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# The Development of Boxing: The Ancient World (The Hellenistic World and Rome)

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## Abstract

While Hellenistic boxing maintained an athletic aesthetic and tradition of performance well into the common era, Roman boxing synthesized many of the more brutal Italic aspects of the activity. Ultimately Roman boxing blurred the boundaries between armed and unarmed orthograde combat. We propose a logical classification of boxing into ritual, athletic, and gladiatorial strands. Roman boxing is frequently criticized as a

degraded or decadent form of Greek pugilism. We find this frame unhelpful for understanding the true nature and evolution of boxing in Late Antiquity. Instead, we argue that the final stage of ancient boxing was a synthesis of Homeric *pygmachia* and Italic funeral cult, sharing features with, but still distinguished from, armed gladiatorial combat.

## I Introduction

Historically, boxing waxes and wanes in its degree of violence, as evoked poetically in the fifth book of Vergil's *Aeneid*. Boxing was ultimately eclipsed by gladiatorial combat and other forms of spectacle while elite participation in the sport dwindled. There is little evidence that boxing disappeared because it was banned by any ruling elite. Synthesizing the story of boxing to date, we propose a notional taxonomy: in Late Antiquity, boxing activities can be sorted into ritual, athletic, and gladiatorial forms. Ritual boxing encompasses pugilism undertaken to perform or commemorate before onlookers and the gods, such as the funeral games of Patroclus. Athletic boxing reaches its characteristic apex in the Hellenic Olympics, although the Hellenistic Olympics continue to produce notable boxers and boxing stories well into the common era. Gladiatorial boxing has ancient roots but comes into its own as a violent performance in the Roman Coliseum and its contemporaneous arenas.

## 2 Hellenistic and Roman Greece

While boxers of the ancient Near East, Egypt, and the Aegean (Crete and the Cyclades) almost certainly adhered to rule sets and norms, the sheer wealth of information about Greek boxing allows us to infer much more about the regulation of pugilism in the late first millennium (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d). In many cases, no inference is needed, since ancient writers described the activity *eo nomine*. Not only did the Greeks discourse upon the methods and manners of the sport they called *pygmachia*, they created works of art from those bloody, bruising battles that still exercise a transfiguring effect on the modern viewer. The Greeks set orthograde and pronograde bounds to the previously murky field of unarmed personal combat, and then obscured it again with the invention of the *pankration*. We discuss literary, laudatory, and documentary sources for Hellenistic Greek boxing.

The Greeks and the Romans were interested in perpetuating two types of boxing stories,<sup>1</sup> derived to a great extent from Homeric models, though with considerable variation. Type I includes the funeral games stories,<sup>2</sup> in which two peers engage in a prize fight to honor a fallen comrade. One combatant is often older than the other but enmity (beyond a little trash talk) is not usually part of the equation.<sup>3</sup> Type II, on the other hand, seethes with ill will. It is the story of a bully who challenges all comers to fight him, then loses to a virtuous figure who is skilled in and represents the finer points of boxing.<sup>4</sup> In most cases, the bully is also a

<sup>1</sup>Vian (2008, p. 400) considers boxing so ubiquitous an element as to call it an “epic motif.”

<sup>2</sup>After Homer the funeral games are considered *un épisode obligé dans l'épopée grecque et romaine* (Thuillier 1996, p. 151).

<sup>3</sup>Statius' account of boxing in Book 6 of the *Thebaid* (Section 3.4.2) is the exception that proves the rule.

<sup>4</sup>Hagopian (1955, p. 57) sees in this type of story an underdog David vs. Goliath or Jack the Giant Killer motif. Indeed, the physical size of the bully is often accentuated in the epics, though his antagonist is never characterized as diminutive.

barbarian, i.e., one who does not represent the values of the Greco-Roman world. The bully is usually called Amycus and his antagonist is typically Polydeuces (Roman Pollux), one of the semi-divine twins known in Latin as the Dioscuri. While Type I funereal boxing is clearly ritual, Type II agonistic boxing partakes of a generally athletic attitude, including praise of the superior skill of the victor and protagonist (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d, pp. 126ff., 132ff.).

Hellenistic Greeks recognized that other cultures had their own boxing traditions, and they generally belittled them. The fourth-century BC orator and statesman Demosthenes, in *Philippic I*, 4.40, offered a scathing critique of the Athenian military by comparing it to a barbarian pugilist:

But you, Athenians, possessing unsurpassed resources—fleet, infantry, cavalry, revenues—have never to this very day employed them aright, and yet you carry on war with Philip exactly as a barbarian boxes [πυκτεύω]. The barbarian, when struck [πλήσσω], always clutches [ἔχω] the place; hit him on the other side and there go his hands. He neither knows nor cares how to parry [προβάλλω]<sup>5</sup> a blow or how to watch [βλέπω] his adversary [ἐναντίος] (Vince 1930).<sup>6</sup>

Demosthenes' simile serves not only as an indictment of how non-Greeks boxed, it also indicates what Greeks valued in a good boxing match. They appreciated solid defensive technique, including careful scrutiny of one's opponent.<sup>7</sup> These characteristics redound through all the Greek (and Roman) epic boxing vignettes (including Homer and the *Argonautica*, reviewed in Dioscurus and Dioscurus, 2022d) as emblematic of successful boxers.

However, the esteem was not universal. Sparta (betimes the legendary inventors of boxing) rejected the sport for its individualist nature: “In time, however, they [the Spartans] abandoned boxing and likewise the pankration, believing that it was disgraceful to compete in these events, in which it is possible, through just one person admitting defeat, for the whole of Sparta to be reproached for lack of courage” (Philostratus, *Gym.* 9).

Why are there so many expressions of athletic boxing in Greek epic poetry? The Greeks recognized a close connection between athletes and soldiers. The Greeks found a dim echo of war in athletics but they acknowledged the differences. According to one critic of Greek sport:

The ritual ordeal of the athlete reenacts the ordeals of the warrior, and, like heroic deeds, athletic activity compensates for the athlete's mortality as the athlete figuratively dies a ritual death in recurrent festivals. The origin of athletics is related both to initiation and to funeral games, and real or symbolic death and rebirth is common to both activities. Epinikian songs refer to those done ‘in compensation for’ (*epi*) the ordeal involved in winning the victory (Nagy 2021)

<sup>5</sup>The verb, here in the mediopassive voice, probably means ‘to cover or protect oneself’.

<sup>6</sup>ὑμεῖς δ', ὃ ἀνδρες Αθηναῖοι, πλείστη δύναμιν ἀπάντων ἔχοντες, τριήρεις, ὅπλίταις, ιππέας, χρημάτων πρόσοδον, τούτων μὲν μέγρι τῆς τήμερον ἡμέρας οὐδὲν πώποτ' εἰς δέον τι κέχρησθε, οὐδὲν δ' ἀπολείτετε, ὥσπερ οἱ βάρβαροι πυκτεύουσιν, οὕτω πολεμεῖν Φιλίππων. καὶ γὰρ ἐκείνων ὁ πληγεῖς ἀεὶ τῆς πληγῆς ἔχεται, κανέντερωσε πατάξῃ τις, ἐκεῖσ' εἰσιν αἱ χείρες: προβάλλεσθαι δ' ή βλέπειν ἐναντίον οὖτ' οἴδεν οὔτ' ἐθέλει (Butcher 1903).

<sup>7</sup>It is still common in early modern and modern boxing to spend a round “feeling out” an opponent cautiously when fighting a new adversary.

For the Greeks, then, there was glory in war and there was glory in sport.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.1 *Idyll 22*

Writing the *Idylls* in the third century BC, Theocritus gives us his account of the boxing match between Polydeuces and Amycus in Book 22. The narrative, written in hexameter, is “probably an imitation” of the Apollonine version of the same episode found in the *Argonautica* (Nelis 2001, p. 9fn. 41).<sup>9</sup> The resemblance between the two works is “reinforced by verbal similarities and coincidences of detail” (Gow 1942, p. ii). The same commentator reasons that the Theocritean “poem is the later of the two” and that the author “deliberately set [...] out to improve on A[pollonius],” though this is much debated (*ibid.*).

The second part of *Idyll 22*, roughly between lines 27 and 134, describes the boxing match between Polydeuces and Amycus.<sup>10</sup> Book 22 is itself a hymn to the Dioscuri—those “boxer bards” (ἀεθλητῆρες ἀοιδοί, line 24) and “helpers twain of men” (ἄμφω θυητοίσι βοηθόοι, line 23) according to Edmonds (1912)—with the first part devoted to Polydeuces.<sup>11</sup> The second half of the diptych pertains to Castor. In it the brothers abduct the rightful fiancées of two other men (their cousins, the Apharidæ) and Castor kills one of them gruesomely in an armed duel.<sup>12</sup>

“[R]uddy as the wine” (οἰνωπός, line 34),<sup>13</sup> Polydeuces wanders through a pleasant woodland (the *locus amoenus* of the poem) in search of fresh water for himself and his crew. He comes upon Amycus, the warden of a crystal spring, a man “both huge and terrible.” Amycus is described in terms that “assimilate him to the landscape”: “down from the top of his shoulders the muscles on his solid arms stood like round boulders which a winter-flowing river spun and polished with great eddies” (Chaldekas 2020, p. 20).<sup>14</sup> His ears (οὖς) were tough (σκληρός) and rendered shapeless (τεθλατμένος) by the fist (πυγμή), an early reference to perichondrial hematoma, an occasional subject of Greek boxing art (e.g., Figure 2). The round contour of his mighty chest is emphasized in line 46: στήθεα δ’ ἐσφαίρωτο πελώρια .... The flesh of his broad back appears to be constituted of iron (σιδήρεος), giving the impression that Amycus is a gigantic statue, a veritable colossus (κολοσσός).<sup>15</sup>

Theocritus calls the giant ὑπέροπλος ‘insolent’ (line 44)<sup>16</sup> and the ensuing conversation

<sup>8</sup> The bloodier-minded Romans seemed to never quite wrap their heads around this universalizing attitude (cf. Section 3.5).

<sup>9</sup> See Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022d, pp. 132ff.) for a full discussion of the boxing episode by Apollonius of Rhodes.

<sup>10</sup> Line numbers in this section come from Cholmeley (1901) unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>11</sup> ὑμέων Πολυδεύκεα τρώτων λείω (line 26).

<sup>12</sup> The problematic nature of Castor’s section of the poem, which lacks the literary finesse of Polydeuces’ and shows us the Dioscuri participating in a morally questionable adventure, has been pondered at some length (Gow 1942, Chaldekas 2020).

<sup>13</sup> The adjective likely refers to Polydeuces’ age, at the cusp of manhood, not quite ready to grow a beard (Sens 1997, p. 104).

<sup>14</sup> ἐν δὲ μύεις στερεοῖσι βραχίοσιν ἄκρον ὑπ’ ὅμον | ἔστασαν ἡύτε πέτροι ὀλοίτροχοι, οὖστε κυλίνδων | χειμάρρους ποταμὸς μεγάλαις περιέξετε δίναις (lines 48–50)

<sup>15</sup> The term κολοσσός most likely suggests a “statue of archaic or archaizing type” (Sens 1997, p. 115). Both Williams (1945b) and Sens (1997) claim that Theocritus refers to a particular statue. According to Williams (1945b), it is the famed Terme Boxer (Figure 26). Sens (1997, p. 115) argues that “Amycus is compared not merely to any statue, but to a specific archaic antecedent,” perhaps a statue of Zeus dedicated at Olympia by a member of the (Corinthian) Cypselid dynasty. The matter is by no means settled.

<sup>16</sup> Sens (1997, p. 113) contends that ὑπέροπλος has no “unambiguously moral implications” here, but “principally

(presented to the reader as a formal stichomythia, lines 54–74) brims with insulting language.<sup>17</sup> The exchange arguably has descendants in the highly publicized ‘trash talk’ that precedes modern boxing matches. In essence, Amycus “refuses to treat the Dioscuri hospitably” (Sens 1997, p. 95). But as one critic has observed, “To fight with the Tyndaridæ is no light matter” (Moulton 1973, p. 41). Polydeuces tries to bargain for access to potable water but instead of an exchange of silver, the louring Amycus challenges him to ‘lift up’ (*ἀείρω*) his hands to ‘oppose’ (*καθίστημι*) each other ‘man to man’ (*ἐναντίος ἀνδρὶ*) in a boxing match.<sup>18</sup>

The model “Hellenistic gentleman” (Sens 1997, p. 95), Polydeuces politely inquires if the combatants will also (*ἢ καὶ*) kick each other’s legs (lit. ‘strike legs with feet’), or if the contest will consist of *pygmachia* alone.<sup>19</sup> Amycus tersely clarifies that the fight will be ‘with the fist’ (*πνὺξ*) and that the utmost exertion (*διατείνω*) and cunning (*τέχνη*) will be required, consistent with the Greek understanding of pugilism in the late first millennium.<sup>20</sup> Before Amycus’ reply, at the end of line 66, we find a few words, *ὅμματά γ' ὁρθός*, from which one critic argues “no sense can be extracted” (Gow 1952, p. 392). Presumably spoken by Polydeuces (though attributed betimes to Amycus, e.g., by Edmonds (1912)), the line may suggest that one of the combatants proposes eye-gouging (Gow 1952, p. 392) but the corrupted line remains something of a *mauvais pas* (Thomas 1993, pp. 254–256). Those who find it unsettling that Polydeuces might propose ungentlemanly conduct in the ‘ring’ should remember that eye-gouging was an acceptable move in *pankration*, as Sens (1997, pp. 126–127) observes.

