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# Greek Combat Sports and Their Transmission to Central and East Asia\*

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ABSTRACT: After the conquests of Alexander the Great and during the reign of his numerous successors, the tradition of combat sports games became institutionalized by the elite of an Hellenized warlike aristocracy in Asia. The heroic cult of the Greeks was perpetuated as far as Central Asia, improving the local traditions by building a gymnasium in every new city of the colonies. The various technical aspects of ancient Greek combat sports were transmitted as well in order to improve effectiveness in close-combat fighting. To trace back these technical features, a detailed description of wrestling, boxing and *pankration* as developed in ancient Greece are compared together with their East-Asian counterparts.

## I. Introduction

Bare-handed combat has been practiced at different periods of human history and in many different cultures. However, the institutionalization of competitive bare-handed combat at a professional level that took place in ancient Greece required a systematic methodology in order for a protagonist to be effective against a trained opponent. There was no more typically Greek institution than the gymnasium and organized games were an essential part of Hellenic life.<sup>1</sup> With the conquests of

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<sup>1</sup> Professionalism in combat sports was a reference for the Greek citizen as Xenophon mentions in his *Apomnemoneumata* (3.12). "No citizen had any right to be an amateur in the matter of physical training: it is a part of his profession as a citizen to keep himself in good condition, ready to serve his state at a moment's notice. The instinct of self-preservation demands it likewise: for how helpless is the state of the ill-trained youth in war or in danger! Finally, what a disgrace it is for a man to grow old without ever

Alexander the Great and the rule of his successors for over three hundred years in Central Asia and northwest India, the educational and military training center that was the gymnasium became institutionalized by local populations as a specialized combat sports and warfare center.<sup>2</sup> The notion of a professional athlete who could distinguish himself in combat-sports competitions would be crucial for the continuity of the science of bare-handed combat within the various gymnasiums that flourished throughout the Seleucid Empire and the Greco-Bactrian kingdom.<sup>3</sup> Not only wrestling proper, but also joint locks, punching, kicking, and hitting with the palm or the fingers were incorporated into the close-combat sports for warfare, developed by the Greeks, namely “boxing” (*pygmachein*), wrestling (*pale*) and *pankration*.<sup>4</sup> In the later Kushana Empire in Gandhara, combat-sports training continued among a certain Hellenized Buddhist warlike aristocracy, who worshiped the divinity Heracles under the name Vajrapani as the god of strength.<sup>5</sup> From the first to the fourth century B.C., gymnasiums in Gandhara appear to have maintained their function as a center for “body and mind exercises,” as in Hellenistic and Roman times.<sup>6</sup> From the third century B.C. in Central and East Asia, existing combat-sports rituals, associated with the bull and influenced by Mesopotamia and Persia, were transformed under the influence of Greek professionalism, making them better preparation for the battlefield, and also providing royal spectacles. Ancient Greek combat sports, also called the “heavy games” (Greek, *barea agonismata*),

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seeing the beauty and the strength of which his body is capable! To develop his beauty and his strength to the utmost is the duty of a citizen. This is the Greek ideal.” See also E. N. Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World* (Oxford 1971) 71.

<sup>2</sup> All the cities built by the Greco-Macedonians in Asia had a gymnasium or *palaestra*. See R. L. Sturzebecker, *Athletic-Cultural Archaeological Sites in the Greco-Roman World: Europe-North Africa-Middle East Photo Atlas* (West Chester 1985).

<sup>3</sup> P. Bernard, *Fouilles votives d’Ai Khanoum; Le gymnase*, mémoire DAFA 30 (Paris 1987) pl. 52–53.

<sup>4</sup> See M. B. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence and Culture* (New Haven 1987).

<sup>5</sup> In Greco-Buddhist art, Heracles-Vajrapani is always positioned next to the Buddha as a protector, symbolizing the athletic strength and power consecrated by the games. In his “inner” aspect in Buddhism, he symbolized resistance to passions and desires as with the Cynics in Greece. Many sculpted, dedicated weights have been found that indicate the religious nature of the athletic games in Gandhara. C. P. B. Julien, “Haltères votives de lutteurs dans le Gandhara,” *Studia Iranica* 11 (1982).

<sup>6</sup> J. Delorme, *Gymnasion; Etude sur les monuments consacrés à l’éducation en Grèce (des origines à l’empire Romain)* (Paris 1960) 256–57.

were practiced in a special, usually square building named the *palaestra*.<sup>7</sup> Various vase paintings from around the sixth century B.C. show details of the *palaestra*. Attached to the rectangular gymnasium, the *palaestra* was a place for changing, weight-lifting, punching bags, and the practice of combat sports.<sup>8</sup> There are many references in the ancient texts to the *palaestra*, such as when Plato<sup>9</sup> and Pausanias describe the Lyceum of Athens.<sup>10</sup> The most important halls of the *palaestra* were the *konisteirion* and the *koreikion*, this latter being used for punching bags, weight lifting and training boxers. The best description of a *palaestra* comes from the Roman author Vitruvius in around 27 B.C. He clearly describes the architecture of the Greek-style building with its baths, promenade, chambers, and store-room.<sup>11</sup> In sections 3, 4, and 5 of this essay, I will describe the three major combat sports practiced in the *palaestra* in order to establish their technical features.

## II. Greek Combat Sports in Parthia

Few sources remain on Greek athletics in Parthian times. The local Asian populations within the Seleucid Empire are known to have participated extensively in Greek athletics, even attending the sacred all-Greek competitions. A Delian text from 270 B.C. mentions two Phoenician champions, a Tyrian boxer who was crowned at the *Amphiaraiia* games, and a Sidonian athlete (from present-day Palestine), who was crowned in *pankratation* at the Panathenaic games in 142 B.C.<sup>12</sup> The interest of the local people of Parthia in Greek combat sports was shared by the various steppe peoples of Bactria, and in India, as will be seen from the discussion of the Kushana Empire's wrestling and boxing traditions in section 2. In Babylon, an inscription dated 109–108 B.C. gives

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<sup>7</sup> K. Latte, ed., *Hesychii, Alexandrini Lexicon* (Copenhagen 1953). [παλαίστρα]. ὅπου οἱ παῖδες ἀλείφονται. (“*Palaestra*, where children rub themselves down [with oil],” 3.138.)

<sup>8</sup> Herodotus, 6.126, “Cleisthenes had a running-track and a wrestling-place made and kept them expressly for their (the Greeks’) use.”

<sup>9</sup> Lysis 3, Theaetetus 162b, Phaedo, 227a.

<sup>10</sup> Pausanias, 1.29.16.

<sup>11</sup> Vitruvius, *On Architecture*. 5–11.

<sup>12</sup> For detailed references on the games of the Hellenistic period in Asia, see M. Launey, *Recherches sur les armées Hellénistiques*, chapter 14, “Les armées et le gymnase” (Paris 1987).

a list of victors during the reign of Mithradates VI *Eupator* (132 to 63 B.C.).<sup>15</sup> Of the six games mentioned, the first four were strictly military: archery, javelin, combat with the round shield (*aspis*) and the long shield (*thureos*), and the running competitions, *dolichos* and *stadion*.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, shooting techniques were mentioned first, although in Greece these were not highly regarded, archers only being recognized as citizens of Athens in the second century B.C.<sup>15</sup> This was because the Parthian fighting customs were significantly different from those of the Greeks. It also demonstrates the extent to which Greek athletics and military education were adapted to suit the non-Greek elements in the gymnasiums of Asia. According to the Acts of San Mari,<sup>16</sup> there were three categories of gymnasts in Seleucia on the Tigris, during the reign of the Parthians, just as in Greece. This document shows that the Greeks maintained their own private athletics institutions in the cities of Asia, even under Parthian rule, all the winners mentioned having Greek names. An inscription from the city of Suza also states that a Ma[cedonian] named Nikolaos was “first friend” and bodyguard to a Parthian king, pointing to the continuation of a Hellenistic-type military institution and the important role of the Greek gymnasium among the Parthian aristocracy. Nikolaos was *gymnasiarch* in around 100–50 B.C. and donated a stadium to the city.<sup>17</sup> Some one hundred years later, Philostratus in his *Life of Apollonius* writes that Apollonius of Tyana (A.D. 15?–100?) visited professional athletes living in Babylon, who practiced combat sports during the reign of the Parthian king Varadanēs I (A.D. 40–45).<sup>18</sup> The Parthians also preserved Greek combat sports. Modern Iranians refer to their combat sports as the “Sport of the heroes” or *varzeš-e pahlavānī*, and claim that these originated in Arsacid times. These sports include wrestling as well as training in gymnasiums with tools made of two heavy wooden bludgeons or metal shields, and bow-shaped iron weights.

