

Legends of Olympia¹ XI

by *Cleanthis Paleologos* ©

Melankomas of Karia Boxer

Boxing, together with running and wrestling, is one of the oldest forms of combat. Primitive man had to save himself from an enemy or wild beast by flight or by standing his ground and facing the danger at close quarters, by using his hands to inflict or avoid blows. That is why the fist is the most handy of means to harm an adversary and boxing as ancient as the human hand.

However, this primitive boxing, which was a matter of life or death, was vastly different to the fight where two men without any previous enmity encounter each other for a prize and for honour.

We find that such confrontations are mentioned for the first time in Homer's epic poems, when the hero Achilles wished to do honour to his friend Patroclus' memory in this way. We also find it in the fights which took place on the island of the Phaeacians where the much tried Odysseus and his comrades were washed up by the sea. Mythology also tells us how Apollo killed Phorbas, the son of a king, and so good a boxer that he boasted he could fight with the gods. So Apollo appeared before him, fought him and killed him.

At Olympia boxing took place for the first time in the 23rd Games, in 688 B.C. The winner was Onomastos of Smyrna who, it is claimed, laid down the rules for boxing.

The value of boxing skill was apparently first shown by Pollux², the hero of the Argonautic campaign. He was forced to stand up to a very powerful boxer and the episode as told by mythology is too charming to be overlooked.

Here it is.

Amykos was the son of Poseidon and the nymph Melia; he ruled over the Bebrykes of Bythinia, in Asia Minor. He was ruthless and uncouth, but a very strong boxer and was thought to be invincible. They say that he invented the thongs with which the fighters bandaged their hands up to the wrist in order to make them rigid and hit harder.

According to Theocritus, when the heroes of the Argonautic campaign took refuge on a sea shore in Amykos' country, they found the giant in the forest clothed in a lion's skin and sitting by a spring. They wanted to drink and fill up their water jars for their ship, but that wild fellow would not let them and told them that they could take the water only if one of them would consent to a boxing match with him. This was his habit and he challenged every stranger who came to his country. From the Argonauts, Pollux stepped into the middle, took up the challenge and called for all his comrades and also for

¹ See "Olympic Review" since No 64-65.

² He was the son of Tyndar, king of Sparta, twin brother of Castor and brother of Helen the wife of Menelaus, who was the cause of the war of Troy which lasted for ten years. He was also the brother of Klytemnestra, the tragic wife of Agamemnon.

Amykos' subjects to be present at the fight. The agreement was that the vanquished would be at the victor's utter mercy.

Pollux, young and agile, strong and dexterous, stood facing the awkward giant whom they compared to Typhoeas¹. The bout was very rough, but in the end Pollux won thanks to his art and dexterity. Amykos' blows went wide; fortunately the young man avoided them and administered his blows where the slow moving giant least expected them—the head, the chin and the body.

Once more it was made obvious that brute force does not always secure victory. It is more often the technique, together with the assistance of a quick brain. Pollux had noted this. As soon as the barbarian received a punch, he immediately placed his hand on the painful spot where he had been hit and no longer looked at his opponent. At the same moment, the clever Pollux delivered with his other fist a harder blow to an unprotected part. Amykos groaned, panted, could not regain his breath; he became angry and the angrier he became the more he lost control over his movements, and he failed in his attacks. Not being able to stand on his feet any longer, he staggered, stumbled and bent and at one moment fell on his knees exhausted, whilst his people formed a circle in order to protect him. Pollux did not kill him, leaving the giant Amykos alive, but took him to his father Poseidon, the lord of the sea, to swear that in future he would stop molesting people and would not challenge them any more to box him. In Ptolemy's "Stories" we read in chapter III: "On Amykos' grave an oleander was planted and those who

ate of it became renowned boxers. Aretodoros, who ate from that bush, won thirteen victories; the Theban Dioskouroi was beaten in his fourteenth match because they say that Amykos was the winner over one of the Dioskouri."

From this incident, which is one of the more characteristic of the famous campaign of the Argonauts, the Greeks considered Pollux as the inventor and master of the art of boxing, because without being prepared for his adversary's gigantic force, he managed to win with his tactics, by which he not only avoided blows, but also placed his own with accuracy on vulnerable and unprotected parts of the body. This is the reason why Homer refers to Pollux as "a good puncher" and as "great" because he used his art in attack as well as defence against an incredibly strong opponent.

