

# Legends of Olympia II<sup>1</sup>

by Kleanthis Paleologos ©

## MILON OF KROTON THE WRESTLER

*"To ascend the ash coloured heaven was not possible, but with his victories at Olympia and at the other sacred games he won as much fame as we mortals can ask for and the utmost happiness for which we can hope".* These are the closing words of an Ode by Pindam, the bard of Olympia. These lines are definitely suitable for one of the greatest athletes in the history of Olympia and the ancient games. What glory! HOW can I put all this into such a brief narrative. What an end! How shall I be able to render credible, such tragedy in such a splendid life.

We are in the midst of the 6th century B.C. Olympia has become the athletic and spiritual centre of Hellenism and its games are the greatest in the world. At this time the little town of Kroton in Southern Italy, which had been founded only a century before by the Achaeans, makes its first appearance. A small town, it takes its place in the ancient world with its many ships, rich and fair, with a progressive and orderly democracy, with its wonderful harbour, renown for its healthy climate, its doctors<sup>2</sup> and its great Olympic winners. The great glorious period for the Krotonian athletes starts with Glaukos the Stadion-run winner (588 B.C.) continues with Lykinos (584 B.C.), Eratosthenes (576 B.C.), Hippistratos (564 and 550 B.C.), Diognitos (548 B.C.), all of them Stadion-run winners, the wrestler Timasitheos (528 B.C.)<sup>3</sup>, Isomachos (508 and 504 B.C.) and Tisikratis (496 and 492

B.C.) both again Stadion-run winners, the famous fleet footed Astylos, who won the Stadion race three times (488, 484, 480 B.C.) and others. Moreover in this line of great athletes of the small town of Kroton, hardly any but the Stadion winners are recorded and very few winners of other games have come down in history. So we can imagine how many more Krotonian Olympic winners in other games there must have been, had we only known their names.

Milon the son of Diotimos, whose name has been written on the marble stones of Olympia and the greatest of all the athletes from Kroton has gone down in history as one of the most famed of the ancient world. And what fame! He won the wrestling game for boys once and five times for men at Olympia; he won the Pythian games seven times, the Nemean nine times and the Isthmian 10 times. He career-toured the whole of Greece as a victor and won innumerable wreaths at the games in which he took part.

In order to show Milon's fabulous powers, the writer Hierapolitis Theodoros tells the following tale of a happening at Olympia. Milon lifted a live bull on his shoulders and carried him around the gaping crowds, who came to the fair on the day of the sacrifices and put him down in front of the priests of Zeus. After the priests had blessed the animal he killed it and leaving the chosen parts as an offering, he sat down and ate the rest of the bull! This incident which is described by Hierapolitis made such an impression, that the poet Dorieus dedicated a poem mentioned by Athinaeus (Σ.4).

*"Such was Milon when he lifted a four year old calf on Zeus' feast day. Having lifted it as if it were a small sheep, he*

<sup>1</sup> See *Olympic Review* No. 64-65.

<sup>2</sup> Herod. 3, 131.

<sup>3</sup> Paus. 512 B.C.

*placed the huge beast on his shoulders and carried it high in triumph amongst the celebrants. So all remained stupefied before so wonderful a feat; he put it down at the feet of the priest of Pisa who was sacrificing. This ox, which had no equal; then he carried it around, cut it up, roasted it and ate it alone."*

The same writer also mentions in his book "About the Games" that Milon consumed "twenty minas of meat and an equal amount of bread" or 25 kilos of meat and the same quantity of bread. Once on Aegina, at a festival of Dionysos, during the month of Anthestirion, when new wine was being tasted and seated at a communal table, where they were betting who could drink the most wine at one gulp, Milon succeeded drinking three chœs<sup>1</sup> at one draught and won the bet and prize.

In order to verify all these amounts attributed to Milon, which today seem so exaggerated, we must refer to another Olympic winner who had made a name for himself as a big bodied, heavy eater and drinker. This was Herodoros who performed a feat never repeated. He was proclaimed ten times Olympic winner at the contest of the trumpets. According to the Alexandrian writer Amarantios to whom Athenaios refers us (10, 415) Herodoros the trumpeter was a man of huge dimensions. His height was 3½ cubits and his ribs were huge and terribly strong. He slept on a lion skin laid out on the floor. He used to consume six choinikes of bread (about 7 kilos), twenty litres of meat (about 7 kilos), and drink 2 chœs of wine (6 litres).

