

# Pankration

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An Olympic Combat Sport  
An Illustrated Reconstruction

Volume I

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*Prowess without hazard has no honor among men or among the hollow ships.*

—Pindar

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND SOME METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Pankration—παγκράτιον was one of the three empty-hand combat sports practiced in ancient Greece—the other two being wrestling and boxing—and it was the one of the three that most closely approximated all-out empty-hand combat. The name of pankration alludes to “the most powerful” or to “the one using all powers and means.” Actually, it is arguable that pankration competition is the closest that a sport has ever come to outright no-rules empty hand combat. Pankration is described succinctly by Philostratus,<sup>1</sup> who calls it a dangerous form of wrestling, which involves bruising strikes to the face, grappling techniques—including after falling to the ground—different types of chokes, foot and arm locks, and strikes and kicks; all this except biting and gouging. Aristotle describes pankration as the event where it is required to do both what wrestlers do and what boxers do.<sup>2</sup> Philostratus expresses a similar view of pankration in another work of his, where he calls the sport a combination of impure wrestling and impure boxing.<sup>3</sup> In this context, it should be noted that pankration was also called πάμμαχον—pammachon or παμμάχιον—pammachion.<sup>4</sup> These names may actually precede the one of pankration,<sup>5</sup> and more directly describe the athletic event itself, making it even more clear that it is combat by virtually any means. We have clear evidence of pankration competitions from the seventh century BCE to the fourth century CE, i.e., lasting a millennium.<sup>6</sup> There are some indications, however, that the Greeks held pankration competitions even before the seventh century BCE (Chapter 2). Pankration was strictly a sport of the Greek world, with no counterpart in the ancient Near East.<sup>7</sup>

My first and fundamental aim in writing this book is to reconstruct the ancient sport of pankration from all the available primary sources of information—from the texts and the products of the visual arts of antiquity. In my research, I have tried to be exhaustive in identifying textual references to, as well as artistic representations of, pankration that could provide an insight into some aspect of the sport. In this sense, the book can be used as a

<sup>1</sup> Philostratus *Imagines* II.6.(3).

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle *Rhetoric* I.v.14.

<sup>3</sup> Philostratus *Gymnastikos* 11.

<sup>4</sup> Dio Chrysostom 37.14.

<sup>5</sup> Poliakoff, *Studies in the Terminology of the Greek Combat Sports*, section 6.

<sup>6</sup> It is certain that pankration was being practiced through at least the end of the fourth century CE when the Olympic Games were abolished by emperor Theodosius (Chapter 2).

<sup>7</sup> Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World*, p. 54.



reference source for researchers of the topic of pankration and, more generally, (combat) sports in ancient Greece. However, I should point out that, in the interest of economy, I have not referred to all identified material in this book as some of it simply reinforces points that are already evident from the material that I have decided to reference. I am also sure that there still exist artistic representations, as well as references in ancient texts, which could help further “fill out” the picture of the practice of pankration, but which I did not manage to survey. I hope other researchers will bring them to the fore.

The second aim of the book is to provide modern practitioners of combat sports the information surviving on the practice of ancient pankration. It is for this reason that I have chosen to organize the book as a practitioner’s manual. The text permits the modern athlete or trainer to compare his notes on techniques and training regimes with the practices of his ancient counterparts and gain new insights in the process.

The third aim of the book is to build a bridge between the world of research in classical studies and that of the contemporary practice of sport. This bridge can, inter alia, provide some assurance about the realism of the academic perspective. It is not uncommon the case of an academic study misinterpreting or ignoring an artistic representation or a textual reference due to the lack of practical experience of the researcher with pankration. In contrast, this study has interpreted the data through the eyes of effectively a modern practitioner of pankration,<sup>8</sup> and has hopefully discerned in these data some things that may not be evident to a non-practitioner analyst. Moreover, this perspective has helped eliminate a number of hypotheses on techniques advanced by non-practitioners, because of the infeasibility of these techniques in the actual practice of combat sport.

My fourth aim in writing this book is to help reintroduce pankration in the modern Olympic Games. This study can help create an awareness of the sport and provide a detailed picture of its practice at a time when there are thoughts of reintroducing into the modern Games arguably the most popular sport of the ancient Games (Chapter 2).