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<sup>15</sup> During the reign of Mithradates VI, Greek was the official language of the Parthian Empire.

<sup>14</sup> B. Haussoullier, “Inscriptions grecques de Babylone,” *Klio* 9 (1909) 352–63.

<sup>15</sup> Launey (above n.12) 828.

<sup>16</sup> Act Sanct Mari (Mar Mari), *Apost*, 19, in *Analecta. Bollandiana* 5 (1885). See also, C. Julien and F. Julien, eds., *Les Actes de Mar Mari: Corpus Scriptorum Christianum Orientalium*, vol. 602. *Scriptores Syri Tomus 234* (Louvain 2003).

<sup>17</sup> F. Cumont, *The Excavations of Dura-Europos, Preliminary Reports of the Seventh and Eighth Seasons of Work* (New Haven 1933) 264–68. Also Haussoullier (above, n.14).

<sup>18</sup> Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 1.34.

### III. Greek Combat Sports in the Kushana Empire, A.D. 100–300

A major influence of Greek body-culture in the development of Central and East Asian Buddhist arts was the consecration of combat-sports competitions within certain Buddhist circles. As mentioned by Tarn, during this period Buddhism was not only a monastic religion, but was also practiced by a heavily armed aristocracy.<sup>19</sup> This aristocracy was mainly composed of itinerant knights, including Parthians, Saka, and Greeks (*Yavana*), who fought in Gandhara in the Kushana Empire. Greeks were definitely present in the Kushana Empire, as evidenced by the sculpture of Menander the wrestler,<sup>20</sup> and by references to Agesilaos, a Greek craftsman living under Kanishka,<sup>21</sup> the first Kushana king, who strongly promoted (Greco)-Buddhism. The *Mahabharata* often makes the distinction between the foreign *Kshatriya* warrior caste of northwest India and the Brahmins who represented Indian ethical ideals.<sup>22</sup>

Greek combat sports passed into some Buddhist warrior circles as a way of overcoming suffering in the face of adversity, as in early Greece, where Heracles was considered to have won immortality by overcoming life's challenges. Wrestling, *pankration*, and boxing were practiced in Gandhara and are mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and in the *Milindaphana*, which purports to record the philosophical discussion between Menander (Milinda), the Greek king of India, and Nagasena, a Buddhist monk, in around 150 B.C. The *Milindaphana* represents a Greco-Buddhist amalgam dating back to the time of Asoka (304 B.C. to 232 B.C.), the first Buddhist king of India,<sup>23</sup> and Diodotes of Bactria, together with the later Indo-Greek kings who promoted Buddhism. Not only wrestlers but also professional boxers, actors, and acrobats are mentioned,<sup>24</sup> showing the impact of professional athletic games and festivities in the Kushana Empire at that time.

<sup>19</sup> W. W. Tarn, *The Greeks of India and Bactria* (Cambridge 1951) 134.

<sup>20</sup> Minandrasa written in Kharoshthi letters inscribed on the right top corner of the panel; sculpture excavated in Peshawar, late Kushana period (Hargreaves: 1930:25).

<sup>21</sup> Agisila, vase inscription, Konow (1929).

<sup>22</sup> According to the *Mahabharata*, *Udyoga Parva*, *Bhagwat Yana Parva* (Mohan Ganguli) 158. Bharata (*Bharats* means India in Sanskrit), the legendary king who first unified India, killed many foreign *Kshatriya* including Greeks (*Yavana*) near the Himalayas. In Cave 3 at Nasik, there is an inscription with a reference to the victories of Gautamiputra Satakami against the *Kshatriya*, "Saka, the Yavanas, Palhavanisudanas and Kshaharata." Gautama Satakami was a king in southern India during the second century A.D.

<sup>23</sup> According to W. W. Tarn (*The Greeks of Bactria and India* [Cambridge 1951] 152), Asoka had Greek ancestors.

<sup>24</sup> *Milindaphana*, 191.3.

Various wrestling scenes have been discovered, together with scenes of archery, belt-wrestling, and armed duels with swords, showing the important role played by martial arts in the gymnasiums of the Kushana Empire. The “*Rhabdops*” or whip-stick with a piece of cloth used by the referee in a wrestling competition depicted in a Greek vase painting from Onesimos (490–480 B.C.), is very similar to those used by the Kushana referees in Gandhara more than six hundred years later. This points to the continuity of Olympic wrestling rules and the transmission of the Greek science of combat sports. If the religious significance of the games and the traditional Olympic rules were preserved in Kushana, with Greek wrestlers (Menander) even taking part, we may infer that the pan-Kushana games were held on special occasions and that there would have been participation in international games, which continued in the same tradition in Daphne until the sixth century. The Indian games took place on the first day of the Kartik lunar month (October) and lasted for thirteen days according to the *Mahabharata*,<sup>25</sup> much as the Olympic Games, which were held on the second or the third full Moon after the summer solstice (August to September).<sup>26</sup> The *Milindaphana* states that the wrestler was required to put his adversary’s back to the ground in order to win.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the techniques used in wrestling were compared with the thinking process,<sup>28</sup> a direct parallel with Socrates’ teachings.<sup>29</sup>

Combat-sports practice in the cities of Gandhara had four major functions inherited from Hellenistic times:

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<sup>25</sup> *Mahabharata, Sabha Parva*, book 2, *Jarasanda-Badha* 23, K. M. Ganguli, tr. (1885–1896).

<sup>26</sup> In the *Mahabharata* the athletes participate in boxing, wrestling and *pankration* competitions for thirteen days. The “thirteen days” are related to the lunar cycle; see V. Vaughan, *The Origin of the Olympic Games: Ancient Calendars and Race against Time* (2002).

<sup>27</sup> *Milindaphana*, 293.

<sup>28</sup> *Milindaphana*, 278.

<sup>29</sup> The clearest example can be found in Plato; *Theaetetus, Theodoros*, 169a–b. Mixing the skills of wrestling with philosophy was a particularly Greek characteristic throughout the time of the *Pan-Hellenic* Games and was strongly influenced by Plato’s writings from the fourth century B.C.. Wrestling was also compared with the art of rhetoric during the Roman Empire, as with Libianus of Antioch (A.D. 314–394), for example, who also practiced wrestling and “used his wrestling tricks against his mentor” in his dialectic, according to a letter of his relative Bassianus in A.D. 360 Nilus Ankyranus (A.D.?–430), the disciple of John Chrysostom made the same association between the soul and physical combat in his *Narratio* (3; 10–14), saying that the *paedotrib* should teach his young students of combat sports to resist their passions and should “attach them to the rock (of virtue),” as mariners would attach their boats against the storms (of passion) in the ports.

Hellenistic Gymnasium

- 1) Cult of the Greek gods
- 2) Greco-Macedonian dynastic cult
- 3) Military training of Greek soldiers
- 4) Center for Hellenistic culture

Kushana Gymnasium

Cult of the Buddha under the authority of *Vajrapani-Heracles*  
 Kushana dynastic cult  
 Training of Hellenized Scythian warriors  
 Center for Greco-Buddhist culture

The spread of combat sports in East-Asia would continue mainly through the Kushana Greco-Buddhist traditions, which incorporated education in the gymnasium, considered as a center for training in both warfare and philosophy. In Thailand,<sup>30</sup> Burma,<sup>31</sup> Japan,<sup>32</sup> Vietnam, Tibet<sup>33</sup> or China,<sup>34</sup> combat sports underwent further development over the years, giving rise to numerous schools influenced by local traditions.

#### IV. Boxing: *Pygmachia-Pygmachein*<sup>35</sup>

In Greece, boxing competitions (plate 1) were introduced during the twenty-third Olympiad in 688 B.C. However, the earliest traces of boxing techniques are to be found in the Egyptian and Minoan civilizations. Boxing subsequently became a favorite pastime among the early Greek

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<sup>30</sup> The *Muaythai* boxers of Thailand use gloves in the manner of the ancient Greeks. They also perform a war dance to music with boxing and kicking, just as in the games and “war dance” events of ancient Greece.

