

The barbarity in the Olympics of antiquity

(The information in this article was taken from the exceptional book by Kyriakos Simopoulos, "The Olympiads: Myth, Fraud and Barbarity", Stahe Publications. Athens 1998).

For more information please visit "The real story of the Olympic Games" at : <http://www.museum.upenn.edu/new/olympics/olympicintro.shtml>

While the hierarchy of the Church in Greece was actually asking the faithful to participate as volunteers in the 2004 Athens Olympics, the neo-pagans were accusing Christians of having supposedly put an end to a.....sublime Olympic ideal, centuries ago.

Just how "sublime" was this institution?

A few months ago I was attending a Divine Liturgy when the priest surprised us with an announcement that he read, issued by the hierarchy of the Church of Greece. The announcement was prompting the faithful to offer their voluntary services – no less – for the..... 2004 Athens Olympics (!!!)

At that very moment, I stopped to ask myself: What do Christians have to do with exhibitions that involve the igniting of a "sacred flame" and rituals of priestesses belonging to the ancient Hellenes' idolatrous religion?

Of course The hierarchy was striving to show that the Church always supports the athletic ideal, and even more so, because the Church has recently been accused of having put an end to the Olympics centuries ago. The hierarchy chose to make a political move for the sake of giving a good impression and also to not displease those who still harbored nostalgia for such events....

Naturally the modern Olympics bear no resemblance to the ancient ones that the Church had ended for their pagan barbarity; We would therefore like to take the opportunity to remind our readers in this article what the Olympics meant to the civilization of ancient times. What, indeed, was that famous “Olympic ideal” that we are constantly reminded of by the various “factors” who are embroiled in these events? And **what –finally– was the actual reasons that made the ancient Christians discontinue this barbarity?**

Opinions on the Olympics by ancient citizens

There are those who speak of the Olympic ideal that was discontinued by the “evil Christians”. However, the truth of the matter is far different. In order to secure a self-indulgent lifestyle, the professional athletes did not hesitate to resort to all sorts of illegal and dishonorable acts. They “sold and purchased the victories” (πωλείν τε και ωνείσθαι τα νίκας) at Olympia; some, for the sake of making money and others, in order to avoid perilous confrontations. This profiteering was even promoted by the athletes’ trainers, who “made provisions for their personal profit” (προνοούντες του εαυτών κέρδους) [see Philostratos: *Gymnastikos* (Φιλόστρατος: *Γυμναστικός*), p.43].

According to Galena, in his work “Exhortative, on the arts” [Γαληνός: *Προτρεπτικός επί τας τέχνας*] pages 9-14, the athletic art cultivated deception. Tough physical training did not render anyone more powerful than the creatures of the animal world; people should be honored for their achievements in the civilized arts. “Only the best among people should be deserving of divine honor, not for doing well in contests, but for the benefit acquired from the arts” (τών ανθρώπων γαρ αρίστους θεία αξιωθήναι τιμή, ουχ ότι καλώς έδρασαν εν τοις αγώσιν, αλλά δια την από τών τεχνών ευεργεσίαν). All natural riches are either spiritual or physical. No other category of riches exists. Athletes never dream of such riches; they have no logic. They continuously accumulate flesh and blood and they preserve their spirit lifeless, like the animals. “Because, by constantly incrementing masses of flesh and blood, it is as though they have extinguished their soul in a large mire, (rendering it) unable to understand anything with precision, only mindless, and similar to the reasonless animals” (Σαρκών γαρ αεί και αίματος αθροίζοντες πλήθος, ως εν βορβόρω πολλώ την ψυχήν εαυτών έχουσιν κατασβεσμένην, ουδέν ακριβώς νοήσαι δυναμένην, αλλ' άνουν, ομοίως τοις αλόγοις ζώοις). Galena reminds us of Hippocrates’ words, that: “health implies a

control over food and labor. Measure is required everywhere.” And he says that on the contrary, there is no state more unstable than that of athletes’ health: “...for they say that everything in excess is hostile to nature” (παν γαρ, φησί, το πολύ τη φύσει πολέμιον). Galena compares the life of athletes to that of pigs; the difference being that pigs are not forced to toil or eat: “...so that their way of life is regarded as the behaviour of swine...” (ώστε εοικέναι τον βίον αυτών υών διαγωγή).