What has been said about Milon sounds mythical. Once the Sybarites envious of the well being of their neighbouring town, started a war against Kroton and arrived threatening to besiege and subject it. Then as Hieropolites Theodoros tells us Milon went out into the square. He wore a wreath on his head, had thrown a lion's skin over his shoulders and brandished a heavy club, like another Heracles. — "Forward fellow countrymen and follow me".

He gathered the men, all those who could carry arms, he lined them up and placed himself in front of them. The assault of the Krotonians was so crushing that the Sybarites took to their heels leaving a lot of dead on the battlefield.

Milon of Kroton belonged to the Pythagoreans, it is said that he had done some writing. They also said that at a banquet, in the stoa of the Pythagoreans, the roof of the hall started shaking and there was a danger of its falling at any moment and crushing all the guests. So Milon took hold of the shaking pillar, so as to hold up the roof, to give time to his friends to clear the room and in the nick of time managed to jump out while the roof fell in with a great clatter.

What was being said about Milon's super human strength, has been preserved in the writings of various authors and surpasses the most unlikely myths in fantasy.

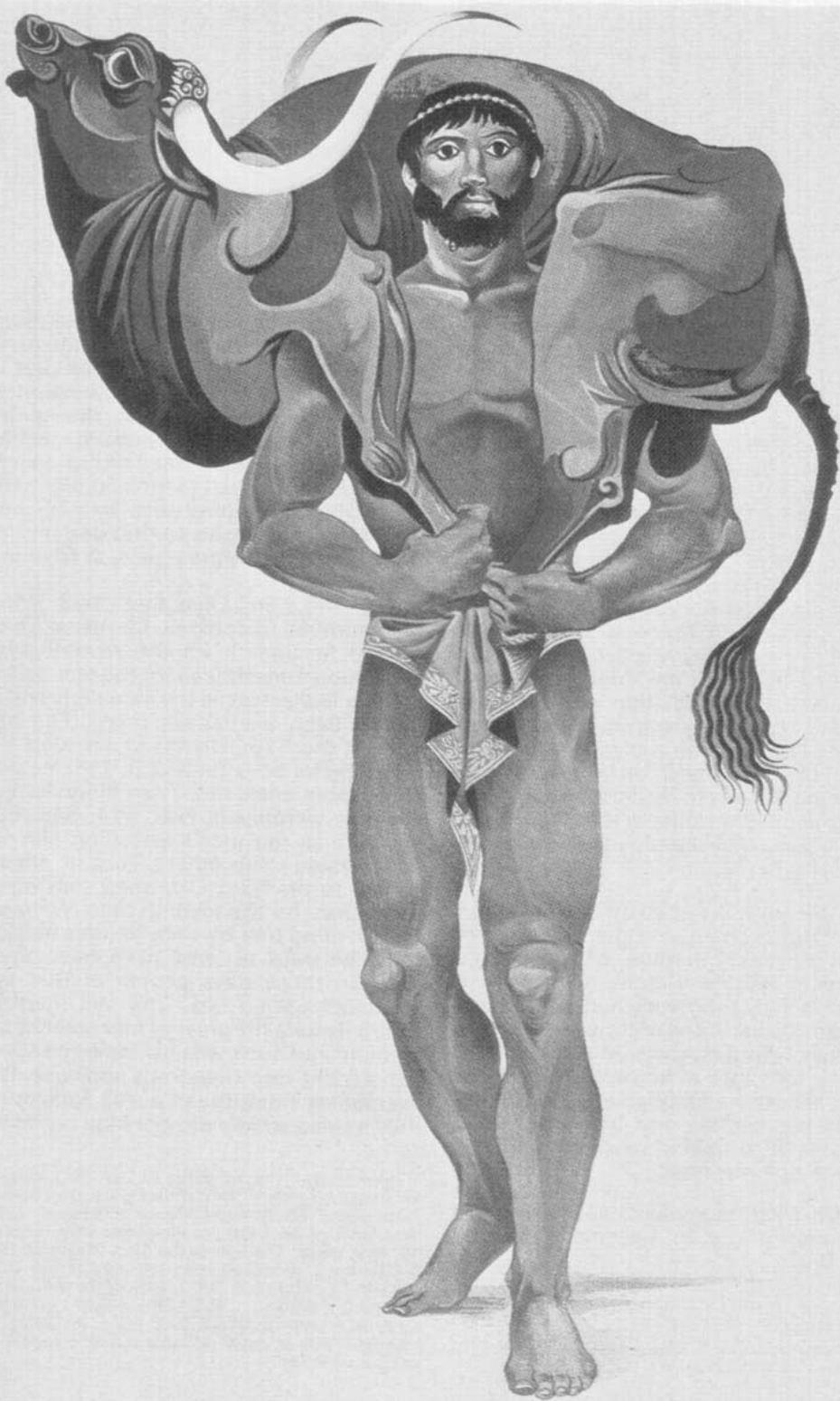
He once held a pomegranate in his fist and no one was able to move a finger or make him crush the fruit!

