pr. Université, 2001), 157–70.

3. For the boom in athletic contests, see Sofie Remijsen, *The End of Greek Athletics in Late Antiquity*, Greek Culture in the Roman World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 30, echoing the earlier comments of Louis Robert, “Les concours grecs,” in *Choix d'écrits*, ed. Denis Rousset (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2007), 267–78, at 270 = *Actes du VIIIe Congrès international d'épigraphie grecque et latine. Athènes 1982* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1984), 35–45, at 38.

4. For some discussion of this debate, see Jody Rubin Pinault, “The Medical Case for Virginité in the Early Second Century C.E.: Soranus of Ephesus, *Gynecology* 1.32,” *Helios* 19.1–2 (1992): 123–39; Paola Manuli, “Elogio della castità. La ginecologia di Sorano,” *Memoria. Rivista di storia delle donne* 3 (1982), 39–49.

5. On athletic trainers, see two chapters by Jason König: “Regimen and Athletic Training,” in *A Companion to Science, Technology, and Medicine in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Georgia L. Irby (Chicester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 450–64; “Athletes and Trainers,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the*

doctors, as is apparent especially in the works of Galen, who was dismissive of their credentials, and had much to say against them in his writings.<sup>6</sup> Though little evidence survives about athletic trainers outside the works of Galen, it is still clear that they played a large role in discussions about good health in the second and third centuries.<sup>7</sup> The muscular bodies and performances of the athletes they trained provided proof that their lifestyle was healthy, even if it was extreme.

In this period, health and healing were likewise topics of great interest for early Christian authors.<sup>8</sup> This included engagement with the work and research of doctors. Some Christians numbered among the audience of the medical demonstrations performed by Galen and other doctors in the second century.<sup>9</sup> The knowledge that they possessed about medicine was applied in thinking about basic Christian rituals and doctrines. Some Christians were concerned with the purported health properties of the wine used in the Eucharist.<sup>10</sup> Others used prevailing theories about embryology in discussions of Jesus' birth and parentage.<sup>11</sup> Even Christian attitudes on the subject of Mary's virginity were informed by shifting ideas about anatomical means of verifying that a woman was a virgin.<sup>12</sup>

---

*Second Sophistic*, ed. Daniel S. Richter and William A. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 155–67.

6. On Galen's debates with athletic trainers, and one possible response to his critique by Philostratus, see Jason König, *Athletics and Literature in the Roman Empire*, Greek Culture in the Roman World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 274–91, and 325.

7. See David Potter, *The Victor's Crown: A History of Ancient Sport from Homer to Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 140. For other critiques of athletic trainers, note Rufus of Ephesus, *Quaestiones medicales*, 29–30, ed. Hans Gärtner, *Rufus von Ephesos. Die Fragen des Arztes an den Kranken, Corpus medicorum Graecorum* (henceforth *CMG*) suppl. 4 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1962); Plut. *De tuenda sanitate praecepta* 133b-d (LCL 222:280), with discussion of the latter passage in König, "Athletes and Trainers," 162–4.

8. For overviews of recent work on this subject, see Heidi Marx-Wolf and Kristi Upson-Saia, "The State of the Question: Religion, Medicine, Disability, and Health in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8.2 (2015): 257–72, and Jared Secord, "Introduction: Medicine beyond Galen in the Roman Empire and Late Antiquity," *Studia Patristica* 81 (2017): 1–7.

9. See Jared Secord, "Medicine and Sophistry in Hippolytus' *Refutatio*," *Studia Patristica* 65 (2013): 217–24, at 221–4.

10. See John David Penniman, "The Health-Giving Cup': Cyprian's *Ep.* 63 and the Medicinal Power of Eucharistic Wine," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23.2 (2015): 189–211.

11. See Gregor Emmenegger, *Wie die Jungfrau zum Kind kam: zum Einfluss antiker medizinischer und naturphilosophischer Theorien auf die Entwicklung des christlichen Dogmas*, Paradosis 56 (Fribourg, 2014): 87–141, and Jared Secord, "Galen and the Theodotians: Embryology and Adoptionism in the Christian Schools of Rome," *Studia Patristica* 81 (2017): 51–63.

12. See Julia Kelto Lillis, "Paradox in Partu: Verifying Virginity in the *Protoevangelium of James*," *JECS* 24.1 (2016): 1–28.

In short, early Christianity was deeply immersed in the medical thought-world of the Roman Empire, including the fundamental issue of defining good health.

The metaphorical language used by early Christian authors signals engagement with issues relating to health, especially in contexts that evoke doctors and medicine. It has been tempting for scholars to treat such language as merely figurative. Medical metaphors, Gary Ferngren suggests, cannot be taken as proof that Christianity was presenting itself as a superior healing religion.<sup>13</sup> According to Ferngren's argument, Christian clerics who called themselves physicians were interested in healing the souls of sinners, rather than the bodies of the sick.<sup>14</sup> But, as Wendy Mayer notes, there was a considerable overlap in antiquity between the categories of psychic and physical healing.<sup>15</sup> Christian clerics therefore did see themselves as *real* physicians, providing "psychic therapy" to their charges.<sup>16</sup> As such, Christians were claiming a place in the crowded and competitive world of healthcare in the Roman Empire, alongside philosophers, ritual experts, and practitioners of rival schools of medicine.<sup>17</sup> The use of medical metaphors shows that the spiritual health of Christians was derived both from the body and the soul. Metaphors of this sort provided a way of signaling that Christian clerics were just as concerned about the mental and physical well-being of their charges as were doctors and athletic trainers.<sup>18</sup>

The use of athletic metaphor in early Christian literature reinforces this concern with good health, extending to the controversial subject of sexuality. When Christians were described as athletes, this did evoke the idea that life

13. Gary B. Ferngren, *Medicine & Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 30 and 73, disputing a claim made by Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 129.

14. Ferngren, *Medicine & Health Care*, 31.

15. Wendy Mayer, "The Persistence in Late Antiquity of Medico-Philosophical Psychic Therapy," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8.2 (2015): 337–51.

16. Mayer, "Persistence," 339–40.

17. See Vivian Nutton, "Healers in the Medical Market Place: Toward a Social History of Graeco-Roman Medicine," in *Medicine in Society*, ed. Andrew Wear (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 15–58. For discussion of how philosophers conceived of themselves as healers, see Michael Trapp, "Philosophical Authority in the Imperial Period," in *Authority and Expertise in Ancient Scientific Culture*, ed. Jason König and Greg Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 27–57, at 33–4.

18. For discussion of how metaphors were used in competitive ways in antiquity, see Markus Asper, "(Some) Domains of Metaphor in Hellenistic Literature," in *The Metaphorical Use of Language in Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature*, ed. Markus Witte and Sven Behnke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 41–58.

was a competitive struggle, with a prize at the end for victors.<sup>19</sup> But athletic metaphors also reference the health and self-control associated with athletes, especially in matters relating to sexuality. Athletic metaphors in Christian literature consequently need to be read in light of prevailing medical thought on the phenomenon of athletic celibacy, and the associated debates about good health. My discussion of athletic celibacy will therefore suggest that this phenomenon helps to provide a larger context within ancient medical thought for the practice of early Christian sexual renunciation. In particular, the article's focus on connections between asceticism, athletics, and medicine suggests that Christian sexual renunciation should be approached through the lens of ancient ideas about regimen or dietetics, an area of medical thought concerned with food, drink, exercise, bathing, and sex.<sup>20</sup> Those interested in regimen often had much to say about the extreme lifestyle of athletes, and especially the choice that some of them made to renounce sex. Viewed from the perspective of regimen, it becomes clear that athletic celibacy anticipated the emerging phenomenon of Christian sexual renunciation, which was more closely associated with concerns about a healthy lifestyle than has sometimes been granted.<sup>21</sup>

The paper's first section discusses a debate in the second and third centuries regarding whether total abstention from sex was a healthy lifestyle to follow. Section two demonstrates the engagement of Christian authors with this debate, and their awareness of athletes as central figures in discussions of health

19. For the use of athletic metaphors to illustrate competition, particularly in the area of warfare, see Thomas F. Scanlon, "Combat and Contest: Athletic Metaphors for Warfare in Greek Literature," in *Coroebus Triumphs: The Alliance of Sports and the Arts*, ed. Susan J. Bandy (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1988), 230–44.

20. For a helpful discussion of ancient dietetics, with a focus on the Hippocratic Corpus, see Jacques Jouanna, "Dietetics in Hippocratic Medicine: Definition, Main Problems, Discussion," in *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, Studies in Ancient Medicine 40 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 137–53.