A step behind the reader, it would seem, Polydeuces then asks Amycus who his opponent is to be: for whom does he bind on (*συνερείδω*) the leather thongs?<sup>21</sup> In a bit of poorly understood levity or perhaps an obscure kenning, Amycus claims that the boxer (*πύκτης*) “may be called a woman.”<sup>22</sup> The statement may be intended to goad Polydeuces, suggesting he is too weak to fight a real man, though the selfsame statement appears to humiliate his rival, as well. Perhaps this is for comic effect.<sup>23</sup> We prefer Sens’ simpler interpretation of Amycus’ gibe: “Not being a sissy [like Polydeuces], he [the opponent, i.e., Amycus] will be called ‘The Boxer’” (Sens 1997, p. 128).<sup>24</sup> Polydeuces wonders aloud if the two will wrangle (*δηριάσουμαι*) for a prize (*ἄθλον*). Amycus proclaims that “the vanquished will be the victor’s slave.”<sup>25</sup> Polydeuces asks if this is not too much like a cockfight (*κυδοιμός*) but Amycus dis-

refers to Amycus’ size.” Hunter (1996, p. 62) notes that *ὑπέροπλος* may refer to “both moral and physical excess.” The portrayal of Amycus “is based on the monstrous Homeric shepherd Polyphemus,” also a son of Poseidon (ibid., p. 95).

<sup>17</sup>The “remarkable” stichomythia in *Idylls* 22 is “a complete surprise” (Hunter 1996, p. 58).

<sup>18</sup>“Up hands fight me man against man” *ένι χείρας ἀειρόν ἐναντίος ἀνδρὶ κατατάς* (line 65), trans. Edmonds (1912). The series of misunderstandings, enshrined in the stichomythia between Polydeuces and Amycus has been read as a clash between Greek cultural norms—specifically those related to the treatment of strangers<sup>19</sup>—and those of the barbarians (Chaldekas 2020).

<sup>19</sup>*πυγμάχος*, *ἢ καὶ ποσὶ σθενών σκέλος*; (line 66). See Thomas (1993, p. 254–255) for the interpretation that Polydeuces alludes to *pankration*.

<sup>20</sup>*πνὺξ διατεινάμενος σφετέρης μὴ φείδεο τέχνης* (line 68).

<sup>21</sup>Sens (1997, p. 128) argues that the expression with *συνερείδω* probably means “with whom I shall join my hands in combat,” though readings of the *συνερείδω* as ‘clench’ (of a fist) and ‘bind’ are also possible.

<sup>22</sup>*ἔγγυς ὁρᾶς*: οὐ γύννις ἔνω κεκλήσεθ' ὁ πύκτης (line 69). The term *γύννις* may mean ‘effeminate man’ and is used in that sense by Chaldekas (2020, p. 17): “He’s no girly man and he will be called ‘The Boxer.’” The translation with a definite article is intentional here and suggests Amycus’ jactance (Sens 1997, p. 129).

<sup>23</sup>The Bebrycian goon was perhaps widely seen as a comic figure, attested for example in a lost comedy by Epichar-mus and a fragmentary satyr play by Sophocles, both entitled *Amycus* (Sens 1997, p. 96).

<sup>24</sup>This obfuscation is in keeping with Amycus’ haughty refusal to reveal his identity.

<sup>25</sup>Gow (1942, p. 11). Line 71 reads *σὸς μὲν ἔγώ, σὺ δὲ ἔμός κειλήσεαι, αἵκε κρατήσω*. Sens (1997, p. 129) points out

misses his protest (or perhaps his *jeu d'esprit*), averring that this is the “only stake” (*ἀθλον*) on which they will fight.<sup>27</sup>

The blow of a conch summons Amycus’ supporters (lines 75–80).<sup>28</sup> Most eminent Castor (*ὑπείροχος ... Κάστωρ*), Polydeuces’ divine twin, gathers the Argonauts from the hull of their ship. The crowd assembles *ὑπὸ σκιερὰς πλατανίστους* ‘under the shade of the plane trees’, where the fight presumably takes place, as well.<sup>29</sup> The contenders harden or strengthen (*κρατύνω*) their hands with leatheren coils (*σπείρα ... βοείαις*).<sup>30</sup> These *σπεῖραι* are arguably different from the *himantes* which are mentioned in the subsequent line and may be related to the similarly-spelled *sphairai* described by Plato (Gow 1942, p. 13fn.). Given the clear differentiation between the two handwraps, we agree with Sens (1997, p. 135) that Theocritean *σπεῖραι* most likely refer to the “coils of heavy leather that after the fourth century boxers wore over their knuckles ... distinct from the more pliant thongs they used to reinforce their forearms.” These coils are portrayed, for example, on the hands of the Terme Boxer (Figure 27). The combatants then wind (*ἔλισσω*) the long *himantes* (*μαχρός ... ἴμας*) around their hands and ‘limbs’ (*γυνῶν*), most likely their arms.<sup>31</sup> Though the boxers’ comrades carry out this function in the Apollonine vignette, here the fighters clearly tie on their own thongs, a practice which “seems to have been normal in antiquity” (Sens 1997, p. 135). Gathering together *ἐς μέσσον* ‘in the midst’, the combatants breathe out murder against one another.<sup>32</sup>

The fighters first tussle for position to determine “which should have the sunshine [φάος *ἡλιόιο*, line 84] at his back.” Forthwith Polydeuces gets the advantage (*παρέρχομαι*, with connotations of outwitting his opponent by craft or deceit), such that the beams (*ἀκτίς*) “fall full” in Amycus’ face, a presagement of the facial beating he is about to receive (Edmonds 1912).<sup>33</sup> His *thymos* aroused (*ἐν θυμῷ κεχολωμένος*), Amycus dashes forward (*ἱημὶ πρόσω*), aiming straight (*τιτύσκομαι*)<sup>34</sup> with his hands at the mark before him. Hagopian (1955, p. 38)

that Polydeuces, referred to as the ‘champ’ (*ἀθλοφόρος*) on line 53, is “somewhat coy” in asking about the prize.

<sup>27</sup> οὐκ ἀλλῳ γε μαχεσσαιμεθ' ἐπ' ἀθλῳ (line 74). Amycus may propose the two will fight to the death (a more natural outcome for a cockfight), though he uses oblique language, viz., that the victor will ‘call’ (*καλέω*) the vanquished ‘mine’ (*ἔμοις*), hence Gow’s allusion to enslavement. Sens (1997, p. 130) muses “that the losing bird ... follows the victor as though his servant ... and was likely called a δοῦλος [‘slave’].” The author notes that “roosters were proverbially pugnacious as well as boastful” in antiquity (*ibid.*). We find in this passage more evidence for a latent connection between animal fighting and boxing as truly ancient human activities (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022a;b;c).

<sup>28</sup> Greek writers sometimes included the conch, re-purposed as a kind of trumpet, to suggest the primitive state of those who blew it, in this case, the uncouth Bebrycians ruled by an “uncivilized son of Poseidon” (Sens 1997, p. 133).

<sup>29</sup> Sens (1997, p. 132) notes the connection to the grove of plane trees where young Spartans would hold their own fights (*Paus.* 3.14.8), which perhaps included boxing. Sparta was the legendary homeland of the Dioscuri. A plane-tree cult associated with Helen, sister of the Dioscuri, is mentioned by Theocritus in *Idyll* 18 (Hunter 1996, p. 158).

<sup>30</sup> The verb *κρατύνω* unfortunately does not do much to clarify exactly what function the Greeks understood the *σπεῖρα* to serve. Did the coils ‘strengthen’ the hands in their ability to withstand or deliver punishment? Unfortunately, much debate as to the function and terminology of boxing hand gear in Greece has not settled the matter (Sens 1997, p. 135).

<sup>31</sup> *χείρας καὶ περὶ γυνὰ μαχροὺς εἴλιξαν ἴμαντας* (line 81). The verb *ἔλισσω* ‘wind round’ “would be slightly more natural” if it appeared here in the middle voice since the action affects the subjects, i.e., the boxers. In Homer, the active voice form of *ἔλισσω* is used only “of turning horses round a turning post” (Sens 1997, p. 136). Another commentator sees a clear difference between the *cæstus*/*σπεῖρα*, which fortify the hands, and the *himantes*, which are wrapped around the arms (Hagopian 1955, p. 37).

<sup>32</sup> *ἐς μέσσον σύναγον φόνον ἀλλήλοισι πνέοντες* (line 82). The phrase *ἐς μέσσον* is used elsewhere (Soph. *Trach.* 513–514) “of combatants approaching one another” (Sens 1997, p. 136).

<sup>33</sup> One commentator has argued that the sun is already setting, thus low in the West, when the bout begins, since the Argonauts had earlier prepared their beds and fires for the evening (line 33) (Sens 1997, p. 137).

<sup>34</sup> The Indo-European root for this term, \**dh<sup>1</sup>-eug<sup>b</sup>*, is realized in Old Armenian as *y-an-dugn* ‘bold, rash’. The

surmises that Amycus was enraged because he had the sun in his face.

Unfazed by this intempestivity, Polydeuces strikes (*τύπτω*) his adversary on the point of the chin (*ἀκρος ... γένειον*). This further incites (*δρίνω*) Amycus so that his fighting blood (*μαχᾶς*)<sup>35</sup> is stirred up (*ταράσσω*) even more.<sup>36</sup> Overwrought, Amycus stumbles,<sup>37</sup> perhaps tackling his opponent to the ground: ... πολὺς δ' ἐπέκειτο νενευκῶς | ἐξ γαῖαν ... (lines 90–91). The verb *νεῦω* ‘incline in any direction’ suggests “that Amycus keeps his head down as he launches his attack, an imprudent practice for any boxer, ancient or modern” (Sens 1997, p. 141).<sup>38</sup> The Bebrycians ‘shout in applause’ (*ἐπαυτέω*) suggesting that whatever Amycus did, it was effective, or at least entertaining. Feeding off the energy of the crowd, Polydeuces is emboldened (*θαρσύεσκον*) by the crowd’s cheers, though apparently in favor of his opponent. Some of the crowd fear that Polydeuces will fall (*ἐπιβρίθω*),<sup>39</sup> being overpowered (*δαμάζω*) by Amycus, whose resemblance to Tityus is noted by Theocritus at this turn.<sup>40</sup>

The boxing match takes place in a *χώρος* ... *στενός* (line 94). The term *χώρος* is glossed as ‘a definite space’ while *στενός* is glossed as ‘confined’. This, then, is the first clear literary reference to the confinement exerted on boxers when they fight. Thus, we submit that *χώρος στενός* ‘confined space’ in Theocritus is the earliest literary reference to a boxing ring.<sup>41</sup>

Polydeuces (here called *Διὸς νιὸς* ‘the son of Zeus’) steps in on his rival here and there (*ἐνθα καὶ ἔνθα παρίστημι*), ‘lacerating’ (*ἀμύσσω*, line 96)<sup>42</sup> him on either side (*ἀμοιβαδίς*) and ‘holding fast’ (*ἔχω*), perhaps suggesting a clinch. Amycus, the child of Poseidon (*παιδα Ποσειδάνωνος*) once splendid in his coxcomberly (*ὑπερφιάλον*),<sup>43</sup> found himself “drunken with his drubbing” (*πληγαῖς μεθύων*)<sup>44</sup> and expectorating (*πτύω*) crimson blood (*αίμα φοίνιος*).<sup>45</sup> The crowd exulted (*κελαδέω*) loudly over the wounds (*Ἑλκος*) appearing around his mouth and jaw (*περὶ στόμα τε γναθμούς τε*, line 100). The swelling (*οἰδέω*) of his face (*πρόσωπον*) was so great that it stretched his skin and narrowed (*ἀποστενόω*) his eyes.