<sup>31</sup> Maung Gyi, the former director of sports in Burma’s Ministry of Education, and one of the greatest masters of the Burmese *Bando* “martial art” living and teaching in the USA, maintains that “The knife (*kukri*) and the bare-hands and wrestling techniques originate from the soldiers of Alexander the Great; the animal forms come from China.”

<sup>32</sup> Oyama Masutatsu (大山 倍達) the founder of *Kyokushin* (極真) *Karate*, referred to the influence of *pankration* in Japanese *Karate*.

<sup>33</sup> In Tibet, the itinerant monks called the *Dob-Dob* arranged their hair in the form of goat-horns. They were also the inheritors of the Greco-Buddhist combat sports, with stick fights, long jump, and running competitions. They served as bodyguards in the *gelugpa* monasteries, such as Sera, where a large number of them protected the religious authorities.

<sup>34</sup> See L. Christopoulos, “Early Combat Sports Rituals in China and the Rise of Professionalism (475 B.C.–220 A.D.)” *Nikephoros* 23 (2010).

<sup>35</sup> Latte (above, n.7) (πυγμή) γρόνθος, πυκτή, ἤγουν τὸ συγκεκλεισθαι τοὺς δακτύλους, “*Pugmy*, or ‘fist’, joining the fingers together; *Pygmachia* or fighting with the fists.” (vol. III) -4283, 210.

tribes. On the island of Delos, the sacred birthplace of Apollo, the creator of boxing,<sup>36</sup> long-robed young men danced and boxed to please the god in around 1000 B.C.<sup>37</sup> The *Rython* of the boxers from Crete and the Theran painting of two young boxers provide further examples, and Hesiod (~700 B.C.) describes the shield of Heracles as being decorated with boxing scenes.<sup>38</sup>

Feats of *pygmachia* were also attributed to the Dioscuri. Theocritus tells how Polydeuces (Pollux) fought with his fists during the voyage of Jason and the Argonauts, defeating a powerful boxer called Amycus from the Bebryces tribe.<sup>39</sup> Relying on ruse and technique rather than physical strength, he was able to beat his stronger, taller adversary with a well-placed blow to his temple.<sup>40</sup> The Dioscuri became the symbol of combat sports and athletic contests among the Scythians around the Black Sea, where they were associated with horsemanship, archery, and training in various other warfare techniques. In Sparta, together with Heracles and Hermes, they were the patrons of athletics.<sup>41</sup> Although athletic contests were not institutionalized to the same level in the Asian steppes, and there was no training in *palaestra*, gifts were offered to the winners, as Thucydides mentioned in around 431 B.C.:

For in early times, even in the Olympic games, the athletes wore girdles about their loins in the contests, and it is not many years since the practice has ceased. Indeed, even now among some of the Barbarians in Asia, when prizes for wrestling and boxing are offered, the contestants wear loin-cloths. And one could show that the early Hellenes had many other customs similar to those of the Barbarians of today.<sup>42</sup>

Archaeological evidence from the Sumerian civilization also indicates that “belt-wrestling” was practiced by Sumerian and Babylonian

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<sup>36</sup> Pausanias, 5.7.10.

<sup>37</sup> *The Homeric Hymns*, 5 to (*Delian*) *Apollo*, 140. “. . . for there the long-robed Ionians gather in your honor with their children and shy wives: mindful, they delight you with boxing and dancing and song, so often as they hold their gathering”; Thucydides, 3–104.

<sup>38</sup> Hesiod, *Shield of Heracles*, 285. “Also there were men boxing and wrestling and huntsmen chasing swift hares . . .”

<sup>39</sup> According to Philostratus (*On Gymnastics* 9), the Bebryces, a people of Bythnia neighboring the Scythians to the southwest of the Black Sea, had learned boxing earlier from the Spartans.

<sup>40</sup> Theocritus, *Idyll* 22. 55-79.

<sup>41</sup> Pindar. *Nemean Ode*. 10.51.

<sup>42</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, 1.5.5–6, C. F. Smith, tr. (Cambridge, Mass., 1919–1928) 13.



fighters,<sup>43</sup> while the Greeks were accustomed to wrestling naked and using the entire body to catch hold of and fight. These styles would have been as different as the Swiss belt-wrestling *Schwingen* is to modern professional Olympic freestyle wrestling today. Naked wrestling using the whole of the body requires greater skill because it incorporates many techniques, and while the Egyptians wore a loincloth, the Beni-Hassan stone also shows a high degree of technical achievement. The possibility of transmission to Greece<sup>44</sup> should not be discounted. However, as pointed out by Poliakoff, the promotion of outstanding practitioners of combat sports in literature and the arts was confined to Greece. This was because of Homer's influence, which was dominant in education at the gymnasium, promoting bravery rather than submission:

Egyptians engaged vigorously in sports, and there is evidence of a competitive spirit: "The story of Truth and Falsehood," for example, tells of a schoolboy who "learned to write excellently and pursued all contests and surpassed all his older comrades who were with him at school." But neither here nor elsewhere is there any hard evidence of organized contests whose purpose was the isolation and recognition of outstanding individuals; it seems that the element of hierarchy and control made a complete *agon* (competition) impossible in ancient Egypt.<sup>45</sup>

Arrian of Nicomedia (A.D. 86 to 160),<sup>46</sup> a Greek historian serving in the Roman Empire, describes the Indians as the "tallest and swiftest of

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<sup>43</sup> Sumerian belt-wrestling, bronze statuette (10 x 8.8cm) Khafaje, early third millennium B.C., Iraq Museum 41085; Sumerian wrestling scene; relief carving, early part of the third millennium B.C., found at Khafaje on the Dyala river, Iraq Museum; Old Babylonian wrestling scene, hematite seal, 1800 B.C., Yale Babylonian Collection 912.

<sup>44</sup> Plato, *Laws*, bk. 2, 656c–657a. The Egyptians kept traditional postures unchanged over thousands of years, and they perpetuated their arts without transformation or innovation. In the case of the Beni-Hassan paintings, we see the transmission of a very old and precise art of close combat painted as a "manual" for future generations.

<sup>45</sup> Poliakoff (above, n.4) 108.

<sup>46</sup> Arrian, or Lucius Flavius Arrianus (Ἀρριανός 86 to 146 A.D.), was a historian of Greek origin from the Roman Empire. Born in the city of Nicomedia (today Izmit in Turkey), he worked first in Attica. He studied Stoicism under the philosopher Epictetus and wrote two books about him. He then entered service in the Roman Imperial Army service and became consul, traveling as far as the limits of the empire (Gaul, the Danube border, and then the Parthian front). In 131 A.D., he became the commander of the Roman legions in the Black Sea province of Cappadocia and wrote books on military strategy with descriptions of warfare against the Alan's hordes.

all humankind” and accustomed to boxing and wrestling duels before getting married.<sup>47</sup> A Mesopotamian relief from the early second millennium B.C. depicts two boxers in a duel, showing that the tradition was also in vogue in Asia even before the time of the Trojan war.<sup>48</sup> However, this can only be taken to imply that bare-handed fighting traditions were practiced in the whole of the Eurasian continent at different levels as a means of demonstrating individual bravery through kicking, punching, or wrestling. To elevate bare-handed combat sports to a science would require regular competitions and technical transmission via special establishments such as the Greek gymnasiums and *palaestra*, where this aspect of education was considered to be an imperative ethical achievement. In the earliest combat-sports traditions outside the Greek world, boxing or wrestling did not appear to be as prestigious as in the *Panhellenic* competitions. Otherwise, their fame would have surpassed that of the Greeks during the time of the Olympic Games from 776 B.C. to A.D. 336. The Roman and Parthian kings had personal Greek bodyguards and athletics were practiced mainly by Greeks, who were referred to as champions in combat sports. Horace (65–8 B.C.) admits that the “little Greeks” (*Graecari*) were better than the Romans in combat sports and that it would be unreasonable for the Romans to say, “We are better than the Greeks at wrestling”:

After hunting the hare or wearily dismounting from an unbroken horse, or else, if Roman army exercises are fatiguing to one used to Greek ways, it may be the swift ball takes your fancy, where the excitement pleasantly beguiles the hard toil, or it may be the discus (by all means hurl the discus through the yielding air)—well, when toil has knocked the daintiness out of you; when you are hungry and thirsty, despise, if you can, plain food; refuse to drink mead, unless the honey is from Hymettus and the wine from Falernum.<sup>49</sup>

The Tamil kings of India also recruited *Yavana* (Greco-Romans) as palace guards and in China the acrobatic and combat-sports skills

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<sup>47</sup> Arrian, *Anabasis, Indica*. 8.17.