This (and any modern) study of pankration can only be fragmentary and nonexhaustive because the data set on the practice of pankration is and will remain incomplete. The most obvious reason is that we are many centuries removed from the practice of pankration in ancient Greece, and—it is sensible to assume—that only a fraction of information about pankration was ever reflected in the texts or the works of the visual arts of antiquity. In addition, the time that has elapsed since the period when pankration was practiced in antiquity has meant that only a small fraction of the originally existing references to, and representations of, the sport have survived for us to survey. In this context, we can only

<sup>8</sup> The author has a black belt in *Jujitsu* and has been practicing combat sports/martial arts since 1996.



speculate that at least some of the most popular or impressive techniques are reflected in the surviving data set, as they would have been more frequently the subject of artistic representations. However, the choice of subjects must surely also have been affected by what was feasible or esthetically pleasing in the art medium that was used. For example, one could expect that in vase painting, pankration on the ground would be under-represented because of the difficulty of clearly depicting the intertwined bodies. Moreover, there would be an inferior esthetic effect. Therefore, it is certain that many of the common or popular techniques of pankration and many aspects of the training regimes<sup>9</sup> are not part of the surviving data set today and cannot, on that account, be included in the list of techniques presented in Chapters 7–12 of this study.

However, in this context it can be asked whether a study on pankration could theoretically exhaust all techniques used in pankration; this question is related to the fundamental issue of whether pankration was a martial art or a sport. If it was a martial art in the sense used in modern times—especially in the Asian schools, where all the techniques of the school are usually found in its “katas” or “forms”—then one would expect that pankration would have a specific and very finite set of techniques and approaches to combat, and would explicitly exclude others. As a corollary, that would permit in principle an exhaustive description of the “martial art of pankration.” I would argue that pankration was not a martial art in the sense that there were no techniques that were excluded in practice or competition, except the few described below under the rules of competition that had to do with avoiding certain types of injury to the athletes. In pankration, the fundamental principle was to use whatever worked for the specific athlete and in the circumstances of the specific competition. In that sense, pankration was the *universe* of the practice of hand-to-hand combat, which in its *sport form* excluded the few techniques prohibited for minimal safety reasons.

At the same time, it is arguable that there were many techniques that were allowed in pankration competition but were hardly ever used, simply because they were inefficient in bringing about victory to most of the athletes. Techniques must have been “weeded out” by their limitations in practice. The athletes would learn about these limitations from their trainers and from their own experience in the palaestra. It is therefore quite certain that there must have been a collective experience of the most efficient techniques/tactics and their application, as well as—implicitly or explicitly—of which techniques not to use. In this sense, the present study provides an—albeit very partial—insight into *some* of the techniques that had proved their efficiency.<sup>10</sup> These techniques could be of value to modern

<sup>9</sup> Moreover, knowledge of the *tactics* often employed in pankration, i.e. the sequence of actions/techniques, is even sketchier because the visual arts will usually only give us *one* snapshot of *one* technique. Textual references can give us more information, but they are relatively few.

<sup>10</sup> For example, in principle pankration included the use of high kicks (i.e., to the head), but pankratiasts are not shown in art or described in texts as using them in confrontations, raising the distinct possibility that they were considered to be an inefficient and risky fighting tool. This is consistent with experience many have gained in modern “no-holds-barred” competitions.

It should be noted that there is a textual reference in Lucian *Anacharsis* 4, to jumping and kicking at the same time. However, this appears to have been part of conditioning as it is mentioned together with sprints and running/jumping in place.



practitioners of combat sports as they could be seen as (part of) the distilled experience of at least a millennium of testing of techniques in actual competition.<sup>11</sup> This is of some consequence to the majority of modern combat sport/self-defense practitioners who always have in the back of their minds the question of whether a certain technique will work in a confrontation.

One should be aware of a caveat: what constitutes an efficient technique in a confrontation *will* change as one relaxes even the minimal rules of pankration competition, i.e., biting and gouging. Therefore, the techniques of pankration in its sport form would need to be modified in some cases to fit the needs of self-defense. These modifications correspond to the practice of pankration in its *combat form*. I would like now to turn to the distinction between pankration as practiced in the big athletic events of Greek antiquity and pankration in its combat form.