Using the adjective *ἐτώσιος* ‘to no purpose, fruitless’ to describe Polydeuces’ hands, Theocritus makes reference to punches that are “intentionally unsuccessful and misleading, i.e., feints,” on line 102 (Sens 1997, p. 147). These ‘fruitless fists’ perform the action *προδείκνυμι*

expression *χεροὶ πτυσκόμενος* may be based on a “Homeric use of the verb with the dat[ive] of a weapon” such as a lance (*ἐγχέιη*) or a spear (*δόρυ*) instead of the hands (Sens 1997, p. 139).

<sup>35</sup>Literally, ‘wish to fight’ (verb).

<sup>36</sup>Sens (1997, p. 140) points out that “a wild and artless boxing style was considered characteristic of non-Greek pugilists.” The verb *ταράσσω* suggests such a style in this passage.

<sup>37</sup>In the charming diction of Edmonds (1912), “[It] did ... make him to betumble his fighting.”

<sup>38</sup>In our experience, boxers must be carefully trained to avoid looking at the ground, both when they ‘roll’ underneath punches (generally hooks) and when they rush their opponent. In the latter case, it is common for a beginner to expose the top of his head like a ram and barrel into his adversary’s chest. This detail in Theocritus’ vignette suggests to us that Amycus, an experienced boxer, was indeed transported in his wrath.

<sup>39</sup>The verb *ἐπιβρίθω* may also mean ‘press close around’ or ‘attack’ (Sens 1997, p. 142).

<sup>40</sup>A giant of the earth, Tityus attempted to rape Leto, the mother of Apollo (himself the divine patron of boxing, Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d), and was thereafter subjected to the same torture as Prometheus (Sens 1997, p. 144).

<sup>41</sup>The reader should cast his or her mind back to antecedents such as the crowd gathered round a fight, as at the funeral games of Patroclus.

<sup>42</sup>The use of the verb *ἀμύσσω* ‘lacerate’ strongly suggests that the fighters use the *bimantes oxeis*, as these “tear at Amycus’ face” (Sens 1997, p. 145).

<sup>43</sup>The boxing match between a son of Zeus and a son of Poseidon is suggestive of the larger conflict between sailors, special protégés of the Dioscuri, and the sea, the province of Amycus’ father.

<sup>44</sup>The term *μεθύων* is used elsewhere to suggest grogginess, as well as mental states associated with love and success (Sens 1997, pp. 145–146).

<sup>45</sup>The adjective *φοίνιος* is a Homeric *hapax*, used only to describe the blood of Iros in the Odyssean boxing match (Sens 1997, p. 146).

‘show by example’, which by Theocritus’ time may have been a technical pugilistic term for feinting (*ibid.*). On line 103 the narrator refers to Polydeuces as ‘lord’ or ‘master’ (*ἄναξ*). While regularly applied to Homeric heroes, the term is of special significance in this context since the Dioscuri were known by the cult title *Ἄνακ(τ)ε(ς)* in various localities (Sens 1997, p. 147). Correctly perceiving his opponent to be confused (*ἀμηχανάω*), Polydeuces “let drive at him to the bone” (Edmonds 1912). In the original Greek, he drops a fist from above, striking Amycus “in the middle of the forehead just above the bridge of the nose” (Sens 1997, p. 148).<sup>46</sup> The outcome of this blow seems to recall a Warner Brothers cartoon: Amycus falls flat, stretched out (*ὕπτιος ... ἐκτανύω*) in a bed of springing flowers (*ἐν φύλλοισι τεθηλόσιν*), perhaps with a halo of little birds twittering around his cracked skull.

But the disgruntled son of Poseidon is by no means knocked out—not yet, at least.<sup>47</sup> The boxers continue to wreak havoc (*δλέκω*) on each others’ bodies, pounding (*θείνω*) with their hardened (*στερεώ*) gauntlets. In lines 109–111, the reader is treated to a blow-by-blow commentary: while the king of the Bebrycians lands shots (*χεῖρας νωμάω*, line 109) to Polydeuces’ chest and neck,<sup>48</sup> the son of Zeus succeeds at head-hunting.<sup>49</sup> The description gives no indication that landing blows to the body was illegal (Poliakoff 1987a, pp. 84–85).

The blows (*πληγή*) to Amycus’ face are considered ‘unseemly’ or ‘disgraceful’ (*ἀεικής*, line 110). Hellenistic writers were in some cases amused by the facial swelling and disfigurement that occurred concomitant with boxing (see below). Artists of the period also found it a noteworthy and likely comical subject (cf. Figure 38 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)). It is possible that Theocritus hints at this perspective in his use of *ἀεικής* to describe the blows delivered to Amycus’ nose. He may also be suggesting that boxers should be ashamed of what they do to one another in the ring; however Gow (1952) argues that in using *ἀεικής* the poet “probably means ‘disfiguring’ rather than ‘disgraceful’ and attaches to the blow the epithet which belongs more strictly to the wound,” not the activity that causes it. Sens (1997, p. 151) notes that the adjective is used in the *Iliad* to describe how Achilles disfigures Hector’s body “without ... any moral condemnation of Achilles.” Both interpretations were known in arethede via debates over the “physical corruption of Hector’s corpse” (*ibid.*). Another interpretation presents itself: Amycus was shamefully beaten not due to some moral failure of Polydeuces but as a result of Amycus’ own disgraceful lack of skill in the boxing ‘ring’. This suggests a moral stance towards boxing in which the observer regards the loser as getting what he deserves. To us, this seems altogether consistent with the ancient (and modern) attitude towards the sport.<sup>50</sup>

The poet next makes a curious observation: the physical size of one of the boxers (presumably Amycus) begins to diminish due to sweating.<sup>51</sup> Contrarily, as Polydeuces’ exertions increased, “so waxed his limbs ever more full and round and his color ever better” (Edmonds

<sup>46</sup> μέσσης ρινὸς ὑπερθε κατ’ ὀφρύος ἥλασε πυγμῆ (line 104).

<sup>47</sup> Hagopian (1955, pp. 37–38, 51–52) separates the action of the boxing match into two ‘rounds’ [Ger. *Ganger*] punctuated by the knockdown of Amycus.

<sup>48</sup> At least one commentator seems to suggest that these blows are below the belt (Ahrens 1887), but Sens (1997, p. 150) is skeptical given their ineffective nature.

<sup>49</sup> The expression used here is *συμφύω πρόσωπον* ‘knead together the face’ as if it were a lump of bread dough.

<sup>50</sup> On line 131, Amycus is called ‘reckless’ *ἄταθαλος*, an adjective that Sens (1997, p. 164) elaborates as denoting “behavior for which men not only suffer but deserve to suffer.”

<sup>51</sup> In the Greek, his ‘flesh sank to sweat’ (*σάρκες ... ιδρῶτι συνιζάνον*). The verb is common in Hellenistic medical writing and proceeds from the Greek belief that perspiration caused a loss of strength since “liquid ... gave the flesh its substance” (Sens 1997, p. 152).

1912).<sup>52</sup> In the ring, a boxer naturally looks for any sign of weakness in his opponent. Theocritus' peculiar commentary here corresponds to our own experience as veterans of the ring. The physical appearance of an adversary seems to change—at least in the eye of his sparring partner—as he experiences success or failure during the course of a bout. What Polydeuces regarded as the wilting of Amycus, regardless of its etiology, likely cheered the son of Zeus more than even the clamor of the crowd, as it assured him of victory. The physical transformation of godlike Polydeuces, which no doubt disheartened Amycus, should be the aspiration of all students of the sweet science. We become different people in the ring; Theocritus (or those poets he emulated) was aware of the subjective response a fighter experiences as he witnesses the physical changes to his opponent during a bout.

The poet interrupts the narrative (lines 115–117) with an appeal to the Muse—a standard Hellenistic conceit—imploring her to describe how Polydeuces finally ‘took down’ (καθαιρέω) the ‘glutton’ (ἀδηφάγος) Amycus.<sup>53</sup> As the fight reaches its conclusion, Amycus leans forward (κλίνω), keeping his guard up (προβολή, line 120), and seizes (λαμβάνω) Polydeuces’ left hand with his own left.<sup>54</sup> This manoeuvre, most likely an illegal tactic (Hagopian 1955, p. 38), would result in the fighters’ left arms crossing in front of their bodies or perhaps their faces. Availing himself of the pell-mell, Amycus throws a right hand “from his right flank” (δεξιτερῆς ... λαγόνος). This seems like a description of a shovel hook or uppercut<sup>55</sup> thrown from the hip except for the rather confusing use of πλατύς γυῖον which literally means ‘flat fist’ or ‘flat forearm’ (line 121).<sup>56</sup> If this is an open-handed offensive gesture, then it may force us to reconsider the ubiquitous generalization that the open hand in Greek depictions of boxing is a defensive tactic.<sup>57</sup> One commentator regards the term πλατύς γυῖον as referring to “the whole forearm girt with the cæstus” and claims that “[t]he Greeks used this swinging blow much more than the modern prize-fighter” (Cholmeley 1901). At the same time, Polydeuces slips (ὑπεξαναδύουμαι)<sup>58</sup> his head to the side and throws his own sturdy (στιβαρός) hand (presumably his right). He attacks Amycus with a blow delivered squarely from his shoulder (ἐπεμπίπτω ὄμος),<sup>59</sup> striking him under the left temple (σκαιός κρόταφος). This opens up a

<sup>52</sup>The comparative adjective used to describe Polydeuce’s improved limbs, πασσονικά ‘stouter’, also appears throughout the *Odyssey* on occasions when Athena miraculously enhances the hero’s appearance (Sens 1997, p.152). The term that Edmonds translates as ‘color’ is properly ‘skin’ χροίᾳ. A variant of this word, χρόα, surfaces in Epeius’ taunt issued to his potential rivals before the Iliadic boxing match when he threatens to “rend their flesh” (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d, pp. 120–121).

<sup>53</sup>Sens (1997, p. 154) notes that “boxers and other athletes had proverbially large appetites” in Greek literature. It may be attractive to consider Amycus a “glutton for punishment,” eating the many punches that Polydeuces served up.

<sup>54</sup>The adjective προβολή, relating to anything held up as a screen or bulwark, is an important bit of fight game terminology, suggesting just how advanced the Greeks had become at using language to describe boxing techniques by Theocritus’ era. Sens (1997, p. 158) notes that the term is used in the “sense of weapons in military context” but also of boxers holding up their fists.

<sup>55</sup>Commentators have elaborated on the Theocritean reversal of Apollonius here. In the *Argonautica*, Amycus drops a punch from above, missing his opponent. In the *Idyll*, the corresponding punch from Amycus is an errant uppercut (Sens 1997, p. 158).

<sup>56</sup>The verb is ἐγγύω, which might be translated as “Polydeuces answered” his opponent with a punch or, even more colorfully, “pledged” the blow “for security”.

<sup>57</sup>An alternative is presented by Poliakoff (1983, pp. 112–113), who argues that πλάτος refers to ‘broadness’ and is “a very common epithet for the bodily parts of participants in combative events,” including the neck and feet. The name ‘Plato’ itself may be implicated. Greek and Etruscan depictions of boxers occasionally limn the open hand with inordinately long fingers, e.g., in the Tomba della Scimmia (Figure 32 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)).

<sup>58</sup>Elsewhere (*Iliad* 13.351–352), the verb means ‘rise up out of’, but that does not fit the context here.

<sup>59</sup>Here ‘shoulder’ appears in the dative. It may be rendered as “fell upon him with his shoulder” (Sens

‘gaping’ (*χάσκω*, line 125) wound from which the blood quickly pours (*χέω*). The injury is consistent with the use of the sharp thongs—the Theocritean *σπείρα*—and is reminiscent of the verb *ἀμύσσω* ‘lacerate’ employed to describe the action earlier in the narrative (line 96).

His left hand now freed, Polydeuces follows up with a jab, i.e., a punch from the left (*λαιῆ ... κόπτω*)<sup>60</sup>, to his adversary’s mouth, rattling (*ἀραβέω*) his teeth.<sup>61</sup> Then he lets loose with his fists in a torrent of punches. The noun *πίτυλος* characterizes the barrage; in another context it refers to the sweep of oars (Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris* 1050) and may have resonance here with the Dioscuri’s role as protectors of sailors. The adjective *όξυς* ‘sharp’ is used here in the dative, presumably to clarify that Amycus’ faces is not only being struck, it is being slashed to ribbons. Indeed, the onslaught ‘spoils’ (*δηλέοματ*) his countenance, or in Edmonds’ parlance, the king was mauled “till his visage was all one mash” (Edmonds 1912). At last the brute falls (*κείμαι*), dazed (*ἀλλοφρονέω*, lit. ‘giving no heed.’)<sup>62</sup> Amycus then raises (*ἀνεσχέθομεν*) his hands to call off the fight (*νείκος ἀπανδάω*, line 129). The verb ‘raise’ is a variant form of *ἀνέχω* familiar from Homer as the term used for boxers when they begin their battles. Here, Theocritus cleverly provides a coda to the fight with this otherwise proemial signal.<sup>63</sup> All this did Amycus because the fearsome Polydeuces had brought him near the gates of death: ... ἐπεὶ θανάτου σχεδὸν ἦν (line 130).