<sup>48</sup> Mesopotamian Boxers, relief carving, Ashurnak, early second millennium B.C., Louvre Museum.

<sup>49</sup> Horace, *Satire* 2. 15–19. H. R. Fairclough, *Horace. Satires, Epistles and Ars poetica* (Cambridge, Mass., 1926), *leporem sectatus equoque lassus ab indomito vel, si Romana fatigat militia adsuetum graecari, seu pila velox molliter austerum studio fallente laborem, seu te discus agit (pete cedentem aera disco) – cum labor exuderit fastidia, siccus, inanis sperne cibum vilem; nisi Hymettia mella Falerno ne biberis diluta.*

of the *Lixuan-Daqin* (Greco-Roman) athletes were famous. Regular boxing training under the supervision of an experienced teacher, which had been institutionalized by the Greeks, became commonplace. Boxing competitions were a major event from the eighth century B.C. and the regular training of athletes for victory was a goal pursued by young men from the various Greek communities. A victory in a Panhellenic competition would mean fame and fortune for the winner,<sup>50</sup> because of its connections with past heroic traditions. Boxing contests were very violent, lasting up to four hours and only finishing when one of the contestants gave up or was disqualified for the use of a prohibited technique. A satiric poem, written by Lucillus, even makes fun of an athlete's unrecognizable face:

When Ulysses returned to his birthplace after twenty years of absence his dog recognized him immediately. You, on the other hand, are so unrecognizable after four hours of fighting that neither dogs nor people will know who you are. If you take one look in the mirror you will swear you're not Stratofon.<sup>51</sup>

Eurydamas from Cyrene is said to have lost his teeth during his fight and swallowed them so as not to give satisfaction to his adversary, according to the Roman author Aelian.<sup>52</sup> The boxers used head protection and leather bands, called *imantes* or *sphaira*, around their fists in the place of gloves.<sup>53</sup> In Roman times, boxers also wore iron rings called *caestus*<sup>54</sup> on their fists, for the amusement of the Roman spectators during gladiatorial contests.

Philostratus, a Greek living in the Roman Empire in the third century A.D., describes clearly how the bands of leather were tightened around the boxers' fists and why pigskin was prohibited in boxing competitions.<sup>55</sup> Unlike modern boxing, *pygmachia* also used various open-hand

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<sup>50</sup> Plutarch *Solon*.23.3.

<sup>51</sup> Lucillus, *Anthologia palatina*. 11.77.

<sup>52</sup> Aelian (A.D. 175–235), *Diverse Stories*, 10.19.

<sup>53</sup> *Sphaira* or "sphere" would mean "round padded glove," less dangerous than the *imantes*. "In order to imitate as closely as possible fighting in the ring, we would wear *sphaira* instead of *imantes* so that we could practice striking and avoidance of blows as much as possible" (Plato, *Laws* 8.830b). *Sphaira* would also sometimes refer to ball games.

<sup>54</sup> The Romans included spikes, studs, iron plates, cutting blades or "limb-piercers" (*myrmex*). See H. M. Lee, "The Later Greek Boxing Glove and the 'Roman' Caestus: A Centennial Reevaluation of Jüthner's Ueber antike Turngeräte." *Nikephoros* 10 (1999) 161–78.

<sup>55</sup> Philostratus, *On Gymnastics* 10.

strikes, as indicated by various sources. In Homer's verses, Apollo came down to earth to kill Patroclus with an "open-palm strike to his back"<sup>56</sup> and Damoxenos pierced the internal organs of Kreugas with a finger strike (plate 2).<sup>57</sup> Vase paintings also depicted ancient boxing practices, as in the case of the pseudo-Panathenaic amphora from Exarchos in Locrid by the painter Eucharides (~500 B.C.), which shows a palm strike and a forearm block (plate 3).

The painting of Eucharides also shows the unusual "distended" abdomen of the athlete, as if filled with air, a characteristic that is seen today in China among the adepts of traditional combat sports. The use of the principles of *pneuma* together with other concepts from Greek medicine led to training in various breathing techniques that were later lost in the West because of the mind/body split introduced by the Catholic Church. Indeed there is no trace of this practice in the Western world today. The explanation of Pausanias concerning the fight of Damoxenos, that "with the sharpness of his nails and the force of blow he drove his hand into his adversary, caught his bowels, and tore them out,"<sup>58</sup> is incomplete in my opinion.

Pausanias, a second-century A.D. traveler and geographer, must have had a superficial understanding of what he heard, since he had no practical knowledge of ancient *pygmachia* training. To pierce the human body with one's bare hands requires strengthening of the fingers together with explosive power developed through breathing exercises, allowing one to apply the muscular strength of one's whole body instantaneously when striking (plate 4). Standing without changing position, and breathing techniques such as those used by Melankomas or those described by Oreibasius,<sup>59</sup> were an integral part of a boxer's training to fill his body with *pneuma*. Today in China, the best traditional boxers<sup>60</sup> are those who

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<sup>56</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 16.777. "And Apollo took his stand behind him, and smote his back and broad shoulders with the flat of his hand, and his eyes were made to whirl".

<sup>57</sup> Pausanias, 8.40.3–5.

<sup>58</sup> Pausanias, 8.40.4.

<sup>59</sup> Oreibasius (A.D. 320–400) was the personal physician and doctor of the emperor Julian. He studied in Alexandria with Zenon of Cyprus and went to Delphi to offer his services; in exchange he received the "last oracle of the *Pythi*": "Report to the emperor, that fallen is [the] splendid hall, and that Phoibos no longer has [his] house. Neither the prophesying laurel nor the well will talk anymore, silent also is the babbling water." (Εἶπ' αὖτε τῷ βασιλεῖ, χαμαι πέσε δαίδαλος αὐλά, οὐκετι Φοῖβος ἔχει καλύβαν. Οὐ μαντίδα δαφνῆν, οὐ πηγὴν λαλέουσαν, ἀπέσβετο καὶ λάλον ὕδωρ.)

<sup>60</sup> The best fighting athletes I saw during my ten years in China were those who practiced inner-breathing exercises to move the *pneuma* (*Qi*氣) within the body, or *Qigong* (氣功) ("*pneuma work*") exercises.

apply the notion of an inner vital breath or energy. Oreibasius called this type of exercise “side therapy” or *apotherapia*, techniques which developed the athlete’s strength through inner breathing exercises or massage to activate the *pneuma* within their bodies. He advised combat-sports athletes to breathe from the lower abdomen, and to push the *pneuma* down using other types of breathing exercises, and also to speak with a deep voice, in order to open and fill the “empty spaces of the body.”

We will prescribe what we call the retention of the vital breath (*tou pneumatatos*). . . . That is for the same reason that an important part of *apotherapy* consists of suspending and holding the breath by the tension of all the muscles of the breast and by relaxing the muscles of the stomach and the diaphragm; in this way, the excrements are pushed down. The next step is to submit the *apotherapy* to the inner organs of the lower stomach by softly tensing the muscles. . . . The best gymnasts also use the exercises of holding the *pneuma* and the *apotheraeutic* massages. . . . That is why I agree with those who use *apotherapy* in the middle of the [gymnastic] exercises, especially for those that are in charge of the training of the “combat sports” (*barea agonismata*) athletes.<sup>61</sup>

There is a strong parallel here with the traditional combat sports practiced in present-day China. One example (there are many) comes from a text written at the end of the twentieth century by a famous Chinese boxer. It shows the importance he gives to the inner principles of the body. Although the text was written around two thousand years after Oreibasius, the parallels with ancient Greek combat sports are obvious insofar as the *pneuma* had the same importance as the *Qi* (氣 vital energy) in training.