The mere fact that there were some minimal rules in pankration competitions at most of the ancient Games meant that pankration in the games was not all-out combat (μάχη—*machē*). This distinction between pankration as competition (αγώνες—*agōnes*) and pankration as combat—*machē*—is clearly present in the texts of ancient writers. Philostratus writes that the Spartans allowed biting and gouging in intra-city competitions because, he supposed, they were training for combat (ες τας μάχας); he noted, however, the competitions (αγώνες) in the Olympic Games excluded these techniques.<sup>12</sup> There is also evidence that the combat form of pankration was de facto self-defense<sup>13</sup> and had military applications. Regarding the latter, Philostratus argues that pankration was invented because it had applications in ancient combat, and notes that in the battle of Thermopylae the Spartans continued to fight quite successfully with empty hands, after their weapons had been broken, using their pankration skills.<sup>14</sup>

There are indications that pankration in its combat form was being practiced already in the period before the (re)introduction of pankration as an event in the Olympic games in the seventh century BCE. In the confrontation of Ulysses and Irus in the *Odyssey*, Homer has Ulysses explicitly contemplating whether to carry out mortal combat: “whether he should hit him in such a way so that he drops dead on the spot, or he should strike him lightly, and stretch him on the ground.”<sup>15</sup> He opted for the latter, “so that the others would not

<sup>11</sup> There are exceptions to this argument, in the case of a small number of techniques identified in this study that are very complex and difficult to execute, requiring very disparate proficiency levels between the two athletes. I believe that these techniques, which require an extraordinary dominance by one of the two athletes, are depicted in art exactly in order to convey the alleged dominance of the personality that is depicted as the winning athlete. It is in this category that I include the statues showing the submission phase of the competition with king Ptolemy as the winner. See, for example, a bronze figurine in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens (Figures 1 and 2), and yet another now in the Walters Arts Gallery in Baltimore (Figures 3, 4, and 5).

<sup>12</sup> Philostratus *Imagines* II.6.3.

<sup>13</sup> This is exemplified by a painting on a Greek vase of about 510 BC now in Paris (Figure 6). It shows Hercules using an—illegal in competition—eye gouge, along with his pankration holds, to defeat Antaeos in real combat.

<sup>14</sup> Philostratus *Gymnastikos* 11.

<sup>15</sup> Homer *Odyssey* XVIII.66-101.



recognize him,” presumably from his advanced knowledge of pressure points and his power, which would have been characteristics of advanced practitioners of combat pankration, like Ulysses. In this passage from at least the eighth century BCE, we see that the practice of combat pankration was already widespread (as the crowd in the Homeric palace would readily recognize the advanced techniques of Ulysses) and highly sophisticated (as exemplified by the knowledge of pressure points). This book will present any information that illuminates combat pankration per se.

I would like now to turn to the question of where pankration (in its sport form as well as its combat form) fits into the genealogy of the world’s developed hand-to-hand combat. Since approximately the Second World War, there has been a widespread perception that complete empty-hand combat systems were first conceived and developed in Asia. From there, they were introduced to the West, especially in recent decades, along with cultural and spiritual practices characteristic of their various Asiatic origins.<sup>16</sup> This joint importation—of fighting systems and cultural practices—has solidified the perception that well developed hand-to-hand combat is really an original creation of Asian civilizations. I would like to argue instead that the existence of pankration in its combat and sport forms since at least the seventh century BCE, if not the twelfth century BCE (Chapter 2), suggests a very different origin and genealogy of developed empty-hand combat.

Given that the founding of the Asian fighting systems is traditionally traced by their practitioners to the sixth century CE Indian Buddhist monk Bodhidharma,<sup>17</sup> the much earlier thriving of pankration in Greece establishes the latter as potentially the first development of sophisticated (as opposed to primitive) empty-hand combat—outright or for sport—and Europe as the first origin of developed hand-to-hand combat. While many students of the subject would probably easily agree with this amendment to the popular perception, this would not necessarily imply any “genetic” connection between modern fighting systems and sports on the one hand and pankration on the other. Pankration could simply be seen as an evolutionary experiment that was isolated and became “extinct”, and which had to be repeated, starting from a clean slate, in Asia before reaching us today. However, it is possible that the origins of Asian martial arts did not come about in that Indian monk’s genius operating in a vacuum. Bodhidharma came from a region which not only had had contact with but had been, to some extent, part of the Hellenistic world through the expansion of Alexander’s empire to parts of India. Alexander and his successors not only passed with their armies through that region, but created kingdoms and colonies and brought to that part of

<sup>16</sup> Examples are the wearing of varieties of kimono in practice, the bowing and prostration in front of the teacher or more senior practitioners, the Asian language vocabularies of techniques and practices, and the parallel practice of Buddhism (or elements thereof) by teachers and students of the combat systems.