The resolution of the boxing match is perhaps the most salient reason one commentator has called the Theocritean episode “light” (Sens 1994, p. 126). Unlike the Apollonine version of the Bout in Bebrycia, in this one Amycus does not die. Instead, Polydeuces merely compels his adversary to swear an oath to be more hospitable to strangers, giving the vignette the apologetic feel of a Saturday morning cartoon.<sup>64</sup> The ending may not be entirely original. A comparison has been drawn with the “sarcastic remark” Odysseus makes to Iros after knocking him silly in the *Odyssey* (Sens 1994, p. 124). *Odyssey* 18.106 includes Odysseus’ admonition that the gasconading Iros cease to lord it over strangers. Amycus, spared from death by Polydeuces, swears to cease doing annoyance to strangers (line 134). It has been noted that Theocritus’ Amycus is “something of a comic buffoon” akin to the Odyssean Iros (Sens 1994, p. 126). Indeed, the villainous king takes on a much more menacing aspect in other versions of the story, particularly the one written by the Flavian poet Valerius Flaccus (see below).

Theocritus’ depiction of boxing is notable for the poet’s concentration on the left and right sides of the body. In the *Idyll*, punches and their landing sites are frequently described in these terms, providing further evidence that by Theocritus’ time boxing had evolved a

<sup>1997, p. 160). The related verb ἐμπίπτω can have the special meaning “fall upon an opponent” in the context of combat sports (Poliakoff 1983, pp. 107–108).</sup>

<sup>60</sup>To call the punch a jab here assumes that Polydeuces is an orthodox boxer. There is still no unique verb for ‘jab’ in Theocritus’ time.

<sup>61</sup>There is some disagreement as to whether the sound of the teeth is caused by the fact that they are loosened by previous punches or if this particular punch causes Amycus’ teeth to gnash (Sens 1997, p. 161).

<sup>62</sup>ἀλλοφρονέω also characterizes Euryalus when he is carried away at the end of the Iliadic boxing match.

<sup>63</sup>Amycus’ gesture of submission should not be confused with the single raised finger evident among boxers, wrestlers, and pankratists of Greek vase-painting. In this instance, Theocritus goes to some trouble to clarify that both hands (*ἀμφοτέρας χειρας*) are raised at once (*ἀμα*, line 130). Sens (1997, p. 163) suggest that the poet is recalling the gesture made by the moribund Diomedes in *Iliad* 4.523, among others, “offering supplication or appealing for aid.”

<sup>64</sup>Though unmentioned by Theocritus, in other sources it appears that Amycus was bound to a tree or rock as a preliminary to his oath-swearing (Gow 1942, pp. 12–13fn. 2). This is depicted on the Ficoroni Cista (Figure 40 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)) and on a red-figure Lucanian hydria (425–400 BC) held in the Cabinet des Médailles in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (No. DE RIDDER-442) (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Amycus punished after his defeat at the hands of Polydeuces. Detail of red-figure vase by the Amycus Painter, c. 420–400 BC. Located in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (No. DE RIDDER.442).

highly technical praxis. The advantages and disadvantages of throwing lefts and rights, hooks and straights under a variety of circumstances were understood even by a general audience; it is almost certain that boxers were taught these skills explicitly. Nor were the more archaic, obumbrative hammer blows yet forgotten. Theocritus does not benefit from a fully developed boxing orismology: specialized vocabulary still did not exist for the punches themselves, though the poet describes subtleties like feinting, slipping, and holding up one's guard in a sophisticated style. Theocritus entertains his audience with an account remarkable for its athletic realism despite some of its more cartoonish embellishments.

AENEID

## 2.2 The Pauline Epistles

Combat sport is mentioned in some of the earliest writings included in the New Testament, viz., the Apostle Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, his second epistle to Timothy, and his epistle to the saints at Ephesus. There is considerable doubt that the epistle to the Ephesians was written by Paul himself, and may have been composed up to 25 years after his death (as late as 90 AD). I Corinthians was almost certainly written by Paul around 54 AD. The case for the authorship of II Timothy is somewhat dubious; it may have been written by an unknown follower of Jesus as late as 140 AD. For our purposes, the authorship is not so important as the date of the New Testament's references to boxing. These were put down sometime between the middle of the first and the middle of the second century AD. In the epistles, Hellenistic

boxing is regarded from the perspective of early (Pauline) Christianity.

In I Corinthians 9:26, Paul contrasts boxing (*πυκτεύω*) with shadowboxing or ‘flaying the air’ (*ἀέρα δέρω*). One who follows Jesus will engage in the former, not the latter in his fight with evil.<sup>65</sup> Paul’s explicit allusion to boxing was doubtless intended to impress his audience with the realism of his fight with the natural man. It was not for show and the blows were real. In the next verse (27), Paul uses the highly specific verb *ὑπωπιάζω* ‘strike under the eye’ to indicate how a follower of Jesus will beat back his own carnal nature.<sup>66</sup> While Paul could have used a general term for fighting, he explicitly chose boxing in this passage, presumably because the saints at Corinth understood the conventions of Hellenistic pugilism. Paul probably counted on their familiarity with the common epic formula of wasting one’s punches on the air (e.g., *Aeneid* 5:446).<sup>67</sup>

In II Timothy 4:7, the author writes of fighting “the good fight”. The term for the ‘fight’ is *ἀγῶνα* and the verb of ‘fighting’ is the related term *ἡγώνισμαι*. The KJV phrase “we wrestle not against flesh and blood” (Ephesians 6:12) invokes the term *πάλη* ‘wrestling’.

### 2.3 *Orations 28, 29*

Dio Chrysostom memorializes in his twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth orations the history of Melancomas (*Μελανκόμας*) motivated by an incidental encounter with Iatrocles his onetime opponent. Melancomas was notable as a defensive boxer, able to maintain his hands up as a guard for long periods of time, up to two days. Ultimately he leveraged this skill to garner victory in the 207th Olympiad (A.D. 49). The first descriptive passage of note concerning boxing spans sections 7 and 8:

At any rate, although boxing was his specialty, he remained as free from marks as any of the runners; and he had trained so rigorously and went so far beyond others in toilsome exercising that he was able to remain for two whole days in succession with his hands up, and nobody could catch him letting them down or taking a rest, as athletes usually do. Then he used to force his opponents to give up, not only before he himself had received a blow but even before he had landed one on them. For he did not consider it courage to strike his opponent or to receive an injury himself, but thought this indicated lack of stamina and a desire to have done with the contest. ¶But to last out the full time without either being done up by the weight of his arms, or becoming out of breath, or being distressed by the heat — that, he thought, was a splendid achievement.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> γὰρ τοίνυν οὕτως τρέχω ὡς οὐκ ἀδήλως, οὕτως πυκτεύω ὡς οὐκ ἀέρα δέρων “I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air” (KJV).

<sup>66</sup> The same verb is used in Luke 18:5, a parable in which a judge relents to the remonstrations of a widow lest she ‘harass’ *ὑπωπιάζω* him.

<sup>67</sup> *Entellus vires in ventum effudit ...*

<sup>68</sup> πυγμὴν γοῦν ἀγωνιζόμενος οὕτως ὑγιῆς ἥν ὀσπερ τῶν δρομέων τις, οὕτω δὲ σφόδρα γεγύμναστο καὶ τοσοῦτο περιήν τοῖς πόνοις, ὅστε δυνατός ἦν καὶ δύο ἡμέρας ἔξῆς μένει ἀνατετακὼς τὰς χειρας, καὶ οὐκ ἄν εἰδεν οὐδεὶς ὑφέντα αὐτὸν ἦν ἀναπαυσάμενον, ὀσπερ εἰώθασιν. πρότερον δὲ ἡνάγκαζε τοὺς ἀνταγωνιστὰς ἀπειπεῖν, οὐ μόνον πρὶν αὐτὸς πληγῆναι, ἀλλὰ καὶ πρὶν πλήξαι ἐκείνους: οὐ γάρ τὸ παιίνειν καὶ τιτρώσκεσθαι ἀνδρείαν ἐνόμιζεν, ἀλλὰ τοῦτο μὲν εἶναι μῆδι δυναμένων πονεῖν καὶ ἀπηλλάχθαι βουλομένων: τὸ δὲ ἀνέχεσθαι τοῦ χρόνου καὶ μῆτε τοῦ βάρους τῶν χειρῶν ἡττᾶσθαι μῆτε τοῦ πνεύματος ἐνδεᾶ γίγνεσθαι μῆτε τῷ καύματι ἀχθεσθαι, τὸ δὲ εἶναι γενναῖον.

Firmly within the Greek athletic tradition, Dio focuses on the glory of Melancomas' technical accomplishment. Being at leisure to strike an exhausted opponent rather than play for his yielding, Melancomas (in Dio's conception) refused in favor of the principle of maintaining his defensive stance. "He held that it was the truest victory when he forced his opponent, although uninjured, to give up; for then the man was overcome, not by his injury, but by himself." Dio sees in this the mark of arete, personal excellence.

Melancomas' boxing appears to be highly technical, relying on an ability to block with his arms rather than counterstrike his opponent. He appears to have regarded this form of winning as a sort of private game. The phrase "with his hands up" μένειν ἀνατετακώς τὰς χεῖρας denotes an abiding discipline of the hands in order, resisting their weight. The duration of two days in boxing would appear to refer to multiple bouts against opponents, likely throughout an entire athletic competition. The opponents were forced "to give up" ἀπειπεῖν, to exhaust themselves against his prodigious display.

The other technical passage in Dio Chrysostom, from 29:11–12, elaborates on his expertise:

Furthermore, a person might have been amazed at this — that he won all his victories without being hit himself or hitting his opponent, so far superior was he in strength and in his power of endurance.<sup>69</sup> For often he would fight throughout the whole day, in the hottest season of the year, and although he could have more quickly won the contest by striking a blow, he refused to do it, thinking that it was possible at times for the least competent boxer to overcome by a blow the very best man, if the chance for making it were offered; but he held that it was the truest victory when he forced his opponent, although uninjured, to give up; for then the man was overcome, not by his injury, but by himself; and that for an adversary to give up because of the condition of his whole body and not simply of the part of his body that was struck, meant brilliant work on the part of the victor; whereas the man who rushed in to win as quickly as possible by striking and clinching was himself overcome by the heat and by the prolonged effort.<sup>70</sup>

"To hit" here is *παίω* and derivatives, "to strike, smite" or "to dash together". Indeed, Dio Chrysostom lavishes praise on Melancomas' boxing but expresses little of *how* Melancomas operationally realized his absolute mastery. Dio rather prefers to use Melancomas as the occasion for a discussion of athletic beauty and the favor of the gods in taking the young before they are marred by time.<sup>70</sup> The celebration of athleticism following is among the best philosophical expositions of athletic boxing that has yet been written.

Dio Chrysostom strongly distinguishes athletic sport boxing from a soldier's combat. Dio argues for two ways in which boxing ranks as superior:

<sup>69</sup> οὐδὲ καὶ τόδε ἂν τις αὐτοῦ κατεπλάγη, τὸ μῆτε παιόμενον αὐτὸν μῆτε παίοντα νικᾶν: τοσοῦτο τῇ ρώμῃ περιήν καὶ τῷ δύνασθαι πονεῖν. πολλάκις γάρ δι' ὅλης τῆς ἡμέρας ἡγωνίσατο ἐν τῇ σφοδροτάτῃ ωρᾳ τοῦ ἔτους, καὶ δυνάμενος θάττον ἀν περγενέσθαι πάιων οὐδὲ βούλετο, νομίζων τὸ μὲν πλῆγῃ νικῆσαι καὶ τοῦ φαυλοτάτου ι ἔσθ' ὅτε εἰναι τὸν βέλτιστον, εἴ τίχοι: τὴν δὲ ἀληθεστάτην νίκην, ὅταν ἄτρωτον ἀναγκάσῃ τὸν ἀντίπαλον ἀπειπεῖν: οὐ γάρ τοῦ τραύματος, ἀλλ' ἑαυτοῦ ἡττῆσθαι: καὶ τὸ δλῶ τινὰ τῷ σώματι. ἀπειπεῖν, ἀλλὰ μὴ τῷ πληγέντι μέρει, λαμπρόν. τὸν δὲ € ἀπειγύμενον ὡς οίών τε τάχιστα μικῆσαι καὶ παίοντα καὶ συμπλεκόμενον αὐτὸν ἡττῆσθαι τοῦ καύματος καὶ τοῦ χρόνου.