A huge pecuniary bazaar

Pindar’s hymns honoring Olympic victors were regarded by everyone as a commodity for sale. Those who were unsuccessful in the Olympics and other games usually returned to their homeland completely humiliated and despised. They would hide in narrow sidestreets in order to avoid their enemies, on account of their failure. “...making themselves invisible to enemies, in secluded places, having being struck by misfortune...” (κατά λαύρας δ’ εχθρών απάοροι πτώσσοντι, συμφορά δεδαγμένοι), in *Pythionikes* (Πυθιονίκες 8). In exchange for a generous sum of money, Pindar would even laud tyrants such as Hieron of Syracuse and Theron of Akragas, who had “won” the contests by paying off their opponents as well as the judges. In 488 b.C., Hieron was the “winner” of the equestrian events at Delphi, also in 476 b.C. at Olympia, without any personal involvement in the contests, and yet Pindar exalted him as one who “reaps virtues” [Olympic Victors (Ολυμπιονίκες) 1, vs.17-20]. In fact, Pindar even lauds victors of the brutal, no-holds-barred “Pancration” wrestling contest, as in the case of Pytheas at Nemea [Olympic Victors (Ολυμπιονίκες), 1].

In 372 b.C. (at the 102nd Olympiad), one of the judges, Troilus, actually participated in a chariot race when it was forbidden for judges to participate in the events themselves (Pausanias: Travelling around Hellas (Ελλάδος περιήγησις), VI, 1, 51). He was naturally declared an Olympic champion and his statue was erected at the sacred Altis of Olympia. Two other judges had proclaimed Eumolpos an Olympic victor, following a secret agreement. However this was discovered and they were obliged by the Representative Body of the games to pay a fine (Pausanias, Travelling around Hellas (Ελλάδος περιήγησις), VI, 3, 7). According to Plutarch, (On relenting - Περί δουσωπίας 17, 535c), the judges would grant victory wreaths after submitting to bribery and other immoral transactions, to persons who were irrelevant to the contests.

Many athletes would bribe their opponents in order to become Olympic champions themselves. In 388 b.C. (at the 98th Olympiad), Eupolos the pugilist from Thessaly bribed his three opponents (Pausanias: Travelling around Hellas (Ελλάδος περιήγησις), V, 21, 5). One of them who had taken the bribe was also a victor of previous Olympics.

As Philostratos writes, one could freely sell the victory wreath and just as freely buy it. “As for the wreath of Apollo or of Poseidon, they were bestowed by permission and were purchased by permission.” (στέφος δε Απόλλωνος ή Ποσειδώνος άδεια μεν αποδίδοσθαι, άδεια δε ωνεισθαι) [see Philostratos: Gymnastikos (Φιλόστρατος: Γυμναστικός), p.45].

There are many more examples of bribery between athletes that we could mention, WHICH WERE EITHER PERCEIVED AT THE TIME OR HAPPENED TO BE PRESERVED TO THIS DAY.

Let us now examine a few other details.

Let us examine the sale and purchase of athletes

Four years after Astylos' (an athlete from Croton) victory at Olympia in 488 b.C., Hieron, the tyrant of Syracuse purchased him so that he would participate in the next Olympics as a Syracusan. Thus, in 484 b.C., his victory was for Syracuse. (Pausanias VI 13,1). The Cretan Sotades was the winner of the “dolichos” race during the 99th Olympiad. In the next Olympiad, he was purchased by the City of Ephesus and appeared in Olympia as an Ephesian athlete (Pausanias VI 18,6).

Olympic champions were “used” by cities as diplomats, as colonialists and as generals. Statues of them were erected, not only in their home towns, but also in Olympia, in lieu of an advertisement. (Pausanias VI 1 - 18).

According to Philostratos, the athletes of his time (3rd century A.D.) wallowed in luxury and prestige. They accepted bribes because they needed money to support their squandering lifestyle; others bribed their co-athletes simply because they were not in a position to achieve victory. “For some of them also applied themselves to a personal glory by taking from many, while others are purchased, who

do not desire victory with pains, on account of a carefree lifestyle..” (Οι μεν γαρ και αποδίδονται την εαυτών εύκλειαν, δι' οίμαι, το πολλών δείσθαι, οι δε ωνούνται το μη ξυν πόνω νικάν δια το αβρώς δαιπάσθαι [see Philostratos: Gymnastikos (Φιλόστρατος: Γυμναστικός), p.45].

The guise of the contests

On a coin of Verria there is a man holding a whip, representing the assistant of a contest organizer. Coins from Pergamus and Lydia likewise bore scenes of flagellators whipping ill-natured athletes.

In the 5th century b.C. (456 και 452) wrestling contests, Leoniscos from Messina had found it impossible to throw down his opponent and so resorted to grabbing his fingers and crushing them, as a result of which, his opponent suffered so many fractures that he was forced to abandon the contest. In this manner, he had managed to be twice proclaimed Olympic champion. His statue was however erected in the city of Regium, given that a sign was discovered in Olympia which forbade the crushing of opponents' fingers (Pausanias, Travelling around Hellas (Ελλάδος περιήγησις VI, 4,30).