Olympia, Delphi, the Isthmus and Nemea Games gave us many famous boxers for the thousand years that their glory lasted under the protection of Zeus, the thunderbearer, and the golden haired Apollo.

In those days an athletic victory had an unsurpassable value, because it embodied the highest valour and wisdom. The gods were the protectors of the games and from them the athletes received the gifts of mind and body necessary for these competitions. The glory which men, youths and children alike were seeking was much coveted because they knew that with the wild olive wreaths they would also gain the blessing of the gods.

We have seen Diagoras of Rhodes, the most eminent of all the ancient boxers, we have talked of his sons and grandsons, all of them famed Olympic winners and of Glaukos of Karystos whose countrymen claimed that he was the son of a sea god. History tells us

¹ One of the giants with 10 dragon heads breathing fire. Zeus beheaded him and threw him in Tartara.

about the young Moschos of Colophone in Asia Minor. He took part as a boy in the four sacred boxing games, won four wreaths and was proclaimed “periodonikis”¹. It also told us of Cleoxenos from Alexandria, who did not only become a period-winner in boxing, but also all his bouts without the slightest injury. History again speaks about the youth from Samos, Pythagoras. He went to Olympia to contest in the boys’ games, but the judges banned him from this category and the crowd mocked him as being effeminate! So he proceeded to the men’s games and won over all his adversaries². Hippomachos from Elis, another rare phenomenon who was acclaimed winner in the boys’ boxing, is mentioned by Pausanias “without showing the slightest injury or mark on his body”.³ He was a boy with a slim, beautifully proportioned body and a noble expression.

The boxer Melankomas from Karia, in Asia Minor, was admired by the ancient writers as an astonishing athlete. As Dion Chrysostomos tells us, he won many a time without being hit once by his opponent. It is, as this writer says, a very strange occurrence for a boxer to remain completely unhurt. It is well known that boxers have widened nostrils from broken noses, deformed and flattened ears, and faces scarred from previous fights. On the contrary, Melankomas “is so healthy, and untouched as if he were a runner.”

Though there were no rules which provided for the safety of the athletes or prohibited dangerous blows in order to protect their lives, the spectators preferred a clean fight gained with a certain skill and courage, rather than with dangerous and sly blows. They

were aware that the athletes sought victory and they required from the athlete, whom they supported, to force his adversary to surrender by showing his spiritual strength, bodily force and resistance to punches. They did not wish to see the opponent unnecessarily injured. So they doubly rejoiced in a victory gained with skill and courage without bodily harm. Diagoras was considered the greatest of Greek boxers because he was a “straight fighter”, ie. he never bent, turned or avoided his opponents, but always met them face on.

Melankomas had been unsurpassed in the art of boxing and his style enraptured his audience. His movements were easy, free and natural. He only moved his arms to protect himself from his opponent’s attacks. His whole demeanour during the match was marked with grace and strict harmony. Melankomas fought with the delicacy of perfection. Every opponent trembled, became nervous, lost control over his movements, and in the end almost foamed, exhausted, before admitting defeat, certain that if he carried on his labours would be in vain, since he would never be able to touch Melankomas. Dion Chrysostomos maintains that only the nervous and impatient athletes administer blows in despair, because they are in a hurry to finish the bout and to be rid of the toil. He wrote: “Melankomas could keep his hands up for two days—as boxers do in order to protect their face and body— without anyone ever seeing him change position or relaxing.”⁴

The praises for Melankomas and his incomparable art in boxing are justified if one considers with what satire the unfortunate losers, covered with wounds, were greeted when returning to their home towns.