21. For one demonstration of a link between sexual renunciation and good health, note the emphasis placed on celibacy in the early Syrian church, such that sexual desire could be construed as a disability. See John W. Martens, "The Disability Within: Sexual Desire as Disability in Syrian Christianity," in *Disability in Antiquity*, ed. Christian Laes (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 376–87. Contrast this argument with the suggestion of Pinault, "Medical Case for Virginity," 132, that "physical well-being in itself was not the point of a Christian life." Compare also Gillian Clark, "The Health of the Spiritual Athlete," in *Health in Antiquity*, ed. Helen King (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 216–29, an article that demonstrates the link Neo-Platonic philosophers saw between asceticism and good health (221–3), while also emphasizing too much that Christian asceticism was supposed to be unhealthy (227–9).

and celibacy. The discussions of these first two sections provide the basis for the paper's third part, which shows that early Christian uses of athletic metaphors need to be read with awareness of the phenomenon of athletic celibacy. The paper's fourth and final section argues that some Christian ascetics were availing themselves of the medical methods used by athletes to help them repress their sexual urges. The phenomenon of athletic celibacy therefore underlies the emerging practices of Christian asceticism in the second and third centuries. Athletes and Christian ascetics may have chosen to renounce sex for different reasons, but athletes still served as a touchstone to evoke issues relating to good health and regimen.

### I. ATHLETIC CELIBACY AND DEBATES ABOUT HEALTH

There is a long Greco-Roman tradition of linking athletes with sexual abstinence, extending from the classical period of Greece to Late Antiquity. This tradition has been surveyed before, notably in an article by W. Fielder, which collects the relevant evidence, complete with a full discussion of why ancient doctors and philosophers thought that the emission of semen might harm athletic performance.<sup>22</sup> Fielder's study demonstrates just how widespread beliefs about athletic celibacy were, and it remains fundamental for all work on this topic. But it also comes to an essentially negative conclusion about the phenomenon, noting that athletic celibacy seems to have been rare, and that most references to it were drawn from an ancient literary tradition, rather than from first-hand familiarity with athletes who had renounced sex completely.<sup>23</sup> Similar conclusions about the exceptionality of athletic celibacy have also been offered in other studies.<sup>24</sup> In short, there has been a distinct unwillingness to believe that it was a real phenomenon in the second and third centuries CE. This belief is the product of insufficient engagement with evidence from medical literature. As will become clear, doctors of the second and third centuries CE debated about whether celibacy was a healthy lifestyle to follow, and they appealed to athletes as evidence for their opinions. In fact, the real-life examples of celibate athletes helped to normalize the idea of sexual renunciation among doctors,

22. Fielder, "Sexuelle Enthaltbarkeit." See also Thomas F. Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 227–36 on the practice of athletic celibacy.

23. Fielder, "Sexuelle Enthaltbarkeit," 147.

24. See Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics*, 329 and Nick Fisher, "Athletics and Sexuality," in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard (Chichester: Blackwell, 2014), 244–64, at 260–1.

making it more acceptable, and likely more widespread, than it was in previous centuries. Medical literature therefore provides access to first-hand references as well as a better perception of the prevalence of athletic celibacy in the second and third centuries.

Doctors of this period were increasingly accepting of a lifestyle that involved no sex, challenging opinions to the contrary in the Hippocratic Corpus.<sup>25</sup> The great champion of celibacy was Soranus, who addressed the question of whether permanent virginity was a healthy lifestyle choice in his *On Gynecology*. He concluded that total sexual abstinence was healthy for both men and women, explaining that “intercourse (συνουσία) was harmful in its own right,” and referring readers to a longer discussion on this point in another work called *On Hygiene*.<sup>26</sup> This work is no longer extant, but it seems likely that he cited the example of athletes to justify his claim, given the frequency with which he mentioned athletic lifestyles in his extant works, including *On Gynecology*.<sup>27</sup> We have more direct evidence for the relevance of athletes to discussions of celibacy in the works of Aretaeus, who was active likely in the late second century.<sup>28</sup> He offers explicit approval of a celibate lifestyle, citing athletes as evidence: “If a man is self-controlled (ἐγκρατής) in the emission of semen, he is powerful, courageous, and strong as wild animals; a sign [of this] is those of the athletes who are chaste.”<sup>29</sup> A similar attitude appears in the *Gymnasticus* of Philostratus, written early in the third century, which provides a rare glimpse of how athletic

25. See Pinault, “Medical Case for Virginity,” 127–30, for discussion of medical debates about celibacy in this period, with reference to the older views on the subject in the Hippocratic Corpus.

26. See Sor. *Gyn.* 1.32.1 (CMG 4:21), with additional discussions of his views by Manuli, “Elogio della castità,” 39–49 and Pinault, “Medical Case for Virginity,” 123–39.

27. See Sor. *Gyn.* 1.27.3, 3.7.1, and 3.9.2 (CMG 4:18, 97, and 98) for discussions of the physiological impact of athletic training on men and women. Some additional references to athletes appear in Caelius Aurelianus, *De salutaribus praeceptis* 4 and 18, ed. Valentin Rose, *Anecdota Graeca et Graeco-Latina. Mitteilungen aus Handschriften zur Geschichte der griechischen Wissenschaft*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Duemmler, 1864–70), 2:196–202. This is perhaps an abbreviated translation of Soranus’ lost work *On Hygiene*. See Pinault, “Medical Case for Virginity,” 126 for details, and Jackie Pigeaud, “Pro Caelio Aureliano,” in *Médecins et médecine dans l’Antiquité*, Mémoires Centre Jean Palerne 3, ed. Guy Sabbah (Saint-Étienne: Université de Saint-Étienne, 1982), 105–17 for discussion of the extent to which Caelius Aurelianus’ works can really be described as translations of Soranus.

28. For the life and works of Aretaeus, see Alain Touwaide, “Aretaios of Kappadokia,” in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Natural Scientists: The Greek Tradition and its Many Heirs*, ed. Paul T. Keyser and Georgia L. Irby-Massie (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 129–30, which dates him tentatively to the second half of the second century CE.

29. Aretaeus, *De causis et signis diuturnorum morborum* 2.5.4 (CMG 2:71). ἦν δέ τις ἀνὴρ καὶ ἐγκρατής ἔη τῆς θορῆς, κραταιός, εὐτολμος, ἀλκίχης μέσφι θηρίων· τέκμαρ δὲ ἀθλητῶν οἱ σαόφρονες.

trainers, rather than doctors, viewed the phenomenon of sexual abstinence.<sup>30</sup> “If an athlete has just had sex,” Philostratus claims, “it is better for him not to exercise.”<sup>31</sup> As Philostratus explains, athletes who had just had sex would be exposed by a host of signs, including the paleness of their skin, the quantity of their perspiration, and their eyes, which would “glance around in a wandering fashion and indicate their awareness of being loved.”<sup>32</sup> Athletes who came to the gymnasium after intercourse simply lacked the strength and stamina of the celibate, and this was obvious to observers, in keeping with prevailing medical views.

Across medical literature, athletes provided an obvious example to support the claim that celibacy was a healthy lifestyle choice. Even Galen, who held the view that sexual activity was important for health,<sup>33</sup> made an exception when it came to athletic celibacy. In an extended discussion of this phenomenon, Galen notes that a characteristic feature of celibate athletes in his day might be a “withered and collapsed (ῥυσσὸν καὶ προσεσταλμένον)” penis.<sup>34</sup> When one of Galen’s friends asked him why this was the case, he responded, “Those who, from the beginning [of their lives], whether because of athletic or vocal training, remained inexperienced with sex, keeping themselves completely free from any thought or image of it, become [people] with withered and wrinkled penises, similar to those of old men.”<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting, at least in passing, that Galen here links athletic with vocal training, in keeping with the ancient view that exercising one’s voice was simply another form of exercise.<sup>36</sup> It consequently made just as much sense for singers to abstain from sex as it did for

30. For the date of the work, see Jason König, “Training Athletes and Interpreting the Past in Philostratus’ *Gymnasticus*,” in *Philostratus, Greek Culture in the Roman World*, ed. Ewen Bowie and Jas Elsner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 251–283, at 251 n. 1.

31. Philostratus, *Gymnasticus*, 52, ed., trans., Jeffrey Rusten and Jason König, *Philostratus. Heroicus, Gymnasticus, Discourses 1 and 2*, LCL 521 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). Εἰ δ’ ἐξ ἀφροδισίων, ἀμείνους μὲν μὴ γυμνάζειν.