Breathing in and breathing out are the two natural causes for what attaches us to life and the universe, but the techniques of breathing are far from known. The man who has achieved good breathing is in conformity with nature, and the two actions of inhalation and exhalation must be used properly, because when the air returns to the stomach it is like a food which one would absorb. The internal body organs move in pair with breathing and consequently, if this latter is not in conformity, the inner organs will be damaged. If breathing is perfect, the internal body will be in coordination and the five elements will be in harmony. It is for this reason that the followers of martial arts begin with the *Qigong* exercises so that they can bind their internal functions in order to unify the *Qi*. The way to use the *Qi* when the body moves, is not to let it disperse, because if it is dispersed, the feet

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<sup>61</sup> Oreibasius 6.16.

are as if “without roots.” The follower who is balanced and calm has the *Qi* that descends and reinforces the base of the body, and thus has flexible hands and fast arms at the time of training. Then, when it manifests its force in fighting, he has great power. The *Qi* should not however be forced, but allowed to act without damaging it and without damaging the body, so that the attack is lightning fast, clear, and precise. The practice of *Qigong* in *Tongbeiquan*<sup>62</sup> and the martial arts in general is the most important thing, and the follower should absolutely not neglect this aspect . . . People who have a powerful heart, have the tendons and bones that make it possible for the *Qi* to circulate abundantly in the body. They are calm and they use the power of their body to control their breathing. Their movements are flexible and fast, their bodies are round, their hands have a circular motion, and they are fearsome and tough at the time of fighting.<sup>63</sup>

Plato also maintained that the medical doctor Herodicus created “health gymnastics” for longevity and protection against diseases.<sup>64</sup> Many details of ancient Greek combat sports are reminiscent of the way the Chinese practice traditional boxing, including techniques that have disappeared in the West, such as using the back of the hand to strike<sup>65</sup> or blocking with forearms (plate 5). The thumb was also sometimes used to hit particular points of the body in Greek boxing,<sup>66</sup> just as today’s Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Indian boxing styles employ a finger to hit vital points. Anacharsis gave a clear description of boxing competitions after attending a fight during his “Travels in Greece”:

Their heads were covered by a sort of bronze skullcap (*amfotides*)<sup>67</sup> and their fists bore a kind of glove that in fact consisted of leather

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<sup>62</sup> *Tongbeiquan* 通背拳, sometimes called *Tongbiquan* 通臂拳, is a school of Chinese boxing recorded from the sixteenth century that imitates the natural movements of the ape.

<sup>63</sup> From an article by Master Guo Xianghe of the School of Eagle Claw Boxing 鷹爪拳法, copied from the manuscript of his father, *On Tongbeiquan; on Qigong. Wudang* 武当 Magazine (Beijing 1999).

<sup>64</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 3.406.

<sup>65</sup> This painting from an amphora in Tarante Museum of Archaeology shows a boxer ready to slap with the back of his hand.

<sup>66</sup> Boxing with thumb extended; Euboean amphora, sixth century B.C., Vatican Museum, Astarita 27.

<sup>67</sup> In early boxing, the athletes appear to have worn real bronze helmets as the “*Rython* of the boxers” shows, or Philostratus’s description of early boxing contests (*Gymn.*9). Later, special leather protections called *amfotides* were used by the boxers; see Oreibasius (5.33). Xenocrates advised the use of *amfotides*, especially for children (Plutarch, *Moralia* 825 E).

thongs wrapped around their forearms. The attacks were as various as the wounds that followed. Sometimes we saw two athletes making various moves so as not to have the sun in their eyes, spending hours watching each other, waiting for the moment when the adversary would leave a part of his body without protection. Or they kept their arms stretched up, moving them rapidly to protect their heads, and not let the other come too close. Sometimes they attacked with fury and fell on each other, hitting hard with a shower of punches. We saw some precipitating themselves on their adversary with raised arms, and the others who managed to dodge and let the attacker fall heavily to the ground, breaking all of his body. Others covered with deadly wounds, stood up suddenly and found strength in despair. Others were knocked out of the fights; they had no recognizable features at all, only the blood that they were vomiting in great quantities.<sup>68</sup>

Staius (A.D. 45–96), the Graeco-Campanian poet from Naples, also describes a frightening scene from an antique boxing match:

Just as a mass of water hurls itself headlong onto a threatening rock, and falls back broken, so does he wheel round his angry foe, breaking his defense. Look! He lifts his hand and for a long time threatens his face or side, and thus, for fear of his hard weapons diverts his guard, cunningly plants a sudden blow, and marks the middle of his forehead with a wound; blood flows, and the warm stream stains his temples.<sup>69</sup>

Pythagoras himself is said to have been crowned in boxing, according to Eusebios of Cesarea (A.D. 265–339). During the forty-eighth Olympiad (588 B.C.), Glycon of Croton won the *stadiou* race. Pythagoras of Samos was excluded from boxing in the junior category because of his effeminate appearance, but he was still able to participate in the adult contest and beat all his adversaries.<sup>70</sup> Diogenes Laerce also writes that, having been expelled from the junior category, Pythagoras went on to participate in the adult contest and beat all his adversaries.<sup>71</sup>

Some of the boxers had such excellent technique that they were never hit by their opponents. They were called “the untouchables” (*atramatisti*), and included famous boxers such as Kleoxenos of Alexandria

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<sup>68</sup> Anacharsis, *Voyage du jeune Anacharsis en Grèce dans le milieu du quatrième siècle avant l'ère vulgaire*, M. L'abbé Barthélemy, tr., vol. 2 (Paris 1843) 305–306.

<sup>69</sup> Staius. *Silvae*, *Thebaid* I–IV.

<sup>70</sup> Eusebius of Cesarea (A.D. 263–339).

<sup>71</sup> Diogenes Laerce, *Pythagoras*, 47.

(240 B.C.; one-hundred thirty-fifth Olympiad), Melankomas of Caria,<sup>72</sup> and Hippomachos. Hippomachos, son of Moschion, sustained no blows or injuries from his three successive opponents in the games.<sup>73</sup> Julius Africanus (A.D. ~200) wrote that Kleoxenos had never been injured in any of his fights, and that he won all the *Panhellenic* games without being hurt. Melankomas was particularly well versed in standing positions, which are practiced today in China,<sup>74</sup> but have been lost to the Western world.<sup>75</sup> He could remain standing for two days with his two hands raised,<sup>76</sup> a practice far removed from modern boxing. Being so skilful at his art, he was never beaten by his opponents and neither did he hurt them. He just let them exhaust themselves. Dio Chrysostom (A.D. 30–117) wrote that he had perfect control over his mind and body:

The most fantastic thing is that he was not only undefeated by his adversaries, but also by hard training in the heat, avoiding hunger, and sexual desires. The men who wish to be superior to their adversaries should not be defeated by these things. If Melankomas did not have control of himself (*enkrateo*),<sup>77</sup> I doubt that he would be superior in strength, even if he was naturally strong.<sup>78</sup>

Claudius Aelianus maintains that the *pankration* champion Kleitomachos turned his head when he saw dogs copulating on the street, and that he left banquets when the men started to speak of sex,<sup>79</sup> so as to maintain his inner strength and concentration. Even today, professional boxers avoid sex, excessive food, and alcoholic drinks during the training period preceding a match. Oreibasius proposed very precise exercises for the “Heavy Games” athletes:

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<sup>72</sup> On Melankomas, see V. Visa-Ondarcuhu, “A propos de Melancomas: Observations sur des Techniques de pugilat antique et sur le Système du Klimax,” *Nikephoros* 16 (2003) 147–56.

<sup>73</sup> Pausanias, 6.12.6.

<sup>74</sup> *Zhanzhuang* 站桩 is an exercise used by boxers in China that consists of staying in a fixed position and breathing with the lower part of the abdomen.

<sup>75</sup> See S. G. Giatsis, “The Byzantine Views on the Human Body Form the Basis for the Physical Activities in this Period,” *Nikephoros* 2 (1989) 153–73.

<sup>76</sup> Dionis Chrysostom, *Discourses* 28.7.

<sup>77</sup> From the words κράτος (strength) and εν (inside). *Enkrateo* “Interiorizing his suffering through mental strength.”

<sup>78</sup> Dionis Chrysostomi, *Discourses* 28.12; 29.14.

<sup>79</sup> Aelian, *Varia Historia*, 3.30.



