

# Legends of Olympia<sup>(1)</sup> XIII

by *Cleanthis Paleologos* ©

## Amesinas of Barkas Wrestler

There on the bank of the playful river Kladeus, beyond the Altis, a great crowd has gathered. They are talking, pointing at something, discussing, coming and going. The river flows on unconcerned. If you do not wish to call it the Kladeus then call it “the river”, but do not disdain it. In the fine weather, it is charming and serene, with low waters and verdant banks. It also has another name—Keladon. Its waters as they cascade down murmur little tunes and at night the nightingales sing frantically in the poplars and plane trees. But do not try to cross it in winter, when with swollen and muddy waters it inundates the fields and uproots trees. It’s a real river, the Kladeus! At the moment, it is a multi-coloured ribbon which winds through plane trees and oleander bushes, but in winter it becomes a wild and foaming torrent. After encircling the Altis, it joins up with the silver spangled Alpheus.

Here now, in a quiet bay where the river widens something unusual seems to be happening. A group of people are gesticulating, talking together and pointing at something. One can hear the din from far off.

It is some days since the athletes have started to arrive at Olympia with their retainers. On all the country roads

variegated caravans are moving slowly; horses and carts, herds of oxen and sheep, laden with everything that the representatives from the towns about will need at Olympia. Around the Altis and, beyond the stadium and hippodrome, the green valley, the hillsides, the wooded heights, and the bare fields which are even further away from the banks of the shallow Alpheus and Kladeus, there are crowds from all the provinces of Greece. Everyone is busy pitching tents under the trees or erecting shelters covered with palms or poplar branches. Fires burn brightly, voices and songs echo everywhere, while the oxen low and the stallions whinny in their temporary enclosures.

The slaves run to and fro and all this creates an indescribable din, which increases as new parties arrive looking for space under big trees to pitch their tents or places to pen their slaughter animals. These are the pilgrims who come from every corner of Greece to attend the Olympic Games.

Their first job is to pitch their quarters, to pen the beasts which are brought along for sacrifice or as food for the whole delegation, to look after the stallions which they are going to race in the hippodrome. Then, while the slaves put big copper cauldrons over the fires for the meal, the athletes present themselves to the Elian Archons who enrol them and check their papers. The rules are very strict here at Olympia where the most famous games in the world are held. The athletes must register themselves one month before the opening of the Games and have to hand over a certificate from their hometown

<sup>1</sup> See “Olympic Review” since No. 64-65.

confirming that they have been training for at least ten months.

But what is happening down there on the bank of the Kladeus? A brightly coloured caravan which has just arrived is striking camp. Four four-wheeled carts, heavily laden with white tents, show that they must belong to foreigners. They are drawn by sixteen oxen, placed in fours. These are followed by mules staggering under their loads, beautifully harnessed horses, riders and slaves—a multitude of slaves—and a large herd of well fed oxen, sheep and rams, that the cowherds round up and bring to a halt with a great deal of noise. The slaves busy themselves with unloading the carts and setting up camp. Then they pen the animals after giving them armfuls of hay and put up the multi-coloured tents for the Archons.

But all this is quite usual these days. Many such caravans, even more varied, arrive at Olympia by land and sea, from Athens, Thessaly and Thrace, from Macedonia and rocky Epirus, from the islands and even from the colonies such as Italy, Egypt, Africa and Asia. So why have so many people assembled on the banks of the Kladeus?

What has happened that is so unusual?

One beautiful bodied, handsome athlete stands out from all the other strangers. He has dark, flowing, tightly curled hair, a strong neck, powerful chest, shoulders two pikes wide, a narrow waist and tanned legs like one sees on statues. His skin darkened by the sun shines like ebony.

Beside him a bull scratches the earth with his hooves, breathing restlessly. The athlete holds the rope which is tied round its horns. It is a magnificent black beast, not very big, but apparently very strong. Its horns are straight and tapered like two terrifying spears.

The athlete reaches out, strokes its muzzle and gently scratches its forehead. The animal, gratified, lowers its head.

The people who have gathered around question each other and make suppositions.

— What a beautiful, strong bull...

— And how scarlet will be the blood which sprinkles the altar of Zeus when he is sacrificed!

— I bet these strangers are Thracians.

— Can't you see they are Arabs? They have come from Cyrinaica.