<sup>70</sup>This is congruent with the mood of classicist A. E. Housman's ode "To an Athlete Dying Young".

1. The soldier conquers an enemy once for all, while the athlete must maintain his superiority. “In war the man who once conquers slays his antagonist, so as not to have the same opponent the second time; whereas in athletics the victory is just for that one day, and afterwards the victor has for his opponents, not only the men he has beaten, but anyone else who cares to challenge.”
2. The soldier’s use of technology obscures personal excellence, while the athlete epitomizes it. “In athletics the better man proves superior to the inferior man, since he must conquer with nothing else but his courage and physical strength; while in war the might of steel, which is much superior to mere human flesh, does not allow the excellency of men’s bodies to be tested and often takes the side of the inferior man.”

Self-control ἐγκρατείας is set apart for particular praise, and Melancomas’ training and performance merit his adoption as the proximate symbol of ἐγκρατείας. Boxing is portrayed as an exercise of aesthetics as well as mastery, and chance (favor of the gods) enters in as well.<sup>71</sup>

#### 2.4 *Imagines 2*

According to Philostratus the Elder<sup>72</sup> (*Imagines* 2.19), writing in the second or third century AD, Apollo once took vengeance on a wicked ruler in a boxing match. The conceit, as with the other sections of the ekphrastic *Imagines*, is that Philostratus describes a painting to a young companion. He indicates that the scene is near the Boeotian stream Cephisus, οὐ τῶν ἀμούσων “not unknown to the Muses.”<sup>73</sup> Phorbas, the tallest and most savage of the Phlegyans,<sup>74</sup> was also their king. He took control of the road<sup>75</sup> to Delphi, preventing veneration of the oracular god at one of his holiest shrines. Phorbas routinely abducted travelers on the road and competed with the strongest of them in wrestling and *pankration*. He unheaded the vanquished and hung his grisly trophies from a great oak, where they swung from the boughs in various states of decomposition.<sup>76</sup>

Apollo appears on the scene in the form of a youthful boxer with his hair “fastened-up [ἀναλαμβάνω] so that he may box with girt-up [εὗξωνος] head,” perhaps in the manner we observe among later Roman boxers, viz., the *cirrus*. “Rays of light rise from about his brow and cheek.” No fancy footwork could get the sun out of Phorbas’ eyes and into those of his opponent. He emits a “smile mingled with wrath” that a modern boxer could recognize in the ominous glare of his adversary.<sup>77</sup> Apollo throws (βολή) his eye keenly (εὐσκοπος) on his opponent and raises both his hands together (συνεξαίρω). The prefix συν- is critical here, indicating a gesture with not one hand raised, but both. The *himantes* bound (ἐνάπτω) on his

<sup>71</sup>See Poliakoff (1987b) and discussion in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023) on whether the story of Melancomas is fictional or fictionalized.

<sup>72</sup>Philostratus of Lemnos, nephew of Philostratus *simpliciter*, the author of the *Gymnasticus*.

<sup>73</sup>Translations in this section come from Fairbanks (1931) unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>74</sup>The Phlegyans were considered autochthons of Boeotia, in central Greece. Noted for their hostility to surrounding tribes, they once plundered Apollo’s temple at Delphi (Franchi 2013, p. 453). Philostratus the Elder calls them βάρβαροι πόλεις οὐπω δντες “barbarian people who do not yet live in cities.”

<sup>75</sup>This sounds like a job for Apollo Agieus!

<sup>76</sup>Writing on the general mistreatment of corpses in ancient literature and modern media, McClellan (2019, p. 4) notes, “Spectacularized violence of this sort is intended to invoke audience gaze.”

<sup>77</sup>The passage reads: μεδίλαμα θυμῷ ἔνγκεκραμένον ἡ παρειὰ πέμπει. An alternative translation might be, “He smiles with a cheek trembling with restrained *thymos*”.

hands are “beautiful” (*ἡδύς*)—a far cry from those that are dripping with blood in the much later *Dionysiaca* or caked with the brains of former opponents in the *Aeneid*. In the words of the poet, his gauntlets made so pleasant a picture, his hands may as well have been wreathed in garlands (*στέφανος*). Boxing (a reduplicative form of *πυκτεύω*), the god throws in (*ἐμβάλλω*) his right hand (*δεξιά*) and laying him low (*καταλύω*). The Phlegyan king is stretched out (*κείμαι*) on the ground with a wound (*τραῦμα*) on the temple (*κρόταφος*), “blood gushes forth [*ἐκδίδωμι*] ... as a fountain.” With that, the boxing match is over. Philostratus gives his audience little of the drama that characterizes epic treatments of the subject.

The story of Phorbas and Apollo has some similarities to the tale of Amycus and Polydeuces, a popular Hellenistic theme.<sup>78</sup> In both, a ruler blocks access to some resource: for Amycus, it is freshwater, while for Phorbas it is the road to Apollo’s oracle. The bully challenges all comers to fight him in order to obtain their goal. The facinorous<sup>79</sup> king gets his comeuppance when someone *au fait* in boxing finally takes a swing at him. The two myths may be imitations of one another or are perhaps based on a deeply internalized story connected to a real event. A ruler who challenges his subjects in single combat is a trope as old as Gilgamesh. As in Gilgamesh, the wicked king meets his match in a supernatural (if not divine) being sent to topple him. In the Greek versions the king is often killed, whereas Gilgamesh lives to tell the tale and make peace with his own mortality. It is worth noting that in the various examples of the Amycus story (including Philostratus’ version *mutato nomine*) the unworthy king challenges others with his fists, not some kind of blade—a weapon presumably available to even the least consequential of Bronze Age gangsters. Chiromancy seems to have had a deep and abiding significance for ancient cultures of the Mediterranean. These are tales about men settling differences among men, in the most time-honored manner possible: with bare (or barely covered) fists.

## 2.5 Posthomerica 4

Quintus Smyrnaeus’ *Posthomerica* accounts for events after the *Iliad* and before the *Odyssey*, including the fall of Troy.<sup>80</sup> The poem is regarded skeptically by many modern critics based on its style, but its preservation between the two Homeric poems throughout the Middle Ages suggests “it was considered worthy” of this honor by audiences across many generations (Maciver 2012, p. 9). We are interested, of course, in what Quintus, who may have written as late as the 4th century AD and was probably a Christian,<sup>81</sup> had to say about boxing. His boxing episode is closest in form to the one presented in the *Iliad*, a relationship which is generally true of all the *Posthomerica*:

[F]rom the very start of [Quintus’] epic, the reader is made very aware of the inextricable conjunction of the *Posthomerica* with the *Iliad*. This fact, together with the overwhelmingly Homeric nature of the poem’s language and style, adds to the perceptive reader’s impression that the aim of the poem is to be

<sup>78</sup>Scandinavian folktales involving trolls guarding bridges may have the same Indo-European origin (Hartmann 1936).

<sup>79</sup>Philostratus describes Phorbas as “savage” (*ώμος*) and “swinelike” (*συάδης*), highlighting the dichotomy between civilized Greek and brutish barbarian that typifies the Amycus narratives, as well.

<sup>80</sup>Line numbers and translations of passages in this section come from Way (1913) unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>81</sup>Quintus was the father of a Christian priest named Dorotheus who was executed by Diocletian (James and Lee 2000).



Figure 2: Terracotta figure of a boxer wearing the Roman *cæstus* (second or first century BC, provenance unknown). The fighter's right ear is cauliflowered. National Archæological Museum of Athens, No. 5764.

‘still the *Iliad*'. This illusion—the reader knows this poem is not the *Iliad*, and that this poet is not Homer, but a much later writer of a different cultural and literary background— influences reading of the whole of the *Posthomerica*. A studied attempt on the part of the poet to make the poem as ‘Homeric’ as possible makes any differences in the epic technique in relation to the Homeric epics all the more noticeable and worthy of discussion (Maciver 2012, p. 33).

With this cue in mind, we pay special attention to what is *not* Homeric about the boxing match presented in Quintus' Book 4, wherein are described the funeral games of Achilles.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, there are many innovations not attested in the Iliadic or Odyssean boxing matches. These include:

- In the proem to the fight, an older boxer receives a (lavish) prize uncontested.
- Blood is mentioned during the fight, not just at the end; it streaks the boxers' faces and pours forth from their eyes.
- The fight is stopped prematurely by the boxers' comrades (as in the *Aeneid*).
- Both fighters receive the same type of prize (a silver krater).
- Sponges are used to bathe the fighter's brows.
- The fighters are compelled to kiss each other and mend their friendship after the combat is terminated.
- Attention is paid to how the boxers' wounds are treated, including methods of squeezing, sewing, and applying medicine.

In Book 4, Quintus offers his readers a description of the funeral games not of Patroclus, but of his friend Achilles. After a wrestling match has taken place, an older commander named Idomeneus<sup>83</sup> rises to engage in *pygmaichia* (line 284). Idomeneus' *thymos*, the poet says, has already been perfected in many prizefights (ἐπεί οἱ θυμὸς ἱδρίς πέλε παντὸς ἀέθλου, line 285). True to the Homeric model, a dramatic silence takes hold and “none come forth to meet him” (*κατέναντα κιώ*, line 286). Given the lack of a challenger, Idomeneus receives from Thetis, Achilles' divine mother, the grand prize:<sup>84</sup> a chariot and horses (Patroclus' own), which he sends to the ships by means of his servants while he remains in the glorious boxing ‘ring’ (*κλυτῷ ἐν ἀγῶνι*, line 292).<sup>85</sup>

When Phœnix, Achilles' erstwhile tutor, steps up to recruit some fighters (thus fulfilling Achilles' Iliadic role), he indicates that the fighting will “gladden great Pelaides' soul,” lit. ‘warm’ (*ἰαίνω*) the *thymos* of the departed hero. He invokes hands leveled at the opponent like weapons, skilled in ‘straight’ (*ἴθύνω*)<sup>86</sup> boxing: *χεῖρας ἐπ' ἀλλήλοισι δαήμονας* *ἰθύνοντες* | *πυγμαχῆς* ... (lines 298–299). While Idomeneus was given the boxing prize (*ἀθλον*, line 294) uncontested—a bloodless (*ἀναιμωτί*) victory (*τίοντες*)—<sup>87</sup> the younger men will have to

<sup>82</sup> The *Posthomerica* is notable for including an epic account of *pankration*, though the prize goes uncontested to Ajax Major.

<sup>83</sup> A Cretan king, Idomeneus was known for promising to Poseidon the first living thing he laid eyes on when returning to his home country. This oath forced Idomeneus to sacrifice his own son.

<sup>84</sup> The funeral games “serve to divide Achilles' riches among those worthy of them” (Scheijnen 2018).

<sup>85</sup> *ἄγων* is used for the site of the boxing match, as in the Iliadic episode (23.685).

<sup>86</sup> Homer (*Odyssey* 22.8) uses the verb to characterize arrows shot ‘straight’ at their target, reminiscent of our earlier claim that archery and boxing (two domains of Apollo) were not unrelated in the minds of the ancient poets, especially if the fists are regarded as missiles launched at the adversary (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d).

<sup>87</sup> The participle here used to suggest victory in Way's (1913) translation comes from the form *τίω* ‘to pay honor’.

fight each other for glory. Phoenix urges them on though they are “loth to essay the contest [ἀθλος],” bidding them take part in the ‘exalted’ (ἐπήρατος) bruising (ἀλέω), the skill (δαήμων) that ‘delights’ (τερπωλή)<sup>88</sup> young men (νέος, line 304). Boxing, the poet tells us, forges a link between ‘glory’ (κύδος) and ‘toil’ (κάματος, line 305).

Phoenix laments his own advancing age (cf. Nestor in the *Iliad*) and reminisces about fighting Polydeuces himself in a long-ago boxing match held at the funeral games of Pelias.<sup>89</sup> Lines 309–310 read: ἀμφήριστος ἐγώ Πολυδεύκει δίω | πυγμαχίη γενόμην ... ‘When I came to contend evenly-matched with Polydeuces in boxing’. The adjective ἀμφήριστος ‘evenly-matched’ is particularly eyebrow-raising: Not only was Polydeuces a son of Zeus, his skill in boxing had been acclaimed in the ancient world for generations. To ensure that the audience gets the point, the indomitable Phoenix then recounts how he got the better of Ancæus<sup>90</sup> in παλαισμούνη ‘the wrestler’s art’, when the latter “shrank from me, and dared not strive with me that day.” Here, hand-to-hand fighting is invoked using the term ἀγχεμάχοισιν (line 314). Reaching even farther back into the heroic past, Phoenix explains how he “dashed” Ancæus “to the dust” (ἐκνίσατο ‘make dusty’, line 315) on a previous occasion at the site of a grave (σῆμα, line 316) belonging to Amarynceus.<sup>91</sup> Thousands, we are assured, marveled at Phoenix’ bodily strength (βία) and courage (κάρτος).<sup>92</sup> Ancæus certainly did, since he subsequently refused to raise (ἀρω) his hands against him and thus walked away Phoenix with an uncontested (ἀκόνιτος, line 319) prize. The adjective ἀκόνιτος means ‘without dust’ which is here taken to mean ‘without getting dirty’, i.e., without struggle or combat.