He stood on a disk covered with oil and nobody was able to move him.

He tied a string round his forehead and by holding his breath made his veins swell so as to break the string!

Holding his elbow, glued to his ribs, he held his forearm out with the hand turned thumb uppermost and fingers flat and nobody was able to move his little finger. Milon's fame had crossed the borders of Greece and had reached The East. And how ever much we may believe that the exploits of his great athlete may have passed into the realm of myth it is evident both from the huge statue which stood in the Altis of Olympia and from his six Olympic victories, that we are dealing with a man about whom nothing could seem an exaggeration. This huge statue fashioned by the sculptor Damias, was transported in order to be erected at the Altis, by Milon himself, who carried it on his shoulders! On its base there was an epigram by Simonides:

<sup>1</sup> Each "chœs" is equivalent to three litres.



*“Milon, this fine statue of a fine man, he won seven times at Pisa and never dropped to his knees.”*

Appolonios of Tya, a charming man, a writer and Pythagorean philosopher who lived in the 2nd century A.D. saw Milon's statue at Olympia, tried to interpret the myths about the great Olympic winner according to the beliefs of symbolism, current in the Pythagorean stoa. Many thought that the interpretations given by Appolonios were very apt. The citizens of Kroton had made Milon a priest in the temple of Hera, which is why he wore a mitre. The legend of the string stems from the mitre. He held the pomegranate because this fruit came from a tree sacred to Hera. He stood on a disc because the priests of Hera stood on a disc whilst sacrificing. And as to the little finger of his hand, the interpretation is that the priests of Hera held their hands in this position whilst praying<sup>1</sup>.

There was only one person whom Milon recognized as being stronger than himself and that was Titormos of Aetolia, a shepherd<sup>2</sup>. He must really have been a man with a gigantic body and, with titanic strength. He had lifted and carried a rock a distance of eight fathoms. Milon also tried and only managed to move the rock. From a herd of bulls he grabbed a bull with one arm by the hindleg and brought it to a standstill. When Milon saw this, he cried out with astonishment:

— “Oh great Zeus, have you sown this one amongst us to become a second Heracles?”

But it was not decreed that the huge Milon should be vanquished by the giant Titormos, as the latter never took part in the Games. It was from a fellow countryman, a young athlete that the multi-crowned Milon was to experience defeat. The youth was Timasitheos of Kroton and it seems that he used to look on when the great Olympic winner was training and studied his technique so that one day he could also win this great prize at Olympia.

It was the 63rd Olympiad (528 B.C.). Milon arrived to compete for the so much wished for wreath for the seventh time and young Timasitheos for the first. Milon by then had achieved the incredible feat of having been winner six times. The first time in the 57th Olympiad he won the wrestling for boys (in 552 B.C.)<sup>1</sup>. He was then fifteen years old. Then followed five Olympic victories in 548, 544, 540, 536 and 532 in the men's wrestling. An inconceivable achievement. Thus he arrived in 528 to the 63rd Olympiad seeking to win a prize for the seventh time. We must bear in mind that by then he was nearing forty, he must at least have been thirty nine. In those days people of that age were considered old! The still youthful Milon despite his greying hair entered the stadium and such was his fame the spectators broke into clamorous applause. But the modest Timasitheos, a well built, carefully trained athlete did not hide his admi-

<sup>1</sup> These are given by Julian the African. His catalogue of “Stadion-winners”. He is showing in his first book of “Chronicles” The Bishop of Cessaria/Palestine. Eusebius Pamphilos. According to Pausanias, Milon's victories took place: The first at the 60th Olympiad (540 B.C.)—boy's wrestling, then followed at the 62nd (532 B.C.), 63rd (528 B.C.), 64th (524 B.C.), 65th (520 B.C.), 66th (516 B.C.). His defeat by Timasitheos took place in 512 B.C. at the 67th Olympiad. Independently of dates, Milon's victories remain an undisputable fact.