<sup>17</sup> According to Morgan, *Living the Martial Way*, pp. 5-6, tradition has it that “Bodhidharma brought Buddhism from India to China and subsequently founded the long combative arts tradition at the Shaolin Temple in Hunan

Province. He did the latter, as he realized, shortly after his arrival at Shaolin, that his devotees lacked the physical stamina required to withstand the long sessions of meditation he prescribed for their spiritual training. So, he gave them a series of exercises to improve their fitness, which evolved into the famous fighting system of the Shaolin monks.” This tradition is also reported in Yang, *Qigong for Health & Martial Arts*, pp. 5-6.



Asia Hellenic culture, including of course pankration. The Greek kingdoms in that part of the world thrived for over three centuries (between the second half of the fourth century BCE and the end of the first century CE) and the Greeks that moved there mixed with the native populations, giving and taking along the entire spectrum of culture.<sup>18</sup> One can naturally presume that this included pankration—the most popular of sports in the ancient Greek world. While it remains to be submitted to the test of further research, I put forward the hypothesis that pankration may be “genetically” related to the Asian fighting systems, via the Alexandrian expansion to India, and thus the European creation of pankration may lie at the basis of all modern empty-hand combat and sport.

The data that we have on the ancient practice of pankration not only give us clues as to specific combat techniques (e.g. specific throws, locks, or strikes), but also help address broader questions of approach to empty-hand confrontation. For example, they provide insights into the relative importance of grappling versus striking in such a confrontation, and this study discusses these insights explicitly (Chapter 5). Modern martial artists and combat sports practitioners have been asking this question and the same insights are slowly emerging from the experience gained in the last ten years in revived “no-holds-barred” competitions, which are effectively pankration competitions. This is, therefore, another case where insights from the millennium-long practice of pankration in antiquity could be used to enrich the still-limited modern experience.

I argued above that pankration was not a martial art. This does not necessarily imply the absence of fighting “styles” propagated by specific schools/trainers. While I am not aware of any explicit reference to a pankration style/school,<sup>19</sup> it is possible that such styles existed. There is actually evidence that there were famous teachers/coaches of pankration and one could reasonably surmise that they had varying approaches to combat (preparation and training, strategy, tactics, and techniques) that they would transmit to their pupils. At the same time, it is explicitly clear in the ancient texts that each athlete had to develop his own style and approach that would fit his physical (and presumably psychological) characteristics—strengths and weaknesses. Aristotle indicates that the individualized characteristics and methods of the style of the fighter were supposed to be found by self-study of the athlete himself in conjunction with observation by his trainer. He emphasizes, “A professor of boxing does not impose the same style of fighting on all his pupils.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, this idea of a personal fighting style is discernible in the ancient sources, while the idea of a martial arts style—as the latter is propagated in Asian martial arts—is not, and could have actually been considered inappropriate. All this is likely to be consistent with the psychology of the Greeks and the sociology of Hellenic society.

<sup>18</sup> Hellenistic presence and influence in the area continued till the fifth century CE.

<sup>19</sup> I have only located a possible reference to a wrestling style, not a pankration style. Aelian *Historical Miscellany* 11.1 refers to Orikdamos who invented or conceived of the “Sicilian way of wrestling.” It is possible

though that Orikdamos did not create a style of wrestling, but only codified certain rules for wrestling. Aelian actually calls him νομοθέτη—“legislator” or “giver of laws”.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle *The Nicomachean Ethics* X.ix.15.



A methodological issue of some importance is the evolution of the practice of pankration. During the historical period from which the data on pankration were generated, there apparently was an evolution of the techniques and, more certainly, of the training regimes used by pankratiasts. Philostratus, for example, notes changes in the training of athletes in a number of areas, ranging from the use of training cycles to strength training, conditioning, and diet.<sup>21</sup> While this study will mention the available information, to describe effectively any such evolution, we would need more information than we have on each stage/period of the practice of pankration.