Phoenix’ account highlights his prowess as both a boxer (in his match with none other than Polydeuces) and as a wrestler (in his realized match with Ancæus). It is not clear if his aborted re-match with Ancæus was to consist of boxing, wrestling, or even *pankration*: it is called ἀγχεμάχοισιν ‘hand-to-hand fighting’ (line 314) and we are told that on this occasion Ancæus refused to ‘raise’ (ἀρω) his hands, a verb commonly associated with pugilistic encounters elsewhere. While the aged Phoenix may be forgiven for letting his mind wander across all his combative experiences, it may be telling that Quintus, writing in Late Antiquity, blurs the lines between boxing, wrestling, and perhaps even *pankration* in Phoenix’ rambling history. There is evidence that the Romans had done precisely this and that the various combat sports were more eclectic by Quintus’ era (Remijse 2015).<sup>93</sup>

Noting once more his advanced age (and thus excusing himself from fighting), Phoenix bids the young guns in the audience to ‘lift the prize with their hands’ δέθλια χερσὶν ἀρέσθαι

<sup>88</sup> τερπωλή (line 305) is the same term used for the ‘rare sport’ that oblectates the suitors when they compel Odysseus and Iros to fight (*Odyssey* 18.37). A related term is used to describe the ‘delight’ experienced by Apollo in watching the boxing matches mentioned in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo: ἐπιτέρπει (146), τέρπουσιν (150).

<sup>89</sup> Pelias, legendary king of Iolcus, was a son of Poseidon like Amycus, the adversary of Polydeuces in the *Argonauticas* of Apollonius of Rhodes and Valerius Flaccus, as well as *Idyll* 22. The funeral games of Pelias, including a boxing match between Mopsus and Admetus, are mentioned briefly by Pausanias in his *Description of Greece* (5.17.9–10).

<sup>90</sup> This Ancaeus is most likely the son of Lycurgus and father of Agapenor, who led the Arcadians to Troy.

<sup>91</sup> Nestor also took part in these Amaryncean games, once more affirming the long tradition of funeral games that included combat sport (*Iliad* 23.269). Quintus almost certainly put this lengthy rodomontade in the mouth of Phoenix to make of him a humorous parallel to the æolian king of Pylos.

<sup>92</sup> The latter term reminds us of καρδία καὶ θυμός ‘heart and *thymos*’, used to praise Odysseus the disguised boxer in *Odyssey* 18.61. Modern commentators routinely extol boxers for their “heart,” understood as their willingness to fight, particularly in the face of uneven odds.

<sup>93</sup> Similarly, future historians may regard all-in wrestling and mixed martial arts in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century West as a parallel to the farrago of Late Antique fighting sports.

(line 321), a clever *jeu d'esprit* employing the same verb ‘raise’ (*αἴρω*) used just three lines earlier to describe the combat itself. He assures glory (*κύδος*) to the victor. The poet writes, *κύδος γὰρ νέω ἀνδρὶ φέρειν ἀπ' ἀγῶνος ἀεθλον* “Glory on the temple of he who bears away the agon-prize” (line 322, translation ours).

At long last, the audience may have a fight to watch, and a familiar figure to cheer on. The son of ‘haughty’ (*ὑπέρθυμος*)<sup>94</sup> Panopeus, Epeius, strides forth. The victor in the Iliadic boxing match, Epeius is once more the first to take up the challenge (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d). In Homer’s account, Epeius notes that he is not skilled in warfare.<sup>95</sup> Likewise, Quintus points out that “in deadly craft of war, when Ares rusheth through the field, he was not cunning.” Nonetheless, his pugilistic conquests are such that “none dared meet him now in play of fists.”<sup>96</sup> The interplay between the art of war and the sweet science of bruising is a feature to note from Homer to Quintus. From the beginnings of the Greco-Roman world to its twilight, boxing was kept distinct from war-like behavior, though the Romans arguably did much more than the Greeks to smudge the boundary (Section 3.5). Ares is occasionally brought into myths about boxing, but never as its patron. One indicates that the bloody god of war was a tomato can in the ring while the other is too fragmented to inform us of the victor (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d). Epeius, the poor soldier but terrific fighter, personifies the disjunction between ‘baneful, wretched’ (*λευγαλέος*, line 328) war and ‘delightful’ (*τερπωλή*, line 305) boxing.

We are on the cusp of witnessing yet another uncontested (*ἀνιδρωτί*, lit., ‘without sweat’) match when Acamas, the son of Theseus (by some accounts the inventor of boxing, see below), strides forth to meet Epeius (*σχεδόν ἐρχομαι*). What’s more, he is wrapped and ready to go, Agelaus having already wound the cured leather thongs (*ἀζαλέος ίμάς*)<sup>97</sup> around the prince’s hands. The verb used for putting on the gauntlets is *ἀμφιβάλλω*, a general term for items of clothing. The hands are here indexed with the specialized term *παλάμη* denoting ‘hands used in deeds of violence’ instead of the *echt χερσι*. A ‘second’ in the tradition of Diomedes (*Iliad* 23.683–684), Agelaus also ‘excites’ or ‘stirs up’ (*ἐποτρύνω*) his fighter. The comrades (*έταῖρος*) of Epeius, likewise ‘encourage’ (*θαρσύνω*)<sup>98</sup> their boy, who stood forth like a lion ‘in the midst’ (*ἐν μέσσοισι*)—another remarkably persistent Homeric expression for the still anonymous boxing ‘ring’. While the comparison between a boxer and a lion in epic poetry is novel, Quintus has not forgotten the cultic importance of the bull in pugilism: *εἰστήκει περὶ χερσιν ἔχων βοὸς ἱφι δαμέντος | ρινοὺς ἄξαλέας ...* “Epeius stood there while around his hands were thrown by force the overpowering dried flesh of bulls” (lines 338–339, translation ours).

The cheers of the crowd ring out to ‘stir up’ (*ἐποτρύνω*) the fighters as they ‘mix’ (*μίγνυμι*) hands.<sup>99</sup> The intention, the poet tells us, is for the fighters to stain those untiring paws in blood: *ἐν αἷματι χειρας ἀτειρέας* (line 341). We imagine the cagey fighters hopping up and down, shadowboxing. Epeius and Acamas are eager for the anguish of the ‘ring’: *μαιμώωντες*

<sup>94</sup> Compare this term to *μεγάθυμος*, used to describe Epeius’ magnanimous behavior towards his fallen opponent at the end of the Iliadic boxing match.

<sup>95</sup> Quintus credits Epeius with building the Trojan Horse.

<sup>96</sup> *ἄλλον οὖς οἱ τις ἐτόλμα ἐγγὺς ἰκέσθαι | εἶνεκα πυγμαχῆς ...* (line 326–327).

<sup>97</sup> Vian (2008, p. 392) finds in this expression a parallel to *Argonautica* 2.52.

<sup>98</sup> This is the same term Diomedes uses to fortify Euryalus in *Iliad* 23.682.

<sup>99</sup> The verb *μίγνυμι* ‘mix’ is used of liquids and is unmistakably Homeric in its application to the hands of boxers. As has been argued for Greek wrestling in ancient poetry, boxing also routinely “dissolves the borders of the body—causing even human matter to liquefy” (Zilcosky 2019, p. 93).

ἐνὶ ξυνοχῆσιν ἀγῶνος (line 342). They throw out initiatory punches (*πειράω*), like Polydeuces in the Apollonine *Argonautica*, to ensure “their arms were limber and lithe, unclogged by toil of war.”<sup>100</sup>

Suddenly, they raise their erstwhile hanging hands at each other (... ἀλλήλοισι καταντία χειρας ἔειραν). With hands in close (*ταρφύς*), the adversaries cast sharp glances (*παπταίνω*), presumably searching for an opening.<sup>101</sup> Poised on the ‘extremities’ (*ἐπ’ ἀκροτάτοις ... πόδεσσι*) of their feet—most likely the balls—Quintus’ boxers adopt a stance familiar to modern fighters, who still balance on their metatarsal joints for increased agility.<sup>102</sup> As they walk around (*βαίνω*), the fighters shift from knee to knee (*γόνυ γουνὸς ἀμείβω*),<sup>103</sup> trying not to expend too much effort (*ἀλέομαι μέγα κάρτος*),<sup>104</sup> while calling each other on (*βοάω*, line 347) to fight. This is notable as the only instance in epic poetry where the boxers vocalize to one another during the match.

Like a mass of clouds (*νεφέλη*) driven (*βάλλω*) swiftly (*αἰψηρός*, line 349) by the wind (*ἀνεμόω*), the boxers leap (*θράσκω*, line 350) forward, hurling (*ρίπτω*) themselves at one another. The fighters send forth (*προίημι*) lightning (*ἀστεροπή*), an allusion to their punches. Heaven (*αιθήρ*) is stirred (*οροθύνω*), the clouds agitated (*θηγομένως*), perhaps a reference to the dust rising at the fighters’ feet. Heavy, whirling winds (*ἄελλα*) crash (*κτυπέω*) like the dry hide (*ἀζαλέα ... ρινόν*)<sup>105</sup> resoundingly (*περικτυπέω*) slapping the combatants’ chins (*γένειον*, line 353). The Quintean tempest simile (lines 349–354) seems to be his own invention, comparable to the elaborate similes in other epic boxing episodes (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d).

Blood flows down (*καταρρέω*) from their foreheads (*ἐκ ... μετάπων*, line 354), their full cheeks (*θαλερὰς ... παρειάς*) flushed (*ἐρύθαινε*) with bloody sweat (*ἰδρώς αἰματόεις*).<sup>106</sup> The boxers ‘stay busy’ (*πονέομαι*) the whole time, bent (*μέμαα*, line 356) on their savage purpose. Epeius does not stay put (*λήγω*), always pushing forward (*ἐπισεύω*) in his vigorous wrath (*ἔῷ μέγα κάρτεϋ θύων*, line 357). Acamas’ judgment in the heat of the fight remains clear: ... *ἐϋφρονέων ἐν ἀέθλῳ* (line 358). He frequently ‘parries’ (*ἐς κενεὸν ... τίθημι*, lit. ‘place in emptiness’) Epeius’ powerful straight hands (*κρατερὰς χέρας ιθύνεσθαι*).<sup>107</sup> Here Quintus provides a remarkable description of “opening up” an opponent by forcing his hands away laterally: ... *ἰδρείησι διατμήξας ἐκάτερθε | χεῖρας* Idots (lines 360–361). Acamas adroitly (*ἰδρείησι*) ‘cuts in half’ his opponent’s hands, surely a synecdoche for his guard. This allows Acamas to spring (*ἐφάλλομαι*) on his adversary, landing a well-timed blow (*τύπτω*) directly to Epeius’ brow (*δόρυνη*), lacerating him deeply: ... *ἄχρις ίκέσθαι | δστέον ...* (lines 361–362).<sup>108</sup> Conse-

<sup>100</sup> ἄμφω χειρας ἔάς πειρώμενοι, εἴπερ ἔαστιν | ὡς πρὶν Ι ἐντράχαλοι, μηδ’ ἐκ πολέμου βαρύθοιεν (lines 343–344).

<sup>101</sup> The action of *παπταίνω* is attributed to Epeius in the *Iliad* right before he knocks out his adversary and to the combatants in the Apollonine *Argonautica* as they try to locate suitable ground to box on.

<sup>102</sup> In *Argonautica* 2.90 a similar expression is used at the critical moment that Amycus tries to slaughter Polydeuces with a hammer-blow, though it is usually translated as “on tiptoe” (Vian 2008, p. 392).

<sup>103</sup> The expression appears to be lifted directly from the Apollonine *Argonautica* 2.94 (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d).

<sup>104</sup> Way (1913) translates this phrase as, “[E]ach still eluding other’s crushing might.” He makes no mention of what the knees are up to or of the vocalizing verb *βαίνω*.

<sup>105</sup> The *bimantes* are not mentioned here, only the ‘hide’ *ρινόν*.

<sup>106</sup> The suggestion here may be that their cheeks are swollen from being battered, as in Dionysiaca 37.

<sup>107</sup> Here the mediopassive form of the verb *ιθύνω* ‘guide in a straight line’ suggests the path of motion Epeius’ hands travel.