32. Philostratus, *Gymnasticus*, 52, trans. Rusten and König, *Philostratus*.

33. See Édouard Felsenheld, “La médecine du sport chez Galien: corps athlétiques, corps sains, corps malsains,” Ph.D. thesis (Université Paris-Sorbonne [Paris IV], 2011), 129–30; Marke Ahonen, “Galen on Sexual Desire and Sexual Regulation,” *Apeiron* 50.4 (2017): 449–81.

34. Gal. *De Locis Affectis* 6.5 (Kühn 8:451).

35. Gal. *De Locis Affectis* 6.5 (Kühn 8:451). ὅσοι δ’ εὐθύς ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἢ ἀθλοῦντες ἢ φωνασκοῦντες ἄπειροι τῶν ἀφροδισίων διετέλεσαν, εἴρξαντες παντάπασιν ἑαυτοὺς ἀπάσης ἐννοίας τε καὶ φαντασίας τοιαύτης, ἰσχνὰ καὶ ῥυσσὰ τοῖς τῶν γερόντων ὁμοίως αὐτοῖς γίνεται τὰ αἰδοῖα. Ahonen, “Galen on Sexual Desire,” 472 n. 57 observes that τὰ αἰδοῖα “probably” refers to the penis, and notes that Galen says nothing explicit about how permanent celibacy might impact the testicles.

36. See Christophe Vendries, “Abstinence sexuelle et infibulation des chanteurs dans la Rome impériale,” in *Penser et représenter le corps dans l’Antiquité: actes du colloque international de Rennes*,



athletes, based on the idea that it would improve athletic and vocal performance.<sup>37</sup> What matters more for the present argument, however, is Galen's suggestion that total sexual abstinence was an acceptable lifestyle choice, provided that it was cultivated from birth. As for Aretaeus and, most likely, for Soranus, Galen also found reason to support a celibate lifestyle thanks to the example of athletes.

Galen's works likewise reveal that there was broader interest in the celibacy of athletes, and that some people were interested in giving up sex for the sake of their health. This was not a new phenomenon by Galen's time, as is clear, notably, from the example of the future-emperor Augustus, who, as a young man, abstained from sex for an entire year because he was concerned about his "voice and strength (φωνῆς . . . καὶ ἰσχύος)."<sup>38</sup> Galen knew men who attempted to give up sex completely, evidently motivated, like Augustus, by concerns about their health. As it happens, the friend of Galen who asked about the "withered and collapsed" penises of athletes was himself interested in abstaining completely from sex, "contrary to his previous way of life (παρὰ τὸ πρόσθεν ἔθος)."<sup>39</sup> This man's attempt to give up sex soon resulted in his having a "swollen (ἐμφυσώμενον)" penis, so Galen advised him to "expel the accumulated sperm," and henceforth to avoid thinking about sex, just as celibate athletes did.<sup>40</sup>

Galen, however, reveals elsewhere that he was aware of more advanced methods to help patients control their sexual urges, drawing inspiration from how athletic trainers helped their charges achieve similar goals. Galen explicitly states as much in a passage from his *De sanitate tuenda*: "I saw a trainer of athletes placing a lead plate on the loin muscles of an athlete so that he might not have nocturnal emissions."<sup>41</sup> Other sections of Galen's corpus make clear that the application of lead was supposed to have a cooling influence, and thus to restrain the excess heat that would lead to nocturnal emissions.<sup>42</sup> Drawing on this principle of cooling, Galen passed along the lead-plate method to two of his

1–4 septembre 2004, Cahiers d'histoire du corps antique 1, ed. Jérôme Wilgaux and Francis Prost (Rennes: Pr. Universitaires de Rennes, 2006), 247–61, at 247–8.

37. See Vendries, "Abstinence sexuelle et infibulation des chanteurs," 247–61.

38. Nicolaus of Damascus, *Life of Augustus*, F129.15b, ed. Édith Parmentier and Francesca Prometsea Barone, *Nicolas de Damas. Histoires; Recueil de coutumes; Vie d'Auguste; Autobiographie. Fragments* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2011).

39. Gal. *De Locis Affectis* 6.5 (Kühn 8:451).

40. Gal. *De Locis Affectis* 6.5 (Kühn 8:451).

41. Gal. *De sanitate tuenda* 6.14.11 (Kühn 6:446 = CMG 5.4.2.195). γυμναστήν δέ τινα τῶν ἀθληταῖς ἐπιστατούντων ἐθεασάμην μολιβδίνην λεπίδα ταῖς ψόαις ὑποβάλλοντα τοῦ ἀθλητοῦ πρὸς τὸ μὴ ὄνειράττειν αὐτόν.

patients, one of whom was grateful for it, and the other of whom was “unable to bear the harshness (σκληρότης) of the lead.”<sup>43</sup> Galen’s writings therefore reveal the existence of at least a small population of men interested in giving up sex completely, evidently for reasons relating to health. These men, and Galen himself, had an obvious interest in the methods used by athletes to help them be celibate.

These passages from Galen, added to those from Soranus and Aretaeus, establish the centrality of athletes in medical discussions of celibacy in the second and third centuries. Such familiarity with the healthy lifestyle of celibate athletes, in turn, surely must have informed how the sexual renunciation of early Christians was perceived. And, as it happens, there is one famous passage where a non-Christian observer with expertise in medicine offered his opinion of Christian sexual renunciation. This observer was Galen; his comments on the subject come from an Arabic translation of a work no longer extant in Greek:

For among [the Christians] there are people, not only men but also women, who have refrained from sexual intercourse all the days of their life. And among them there are people whose self-control in their moderation with food and drink and whose strong desire for justice has reached such a degree that they do not fall short of the real philosophers.<sup>44</sup>

This passage has received much attention, both because of its surprisingly positive perspective on Christianity, and for the evidence it provides of Christian asceticism in a very early period.<sup>45</sup> Despite this attention, little attempt has been

42. See Gal. *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus* 9.23 (Kühn 12.231–2). Sor. *Gyn.* 3.46 (CMG 4:124) likewise recommends the application of lead plates to the loins of women suffering from an excess of seed (γονόρροια). Lead might also be used in the training of singers, as is clear from the example of the Emperor Nero, who would place a lead plate on his chest as part of his regime. See Suetonius, *Nero* 20.1 (LCL 38:110).

43. Gal. *De sanitate tuenda* 6.14.11–12 (Kühn 6.446 = CMG 5.4.2.195).

44. Gal. *On Plato’s Republic*. Trans. Jakob Engberg et al., “The Other Side of the Debate 2: Translation of Second Century Pagan Authors on Christians and Christianity,” in *In Defence of Christianity: Early Christian Apologists*, ed. Jakob Engberg, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, and Jörg Ulrich, *Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity* 15 (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 229–35, at 235. Compare the translation of R. Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 15, which brought wide exposure to this passage.

45. The passage has become an almost obligatory quotation in studies of early Christian sexuality, and of Greek and Roman reactions to Christianity. For some examples, note the following: Robin Lane-Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 361; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 33; Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*<sup>3</sup> (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 601; Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*<sup>2</sup> (New Haven:

made to contextualize the passage with Galen's other comments on a life of complete celibacy elsewhere in his corpus.<sup>46</sup> Here Galen elects to compare Christians with "real philosophers," but as is apparent from across his other works, his experience with athletes led him to believe that a life completely free from sex could be a healthy choice. The celibacy of athletes therefore must have played a role in how Galen evaluated the total sexual renunciation of some Christians. The same was surely true for many of Galen's contemporaries, given the widespread elite interest in medicine and athletics apparent from literature of the second and third centuries.<sup>47</sup> Sexual renunciation of the sort practiced among early Christians was therefore already familiar in some circles thanks to the example of athletes who practiced lifelong celibacy. The extreme lifestyles of athletes, and the desires of some of them to give up sex completely, made them central figures in debates about healthy lifestyles.

## II. CELIBATE ATHLETES AND HEALTH IN EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

Christians were aware of these debates, and were also familiar with the larger phenomenon of athletic culture in the second and third centuries. This latter point has been demonstrated by several scholars, including the late Louis Robert, in response to contrary claims and assumptions that still persist.<sup>48</sup> One aspect of

---

Yale University Press, 2003), 79–80; R. D. Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World*, Key Themes in Ancient History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 81. For reconsiderations of Galen's perspective on Christianity, see Secord, "Galen and the Theodotians," 59–63, and Rebecca Flemming, "Galen and the Christians: Texts and Authority in the Second Century AD," in *Christianity in the Second Century: Themes and Developments*, ed. James Carleton Paget and Judith Lieu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 171–87.