. . . .To hold four horses at the same time, to lift a significant weight, moving or standing, belong to this kind of exercises. Walking up a slope, climbing on a rope, holding his fists closed, stretching or raising his arms and staying a long time in this position, resisting the effort of someone trying to push them down from a straight stance, moving or staying a long time in a fixed position holding weights, all belong to the same category [of training]. There are thousands of similar exercises that need force in the *palaestra*. The experience and the habit of those are found with the *paidotrib*, a figure as different from the gymnast as the cook from the doctor.<sup>80</sup>

When the fights had no time limit (ακριτος), both of the opponents were required to remain in a fixed position (κλειμάζειν), giving and receiving blows in turn.<sup>81</sup> When striking a blow, the athletes sometimes grunted, as in present-day Chinese or Japanese martial arts, in order to unify their inner powers of will and *pneuma*. They strove to strike with their entire bodies, grunting from the lower abdomen so as to draw out their entire mental and physical force instantaneously.<sup>82</sup>

Kicking was also usual in Greek “boxing,” as many vase paintings and texts show, such as those of Philostratus, which describe the kicking of shins,<sup>83</sup> and Oreibasius, which describe kicking an invisible adversary.<sup>84</sup> Lukianos writes that combat-sports athletes fought each other by kicking, and that they “jumped as if they were running, but stayed in the same place, kicking in the air.”<sup>85</sup> Kicking, punching, and using the elbows, the head, the shoulders, or the knees on bags were certainly common practice for both *pankration* and boxing athletes. Oreibasius advised the use of bags filled with flour or fig seeds for the weak, and sand for the strong. The athletes should use a hanging sandbag as a strengthening method, pulling, punching, or stopping it with the chest or other parts of the body while leaning back to reinforce their inner organs.<sup>86</sup> This exercise is still practiced in China with hanging bags, trees, or with two people bumping into each other, such that the body is hit

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<sup>80</sup> Oribase, “Oeuvres complètes avec texte grec et traduction française établie par les docteurs Daremberg et Bussenmaker,” *Imprimerie nationale*, vol. 6.14 (Paris 1851–1876) 474–75.

<sup>81</sup> Latte (above, n.7) (κλειμάζειν) παλαιεῖν. σκελιζειν. ἀπατᾶν. (vol. II) 96, 485.

<sup>82</sup> Cicero, *Tusc.* II, xxiii, 56.

<sup>83</sup> Philostratus, *On Gymnastics* 11.

<sup>84</sup> Oreibasius, 6.29.

<sup>85</sup> Lucian, *Anach.* chap.3-4.

<sup>86</sup> Lucian, *Anach.* 6, 33.

with moderation and hence reinforced. The exercise is called “the work of hitting” or *paidagong* (拍打功).

Glaukos of Karystos was a famous boxer who knew nothing of boxing technique, but who was naturally talented. The son of a farmer, he first won at the sixty-fifth Olympiad in 520 B.C. Pausanias recounts his story:

Next to those that I have enumerated stands Glaukos of Karystos. Legend has it that he was by birth from Anthedon in Boeotia, being descended from Glaukos the sea-deity. This Karystian was a son of Demylos, and they say that he began working as a farmer. The ploughshare one day fell out of the plough, and he fitted it into its place, using his hand as a hammer; Demylos happened to see his son’s performance, and thereupon brought him to Olympia to box. There Glaukos was inexperienced in boxing, and was wounded by his antagonists, and when boxing with the last of them he was thought to be fainting from the number of his wounds. Then they say that his father called out to him, “Son, the plough touch.” So he dealt his opponent a more violent blow which forthwith brought him the victory.<sup>87</sup>

After this mythical fight, Glaukos won another three times at Olympia, eight times in Isthmia and Nemea, twice in Delphi, and many times in Athens, Rhodes, and other places. This is a perfect example of how a combination of natural strength and inner power is more important than just the practice of techniques. Other famous boxers included Moschos of Kolophon, who won at the four *Panhellenic* games. The very tall Diagoras of Rhodes was from a noble family, and Pindar praised him as a “fair fighter”<sup>88</sup> after his victory in 464 B.C. He never gave ground and he later won at Olympia and Delphi, and at Nemea, Athens, Thebes, Aegina, Megara, and other cities. Under his supervision his two sons, Damagetos and Akousilaos, won at *pankration* and boxing respectively in 448 B.C. This is an example of the transmission of bare-handed combat sports within a family. Two of the sons of Diagoras’s daughters also became champion boxers.<sup>89</sup> The boxer Tissander, from Thasos, swam around his island birthplace, a distance of fifty kilometers, in order to develop his body strength. Another highly skilled boxer from Thasos, Theagenes, became a legend when he carried a bronze statue on his

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<sup>87</sup> Pausanias 6.10.1–2, W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, trs., *Pausanias: Description of Greece*, vol. 3 (Cambridge and London, 1918) 59.

<sup>88</sup> Pindar. *Olympian Ode*, 7, 13–16. 80–95.

<sup>89</sup> Pausanias, 6.7.2.

shoulders from the sacred temple back to his house at the age of nine.<sup>90</sup> Strong and naturally skilled in bare-handed fighting, he won the boxing and *pankration* contests at the seventy-fourth Olympiad in 484 B.C.<sup>91</sup> Theagenes, who could eat an entire bull,<sup>92</sup> also won three times in Delphi, nine times in Nemea and ten times in Isthmia, sometimes at boxing, and sometimes at *pankration*. He subsequently decided to give up fighting to become champion in the long-distance race in Achilles' country. He beat all his opponents, and his victories brought him 1400 crowns.<sup>93</sup>

In 216 B.C. at the Isthmian games, Kleitomachos became the second after Theagenes to win in boxing and wrestling on the same day: "At Isthmia, he won the men's wrestling match and on the same day, he overcame all competitors in the boxing-match and in the *pankration*."<sup>94</sup>

## V. Wrestling: *Pale*<sup>95</sup>

Wrestling was one of the most respected athletic events in Greece, having been introduced to the Olympics in 708 B.C., during the eighteenth Olympiad. Philostratus tells us that while boxing and *pankration* are often practiced alone through "shadow fights" (*skiamachia*), the wrestler proves what he is capable of, both in competition and in regular training.<sup>96</sup> Even for training purposes, Philostratus recommends the "*gymnastis*" (coach) who has practical experience in fights, as opposed to the more sophisticated approach of the *paidotrib*.<sup>97</sup> The Greek word *pale* comes from the root "palm" (*palamai*). His literal meaning is "catching with the palm of the hand." Wrestling no doubt appeared in prehistoric times as a means of waging war and as a defense against wild animals, and the writings of Philostratus,<sup>98</sup> or Lukianos, corroborate this.

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<sup>90</sup> Pausanias, 6.11.2.

<sup>91</sup> Pausanias, 6.6.5.

<sup>92</sup> Anacharsis (above, n.68) chap 8.

<sup>93</sup> Pausanias, 6.11.15.

<sup>94</sup> Jones and Omerod (above, n.87) 91.

<sup>95</sup> Latte (above, n.7) (παλάμαι): αἱ χεῖρες, καὶ αἱ τέχναι. ἐπεὶ δι' αὐτῶν πολλὰ μαιόμεθα. (πάλη)· ἀγών From the word *palamai* "palm," also meaning "technique with the hand"; *Paly*, is an *agon* (athletic contest). (vol. III) 9.

<sup>96</sup> Philostratus, *On Gymnastics* 11.

<sup>97</sup> Philostratus, *On Gymnastics* 14.

<sup>98</sup> Philostratus, *On Gymnastics* 11.

According to Lukianos, Solon tells Anacharsis the Scythian that he should not laugh at the Greek custom of using oil, mud, and sand in the practice of wrestling because it was meant to increase strength on the battlefield.

As to the clay and dust that first moved your laughter, I will tell you now why they are provided. In the first place, so that a fall may be not on a hard surface, but soft and safe. Secondly, greater slipperiness is secured by sweat and clay. Combined (you compared them to eels, you remember), now this is neither useless nor absurd, but contributes appreciably to strength and activity. An adversary in that condition must be gripped tightly enough to baffle his attempts at escape. To lift up a man who is all over clay, sweat, and oil, and who is doing his very best to get away and slip through your fingers, is no light task, I assure you. And I repeat that all these things have their military uses too: you may want to take up a wounded friend and convey him out of danger; you may want to heave an enemy over your head and make off with him. So we give them still harder tasks in training, that they may be abundantly equal to the less.<sup>99</sup>

Wrestling in ancient Greece was very similar to modern freestyle wrestling in that it was also permitted to catch hold of the legs, as may be seen in numerous vase paintings and statues. Wrestling was a science of war from Egyptian times, with arm-locks, breaking the joints, and ground holds, together with full-body throws, as in today's Japanese *Jujitsu* (柔術) or *Judo* (柔道).<sup>100</sup> Remains of statues from limestone show that wrestling was designed for use in war. There are also many examples of body and arm locks in the texts of Heliodoros<sup>101</sup> or Lukianos, for example:

More vigorous is Tydeus than his foe, and superior in spirited valor; nor is it long before he has slipped from the other's hold and unequal weight, and encompassing him as he hesitates, fastens suddenly on his back, then swiftly enfolds sides and groin in a firm embrace and grips his knees between his thighs, and relentlessly, as he struggles in vain to escape from the grasp and force his hand against his side—a burden wonderful and terrible to see—raises him aloft.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, Lucian, *Anacharsis or the Gymnasts*, vol. 3 (London 1905) 204–205.