Loukianos mentions in his revealing work titled “Anacharsis, or, on gymnastics” (Ανάχαρσις, ή περί γυμνασίων):

“Tell me Solon, why are Athenian youths making a habit of these obscenities? They tussle with each other, they trip each other over, they try to strangle one another by squeezing their neck, they twirl the other's body around, they sink in the mud and they roll around in it like pigs. They push each other and they lower their heads and attack each other like rams. Look! That one there has grabbed the other by the legs and has tossed him to the ground and has fallen on top of him and is pushing him into the mud. Now he has wrapped his legs around the other's waist, he is passing his arm under his neck and is squeezing the poor fellow who is beating him on the shoulder, begging him, I'm sure, to avoid being strangled completely.” **[Anacharsis, or, on gymnastics (Ανάχαρσις, ή περί γυμνασίων), 1].**

Let us take a look at Pugilism (boxing)



Apollodorus the story-writer refers to Hercules who used to crush his opponents' ribs: a "heroic" model for Olympic athletes...

An inscription that was discovered on the island of Thera (Santorini) says that pugilism "is won with blood".

Artemidorus writes of pugilism that "...contests with punches are dangerous for everyone. They not only are a disgrace, they also cause calamities. The face is disfigured and blood flows abundantly."

During the Minoan era, the "gloves" worn by pugilists were reinforced with hard coatings, while in a mural of Thera one can see that a protective helmet was worn by the fighters, around 1500 b.C..

In Homeric times, pugilism was seen as a catastrophic contest – an indication of what was going on in ancient Greece. Odysseus confronts the beggar Iros in Ithaca; he punches him below the ear, splinters the bones, thus flooding Iros' mouth with blood. (Homer: *Odyssey* vs.95-98)

From the 4th century onward, instead of the bare fists that were customary until then for pugilism, the fingers began to be bound – supposedly to safeguard the fingers. Philostratos mentions that the four fingers were bound with a small leather strap. Later on however, they would wrap the entire fist with straps made from ox hide, designed to inflict more severe blows to their opponents. [see Philostratos: *Gymnastikos* (Φιλόστρατος: Γυμναστικός), p.10].

In Roman times, pugilists wore leather "gloves" reinforced with pellets of iron and lead. This item was known as "caestus". (Pausanias, *Travelling around Hellas* (Ελλάδος περιήγησις Η, 48).

Plato also refers to the pellets in pugilists' "gloves", which had replaced the leather straps. [Plato: *Laws* (Πλάτων: Νόμοι 830B, and Pausanias: *Travelling around Hellas* (Ελλάδος περιήγησις, 2, VI, 23).

Also used from the 3rd century onwards were the "spiked straps" (ιμάντες οξεις), which had metallic spikes attached to the leather

straps. They were named “myrmiges” (μύρμηγκες =ants), because they were used to inflict ant-shaped punctures, just like the Roman kind and were followed by slaughter. “...a spiked strap was upon the wrist of each hand” (Ιμάς οξύς επί τω καρπῷ τῆς χειρός εκατέρας)... “...This form of murder provoked pain that was attributed to the unquenchable menace of pugilism, irritating the fighter who would furiously swing his arms about wrapped with myrmiges, thus aggravating his thirst to kill...” (Πυγμαχίης δ' ὠδινε φόνου διψῶσαν απειλήν ἰγνιστόρους μύρμηκας εμαίνετο χερσίν ελίσσων. Πυγμαχου δ' ὠδινε φόνου διψῶσαν απειλήν). Thick straps with metallic spikes were also wrapped around the arms up to the elbow, turning it into a deadly bludgeon. In the 6th century b.C. Pausanias mentions that they no longer used the “spiked straps”, but the “gentle” ones (μειλίχες) which only inflicted wounds and caused fractures (Pausanias, Travelling around Hellas (Ελλάδος περιήγησις VIII, 40,3).



Eurydamas from Cyrene won a pugilist contest, but all his teeth had meantime been broken by his opponent. In order to hide this, he had swallowed all of them. [Aelianus,

Miscellaneous History (Αιλιανός, Ποικίλη Ιστορία, 10,19)].

In 496 b.C., the pugilist Cleomedes from Astypalaia island had killed Iccus from Epidaurus. He had struck a blow to his opponent’s ribs which caused an opening in the flesh; he then plunged his hand into the opening and ripped out his lung. Given that this victory was not recognized, he returned to his island, went into a school where 60 children were attending class, smashed the pillar that was supporting the roof, bringing down the entire building and causing the death of all the students. The Astypalaiaians went to consult the Oracle at Delphi and received the following reply: “Cleomedes is the last of the heroes. Honor him with sacrifices, for he is not a mortal.” (Pausanias, Travelling around Hellas (Ελλάδος περιήγησις V, 2, 6-8 and Eusebius: Evangelical Preparation, V, 32).