<sup>1</sup> Philostr. Apoll. Thy. 4, 28.

<sup>2</sup> Helianos. Star. 12, 22.

ration for his great fellow countryman and opponent, perhaps because he had prepared himself thoroughly and therefore seemed calm and collected. Both Krotoniats reached the finals having easily disposed of the adversaries for whom they had drawn. Now they stood face to face and started the contest. Milon as usual attacked immediately trying for any sort of hold.

Timasitheos' plan was to avoid any sort of contact which seemed the only way to curb his invincible opponent. He knew that he would be lost if only once he fell into Milon's iron grip from which he could only emerge crushed and defeated. He had been studying the invincible athlete for a long time and his plan had to be carried out at all costs. He must avoid his adversary, he must be all the time on the defence, he must force him into a constant and desperate attack to tire him out, exhaust him and even if possible, try to break his nerve.

The struggle took a long time. Milon was tired out and gave up the fight. After six consecutive victories at Olympia he owed his head in defeat and prepared to withdraw the moment the herald proclaimed:

— "Timasitheos of Kroton winner of the wrestling".

But that very moment the crowd rushed into the arena, they lifted Milon up and crowning him with wreaths and flowers and laurels on him, carried him round the stadium. Amongst those who were carrying him and were cheering him was his fellow countryman Timasitheos the victor. That day Milon's statue in the Altis was smothered in flowers.

But fate ordained a tragic end to the life of the overfortunate and so greatly honoured Milon. He lived an honoured notable in Kroton when one day, walking in the woods, he saw a big and newly felled tree with wedges in its big trunk which were put there in order to split it. Wanting to split the trunk by force he pushed his hand in, gave it a big pull, the spikes fell out and trapped his hands. Trapped like this he remained in the wilderness, night overtook him and when it came he was devoured by wild beasts!

The gods know when to intervene to end each man's life as they had decreed. They exalted Milon to immortal glory, but for his end they inflicted tragedy.

## **DIAGORAS OF RHODES, THE BOXER**

Diagoras son of Damagetos of Rhodes was a much talked of athlete in boxing. He was an Olympic winner and also a period winner<sup>1</sup> and, according to the historians of his time, the greatest of all ancient boxers.

Pindar considers Eratos as Diagoras' forefather and therefore gives the name of Eratides to all of Diagoras' descendants considering them of ancient and aristocratic lineage. Pindar has written one of his more splendid lyric poems about him

<sup>1</sup> Winner at Olymp, Phyt, Nemean and 1st. games.

and this ode<sup>1</sup> had created such an impression on the Rhodians that they had it engraved with golden letters in the temple of Athena of Lindos. Their imagination, fired by the glorious career of this great athlete made him of divine descent. His mother, they said, found herself in the country and because of the great heat took refuge in the sanctuary of Hermes. There the god found her asleep and made love to her. In reality Diagoras was of royal descent, because Damagetos, his father, was the grandson of the King of Ialissos, Damagetos.<sup>2</sup> Diagoras was a very tall man with a handsome face and his proud walk as well as his sculptural poses caused much admiration. Pindar calls him huge and Pausanias says that he was about 2½ meters tall. It may be that this was the height of his statue which was standing in the Altis. It was made by Kallikles, son of Theokosmos of Megara, who had become famous because of a statue of Zeus which stood in the middle of the Agora of Megara.<sup>3</sup>

Diagoras had won the 79th Olympiad (464 B.C.), he won twice at Nemea, four times at the Isthmus, many times in Rhodes and in many games of towns like Athens, Argos Lykaion, Aegina, Pellene, Plataea, Thebes, Megara and, elsewhere. Pindar gives him the name of "straight fighter" because he never turned sideways and also never avoided his opponent. This straight way of fighting made the followers of an athlete very proud and brought great joy to the audiences who knew how to appreciate straightforwardness and bravery, art and the clean way of contesting for victory, as well as the keeping to the rules, which made a victory irreproachable.