<sup>108</sup> Polydeuces similarly cuts his opponent “to the bone” with his *σπείραι* in the Theocritean boxing match (Section 2.1).

quently, blood ran out of his eyes: ... ἐκ δέ οἱ αἷμα κατέρρεεν ὁ φθαλμοῖο (line 362).<sup>109</sup> Despite the gore, Epeius' ‘heavy hand’ (*βάρειᾶ χείρ*) ‘reaches’ (*τυγχάνω*) Acamas, ‘smiting’ (*τύπτω*) him on the temple, whereupon the Cretan prince takes a dive into the dirt: *χαμαὶ δέ οἱ ἥλασε γυῖα* (line 364).<sup>110</sup> The adverbial ‘down on the temple’ *κατὰ κροτάφοιο* suggests the punch is a hammer-blow, coming from above. This may also explain why Epeius’ hands are described as heavy (one alternative is that *βάρειᾶ χείρ* simply means ‘fist’). By falling down half-way through the fight, Acamas takes on the role of Amycus in his duel with Polydeuces and the audience’s expectation that he will lose the contest is heightened.

Still undaunted, the son of Theseus springs up (*ἀνορούν*), leaping (*ἐνθρώσκω*) on the ‘mighty man’ (*φῶς κραταιός*) and striking (*πλήσσω*) his head. He (probably Epeius) darts (*ἀλσσω*) backward, swerves a little to the left (*βαὶὸν ὑποκλίνας σκαῆ*, line 367) and plants (*τύπτω*) his fist between his opponent’s eyes (*μέτωπον*). Immediately he springs forward (*ἐφάλλομαι*), striking (*ἔλαύνω*) his nose (*ρίς*). He (probably Acamas) skillfully ‘reached out’ (*ὅργεω*) his hands in various ways: ... δς δὲ καὶ αὐτὸς | μήτι παντοὶ γέρας ὥρεγε ... (lines 368–369). This could refer to offense or defense.

At this less-than-dramatic moment in the narrative, the Achaeans prevail upon (*ἔλδομαι*, lit. ‘desire’) the fighters to ‘desist’ (*ἀπερύκω*) from their ‘toil’ (*πονέομαι*) for ‘beloved victory’ (*νίκη ἐρατη*, line 371). The fighters’ pursuivants (*θεράπων*)<sup>111</sup> hurry to the scene to remove (*ἀπό ... λύω*) the bloody ‘skins’ (*ρίνός*, i.e., the *himantes*) from their mighty (*σθεναρός*) hands.<sup>112</sup> The fighters exhale (*ἀποπνέω*) from their toil (*κάματος*, genitive) and wipe (*μόργνυμι*) their brows (*μέτωπον*, previous landing site of punches) with “sponges myriad-pored” (*σπόγγος πολύτρητος*, line 374).

The boxers’ comrades (*έταιρος*) and friends (*φίλος*), fulfilling a role markedly different from that of the lowly attendants (*θεράπων*), appear to broker a peace between the erstwhile combatants. They draw (*ἄγω*) them face to face (*ἀντικρὺς ἀλλήλων*, line 376)<sup>113</sup> and exhort (*παρηγορέω*) them to hastily forget (*λανθάνω*) their grievous wrath (*χόλος ἀλγινόεις*) and make up (*ἀρέσκω φιλότητι*).

The boxers, we are told, hearken to the councils of their friends and kiss (*κυνέω*) one another, forgetting (*ἐπιλανθάνομαι*) their baneful strife (*ἔρις ... λευγαλέη*). Curiously, in this construction it is the fighters’ *thymos* that appears to be the agent of their forgetting: ... *ἔριδος δὲ ἐπελήθετο θυμὸς | λευγαλέης ...* (lines 380–381). The token of friendship symbolized by the kiss has no antecedent in epic boxing. While it has been argued that the *Posthomeric* shows no signs of Christian belief (James and Lee 2000), the kiss-and-make-up at the end of Quintus’ boxing match stands out to us as a potential counterexample despite the poet’s strong Homericizing tendencies. To be sure, displays of magnanimity to a fallen opponent are found throughout epic boxing, including in the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and the *Idylls* (much harsher resolutions are described in other epics, including Apollonius’ *Argonautica* and the *Aeneid*). But the Quintean kiss seems different. The explicit forgiveness of a grudge in the Posthomeric boxing match feels like an overtly religious expression entirely consis-

<sup>109</sup>This gruesome detail is omitted entirely by Way (1913).

<sup>110</sup>*γυῖα*, though in the plural here, seems to have its singular meaning (*γυῖον*), i.e., the ‘whole body’. According to Way (1913), “[Epeius] hurled him to the ground.”

<sup>111</sup>This is the same term used by Apollonius of Rhodes to characterize the henchmen of Amycus.

<sup>112</sup>It is still true that exhausted boxers, having finished their work in the ring, are first unencumbered of their gloves before any (other) post-fight ceremonies.

<sup>113</sup>The related form *ἀντικρύ* ‘against, opposite’ is used by Epeius in his threat against Euryalus in *Iliad* 23.673: *ἀντικρὺ χρόα τε ρήξω σὺν τ' ὅστε ἄραξω* “I will rend his flesh and crush his bones.”

tent with contemporary teachings regarding the duties and character of Christians.<sup>114</sup> The comity achieved by Quintus' quondam combatants has implications for the development of conventionalized 'repair strategies' that take place at the end of modern Western boxing bouts.<sup>115</sup>

The fighters both receive a dark-blue silver (*κυανοκρήδεμνος ἀργυρέους*) krater from the goddess Thetis, who appears to serve as the matron of her son's funeral games, bestowing prizes on the winners.<sup>116</sup> After an extended discussion of the kraters' provenance (lines 381–393),<sup>117</sup> Quintus returns to the exhausted combatants.

More than other epic poets, Quintus concerns himself with the aftermath of the boxing match. He concludes the account by discussing how the fighters' wounds are treated. Podalirius, a son of the medicine god Asclepius and a legendary healer in his own right, sedulously (*ἐνδυκέως*) tends to (*ἀκέομαι*) the boxers' gashes (*ἀμφιδεδρυμμένα τύμμα*).<sup>118</sup> It is possible that the Quintean inclusion of a 'ringside' doctor was drawn from his own experience watching Late Antique matches, where a physician may indeed have been present. There is no other account of an ancient boxing match that includes medical treatment, besides perhaps "The Marriage of Martu" (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b). Podalirius first squeezes (*ἐκμύζησεν*) the lacerations, presumably to remove infection, then he sews them up (*ῥάπτω*). He next applies a drug (*φάρμακον*), perhaps a salve or an herb, "given him by his sire of old" and famed for its immediate virtue over all kinds of 'incurable wounds of men' (*ἀναλθέα τύμματα φωτῶν*). The epulotic philtre did the trick, healing (*ἀπαλθαίνομαι*) the wounds on their faces (*πρόσωπον*) and beneath "their clustering hair" (*εὐκομώντα κάρηνα*, lit. 'well-curled heads'). Quintus does not remark on wounds to any other part of the boxers' bodies, though he concludes by noting that Podalirius' ministrations generally assuaged (*κατηπιάω*) them of their distress (*ἄνια*, line 404).

## 2.6 *Dionysiaca* 37

Nonnus of Panopolis was a Greek poet living in Egypt, probably in the fifth century AD. Most likely a Christian, he was deeply familiar with the New Testament (Vian 1997). His contribution to the epic tradition, an astoundingly lengthy hexametric affair known as the

<sup>114</sup>St. Paul wrote in his epistle to the Colossians (3.13): "Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye" (KJV). This epistle, as only one example of the Christian doctrine of forgiveness, was written, at the latest, near the end of the first century AD and would have been in wide circulation by Quintus' era. See also literature on the contemporaneous "kiss of peace" (*εἰρήνη*).

<sup>115</sup>We have observed the following conventional gestures directed towards an opponent: embracing; smiling warmly; shaking hands or bumping fists; clapping hands; lifting him in the air; cupping a hand behind his head and bringing foreheads together; holding his hand aloft; speaking congenially and at close proximity; holding the ropes to ease his exit from the ring; and greeting members of the opposing corner.

<sup>116</sup>Thetis appears to take on the role of the goddess Nike who is depicted garlanding victorious fighters on numerous vases (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d).

<sup>117</sup>The kraters were fashioned by Hephaestus as a wedding gift for Dionysus, who filled them with nectar and turned them over to his son, Thoas, the king of Lemnos. Hypsipyle inherited them from her father and gave them to Euneus, her son by Jason. Euneus in his turn gave the kraters to Achilles as a ransom for Lycaon, the half-brother of Hector. Homer tells the story a bit differently in *Iliad* 23.747: Patroclus receives one krater in exchange for releasing Lycaon, who was by then his slave. Achilles killed Lycaon after the death of Patroclus. Quintus was presumably interested in making sure the boxing prize had significant connections to the story of Achilles and Patroclus, the honorees of the Posthomeric and Iliadic funeral games, respectively.

<sup>118</sup>The noun *τύμμα* can also refer to a snakebite or an insect sting. The adjective *ἀμφιδεδρυμμένα* is a rare one, perhaps meaning 'torn all around'.

*Dionysiaca*, concerns—among other topics—the military expedition of the wine god Dionysus to India. This war, “fought by the generation of the Iliadic heroes’ grandfathers” is understood by Nonnus to be morally and aesthetically superior to the Trojan War (Verhelst 2016, p. 157). It has been suggested that Nonnus saw Homer as his poetic rival.

Book 37 (lines 485–545)<sup>119</sup> of the *Dionysiaca* features a boxing match between two semi-divine beings named Melisseus and Eurymedon at the funeral games of a fallen soldier named Opheltes: “There are contests about the tomb,” we are told.<sup>120</sup> While closely linked to the boxing vignette in *Iliad* 23, the Nonnian boxing match is “influenced by contemporary realities” of Late Antiquity which arguably affect the way it is presented (Frangoulis 1995, p. 145).<sup>121</sup> It has even been argued that “Nonnus wrote … for a mixed audience, comprised mainly, but not exclusively of Christians” (Agosti 2016, p. 657). This leads us to wonder, what, if anything, is uniquely Christian about the boxing match in the *Dionysiaca*?

While, like other post-Homeric epics, Nonnus’ ergasy languished for many generations, it has experienced renewed interest since the middle of the twentieth century. One commentator writes, “The whole story is imaginative, even visionary, and full of fanciful details, sprinkled with fantastic imagination” (Bannert and Kröll 2016, p. 503). As to its supposedly derivative nature, the same authors note, “Nonnus rarely includes whole verses from [the] *Iliad* and *Odyssey* but prefers to insert references and allusions to be recognized and decoded by the reader. He uses single words bearing literary effect, pointing at certain scenes or situations in the Homeric epic …” (*ibid.*, p. 503). Indeed, while there is much evidence that Nonnus studied other epic boxing matches carefully, it is undeniable that he infused the funeral games of Opheltes with his own imagination, perhaps leavened by his Christian worldview and elements of boxing relevant to a Late Antique readership.<sup>122</sup> Thus, the Nonnian boxing match, written at a time shortly before boxing would “go dark” for over a thousand years, is a critical link in our understanding of boxing’s evolution. Below are a few of the elements that make Nonnus’ contest stand out from those of his predecessors:

- Hermes appears to be the divine patron of the match, having bestowed on one boxer his hand gear.
- One boxer wears armor over his loins.
- There is reference to a defensive hand, compared to a shield, and an offensive hand, compared to a spearhead.
- One fighter lands a ‘lucky punch’.
- The boxer’s sharp teeth are mentioned.
- A clinch takes place.
- Body blows are thrown: A boxer is struck on the chest; another below the nipple.
- Footwork is described in some detail.
- Swelling occurs around the eyes and on the cheeks during the fight.
- A fighter’s brother acts as his ‘second’.
- An ox-hide shield serves as one of the prizes.

<sup>119</sup>Line numbers in this section come from Rouse (1940–1942) unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>120</sup>ἢ γι τριγχοστὸν πέλεν ἔβδομον, εἶνακα νίκης | ἀνδράσιν ἀθλοφόροις ἐπιτύμβιοι εἰσια ὅγωνες (no line numbers: proem to Book 37).

<sup>121</sup>...*influencées par des réalités contemporaines...*

<sup>122</sup>“Ces innovations lui ont peut-être été inspirées par des spectacles de pugilat contemporains” (Frangoulis 1999, p. 42).