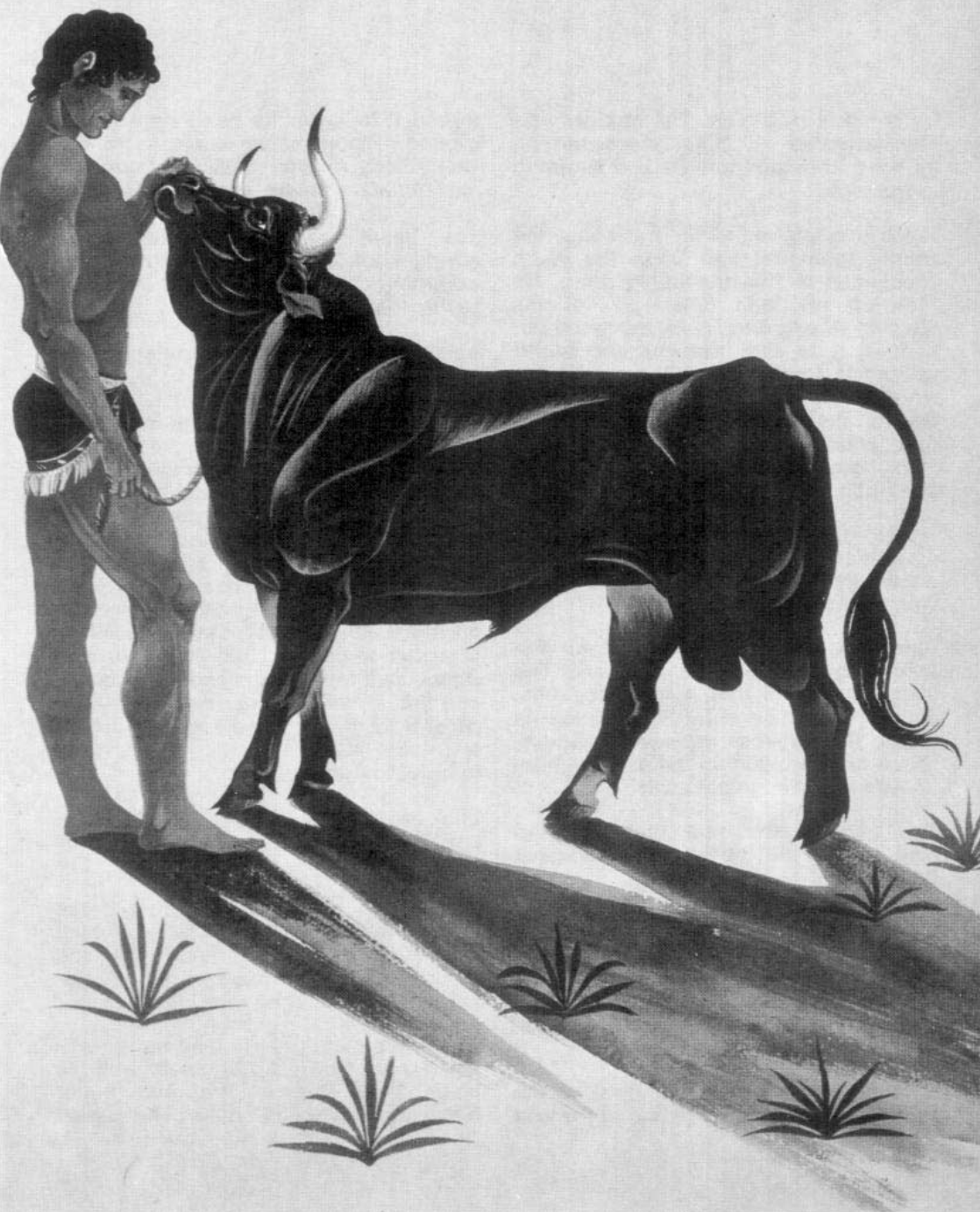
— And what an athlete! By Apollo, I should not like to find myself in his iron grasp!

The crowd looked, watched, wondered and then dispersed when its curiosity had been satisfied.

The great heat was easing off, the sun was descending amongst the trees. The unknown athlete went with his trainer to the control, and after completing the necessary formalities laid down by the laws of Olympia he returned to the encampment which the slaves had prepared. It was the hour for training, now that the heat had diminished with the setting sun.

The athlete was Amesinas, a cowherd from Barkas in Cyrinaica. He had come to Olympia for the first time to compete in the wrestling events. He was a good-looking youth, with proportions which you only find on the statues of Hermes, the messenger of the gods. His muscles seemed to be sculptured on his body and his features showed a kind and proud disposition.