They believed in those days that the games were founded by the gods and that they themselves had laid down the rules. The gods protected the athletes who contested in a straight forward way and who sought a clean victory. The keeping of the moral laws harmonised man's whole course with God's help, whereas any

deviation from the state laws or the fighting rules, shook the god ordained order and heaped exterminating calamities upon the transgressor, his progeny and even his whole town.

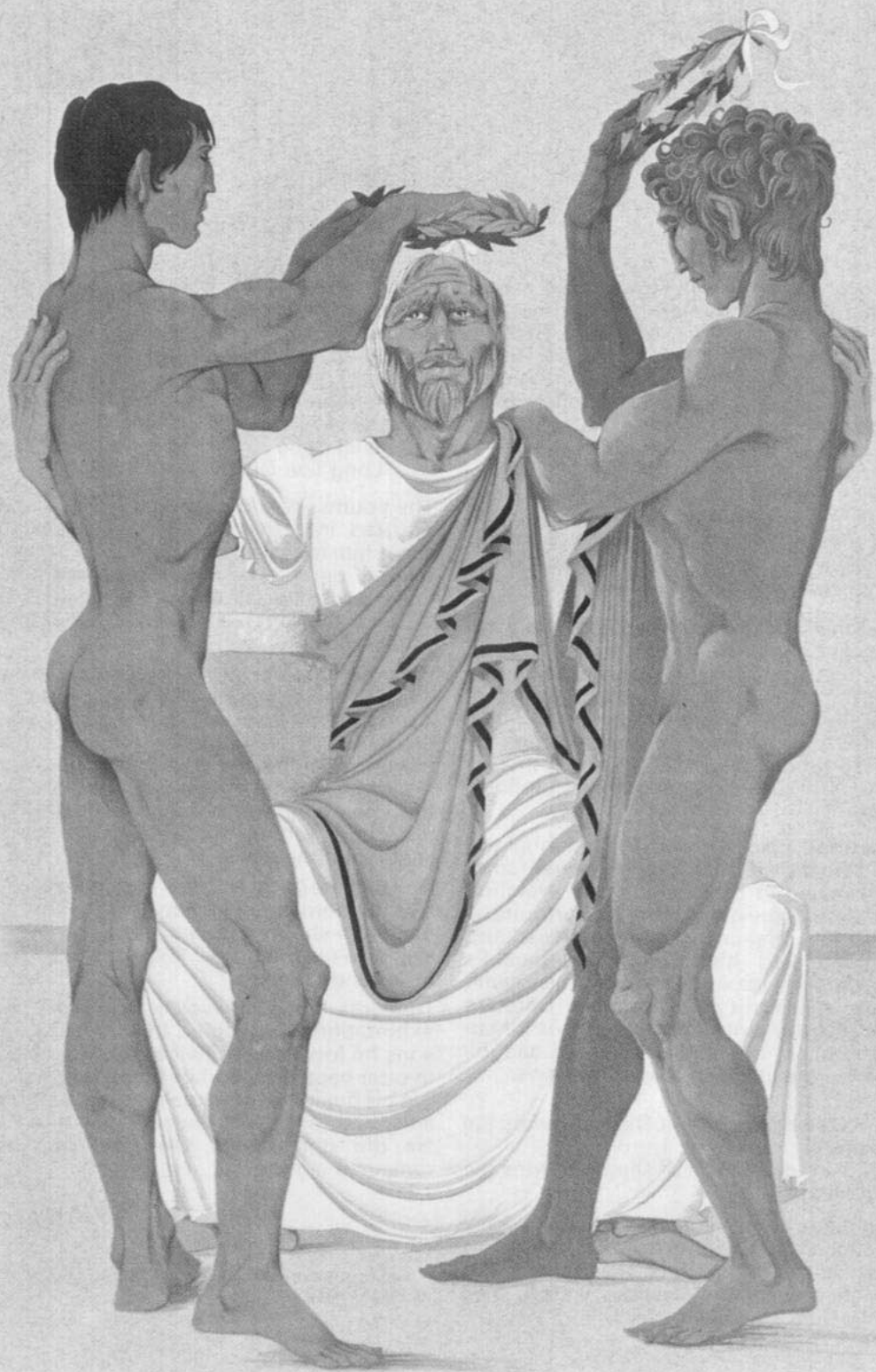
The origins of the gods and men may have been the same, i.e. Earth, the Mother. But the gods differ from the common mortal by a power which is inaccessible to man. It is the bronze coloured sky, where seated on their unshakable pedestal, the immortals rule the world. The gods command, but also help. They accept the prayers and are pleased with the sacrifices, the agreeable odour of the burnt meat and derive great satisfaction from reverence and worship. They praise good deeds but punish strayings and deviations. The games are their invention. They too had to fight a hard battle when they hurled the almighty Titans into Tartarus and established themselves on snowcapped Olympus. They delight in sporty contests and the proud, selfrespecting merit can only triumph if the gods deign to bestow the splendid rays of their divine patronage. But merit and valour can only be acquired with a great deal of toiling, uncountable labour, and even the frequent danger of heavy training if one wished to contest those golden prizes which finally lead to immortality.