<sup>100</sup> See the comparison of Japanese combat sports with Greek combat sports by J. Möller, "Waffenlose Zweikämpfe in griechischer und japanischer Tradition," *Stadion* 25 (1999) 13–32.

<sup>101</sup> Heliodoros of Emesa, *Ethiopian Tale*, 10.31.4.

<sup>102</sup> J. H. Mozley, Statius, *Thebaid*, 6.898–904. Statius. I–IV *Silvae*, *Thebaid* (London 1928) 125–27.

Numerous archaeological discoveries demonstrate further similarities between ancient Greek and present-day Asian combat sports. These discoveries also demonstrate the greater variety of techniques in ancient Greek combat sports compared with modern Olympic sports, such as boxing or wrestling.

In “upper wrestling” (common wrestling, *pale* or *katabletike*), the winner was required to throw his opponent to the ground three times. In “ground wrestling” (*kilisis-alindisis*), which was similar to modern Olympic freestyle wrestling, the winner was required to pin his opponent to the ground.<sup>103</sup> As in all the “heavy games,” a contestant could raise his finger to signal that he was giving up the match. He was also considered to have lost the match if he was thrown out of the designated area.<sup>104</sup> Wrestling was often practiced in a pit filled with water called *skamma*. In the “Anacharsis” of Lukianos, the wrestlers strangled each other and pushed each other’s faces into the mud of the *skamma*:

Then, having fallen upon him, he does not allow the man to lift up his head, pressing his head into the mud. And to finish him off, having wrapped his legs around the man’s belly, having laid his forearm under the man’s throat, he strangles him, and the poor fellow pats his strangler’s shoulder, begging, I suppose, not to be strangled to death.<sup>105</sup>

In competition proper, the wrestlers rubbed themselves with sacred olive oil before each match, and then covered each other with dust so as to gain a better grip. After the match, they cleaned away the sand and the mud with a special half-moon-shaped tool made of wood, bronze, or iron called a *strigil*, before bathing. According to Plato, wrestling was worthy of being practiced as an “Olympic sport,” and not just as a deadly fighting method. Certain techniques were therefore prohibited during games, just as they are in today’s Olympic wrestling and Judo competitions.

But the matters of correct wrestling, the freeing-up of necks, hands and sides, exercising with eager rivalry and under established rules with beautiful bodily strength for the sake of health, such things are useful in all ways, and are not to be neglected.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> See, for example, Philo of Alexandria, *On Husbandry*, 113.

<sup>104</sup> F. Conga, *Nilvs Ancyranvs: Narratio* (Leipzig 1983) 17.

<sup>105</sup> Lucian, *Anach.*, chap 1.

<sup>106</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 796 a.

For power training, the athletes used heavy weights, and also smaller round weights to strengthen their fingers,<sup>107</sup> in order to grasp their opponents better. Pausanias explains that the weights were in the form of elongated discs with a hole slightly off center, which served as a handle, similar to the handle of a shield.<sup>108</sup> On the island of Thera, a black volcanic stone measuring 2.18 meters in height and 1.90 meters in circumference, and weighing 480 kilograms has been discovered with the inscription: "Eumastas the son of Kritoboulos lifted me from the ground." Discus throwing was also a form of dynamic weight-and-strength training, the discus being far larger and heavier than in modern times.

The most famous wrestler of ancient times was Milo of Croton (Croton), who could eat eight kilos of meat a day.<sup>109</sup> He won six times at Olympia and his skill in wrestling was such that he could hold a pomegranate in his hand so firmly that no one could take it from him by force, while at the same time not damaging it. He was said once to have carried a bull on his shoulders to the stadium,<sup>110</sup> and would stand on top of a greased stone and make fools of those who tried to push him off it.<sup>111</sup> He was also able to break a cord tied around his forehead merely by the force of his veins. Pausanias gives a description of his performance, demonstrating a control of musculature very similar to those of various modern Chinese masters of inner-style boxing.

It is said that he would let down by his side his right arm from the shoulder to the elbow, and stretch out straight the arm below the elbow, turning the thumb upwards, while the other fingers lay in a row. In this position, then, the little finger was lowest, but nobody could bend it back by pressure.<sup>112</sup>

Milo was physically strong but he also had control of each of his muscles, so that he made use not only of brute force but also of a very specific and subtle power, tensing and relaxing his muscles according to his opponent's moves.<sup>113</sup> Once, when he was called from the

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<sup>107</sup> Philostratus, *On Gymnastics* 55.

<sup>108</sup> Pausanias, 5.26.3. Those *halteres* were mainly used in long-jump.

<sup>109</sup> Anacharsis (above, n.68) chap 8.

<sup>110</sup> Galien, *Exhortation of Arts*, 9.

<sup>111</sup> Pausanias, 6.14.6.

<sup>112</sup> Jones and Omerod (above, n.87) 85.

<sup>113</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Historical Library*, 9.14.1.

*Hellandodikai* as a victor, he slipped and fell as he came down to take his crown. One spectator shouted that he should not be crowned because he had fallen, but Milo replied that he had not fallen three times, but only once, and asked who wanted to make him fall twice more.<sup>114</sup> Another wrestler, Damostratos, never once fell to the ground in his six fights in Isthmia, where he received the “stone-pine” crown.<sup>115</sup> The junior Alcidas was also praised by Pindar as an outstanding wrestler, winning twice at Olympia (?–463 B.C.), and moving like a dolphin in the sea.<sup>116</sup>

## VI. *Pankration*.<sup>117</sup>

*Pankration* was a violent sport, consisting of a blend of boxing and wrestling, and literally signifying “total control” or “complete power.” The contestant was allowed to wrestle, kick, and punch. Introduced to the Olympic Games in 648 B.C., it became highly prestigious. Athletes were typically specialized in boxing and *pankration* or wrestling and *pankration*. According to Philostratus, *pankration* was also created for the purposes of war:

*Pankration* and wrestling have been created because of their utility in real war. This was first demonstrated at the Battle of Marathon, where the Athenians were behaving in such a way that the battlefield looked more like a wrestling game, even though it was a real fight. Later, during the Battle of the Thermopylae, the Lacedaemonians, seeing their swords and spears broken, wrestled for a long time with their bare hands. Of all the exercises practiced in the public games, *pankration* was the most honorific one, even though it consists of incomplete wrestling together with incomplete *pygmachia*; it was for other reasons that it was in particular esteem.<sup>118</sup>

As the text of Philostratus shows, *pankration* was respected because of its usefulness on the battlefield. Greek soldiers looked to engage in close combat, in contrast to the Persians and the steppe warriors who used bows and arrows and favored divided group attacks and mobile engagements at a distance. “Shield to shield,” “chest to chest,” and “foot

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<sup>114</sup> Anonymous, *Greek Anthology*. 11.36.

<sup>115</sup> Philippos, *Greek Anthology* 16.25.

<sup>116</sup> Pindar, *Nemean Ode* 6.

<sup>117</sup> Latte (above, n.7) 19.

<sup>118</sup> Philostratus, *On Gymnastics* 11.

to foot,”<sup>119</sup> advancing in a highly compact formation, the eight-rank phalanx must have looked like something out of a very bloody rugby game. The strongest soldiers, generally courageous athletes with stout necks and thighs, formed the first rank, and their mission was to push hard against the enemy in order to open a breach in their front line of shields and spears. They then sought to pierce their enemies with their spears and cut or break them with their swords. However, they also made use of wrestling and *pankration*, sometimes dragging their opponents back into their camps to massacre them. The Persians who witnessed this style of fighting considered the Greeks to be quite mad. Mardonios, the Persian counselor to the king, had the following opinion:

Though the Greeks, I have heard, have the custom of engaging themselves in war in a mad way, without any judgment. Once they have started hostilities, they look to find the best place to fight, the most beautiful and the most unified; and when they have found it, they begin to fight. In this way, the winners suffer great losses and the defeated, I won't even talk about them, they are annihilated.<sup>120</sup>

For the Spartans, and later for other Greeks, close combat was associated with a strong sense of personal skills and individual values.<sup>121</sup> This “individualism” and the notion of “heroic freedom” were a result of the Hellenic education, instilled from childhood in the gymnasium and the *palaestra*. This fostered a strong competitive spirit and the goals of excellence and virtue (ἀρετή).