46. At best, the issue of celibacy has been raised only in debates about the authenticity of the passage. Note the skeptical comments of Stephen Gero, "Galen on the Christians: A Reappraisal of the Arabic Evidence," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 56 (1990): 371–411, at 408, and the response of Gotthard Strohmaier, "Galen in den Schulen der Juden und Christen," *Judaica. Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums* 62 (2006): 140–56, at 149.

47. For elite interest in athletics during this period, see König, *Athletics and Literature in the Roman Empire*, esp. 14–17. For elite interest in medicine, see the discussion in Secord, "Introduction," 2–4 and the references cited there.

48. See Louis Robert, "Une vision de Perpétue martyr," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* (1982): 228–76 = *Opera Minora Selecta* 5:791–839; Michael Poliakov, "Jacob, Job, and Other Wrestlers: Reception of Greek Athletics by Jews and Christians in Antiquity," *Journal of Sport History* 11.2 (1984): 48–65; and P. F. Esler, "Paul and the *Agon*: Understanding a Pauline Motif in its Cultural and Visual Context," in *Picturing the New Testament: Studies in Ancient Visual Images*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2:193, ed. Annette Weissenrieder, Friederike Wendt and Petra von Gemünden (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 356–84, for demonstrations of Christian familiarity with contemporary athletic culture. See also C. P. Jones,

Christian familiarity with athletics is engagement with the phenomenon of athletic celibacy, and the prevailing medical theories that supported and justified it. Concern with a healthy life among Christians extended to the issue of sexual renunciation. And, even as more Christians seem to have been giving up sex, athletes continued to come to mind for Christian writers in matters relating to sexual renunciation.

Christian awareness of athletic celibacy is apparent from the foundational treatment of athletes in the letters of Paul. Paul's use of athletic, agonistic imagery has received much attention, especially in relation to the appearance of athletes in other philosophical and religious literature.<sup>49</sup> My treatment here of Paul will consequently be brief, and focus only on his most explicit reference to the phenomenon of athletic celibacy. The key passage is from 1 Corinthians: "Every competitor exercises self-control (*ἐγκρατεύεται*) in every way. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we for an imperishable one."<sup>50</sup> As Roman Garrison has argued, Paul's use of the verb *ἐγκρατεύεται* here implies self-control in matters of sexuality, employing the same word-root as did his near-contemporary Aretaeus.<sup>51</sup> This is clear from the verb's appearance two chapters earlier in a discussion of marriage: "If they cannot exercise self-control (*ἐγκρατεύονται*), let them be married, for it is better to be married than to burn with passion."<sup>52</sup> In this passage, self-control must extend to matters beyond moderation in the consumption of food, which would, in any case, be an odd thing to suggest about athletes,

---

"Imaginary Athletics in Two Followers of John Chrysostom," *HSCP* 106 (2011): 321–38, at 321, for discussion of the difficulties involved in linking early Christian use of athletic metaphors with the reality of athletic competitions. For (unpersuasive) claims that Christians were unfamiliar with athletics, note especially Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif*, 187–8. Similar approaches to athletics are also present implicitly in other studies treating athletic metaphors in Christian literature, such as Robert Paul Seesengood, *Competing Identities: The Athlete and the Gladiator in Early Christian Literature*, Library of New Testament Studies 346 (New York: T & T Clark, 2006).

49. For an overview of recent research on this topic, see Victor C. Pfitzner, "Was St. Paul a Sports Enthusiast? Realism and Rhetoric in Pauline Athletic Metaphors," in *Sports and Christianity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 89–111.

50. 1 Cor 9:25 (ed. Barbara Aland et al., *Greek New Testament* [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001], 588). *πᾶς δὲ ὁ ἀγωνιζόμενος πάντα ἐγκρατεύεται, ἐκείνοι μὲν οὖν ἵνα φθαρτὸν στέφανον λάβωσιν, ἡμεῖς δὲ ἄφθαρτον.*

51. See Roman Garrison, "Paul's Use of the Athlete Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 9," *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 22.2 (1993): 209–17, at 212.

52. 1 Cor 7:9 (ed. Aland et al., *Greek New Testament*, 581). *εἰ δὲ οὐκ ἐγκρατεύονται, γαμησάτωσαν, κρείττον γάρ ἐστιν γαμῆσαι ἢ πυροῦσθαι.*

given their popular reputation as gluttons in Greco-Roman antiquity.<sup>53</sup> As such, this formative reference to athletes and the “perishable wreath” that they sought takes for granted the phenomenon of athletic celibacy, and the belief that an athlete’s performance in competition would be improved by abstaining from sex. Paul stops short of suggesting that Christians should exercise self-control for reasons relating to health and athletic performance, but he nonetheless shows his familiarity with these motivations for sexual abstinence.

Similar familiarity is apparent in the works of later Christian authors, who make their awareness of medical thought more obvious than Paul did. The health benefits associated with celibacy are identified explicitly in the third century by Julius Africanus in his *Cesti*, a miscellany that displays the medical knowledge of its author.<sup>54</sup> Africanus’ reference to athletic celibacy comes, oddly enough, in a context relating to veterinary medicine: “Horses, just like human athletes, should abstain from sexual acts. This causes damage to the eyes.”<sup>55</sup> Africanus here draws on a prevailing medical belief about a link between sexual activity and the eyes, namely that too much sex would draw fluid away from the head, and lead over time to worsening eyesight.<sup>56</sup> It is striking to see that Africanus uses the example of celibate athletes as his analogy in this passage, rather than ascetic Christians, who were by this point already known even to some non-Christians, such as Galen. Athletes were still the obvious example to cite in matters relating to celibacy, in keeping with the prevailing tendency in medical literature.

Africanus’ contemporary Clement likewise displays his awareness of medical views on athletic celibacy, and in the process reveals that Christians in Alexandria were concerned about whether abstaining from sex was healthy.<sup>57</sup>

53. For the gluttony of athletes, see Potter, *The Victor’s Crown*, 139–44.

54. The fragments of this work are edited, with translation, in Martin Wallraff, Carlo Scardino, Laura Mecella, and Christophe Guignard, *Julius Africanus. Cesti. The Extant Fragments*, trans. William Adler, GCS Neue Folge, Band 18 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012). See also Jared Secord, “Julius Africanus, Origen, and the Politics of Intellectual Life under the Severans,” *Classical World* 110.2 (2017): 211–35, at 222–9, for discussion of Africanus and his work.

55. Julius Africanus, *Cesti*, F 12.8.16–17 (GCS 18:62), trans. Adler in Wallraff et al, *Julius Africanus. Cesti*. Ἴππους δὲ ὡσπερ ἀνθρώπους ἀθλητὰς ἀπέχεσθαι χρῆ τῶν ἀφροδισίων. τοῦτο δὲ φέρει βλάβος ὀμμάτων.

56. Note, for instance, [Ar.] *Pr.* 4.1–3 (LCL 316:144–8) for a discussion of the negative impact of sex on the eyes.

57. For discussion of Clement’s awareness of medicine, see Matyáš Havrda, “Galenus Christianus? The Doctrine of Demonstration in *Stromata* VIII and the Question of its Source,” *VC* 65 (2011): 343–75, and Dawn LaValle, “Divine Breastfeeding: Milk, Blood, and *Pneuma* in Clement of Alexandria’s *Paedagogus*,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8.2 (2015): 322–36.

Clement draws from Paul's discussion of athletic celibacy, but makes it even more explicit in terms of the health benefits: "They also say that not a few athletes abstain from sex, exercising self-control (ἐγκρατευομένους) for bodily training (ἀσκησιν σωματικὴν)."<sup>58</sup> Clement's subsequent conclusion on athletic celibacy is dismissive, claiming that "there is nothing virtuous about being unmarried unless it comes from love for God."<sup>59</sup> But considerations about health and "bodily training" evidently still mattered to Clement. As he says, the choice to follow a life of celibacy (εὐνουχίαν) could still be a pious one, and in accordance with "the healthy rule (κατὰ τὸν ὑγιῆ κανόνα)," provided that the celibate person was not dismissive towards the lives of married people.<sup>60</sup> A similar concern with health shows up in other sections of Clement's works. For instance, though he had mixed feelings about bathing, he still believed that both Christian men and women should frequent the baths for the sake of their health (ὑγείας).<sup>61</sup> Clement also believed that men should exercise in the gymnasium, especially when they were young, in large part because of the associated health benefits.<sup>62</sup> As was the case for Paul and Africanus, athletes remained a touchstone for Clement when he discussed celibacy and its associated health benefits. Athletes might renounce sex and marriage for the wrong reasons, but their self-control was still a desirable thing for Christians to have.<sup>63</sup>

All of these references to celibate athletes in the works of Christian authors, alongside their medical contemporaries, suggest that the theme of sexual renunciation should be kept in mind when reading athletic metaphors in early Christian literature, as the paper's next section will demonstrate. Medicine and Christianity were not discrete phenomena, and good health was a concern for

58. Clem. Al. *Strom.* 3.6.50.4 (GCS 15:219). Φασὶ δὲ καὶ ἀθλητὰς οὐκ ὀλίγους ἀφροδισίων ἀπέχεσθαι δι' ἀσκησιν σωματικὴν ἐγκρατευομένους. At the end of his discussion of athletic celibacy, Clement cites a work *On the Peculiarity of Athletic Contests* by Istros of Alexandria, a scholar of the third century BCE associated with Callimachus. For commentary on this passage, and the lost work of Istros, see Monica Berti and Steven Jackson, "Istros," *Brill's New Jacoby* 334 (2015), F 55 (<http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brill-s-new-jacoby/istros-334-a334>, accessed March 31, 2016).