This book is organized as a manual for the practitioner of pankration, because *inter alia* this method seems to be a logical way of organizing the data available to illuminate the entire *practice* of pankration. Chapters 1 through 6 are in (the present) Volume I, along with the list of illustrations appearing in this volume. Chapters 7 through 12 are in Volume II along with the list of illustrations appearing in that volume and the bibliography of the study. Chapter 2 describes the origins of pankration in mythology and history and provides a discussion of the popularity of pankration in Greek antiquity. Chapter 3 discusses the rules of pankration competitions. Chapter 4 addresses the physical and psychological characteristics of a successful pankratiast. Chapter 5 discusses issues of fighting style, skill, and specialization for the pankratiast. The participation of pankratiasts in other sports is also discussed in this chapter. Chapter 6 discusses the preparation and training of pankration athletes. Chapter 7 discusses the basic fighting stance in pankration as well as the data we have on movement, positioning, breathing, and the use of pressure points. Chapter 8 provides the information available on strikes with different parts of the extremities. Chapter 9 discusses the known locking techniques and Chapter 10 provides a discussion of the choking techniques. Chapter 11 discusses the known takedowns and throws in pankration. Chapter 12 provides a discussion of various aspects of strategy and tactics mentioned in the ancient sources.

A number of, hopefully simplifying, conventions have been used in writing this book. First, as many relatively complex techniques are described and it may be difficult to keep straight whose arms and legs are doing what, I use the term “athlete” to connote the pankratiast who executes the technique that is being explained; the term “opponent” is used to denote the pankratiast who is being subjected to the technique. Second, I have decided, albeit reluctantly, not to use the two breathings and three accents of the classical Greek language, but to use only a single accent on the vowel on which one of the three original types of accent would have fallen. I use no accent on words where the location of the accent is self-evident.

<sup>21</sup> Philostratus *Gymnastikos* 43-47. While many of the changes he describes appear to be merely reflecting a lionization of the “glorious past,” some evolution over time undoubtedly took place.

In this context, I should mention that I felt that the inclusion of Greek terms in the text was important as they are part of the evidence we have on pankration, and the interpretation of the terms and phrases related to pankration can illuminate our understanding of the practice of pankration in Greek antiquity. As the pictures of the works of the visual arts are provided for the study of the reader and his—potentially differing—interpretation, so are the Greek terms. These terms have been transliterated with Latin alphabet characters in my text for the benefit of those readers not very familiar with the Greek alphabet. For most well-known names of Greek personalities and locations (as well as some objects, such as types of vases) I have used their conventional rendering in English. For example, I refer to Ulysses and not Odysseus. In making this choice the purpose has been to facilitate the recognition of material by English-speaking readers. Regarding the transliteration with Latin alphabet characters of the rest of the Greek names and words, I have used for the most part the recommended transliteration guidelines found in Wikipedia.

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have helped and encouraged me in the writing and publishing of this book. In particular, I would like to thank my parents, Vasilis and Mary Georgiou, for their endless support in all my efforts. I would also like to thank my martial arts teachers, Peter Patek and Julio Zarate, as well as my boxing coach Henry Thomas; they provided me with much of my knowledge of combat sports techniques, which in turn helped me interpret the information contained in the representations of and references to combat sports in the primary sources of this study—the vases, sculptures, and literature of ancient Greece. My thanks are also due Brenda Sylvia for her faithful drawings of important images of combat sports on works of art that I could not procure photographs of, as well as for her help and ideas regarding the esthetics of this book. Olin Liu and Tom Walters were very kind to help me with the editing of the text. Mathew J. Powers, my jujitsu training partner, gave me very useful feedback on the content of the book. I would also like to express my appreciation to Mrs. Eleftheroudaki and Mrs. Bratsioti for their advise and willingness to help in matters of publication. My thanks also go to Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington D.C., which kindly allowed me to use its library for my research. Regarding publication, I am grateful to the staff of Xlibris for all their work in producing this book. I would also like to express my gratitude to the museums that have permitted me to illustrate this book with photographs of vases and sculptures in their collections. Finally, I am indebted to the writings of the modern scholars that have dealt with the subject of pankration, and ancient Greek combat sports more generally, in the classics literature.