The trainer took the road towards the palaestra and Amesinas followed hold-



ing the bull by a rope. The restless animal advanced with small steps, turning its head from side to side and straining at the rope.

When they arrived at the palaestra, the trainer took the rope while the youth proceeded to the anointing room. He took off his light tunic—all he was wearing—hung it up, selected an oil jar, handed it to the masseur and stood waiting in front of him. The man filled his palms with oil and started rubbing it on to the athlete. The further he proceeded, the more his astonishment grew, which turned to undisguised admiration.

— Oh, fleet-footed Hermes, are you playing some kind of trick on me? Is it a mere mortal who stands before me, or you, the magnificent?

Amesinas returned to the trainer and they both went into the palaestra. The young man took the bull, patted him, coiled and attached the rope round its horns. The animal remained restless, shook its head, dug up the earth with its hooves and tried to get away.

The people who had gathered and stood near the palaestra were most intrigued.

— But what is going to happen?

The astonished crowd saw with their own eyes something which, had it been related by old men to their friends and children, they would never have been able to believe.

Amesinas stood naked in front of the powerful beast, took it by the horns and

forced it to lower its head right to the ground. The muscles in his arms and whole body rippled; their contours and movements showed up very distinctly.

The beast resisted, tauntingly its strong neck. It lifted its head a little, sweeping up the athlete as if intending to throw him on its back.

Amesinas threw the whole weight of his body forward and taking hold of the horns in his two hands, tried to make it yield. The beast stretched its front legs, tossed its neck trying to free itself and shook its head from right to left. The athlete insists. All his force is concentrated in his arms and hands. The bull's head, pushed down by the immeasurable force of the youth, slowly lowers until its muzzle touches the ground. Then the athlete slightly lessens the pressure. Immediately, the still obstinate beast feels this, resists again and rights itself a bit. In the end, it is not the bull that is winning but the athlete who constantly controls the animal with his will—allowing it to lift its head slightly in order to deceive it.

The crowd, following this incredible contest between man and bull, remains astounded and speechless.

The angry beast snorts loudly; the athlete wipes away the sweat which runs from his brow into his eyes and then reaches out a hand to pat the animal and calm it. Then they start again.

Now the athlete tries to lean on the animal's neck to make it kneel and lie down flat. This is the real battle between man and bull. The beast

resists, shifts, shakes itself and struggles. The athlete holds him by the horns with both hands. His arms swell up. The animal is suffering with this twisting, shakes itself suddenly and lifts its head. But Amesinas jumps sideways following the bull's movement and keeps the weight of his body on his hands which are holding on to the horns. Again the beast shows signs of bending. It bends one knee and then the other, again tries to lift its head up, but then gives way falling to the ground on its side.

Hands are lifted towards the sky; there is a sound of cheering.

— Well done, well done!

The other athletes with their followers rushed from everywhere, together with the trainers and Elian judges who were supervising the training. A big crowd gathered.

— By the gods of Olympus, we have never seen such a feat since Heracles the lion conqueror!

Amesinas had come to Olympia to wrestle and for his training used a bull: unheard of, and quite unexpected. What athlete could possibly withstand his iron holds?

It was the year 460 B. C., at the 80th Olympiad, when Klymene, priestess of the goddess Demeter, seated on the high seat of the stadium, was fulfilling her fourth year of service and the Thessalian Tyrymas was proclaimed winner of the stadion. And such was the importance of this news that they lit fires to transmit it to the entire Thessa-

lian encampment. For nearly sixty years the horse breeding area of Thessaly had not had an Olympic winner, since the stadion winner Euandros at the 64th Olympiad in 524 B. C.

The bull tamer Amesinas from Barkas, who herded oxen in his country, wrestled and won effortlessly. As history shows<sup>1</sup>, he won his victory without submitting to one single hold by his opponent.

The crowd having heard how he trained with a bull, cheered him loudly and the spectators followed him in the stadium when he was being crowned by the judges with the wild olive branch.

— Long live the bull tamer!

— Long live the invincible!

Amesinas from Barkas dedicated his bull to the temple of Zeus and the Elians did not kill it. For years they showed it to visitors:

— With this bull, the athlete Amesinas of Barkas used to train. After the terrible Titormos who could apparently defeat even Heracles the demi-god, no other athlete has been found who could defeat a bull.

C. P.

*(to be continued)*



<sup>1</sup> Euseb. Pamf. Chronicle Book A.