59. Clem. Al. *Strom.* 3.6.51.1 (GCS 15:219). οὐδ' ἡ εὐνουχία ἐνάρετον, εἰ μὴ δι' ἀγάπην γίνοιτο τὴν πρὸς τὸν θεόν. See also Fielder, "Sexuelle Enthaltensamkeit," 137–41.

60. Clem. Al. *Strom.* 3.18.105.1 (GCS 15:244).

61. Clem. Al. *Paedagogus* 3.9.46.1 (GCS 12:263). See also Garrett G. Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 85–103 for discussion of the health benefits associated with bathing by ancient authors.

62. See Clem. Al. *Paedagogus* 3.10.49.1 (GCS 12:264).

63. For additional discussion of Clement's perspectives on celibacy and other forms of asceticism, see Henny Fiskå Hägga, "Continenence and Marriage: The Concept of *Enkrateia* in Clement of Alexandria," *Symbolae Osloenses* 81.1 (2006): 126–43.

Christians. As such, a major reason why athletes resonated so much within Christian literature was their centrality to current debates about health. Paul and other Christian authors were consequently eager to suggest that Christians, too, were like athletes in their concerns for bodily training, practicing a regimen that some observers would have regarded as healthy.

### III. CELIBATE CHRISTIAN ATHLETES

Concern with good health, in turn, underlies the use of athletic metaphors in early Christian literature. When Christian authors likened ascetics or martyrs to athletes, they were drawing on the many different associations that athletes had in Greco-Roman culture. Athletes connoted struggle and competition, but their struggles often seem to have focused on areas relating to good health and self-control, particularly in matters relating to sex. With Christian athletes in their care, struggling to achieve self-control, clerics became more than just physicians of the soul. They became like athletic trainers, helping to guide their charges to healthy lives on earth, including the renunciation of sex.

A clear demonstration of this principle comes from the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, whose use of a range of medical metaphors reveals a strong interest in health and healing. Ignatius, notably, identifies Christ as a physician (*ιατρός*), and suggests that the bread in the Eucharist is “the medicine of immortality (*φάρμακον ἀθανασίας*).”<sup>64</sup> Christ is presented here almost as a panacea, and Christianity itself as a religion of the healthy.<sup>65</sup> There are significant medical parallels here in Ignatius’ language, including some that point to a drug whose very name was actually “immortality.”<sup>66</sup> Ignatius’ use of medical language has been treated somewhat uneasily, in keeping with a larger tendency to question whether medical metaphors in Christian literature should be taken literally.<sup>67</sup> But it must be noted that Ignatius’ letters make thoroughgoing use of medical concepts and language, linking the correct doctrine of Christianity with good health, and heresy with poison, notably in the form of plants.<sup>68</sup> The botanical language employed by Ignatius provides an additional sign of his tendency to link Christianity with health and medicine. By his terms, the ideal Christian

64. Ignatius, *Ep.* 1.7.2; 20.2 (ed. Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, updated edition [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999], 140, 150).

65. See discussion on these points in William R. Schoedel, *A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 60.

66. See Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 97.

67. See Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 97, and Ferngren, *Medicine & Health Care*, 73.

68. See Ignatius, *Ep.* 3.6.1, 3; 5.3.1 (ed. Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 162, 178).

cleric was someone who helped others to be healthy, monitoring and controlling their diet and mental health, much like a doctor.

Ignatius' letters even go so far as to depict his correspondents as athletes-in-training, seeking to achieve the best possible condition. Certainly, Ignatius' use of athletic metaphors does draw on the familiar connotations of athletes in terms of competition and victory. For instance, in one of three references to athletes in his letter to Polycarp, he says: "It is [characteristic] of a great athlete to be beaten and be victorious."<sup>69</sup> The athlete here evokes steadfastness, rather than sexual abstinence.<sup>70</sup> But the other references to athletes in the letter point instead to the good health and self-control associated with athletes. In one instance, Ignatius offers straightforward advice to Polycarp: "Be self-controlled, as an athlete of God (Νήφε ως θεοῦ ἀθλητής)."<sup>71</sup> The verb νήφε here might simply be rendered in terms of sobriety ("be sober"), and taken as advice not to drink wine.<sup>72</sup> But another possible meaning of the verb is "to be self-controlled."<sup>73</sup> And this makes better sense of the reference here to an "athlete of God"; athletes were much better-known for abstaining from sex, rather than from wine.<sup>74</sup> Thus we have definite traces here of Ignatius treating athletes in much the same way that Paul did, including an awareness of the phenomenon of athletic celibacy. Christians shared with athletes a concern with achieving top physical condition, as Ignatius makes clear.

Like Clement a century later, Ignatius also reveals that he regarded athletes as pinnacles of good health. This belief is apparent in the third reference to athletes in his letter to Polycarp. It is made explicitly in terms of disease, and is directed, again, as advice to Polycarp: "Endure the diseases of all as a perfect athlete."<sup>75</sup> As before, the passage evokes an athlete as a steadfast figure, enduring hardship. But, in this case, there is the implication,

69. Ignatius, *Ep.* 7.3.1 (ed. Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 196). Μεγάλου ἐστὶν ἀθλητοῦ τὸ δέρεσθαι καὶ νικᾶν.

70. See Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 261.

71. Ignatius, *Ep.* 7.2.3 (ed. Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 196).

72. See G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), s.v. νήφω I, citing this passage from Ignatius.

73. See H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), s.v. νήφω II.

74. Note Arr. *Epict. Diss.* 3.15.3 (LCL 218:100) (cf. *Enchiridion* 29.2 [LCL 218:506]) for a discussion of how athletes would have to monitor their diets. The passage reveals that athletes would still drink wine, though only at particular times of the day.

75. Ignatius, *Ep.* 7.1.3 (ed. Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 194). πάντων τὰς νόσους βιάσταιε ως τέλειος ἀθλητής.



familiar from the works of Clement and medical authors, that athletes might be especially healthy people, thanks in part to their self-control in matters relating to sex. This latter point becomes especially clear in Ignatius' letters to the Ephesians, where he expresses hope that a "plant of the devil (τοῦ διαβόλου βοτάνη τις)" would not be found among them, but that they would "remain in Jesus Christ physically and spiritually with total chastity (ἀγνεία) and self-control."<sup>76</sup> The passage's emphasis on chastity and self-control evokes themes associated closely with athletes, though it does not mention them explicitly. Christians, too, would therefore achieve good health in a similar way, maintaining the bodily discipline associated so closely with athletes. In sum, athletic language in Ignatius' letters points in the direction of sexual renunciation, in addition to competitive struggle and victory.

There is similar emphasis on athletic celibacy and self-control in a famous section of the *Martyrdom of Perpetua*. The example is not strictly metaphorical, but it does take place in a dream described by Perpetua that had clear predictive and allegorical significance for her. In Perpetua's dream, she is transformed into a man, and expected to fight in an arena against an Egyptian. As scholars have observed, the text demonstrates awareness of athletic and gladiatorial conventions.<sup>77</sup> Perpetua reports that she had "attractive youths" accompanying her as "supporters and assistants."<sup>78</sup> These "attractive youths" are the agents in the events that follow in Perpetua's narrative of her vision: "And I was stripped naked, and I became a man. And my supporters began to rub me with oil, as they are accustomed to do for a match."<sup>79</sup> Perpetua's dream presupposes awareness with the phenomenon of athletic celibacy. The "attractive youths" are rubbing

76. Ignatius, *Ep.* 1.10.3 (ed. Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 144). ἵνα μὴ τοῦ διαβόλου βοτάνη τις εὔρεθῆ ἐν ὑμῖν, ἀλλ' ἐν πάσῃ ἀγνείᾳ καὶ σωφροσύνῃ μένητε ἐν Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ σαρκικῶς καὶ πνευματικῶς.