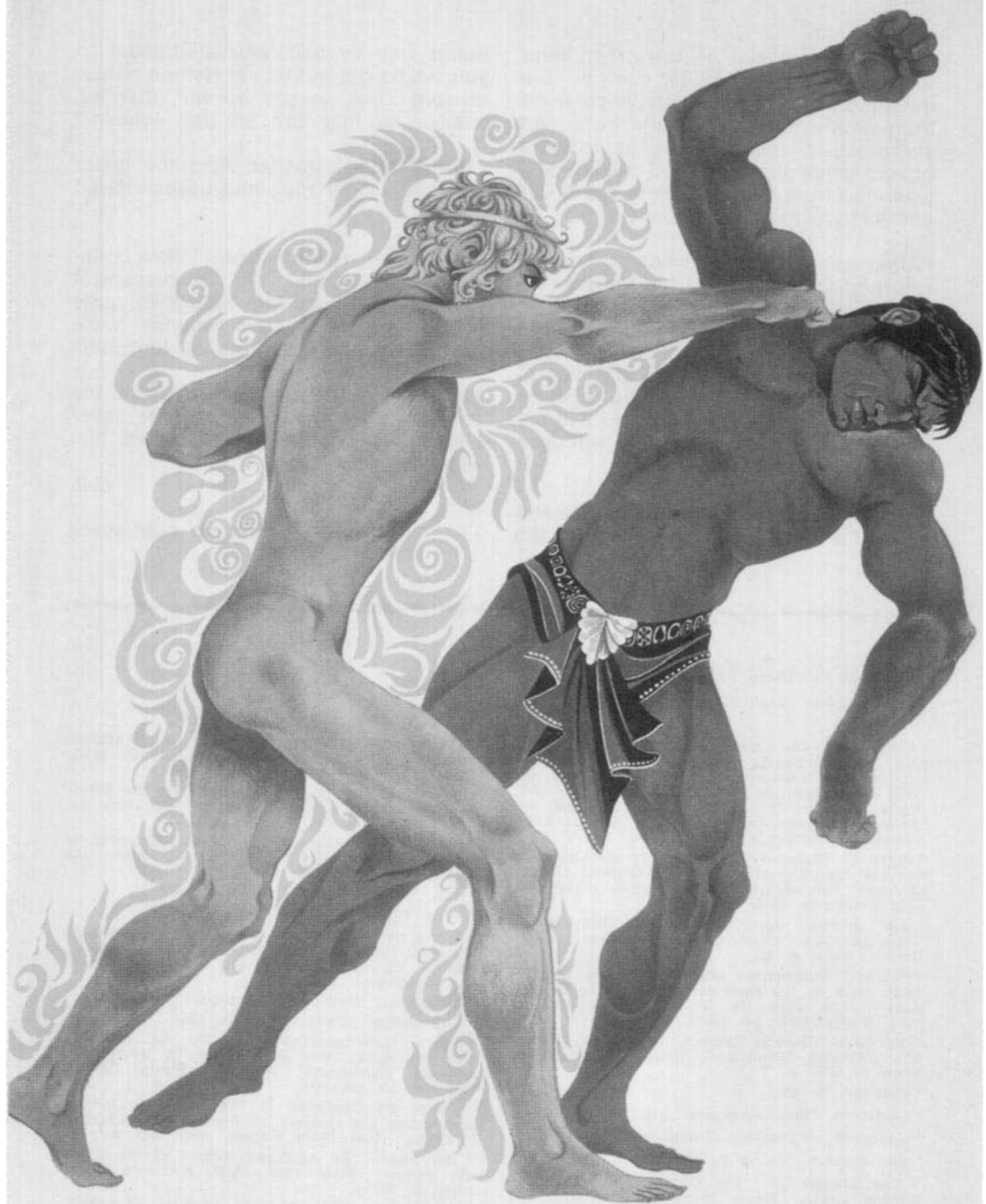
The ancients on the one hand recognised and honoured the good athletes, the straight forward fighters and the

¹ Title awarded to winning athletes at Olympia, Nemea, Delphi and the Isthmus Games.

² 48th Olympic Games, 588 BC.

³ Paus. VI, 12,6.

⁴ Logos, Chap. 27, 533 u.



famous victors, but on the other hand they jeered and made fun of the defeated. A few epigrams have survived from which one can see the irony and scorn which followed the unfortunate boxers when they returned beaten and wounded from Olympia. Here are a few of the most characteristic ones:

“After twenty years, when Odysseus returned to the land of his fathers, his dog ‘Argos’ recognised him as soon as he saw him. But you, Stratophon, who boxed for four hours, not only are you unrecognisable to the dogs, but also to your home town. Should you wish to view your face in a mirror, you will cry out “I am not Stratophon” and will even take an oath on it!”

“His skull was scattered at Olympia and Aulos the boxer, having picked up the

bones one by one, entrusted them to you. As he did not win at Nemea either, oh lord Zeus, to you he will offer his ankles, as they are all that remain.”

“His friends deposited Apis the boxer here. This poor man had never injured anyone.”

With similar railleries, their fellow countrymen received the unsuccessful athletes who went into hiding for quite some time until their wounds were healed and their misfortunes forgotten.

The glory of Melankomas of Karia, the untouched boxer, lasted for ever because the gods had showered him with their protection.

C.P.

(to be continued)