The patron “god” of Pugilism was Apollo and it was for this reason that he also given the title of “Pugilist” (Πύκτης) (Homer: Iliad 23, v.660).

Let us take a look at the “Pancration”



The "Pancration" (=no holds barred) was **not** a marginal sport of the Olympics. In Olympia, the Pancration was regarded as "the most beautiful of contests" and statues of those barbaric athletes were made, honoring their bestiality. [Philostratos, Images (Φιλόστρατος, Εικόνες, 2)].

During a Pancration bout between two Lacedaemonians, the one had grabbed his opponent by the neck, swung him around and tossed him to the ground; however, he managed to bite the attacker's arm. His attacker then shouted "You Laconian! You bite like women do!" "No" replied the other, "I bite like lions do!" [Plutarch, Laconic

Maxims (Πλούταρχος αποφθέγματα Λακωνικά, 234,44)].

The Athenian cynic philosopher Dymonax was overwhelmed when he saw a Pancration fighter bite like a lion. [Loukianos: Dymonax (Λουκιανός Δημόναξ 49)].

On two ancient vases there are representations of Pancration fighters, poking out the eyes of their opponents with their finger. (K.Simopoulos: "Olympiads - Myth, fraud and barbarity", page 97).

In wrestling matches, as in the Pancration, even strangulation of the opponent was allowed. Any kind of savagery was legitimate: fractures, crushing of hands, feet, ribs, even spines. And this was supposedly "athletic education" and an "athletic ideal".....

Pancration fights first appeared in 648 b.C. (33rd Olympiad) and 200 b.C. (145th Olympiad) and were later taught to children. Just imagine parents actually sending their children to be mutilated by such a barbaric sport! [see Philostratos: Gymnastikos (Φιλόστρατος: Γυμναστικός), p.45]. Everything was permitted: dislocating joints, breaking bones, strangling, causing death by all possible means. Kicking knees and groins was customary, as discerned in pottery of that era. As early as the 6th century b.C., one could press the opponent's face into the sand, forcing him to either swallow it or inhale it... (Loukianos: "Anacharsis, or, on gymnastics" (Ανάχαρσις, ή περί γυμνασίων, 3)

The first consequence of a Pancration encounter was –according to Philostratos– the distortion of arms and legs. [Philostratos, Images (Φιλόστρατος, Εικόνες, I 6, II 6)]. The final results were the strangulation of the opponent – a sight that greatly enthused the spectators. The inhabitants of Ilis, Philostratos tells us, actually lauded strangulation during the Pancration. [Philostratos, Images (Φιλόστρατος, Εικόνες, II 6)].

Loukianos writes the following: “They stand up, throw themselves against each other and beat each other with arms and legs. One poor fellow spat out his broken teeth, as his mouth was filled with blood and sand after having received a blow to his chin. The overlord sees these calamities, but does not give the command to stop the event or abolish it. On the contrary, he exhorts the Pancration contestants and praises the one who has struck the final deadly blow.” (Loukianos: “Anacharsis, or, on gymnastics” (Ανάχαρσις, ή περί γυμνασίων, 3).

The Pancration fighters of Lacedaemon would mangle their opponents with tooth and nail; they would blind them by wrenching out their eyeballs [Philostratos, Images (Φιλόστρατος, Εικόνες, II 6)].

The sophist Julius Polydeukis (2nd century A.D.) writes that the terms “pancratation” and “pancratist” signified strangulation, choking, kicks and punches.” (Polydeukis, Onomastikon, 3, 150).

Arrachion, whose statue was erected in the marketplace of the city of Figaleia, had been immobilized in a match by an opponent pancratist and was trapped between the other’s legs while attempting to choke him by squeezing his hands around his neck. Arrachion succeeded in crushing one of the toes of his opponent, but died immediately after. (Pausanias, Travelling around Hellas (Ελλάδος περιήγησις VIII, 40,2).

In another instance, the two opponent pancratists – Kreugas of Epidamnos and Damoxenus of Syracuse – had agreed after a prolonged, victor-less match, to strike down the one who would remain standing and motionless. Kreugas struck a blow to Damoxenus’ head, without any dangerous consequences. Damoxenus struck Kreugas’ side with fingers outstretched; he pierced his flesh and then ripped out the bowels with his hands. Kreugas died immediately. (Pausanias, Travelling around Hellas (Ελλάδος περιήγησις VIII, 40).

I don’t think much more needs to be said....

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