77. See Robert, "Une vision de Perpétue martyr," 228–76 and Potter, *The Victor's Crown*, 310. Robert argues that the *Passion of Perpetua* was originally written in Greek ("Une vision de Perpétue martyr," 256), and he has been followed in this suggestion by David Potter ("Martyrdom as Spectacle," in *Theater and Society in the Classical World*, ed. Ruth Scodel [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993], 53–88, at 57), based in large part on the additional details about athletics that the Greek version of the text contains. But Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 79–99, offers a convincing argument in support of the claim that the Latin version is the original.

78. *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 10.6 (ed. Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 112).

79. *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 10.7 (ed. Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 112). Trans. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. "Et expoliata sum et facta sum masculus; et coeperunt me fautores mei oleo defricare, quomodo solent in agone."

Perpetua with oil, but this has no sexual impact on her. Instead, Perpetua, in her new form as a man, has become like the athletes mentioned by Galen, who never think about sex, and who would experience no temptation or sexual desire, even when they were being rubbed with oil by attractive young men. Perpetua even describes how, in her vision, a figure who seems to represent Christ appears, “carrying a rod, as if he were a trainer of gladiators (*ferens virgam, quasi lanista*).”<sup>80</sup> Though Christ is depicted here as an athletic trainer, rather than a doctor, he still is associated with Perpetua’s health, helping her to keep her passions in check before she defeats the Egyptian. Athletic celibacy consequently makes better sense of this episode than does a recent commentary by Thomas J. Heffernan, which suggests “The eroticism of the scene is inescapable and yet somehow mystifying.”<sup>81</sup> There is, in fact, nothing erotic in the passage at all, apart from the strictly-controlled passion of Perpetua, who has become not just a man, but a self-controlled athlete. Rather than a display of eroticism, this is a demonstration that athletic sexual restraint was a phenomenon familiar to Christians, including the well-educated and bilingual Perpetua.<sup>82</sup>

Readers of early Christian literature should consequently be aware of the many different connotations that athletic metaphors might have had. This is an especially pressing issue in the second and third centuries, thanks to the continuing boom in athletics during this period, and the evident familiarity of Christians with athletic culture. The theme of athletic celibacy can thus provide additional insight to the use of athletic metaphors in Christian literature. If Christ and Christian clerics were physicians or athletic trainers, it follows that ideal Christians were athletes, not simply because of their dedicated struggles to achieve prizes, but also because of their self-controlled lifestyle, including the renunciation of sex. As such, metaphorical references to athletes in early Christian literature may often contain hints of early forms of ascetic behavior. Athletes may have connoted excess in matters relating to diet, and their motivations for renouncing sex may have been questioned, but the figure of the healthy, self-controlled, and celibate athlete still resonated for Christian writers, as their frequent use of athletic metaphors reveals.

80. *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 10.8 (ed. Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 112).

81. Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 93, with additional references to the scene’s eroticism at 262–3.

82. On Perpetua’s education and bilingualism, see Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*,

#### IV. MEDICAL PRACTICES FOR CELIBATE CHRISTIANS

Some ascetic Christians not only tried to follow the healthy lifestyles of celibate athletes, but also followed the example of athletes by turning to prevailing medical knowledge and practices in order to repress their sexual urges. A basic link between medicine and the desires of some Christians to give up sex is apparent from a story told by Justin Martyr in the second century. As Justin explains, an unnamed Christian man in Alexandria wanted to have a doctor surgically remove his testicles, and submitted an (unsuccessful) petition to the provincial governor seeking permission for this.<sup>83</sup> Early Christian ascetics also seemed to be engaging with medical knowledge when they restricted their intake of food. As Teresa Shaw notes, dietary control would have been an obvious suggestion for an ancient physician to give a patient who wished to ward off sexual urges.<sup>84</sup> There is thus no reason to doubt that the practice of Christian sexual renunciation engaged with ancient medical thought.

But neither of the two methods, castration or starvation, would have been acceptable for celibate athletes. Athletes needed to eat in order to train and compete successfully, and castration would reduce their strength, according to no less a medical authority than Galen.<sup>85</sup> There were, however, other methods designed to help athletes repress their libidos, including, as we have seen, the application of lead plates to their loin muscles. There were also many other plant-based substances believed by ancient doctors and botanists to have anaphrodisiac properties, that is, to help reduce sexual urges.<sup>86</sup> These types of remedies, shared between celibate athletes and Christian ascetics, are the concern of this section.<sup>87</sup> As I will argue, Christian forms of sexual renunciation were anticipated by earlier types of celibacy, especially those associated with athletes. Christian authors were well aware of substances and treatments that were believed to repress sexual desire. Though they tended to be critical of those who

83. Justin *1 Apol.* 29.2–3 (ed. Denis Minns and Paul Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, Apologies*, Oxford Early Christian Texts [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 160). See also Daniel F. Caner, “The Practice and Prohibition of Self-Castration in Early Christianity,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 51.4 (1997): 396–415, for more on the phenomenon of castration within early Christianity.

84. For discussion on this point, see Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 124–8.

85. Gal. *On Semen* 1.15.35–7 (Kühn 4:571 = *CMG* 5.3.1.122).

86. For a guide to ancient botanical literature, see Gavin Hardy and Laurence Totelin, *Ancient Botany*, Sciences of Antiquity (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

87. See already John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, Enlarged Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 102–4 for a brief review of evidence relating to Christian awareness of anaphrodisiacs.

used these methods, their wide familiarity with them suggests that some Christian ascetics were tempted to resort to them, following the example of celibate athletes.

At the outset, some general familiarity among early Christians with anaphrodisiac substances may be inferred because of the church's close relationship with Judaism, and the well-attested surgical procedure of epispasm, which was designed to reverse the effects of circumcision.<sup>88</sup> The rationale for this inference has already been established by John Riddle, who suggests that any Jewish male wishing to reverse his circumcision would have needed to stop himself from having erections in the weeks following his surgery.<sup>89</sup> Botanical remedies to help with this task would have evidently been welcome, especially if, as Riddle argues, some of the plants that would have been used actually would have been effective at suppressing male libido.<sup>90</sup> There is no explicit evidence that Jewish men recovering from the procedure of epispasm did use any of these substances, but it is still a natural inference to make. As such, we might expect that some early Christian men of Jewish background made use of anaphrodisiac substances when they tried to reverse the effects of their circumcision. This knowledge of anaphrodisiacs, in turn, would have been passed along to the larger Christian community, including to members with ascetic impulses.

Some more concrete signs of Christian awareness with anaphrodisiacs comes from Julius Africanus' *Cesti*, which offers recipes to deal with many different health concerns. Though none of the recipes in the extant fragments is designed to inhibit someone's libido, the comments of one later reader, the Byzantine scholar Michael Psellus, suggest that lost portions of the work discussed both aphrodisiac and anaphrodisiac substances. Amidst a long list describing what the *Cesti* offered in its recipes, Psellus suggests that Africanus "both kindles and quenches sexual desires (ἔρωτας δὲ καὶ ἀνάπτει καὶ σβέννυσι)."<sup>91</sup> He adds that Africanus "also keeps nocturnal emissions in check (ἐπέχει δὲ καὶ ὀνειρώξις)."<sup>92</sup> How exactly Africanus did this is unclear. But several of the ingredients included in extant recipes were believed in antiquity to have anaphrodisiac properties. Three examples are

88. See Robert G. Hall, "Epispasm and the Dating of Early Jewish Writings," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 2 (1988): 71–86.

89. See John M. Riddle, *Goddesses, Elixirs, and Witches: Plants and Sexuality throughout Human History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 115–17.

90. See Riddle, *Goddesses, Elixirs, and Witches*, 118–19.

91. *Cesti* T 7.68 (GCS 18.16).

92. *Cesti* T 7.65 (GCS 18.16).

worth mentioning: the chaste tree (ἄγνος or λύγος), hemlock (κώνειον), and rue (πήγανον).<sup>93</sup> Africanus identified the last of these, rue, as a key ingredient in an all-purpose remedy for poison. Oddly, there was a widespread ancient belief that remedies for poisons, such as the venom of snakes and spiders, also had anaphrodisiac properties.<sup>94</sup> Africanus was therefore likely familiar with rue's reputed properties as an anaphrodisiac, in addition to its status as an anti-venom. Rue, the chaste tree, or hemlock may all have been involved in the lost recipes that were meant to help people check their libidos. Africanus' mention of rue and other anaphrodisiac substances is suggestive of a general Christian awareness of them in the early third century.