The exercises practiced [in the gymnasium] are required by law, submitted to rules and animated by the eulogy of the masters, and even more by the competitiveness that subsisted between the disciples. All Greece regards this as the most essential part of education, because it makes a man agile, robust, and capable of enduring the work of war and the leisure of peace. Considered from the aspect of health, doctors recommend it with success. Relative to the military arts, we cannot give a better example than that of the Lacedaemonians. They achieved

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<sup>119</sup> Tyrteas, *Elegies* 11, 29–34.

<sup>120</sup> Herodotus, 7.9.

<sup>121</sup> According to Anacharsis (above, n.68) 373. See also Hermipp. Ap. Athen. Lib.4. cap.13 (154); it was the Arcadians of Mantinea who first introduced bare-handed fighting competitions. According to Thucydides (*History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.5) and Philostratus (*Gymn.*9) it was the Spartans. The cities of Sparta and Mantinea are separated by a distance of about eighty km.



their victories because of gymnastics, and they were feared by other people because of that; and during recent times, the others had to raise their level (of gymnastics) to be able to defeat them.<sup>122</sup>

There is no equivalent of *pankration* in the West today, with the possible exception of modern mixed martial arts, such as *pancrase*, which are currently popular among young people. *Pancrase* is a bloody and violent “total combat” that finishes on the ground with wrestling. In China, there exists a “Westernized” martial art of this type called *sanda* (散打) in which it is permitted to kick, punch, and throw one’s opponent to the ground. Ancient *pankration* had much the same goals, one being to throw one’s opponent to the ground from a standing position (*orthopaiia*) and the other to pin him to the ground (*to strebloun*) after kicking and punching him. The *pankration* athletes did not use sand to dust themselves, as in wrestling, and all techniques were permitted with the exception of biting and gouging. One training method was *achrocheirismos* or “at the extremity of the hands,” a kind of light sparring in which the aim was mainly to test the opponent’s thoughts and reflexes. As for famous *pankration* athletes, Philostratus<sup>123</sup> and Pausanias tell the story of Arrachion from the town of Phygalia in Arcadia. He died in his last fight in 564 B.C., during the fifty-fourth Olympiad. While he was in a bad posture a spectator named Eryxias shouted to him that it was better for him to die in Olympia than to give up the fight. Pausanias also tells this story:

For when he was contending for the wild olive with the last remaining competitor, whoever he was, the latter got a grip first, and held Arrachion, hugging him with his legs, and at the same time he squeezed his neck with his hands. Arrachion dislocated his opponent’s toe, but expired owing to suffocation; but he who suffocated Arrachion was forced to give in at the same time because of the pain in his toe. The Eleans crowned and proclaimed victor the corpse of Arrachion.<sup>124</sup>

The young Pytheas of Aegina, son of Lampon, won in the junior category of *pankration* at the Nemean games in 485 B.C., and his uncle Euthymenes, who also fought there, praised his nephew’s progress.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Anacharsis (above, n.68) 120.

<sup>123</sup> Philostratus, *Imagines* 2.6.

<sup>124</sup> Jones and Omerod (above, n.87) 103.

<sup>125</sup> Pindar, *Nemean Ode*, 3–10. 40–53.

Melisso from the city of Thebes won in 477 B.C. in Isthmia, and was crowned with a stone-pine crown. He had exceptional skills, and although disadvantaged by his small stature, he found a way of fighting in which he lay on his back, waiting for his opponents to come closer while protecting himself with his legs.

Melisso won at *pankration*. His merit and his audacity are equal to those of the roaring lion relentless in catching his prey and his skills equal to those of the fox who turned on his back to stop the impetuosity of the eagle. Ruse or courage, everything is good when it is to deceive an enemy. Destiny did not give Melisso the stature of Orion, but even if his aspect did not appear imposing, his force in fights was no less formidable.<sup>126</sup>

*Pankration* incorporated different styles according to the fighter's build and technical skills, allowing full development in a particular technique.

## VII. Conclusion

The examples given in this article demonstrate the high level to which combat sports were developed in ancient Greece as well as their technical particularities. Because the main goal was to surpass oneself in physical strength and fighting techniques, many individuals dedicated their entire lives to achieving victory in the *Panhellenic* competitions. They strove to match past heroes in fame and to please the gods; combat sports became a Greek obsession, one that had a religious element. Their practice also developed into a science of close combat through the continuous study of fighting supported by anatomical knowledge, philosophy, and medicine. After the demise of Alexander the Great, this particular science of warfare was assimilated by the peoples of Central and East Asia, mainly through Greco-Buddhism. While the original features of Greek combat sports slowly disintegrated in the Greek world, they were preserved and have survived in various forms to this day in Central and East Asia.

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<sup>126</sup> Pindar, *Isthmia*, 4.3.42–51.

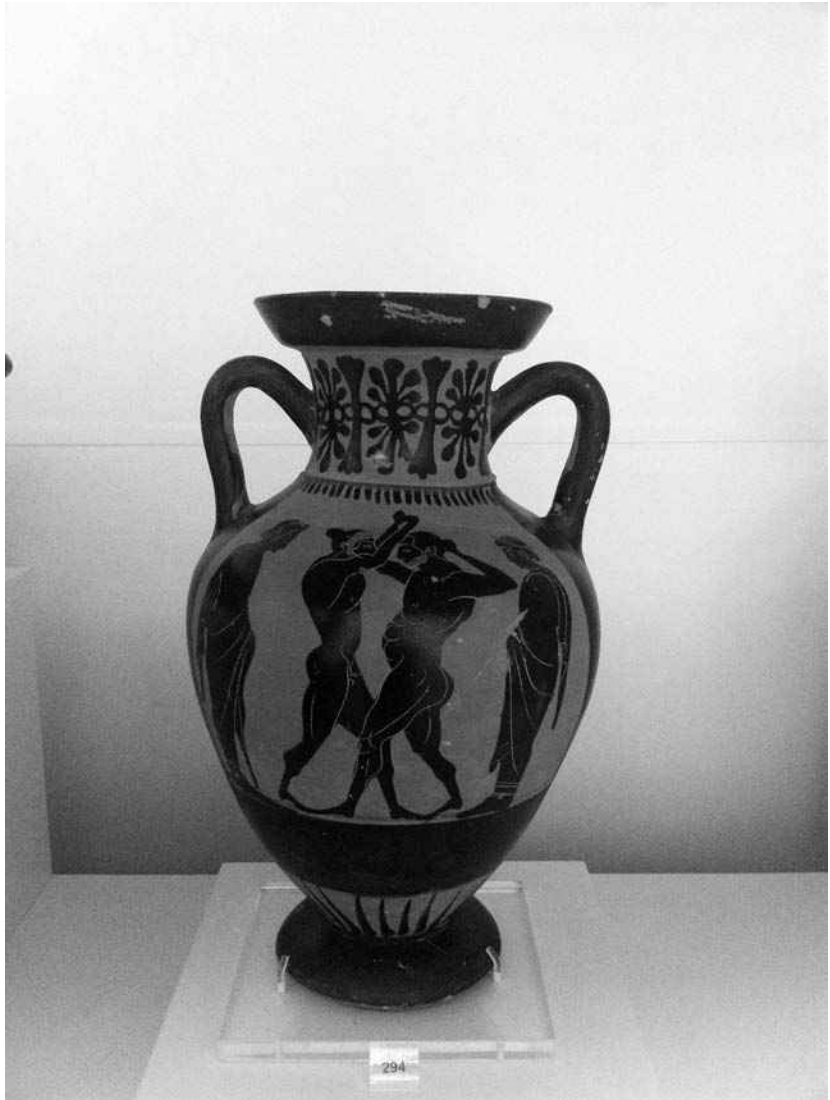


Plate 1. Black Attic Pseudopanathenaic amphora n. (Eur) 402. Museum of Olympia, Greece. Used by permission.



Plate 2. Author's personal photograph.



Plate 3. Author's personal photograph.



Plate 4. Author's personal photograph.



Plate 5. Author's personal photograph.