Diagoras' countenance, as history describes him, breathes out highmindedness and nobility, modesty and capability. When he was alive he was greatly honoured, which reflected like a god-sent heritage on his descendants and his whole progeny. It should be mentioned that all this glory was not only because of his size, his many victories, and his straight way of fighting. From the Olympic arenas many a great athlete had passed who had been crowned five and six times with the glorious Olympic wreath. The great fame of Diagoras hailed straight from the Altis. There his huge statue stood. Next to it was the statue of his first born son, Damagetos, the Olympic boxing champion. On the other side was the portrait of his second son, Akousilaos, who won the Olympics in the Pankration. Then there was the statue of his younger son Dorieas, the most deserving of them

<sup>1</sup> Pin. Olymp. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Paus. IV, 24.1.

<sup>3</sup> Paus. VI, 7.2.



all, who won the Olympics three times, eight times the Isthmians, seven times the games at Nemea and once the Pythian games in the Pankration. Further there were two more statues erected in honour of the Diagorides. Eukles, Olympic winner in boxing and Peisidoros also winner of the Olympics, both grand-sons.

An incomparable glory for his house!  
Not easily to be borne, I think, by a mortal!  
Not that the gods were envious. But they themselves have decreed that great happiness should not be long lived!

Diagoras had the god-sent gift of good fame and he was able to hand down this rich heritage to his children. But it seems that the hour destined by the Fate Atropos, she who severs the thread of life, had come. And the gods sent even death to the fortunate Diagoras in a mild and honoured guise; we can call it a glorious end!

This took place in 448 B.C. during the 83rd Olympiad. Diagoras, the proud father was seated in the stadium and watched his sons contesting. He was surrounded by an admiring crowd who embraced and congratulated him when the herald's thundering voice proclaimed his name twice, making it echo from the Chronos hill far to the swift running Alpheus where the women, mothers, sisters and daughters were encamped, eager for news.

— "Damagetos son of Diagoras wins the Boxing".  
— "Akousilaos son of Diagoras wins the Pankration".

The modest youths receive their wreaths. Their virile faces shine from sheer joy and they run. Forgotten is the sacred toil which the much desired victory has

caused them. There, seated amongst the crowd is Diagoras, their old father, the great Diagoras, the straight fighter. They run to him and embrace him. The old man is deeply moved and the youths, with great spontaneity, crown him with their wreaths of victory. The crowds cheer:  
— "Well done ... well done ...".  
— "Long live Diagoras".

The youths lift him on their shoulders and proceed into the arena. They want to show him to the crowd and rejoice in their mutual pride. The crowds follow and cheer and throw flowers and laurels. It is the peak of Diagoras' life. It is the blessing of the gods.

And then among the crowds a booming voice is heard. It comes from a Spartan. Is it out of envy for so much happiness and glory? No! He also wished to acclaim the triumph of a greatly honoured father, but his strict upbringing makes him realise that man cannot and must not push his ambitions further than the limits prescribed by the gods.

He fears the gods, he fears that this excessive joy borders on impiety. Lifting up his hands he shouts out loudly:

— "Die oh Diagoras! You cannot aspire to ascend Olympus!"<sup>1</sup>

Diagoras heard the voice, he heard the exhortation, and carried by his felicitous sons he lowered his twice crowned head in utter happiness and contentment, leaving his breath in the same place he and his sons had toiled and triumphed:

He did not ascend Olympus, but he remained immortal!

*K.P.*

*(To follow.)*

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, Pelopidas' life, 34 and Aul. Gellius, Attic nights, III, 15.3.