Africanus aside, it is clear that some of his Christian contemporaries were quite familiar with the reputed anaphrodisiac properties of some plants, even if they may have been less than approving of their use to help achieve celibacy. Pseudo-Hippolytus and Origen both cite the example of an Athenian cult official who applied hemlock to his genitals to help him be celibate.<sup>95</sup> Origen's comment on this practice is tellingly dismissive: "There is one hierophant, I believe, among the Athenians, who not trusting his ability to be master of his male desires and to overcome them by force of will, drugs his male parts with hemlock and is thought to be pure for the ritual customary among the Athenians."<sup>96</sup> Origen seems to have regarded hemlock as an effective anaphrodisiac, but he disapproved of anyone who resorted to its use. Christians had no need for it, Origen claims, suggesting that prayer, rather than hemlock, might help Christians "drive out all lust from their mind," recalling Galen's advice to his

93. Chaste tree: *Cesti* F 75.11 (GCS 18:186). Hemlock: F 12.2.98 (GCS 18:50). Rue: D 21 and 48 (GCS 18:114 and 142). For the reputed anaphrodisiac properties of these three plants, respectively, see Dioscorides 4.78.2, 1.103.2, and 3.45.1 (ed. Max Wellman, *Pedanii Dioscuridis anazarbei De materia medica libri quinque* [Berlin: apud Weidmannos, 1906–14]).

94. See Heinrich von Staden, "Spiderwoman and the Chaste Tree: The Semantics of Matter," *Configurations* 1.1 (1993): 23–56.

95. See [Hippol.] *Haer.* 5.8.40 (ed. M. David Litwa, *Refutation of all Heresies*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World 40 [Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016], 254); Origen, *C. Cels.* 7.48 (GCS 3:199). For attestations of similar practices among non-Christian priests, see: *Cyranides* 1.5.9–14 (ed. D.V. Kaimakes, *Die Kyraniden*, Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 76 [Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1976], 44) and [Gal.] *De remediis parabilibus* 1 (Kühn 14:543).

96. Origen, *C. Cels.* 7.48 (GCS 3:199), trans. Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). Καὶ εἰς μὲν που παρ' Ἀθηναίους ἱεροφάντης, οὐδὲ πιστευόμενος ἑαυτοῦ τὰς ἀρσενικὰς ὀρέξεις ὡς κύριος αὐτῶν εἶναι δυνάμενος καὶ κρατεῖν αὐτῶν ἐς ὅσον βούλεται, κωνειασθεῖς τὰ ἀρσενὰ μέρη καθαρὸς εἶναι νομίζεται πρὸς τὴν νενομισμένην παρ' Ἀθηναίους ἀγιστείαν. See also Ahonen, "Galen on Sexual Desire," 457 n. 28 for references to other doctors who advised patients to control their desires by not thinking about sex.

friend with the swollen penis: just don't think about sex.<sup>97</sup> Origen and Galen both seem to have believed that regimen, rather than medication, should be sufficient for most people to control their sexual desires.<sup>98</sup>

But Origen, like Galen, seems also to have known more about methods to help someone be celibate. As it happens, such awareness may underlie some of the rumors spread about Origen in the years following his death, including the famous and controversial story that he had himself castrated early in his life.<sup>99</sup> Epiphanius even reported a story that Origen had “developed a drug to apply to his genitals and dry them up,” though he noted that he did not believe it.<sup>100</sup> Neither of these rumors can be taken for granted, but there still are signs that Origen was aware of some botanical remedies that might help a would-be ascetic repress his sexuality. This botanical knowledge is apparent in Origen's exegesis of the Hebrew Bible, notably in his discussion of the use of chaste tree and willow branches in the Feast of Tabernacles.<sup>101</sup> The reputed anaphrodisiac properties of both plants were clearly known to him, as Rufinus' Latin translation of the passage demonstrates:

I also thus understand the feast day of tabernacles, which is commanded in the Law, that the people should go out on a fixed day of the year and dwell in tabernacles, having branches of palms, foliage of the willow (*salicis*) and chaste tree (*populi*), and boughs of leafy trees. The palm is a sign of victory in that war which the flesh and spirit wage amongst themselves; but the chaste and willow tree (*arbor. . . populus et salix*) are branches of purity as much in virtue as in name.<sup>102</sup>

97. Origen, *C. Cels.* 7.48 (GCS 3:199).

98. On this point, note the assessment of Ahonen, “Galen on Sexual Desire,” 479: “*Aphrodisia* is, in the ancient medical tradition, part of life's conduct, and it is to be managed, not medicated to extinction. We must, through rational observation, find out the peculiarities of our bodies and establish a regimen and lifestyle that works for us.”

99. See Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 6.8.1 (GCS 9.2:534), with the discussion of Christoph Marksches, “Kastration und Magenprobleme? Einige neue Blicke auf das asketische Leben des Origenes,” in *Origenes und sein Erbe: Gesammelte Studien, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 160* (Berlin and New York, 2007), 15–34.

100. Epiph. *Adv. haeres.* 6.4.3,12–13 (GCS 31:409). ἐπενόησέ τι φάρμακον ἐπιθεῖναι τοῖς μορίοις καὶ ἀποξηρᾶναι.

101. See Lev 23:40 (LXX, ed. L. C. L. Benton, *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* [Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007], 161).

102. Origen, *In Exodum Homilia* 9.4 (GCS 29.244). “Ego sic intelligo et diem festum tabernaculorum, qui mandatur in lege, ut exeat populus certa die anni et in tabernaculis habitet habens ramos palmarum et frondes salicis ac populi et ramos arboris frondosae. Palma victoriae signum est illius belli, quod inter se caro et spiritus gerit; arbor autem populus et salix tam virtute quam nomine virgulta sunt castitatis.”

A few features of the passage require comment. First, Rufinus has offered an unhelpful translation of the LXX text underlying Origen's commentary, which refers unambiguously to "branches of the chaste-tree (ἄγνου κλάδους)," rather than of the "poplar tree," as the Latin phrase *arbor populus* implies.<sup>103</sup> Origen, however, must have been using the correct form of "chaste tree" in his homily, thus allowing for a play on words in the final line between ἄγνος, "chaste tree," and the adjective ἄγνός, "chaste."<sup>104</sup> Origen even allowed himself to work an athletic metaphor into his exegesis, drawing on the connotations of a palm as a "sign of victory" in athletic competitions. In this sense, then, Origen may be linking his discussion of anaphrodisiac substances with a larger awareness of the practice of athletic celibacy. The celibate athlete, aided perhaps by the anaphrodisiac properties of the chaste tree, emerges victorious in the battle between the "flesh and spirit." Origen may be one step away from approving of the use of anaphrodisiac substances, but his exegesis still allows for this reading, drawing on the continuing resonance of the celibate athlete, even for Christians.

A few decades later, Origen's critic Methodius applied a similar awareness of anaphrodisiac substances in his *Symposium*, infusing this dialogue about virginity with a liberal dose of botanical knowledge.<sup>105</sup> This is apparent from the outset of the work, where it is noted that the garden where the dialogue took place included a "stately chaste tree (ἄγνος δένδρον ὑψηλόν)."<sup>106</sup> Methodius thereby positions his text relative to Plato's *Phaedrus*, which also includes a reference to a chaste tree in its opening section.<sup>107</sup> Learned readers were evidently expected to note this allusion, and, at the same time, to grasp the significance of the chaste tree. As with Origen, the similarity of the tree's name to the adjective for "chaste" was meant to resonate, and Methodius makes this point explicit later in the dialogue, noting that it was "by its very name the tree of chastity."<sup>108</sup> Methodius likewise follows Origen in using his botanical knowledge to help explain the references to willow in the Hebrew Bible. He suggests that the tree is

103. A more accurate Latin translation for "chaste tree" would be *vitex* (e.g. Plin. *NH* 24.59 [LCL 393:46]).

104. See Riddle, *Goddesses, Elixirs, and Witches*, 113–27, for more on the chaste tree, and the commonness of this play on words in antiquity.

105. See L. G. Patterson, *Methodius of Olympus: Divine Sovereignty, Human Freedom, and Life in Christ* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), for discussion of Methodius' life and works, and his critique of Origen.

106. Methodius, *Symposium*, pref8 (GCS 27:6).

107. Pl. *Phdr.* 230b (LCL 36:422)

108. Methodius, *Symposium*, 9.4 (GCS 27:119). διὰ τὸ φερώνυμον εἶναι τὸ δένδρον τῆς ἀγνείας.

significant in scripture because of the anaphrodisiac properties that its flower has when infused in water: “if it is drunk, it quenches whatever makes bubble up desires and stimulation.”<sup>109</sup> As in Origen’s work, references to anaphrodisiacs are intermingled with the use of agonistic language evoking athletics, emphasizing the “strength of body (ῥώμην τοῦ σώματος)” possessed by Christian virgins.<sup>110</sup> Methodius’ discussion of willow and the chaste tree hints that Christians with ascetic impulses may have been using anaphrodisiac substances, and justifying this with reference to their appearance in the Hebrew Bible.

Some Christian ascetics may even have been resorting to the lead-plate solution used by athletes and their trainers to help suppress their libidos. The paper’s first section already demonstrated that people interested in giving up sex completely were paying attention to the methods that athletes used to help them do this. And, as Galen’s example proves, doctors might pass along advice to their patients about how to give up sex, including the lead-plate method. This same method persisted in medicine in later periods. In the fourth century, Oribasius mentions it: “Lead flakes placed under the loins prevent wet dreams.”<sup>111</sup> So does his contemporary Theodorus Priscianus, who discusses how he used lead to treat men suffering from satyriasis: “If, however, the annoyance of this disease persists still further, so that an erection and desire are prolonged intolerably, I place a thin sheet of lead on the kidneys and nearby parts.”<sup>112</sup> Caelius Aurelianus, in the fifth century, also suggests the use of lead plates for similar purposes.<sup>113</sup> Knowledge of this

109. Methodius, *Symposium*, 4.3 (GCS 27:49). ἐὰν ποθῆ, πᾶν ὅσον εἰς ὀχλείας ἀναΐξει καὶ ἐρεθισμοῦς κατασβέννυσιν.

110. Methodius, *Symposium*, 8.17 (GCS 27:110–12). For additional discussion of the use of agonistic and athletic language in Methodius, see Jason König, *Saints and Symposiasts: The Literature of Food and the Symposium in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Culture*, Greek Culture in the Roman World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 174–5.

111. Oribasius, *Libri ad Eunapium*, 1.13.9 (CMG 6.3.330.12–17). καὶ λεπτεῖς δὲ μολυβδίνῃ ταῖς ψόαις ὑποτιθεμένη κωλύει τοὺς ὄνειρωγμούς. The same passage also mentions the anaphrodisiac properties of rue and the chaste tree.

112. Theodorus Priscianus, *Euporiston*, 2.11 (ed. Valentin Rose, *Theodori Prisciani Euporiston libri III cum Physicorum fragmento et additamentis Pseudo-Theodoreis* [Leipzig: Teubner, 1894], 131). “Si vero passionis huius molestia diutius perseveraverit, ut et tensio et desiderium impatientissime protendatur, lamminam plumbi renibus et partibus vicinis appono.” For Theodorus’ date, see John Scarborough, “Theodorus Priscianus,” in Keyser and Irby-Massie, *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Natural Scientists*, 787–8.

113. Caelius Aurelianus, *On Chronic Diseases*, 7.84 (ed. I. E. Drabkin, *Caelius Aurelianus. On Acute Diseases and On Chronic Diseases* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950], 960). For his date, see John Scarborough, “Caelius Aurelianus of Sicca,” in Keyser and Irby-Massie, *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Natural Scientists*, 201–2.



remedy persisted well into a period when Christian asceticism had become a more widespread phenomenon.

It is therefore no surprise to see that Cassian, an ascetic writer of this period, was familiar with lead's reputed anaphrodisiac properties. Cassian demonstrates his awareness, tellingly, in a passage that begins with a quotation of 1 Corinthians 9:25, a formative passage for subsequent Christian engagement with the phenomenon of athletic celibacy (see Section II above): "Every competitor exercises self-control in every way." Cassian's exegesis of this passage takes for granted Paul's awareness of some of the methods that athletes might use to repress their sexual urges. As Cassian says, athletes "keep themselves so clean from all the pollution of intercourse, that, when they prepare themselves for the struggle of the games. . . they cover up the regions of the kidneys with lead plates."<sup>114</sup> This is the same method mentioned by the doctor Theorodus Priscianus only decades earlier. Cassian's subsequent discussion also displays genuine knowledge of prevailing medical beliefs, noting that it was the "harshness of the metal (*metalli rigor*)" that allowed the lead to be effective in preventing athletes from having nocturnal emissions.<sup>115</sup> The word *rigor* here may refer to a number of properties associated with lead, including its harshness and coldness, both factors mentioned by Galen in his discussion of the metal, as we have already seen.<sup>116</sup> Though Cassian provides no explicit approval that Christian ascetics should apply lead to their loins and surrounding areas,<sup>117</sup> he nonetheless shows that there were medical practices to which Christian ascetics might resort. Origen, together with Galen, may have advised people simply not to think about sex, but there were other—and potentially more effective—methods to help would-be ascetics do this. Christian ascetics may therefore have been tempted not simply by thoughts of sex, but also by their awareness of anaphrodisiac substances and remedies of the sort used by celibate athletes.

114. Cassian, *Institutes*, 6.7.2 (CSEL 17:119). "Atque in tantum se mundos ab omni coitus pollutione custodiunt, ut, cum se praeparant agonom certamini. . . lamminis plumbeis renium contegant loca."

115. Cassian, *Institutes*, 6.7.2 (CSEL 17:119).

116. See P. G. W. Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), s.v. "rigor" 2c and 4a.

117. See Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 73, for the suggestion that Cassian mentions lead plates "as an analogy rather than as a prescription" for Christian ascetics.

## CONCLUSION

Athletics provides much potential for contextualizing the sexual renunciation of early Christians within medical thought of the second and third centuries, and even the fourth and fifth centuries, to judge from the example of Cassian. References to athletes in Christian literature do begin to diminish in these later periods, thanks in large part to the decline of athletic culture in Late Antiquity, a process that has now been described in detail by Sofie Remijsen.<sup>118</sup> Still, medical discussions of celibate athletes provide a bridge of sorts that can allow us to think about how ancient observers with interests in medicine may have regarded the emerging phenomenon of Christian asceticism. A study of athletic celibacy reveals also how people in the second and third centuries, including Christians, may have turned to medical knowledge in their quest to give up sex. Engagement with athletics and medicine can consequently provide additional ways to contextualize how early Christian sexual renunciation was received and interpreted in a period when the human body was regarded as something in need of constant care.<sup>119</sup>

How much impact this concern for the body motivated some Christians to give up sex is, admittedly, a different story. It is by no means clear that any early Christians chose to renounce sex because they thought it would make them healthy. But Christians were unquestionably interested in contemporary debates surrounding good health, and the controversial lifestyles of athletes that were so central to these. Christian literature even depicts clerics as physicians or athletic trainers helping their charges to achieve the necessary self-control associated with good health. The phenomenon of athletic celibacy must therefore explain some of the popularity and the resonance of the metaphorical use of athletes in early Christian literature. When Christian authors called someone an athlete of God, they were drawing, at least implicitly, on the long tradition, in both philosophical and medical literature, of linking athletes with sexual abstinence and the associated debates about whether this was healthy. They may have even been acknowledging that the phenomenon of athletic celibacy anticipated the Christian practice of total sexual renunciation, which was not such

118. See Remijsen, *The End of Greek Athletics*, 164–6. See also Geneviève Bührer-Thierry, “Qui sont les athlètes de Dieu? La performance sportive par l’ascèse et la prédication,” in *Agôn. La compétition, Ve–XIIIe siècle*, ed. François Bougard, Régine Le Jan, and Thomas Lienhard (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 293–310, at 308–9, for discussion of the diminishing use of “athlete of God” language in Christian literature in the early medieval period.

119. On this point, see Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 142–69.

an unfamiliar thing in the Greco-Roman world after all.<sup>120</sup> Christian sexual renunciation may have been motivated more by concerns about immortality and salvation, but scholars would do well to consider it as a matter related to health and regimen in the minds of many ancient readers. ■

120. On the supposed novelty of Christian sexual renunciation, note, among many possible examples: Lane-Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 341 and 373; Brown, *The Body and Society*, xiii; Kathy L. Gaca, *The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity*, Hellenistic Culture and Society 39 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 6; Finn, *Asceticism*, 3. See also Remijsen, *End of Greek Athletics*, 273–4, which attempts to differentiate the use of the word *askesis* in Christian and athletic contexts, claiming that there was no relation between the two.