The episode begins with Dionysus setting up (ἴστημι) a contest (ἀγών)—the cruel (χαλεπός) boxing (line 485). Like Achilles in *Iliad* 23, Dionysus inauguates the action by presenting the prizes (δῶρον): a bull from an Indian stall (ταῦρος ἀπ' Ἰνδῷ οἰο βοαύλου) and an exotic, barbarian ox-hide shield (βοείη)<sup>123</sup> fashioned by black-skinned (μελάρρινος) Indians. The ancient cultic relationship between bulls and boxers (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b) is evident in these tauric funeral gifts (κτέρεα). The god calls for prizefighters (ἀεθλητῆρας), urging (ἐπείγω) two skillful (εὐπάλαμος) men to contend (ἐριδμαίνω)<sup>124</sup> for victory (περὶ νίκης, line 490).

This is the contest of the unyielding (ἀτειρής) fist (πυγμὴ), the god proclaims. The one who conquers (νικάω, active) will receive the shaggy (δασύθριξ) bull, the one who is conquered (νικάω, passive) will bear off the shield (ἀσπίς) with many folded layers (πολύπτυχος) of hide.<sup>125</sup> At the end of Dionysus' speech, warlike (σακέσπαλος) Melisseus arises (ὅρνυμι). Melisseus is identified among the Kuretes, a group of mystical dancer-warriors who, on Crete, protected the infant Zeus from his cormorant father. Melisseus was also a rustic demigod associated with honey<sup>126</sup> and bee-keeping (his name means ‘honey bringer’). According to *Dionysiaca* 28.318, Melisseus imitated the bee, wielding its sting (κέντρα μελίσσης) in battle.<sup>127</sup> He was both accustomed to (ἡθάς) and cultivated in (ἐπιμελέομαι) *pygmacchia*. Seizing (ἄπτω) the ‘beautifully-horned’ (εὐκέραος) bull, the god of apiaries exclaimed, “This way anyone who wants a painted shield! For I will not let another have the fat bull as long as I can hold up [ἀείρω] my hands!” (line 497).<sup>128</sup> Melisseus further mimics Epeius, who in *Iliad* 23 likewise commands all rivals to suit themselves with second place.

Silence, as usual, greets the upstart. Finally, Eurymedon, a son of Hephaestus by a Thracian woman, rises (ἀνίστημι). Hermes himself furnished (πόρω) the lad with the tools (ὅργανον) of boxing, intended for the ‘strong of limb’ (γυαλκέος). The term ‘tools’ is novel in this context. We must assume that it refers to the *himantes*, which he mentions later, but it may also apply to the Theocritean *spherai*, which are differentiated from the *himantes* in *Idyll* 22, or even the two-pronged Late Antique *cæstus* (see below).

Casting Hermes as the divine benefactor of boxing gear is another innovative choice. When it comes to Olympians involved in epic boxing, Apollo is invoked in the Iliadic match, while Poseidon and Zeus are mentioned as the fathers of Amycus and Polydeuces, respectively. Eryx, the semi-divine son of Aphrodite, granted his brain-spattered *cæstus* to Entelclus in the *Aeneid*, and was said to have sparred with Heracles. Hermes as boxer is not entirely without precedent.<sup>129</sup> He appears in a matchup against Ares in a fragmentary poem by Corinna (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d), but Nonnus' choice is still unusual. It has been argued that Hermes and Christ are elsewhere related in the work of Nonnus (Dijk-

<sup>123</sup> A shield appears in the prize position (i.e., between the combatants) in at least one Geometric depiction of boxing, a Theban pedestaled krater held at the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, No. 12896 (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d).

<sup>124</sup> Another meaning for ἐριδμαίνω is ‘provoke to strife.’

<sup>125</sup> The adjectives used to describe the bull and the ox-hide shield seem to make them more comparable.

<sup>126</sup> Large jars of honey are placed around Opheltes' funeral pyre (line 50).

<sup>127</sup> As we will see by the end of the episode, if ever there were a classical antecedent to the dictum “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,” it must—almost by definition—be embodied in the boxer Melisseus.

<sup>128</sup> In *Idyll* 22.65, Amycus challenges Polydeuces to put up his dukes using the same verb, ἀείρω (see Section 2.1).

<sup>129</sup> DeLaine (1997, p. 80) notes that in the Roman world, Hermes, along with Hercules, was the “presiding deity of the *palaestra*” and according to Philostratus, “The *palaistra* of Hermes was the first” (*Gym.* 16): παλαιστρα γένοιτο Τριμοῦ πρώτη (Kayser 1871).

stra 2016, pp. 84–85, 88). Nonnus clearly broke with the epic tradition by invoking Hermes, leading us to speculate that he did so to highlight Christ’s role as the patron of the dionysian boxing match. Indeed, it has been observed that Nonnus’ “fruitful dialogue” between Christianity and Hellenism “ensured the instant popularity and lasting legacy of [his] œuvre throughout Late Antiquity, and beyond” (*ibid.*, p. 88).

A bit of background on Eurymedon: He “used to remain busy beside his father’s furnace hammering [*σφυρήλατος*] away at the beaten [*τύπτω*] anvil.” Does Nonnus here cleverly suggest the boxer’s art in pounding his opponent? As we mentioned in *Dioscurus* and *Dioscurus* (2022d), ancient poets may have amused their audiences with the alliterative similarity between the words ‘hammer’ and *sphairai* or *spherai*, which may refer to one or more types of Greek boxing glove. In any event, Apollonius Rhodius conjures hammers in one of his elaborate boxing similes (*Argonautica* 2.80) and Nonnus likely recalls it here.

Acting in the Iliadic role of Diomedes, Alcon attends (*ἀμφιέπω*) his brother Eurymedon “full of excitement” (*ἐριπτοίητος*).<sup>130</sup> Alcon lays out (*παρατίθημι*)<sup>131</sup> his brother’s *zōma* and fastens (*ἀρμόζω*) a *μίτρα* (see below) snugly around his loins (line 505). We have not observed the anatomical term ‘loins’ (*ἰξύς*) in any other boxing match.<sup>132</sup> Nonnus’ utilization of the *zōma* and his concern with covering the boxers’ nether regions may arise from the pudor of his Christian audience, though we certainly cannot make the same argument for the *zōma*’s appearance in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The term *μίτρα* is highly curious. In Homer it refers to a ‘piece of armor, apparently a metal guard worn around the waist’.<sup>133</sup> In context, it appears to be a synonym for the *zōma* (Frangoulis 1999, p. 154).<sup>134</sup> We are left to wonder whether Nonnus wished to reassure his audience of the boxers’ ample protection in the genital area. If the meaning of the words were synonymous in his time, it is not clear what Nonnus intended: a bit of armor or a cloth garment.<sup>135</sup> If *μίτρα* refers to armor, then we must conclude that strikes to the groin were common in Late Antique boxing, though we need not presume that they were legal (Brophy and Brophy 1985).<sup>136</sup>

Alcon joins together (*συνάπτω*)<sup>137</sup> and binds (*σφίγγω*) his brother’s ‘long hands’ (*δολιχή*

<sup>130</sup>The adjective *ἐριπτοίητος* might also mean ‘scared’ or ‘aroused’. Frangoulis (1999, p. 93) renders Alcon *plain d’inquiétude* ‘full of worry’ and reasons elsewhere that Melisseus’ reputation as a boxer has left Alcon bestraited over his brother’s fate (*ibid.*, p. 154).

<sup>131</sup>The servants of Apollonine Amycus similarly execute the *mise en place* (*τιθημι*) of their master’s *bimantes* before his boxing match with Polyeuces in the *Argonautica*.

<sup>132</sup>The term appear in *Odyssey* 5.231, when Calypso dons a golden girdle.

<sup>133</sup>Even more curiously, *μίτρα* is the ancestor, via Latin *mitrā*, of English *mitre*.

<sup>134</sup>Another possibility is that the boxers wear both a loincloth and a piece of armor, as we have conjectured in a sculptural pair of boxers from the second or third century (Figure 25).

<sup>135</sup>In *Dionysiaca* 37.55, Nonnus again refers to a *μίτρα*, though now metaphorically, in describing how the fat of slaughtered horses encircled (*κυκλῶ*) Opheltes’ corpse on the pyre. In the same book (line 670) *μίτρα* almost certainly refers to a piece of armor and not a mere loincloth, since it is offered as a second-prize (after two spears and a helmet) in the stone-throwing competition.

<sup>136</sup>Modern boxing competition requires a foul protector to be worn over the genitals even though repeated and/or flagrant blows “below the belt” may result in the offending boxer’s disqualification. USA Boxing regulations, however, indicate that the offended fighter will lose the match if he is unable to recover from a first—or second—accidental punch to his privates.

<sup>137</sup>Surely this cannot mean the hands themselves were bound together. The verb presumably suggests the action of joining the hand more securely to the wrist, or the fingers to the hand, etc., one function of wraps.

*παλάμη*)<sup>138</sup> with the dried (*ἀκαλέος*)<sup>139</sup> and coiled (*περίπλοκος*) *himantes* (line 507). He also calls the thongs *όλκός* meaning ‘drawn to oneself’. This may suggest the manner in which they were tied: as the attendant cinches the straps, this naturally draws the boxers’ hands closer to the attendant. The adjective *όλκός* probably indicates that the boxer held his hands aloft or at least away from his body as the attendant performed the binding. In any event, this is a level of detail we have not observed previously in the epic boxing matches.

Then the ‘foremost man’ or ‘champ’ (*πρόμος*)<sup>140</sup> sets out (*ἔρχομαι*) into the midst (*εἰς μέσον*),<sup>141</sup> carrying (*φέρω*) his left hand thrown forward (*προβλήτης*) before his face (*πρόσωπον*, genitive).<sup>142</sup> Nonnus calls the arrangement a “natural shield” (*σάκος ἐμφυτον*, line 509), leaving no doubt as to the defensive nature of this gesture. The lead hand is juxtaposed with the other (the right), which is adorned with the flesh-cutting (*ταυεσίχροας*) *himantes* and made into a kind of spearhead (*λόγχη*). The mayhem inherent in this boxing gear is highlighted by the adjective *ταυεσίχροας*, derived from *τέμνω*, meaning ‘cut’, ‘hew down’, ‘maim’, ‘butcher’, or ‘sacrifice’. While the adjective (and verb) is unprecedented in epic boxing matches, its polysemy recalls the sacrificial scene at the end of the Vergilian boxing match, as well as the facial lacerations in *Idyll 22*. The spearhead (*λόγχη*) reference would likely be identified by a Late Antique audience as the pronged *cæstus* worn by boxers of that era (Figures 16, 18, 17). This may be as close as we come to a literary reference to these gruesome boxing implements.

One of the boxers constantly wards off (*φυλάσσω*) the challenging (*δύσμαχος*, lit. ‘hard to fight with’) onslaught (*όρμη*) of his adversary. Here, ‘adversary’ is rendered as the one he is ‘wrestling against’ (*ἀντίπαλος*).<sup>143</sup> Derived from the noun *πάλη* ‘wrestling’, the application of this adjective may suggest the blurring of the boundaries between boxing, wrestling, and *pankration* in Nonnus’ world. It may also suggest that the adjective had undergone semantic bleaching and meant only ‘rival’ or ‘antagonist’ more generally.

Names and identifying epithets are in short supply during the boxing battle. Moreover, it is hardly clear who is called the ‘champ’ (*πρόμος*) at the beginning of the bout (*ut supra*). By this point in the narrative, the audience would have almost certainly lost the thread as to who was throwing what punch when. That was, perhaps, Nonnus’ intention: the identity of the fighters has become mingled (cf. *μίγνυμι*, line 527), just like the boxers’ hands in Homero–Nonnian epic or perhaps even individual members of the body of Christ. It may be that the Nonnian approach here is another example of the Late Antique tendency in art and literature called “dematerialization, intended to supersede naturalistic representation, in favor of a spiritual weightlessness conferring symbolic meanings,” and “typical of Nonnian

<sup>138</sup>Nonnus’ adjective *δολιχή* is novel of hands in boxing matches. Is it possible he was familiar with much older, manneristic depictions of boxers on Greek vase paintings (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d) and in Etruscan tombs, in which the defensive hand, raised aloft, is frequently dolichomorphic?

<sup>139</sup>The term is also used to describe the leather thongs in the *Posthomerica* and in Apollonius’ *Argonautica*.

<sup>140</sup>It is not altogether clear who Nonnus refers to as *πρόμος*. Is it Melisseus, cultivated in the sweet science and audacious to claim the bull? Or is it Eurymedon, who received his boxing gear from a deity? Nonnus is perhaps toying with his audience’s perception of the fighters as individuals (see below).

<sup>141</sup>By the fifth century AD there was still no definitive word for the boxing ring. Clearly the Greeks and Romans did not conceive of it as a defined space in the manner of their early modern and modern counterparts.

<sup>142</sup>The syntax is somewhat touchy, with no preposition to make the relation between the hand and face explicit: ... *ἐν προβλήτῃ προσώπου | λαῖγη χείρα φέρων ...* (lines 508–509). Nonnus may be influenced here by the allusion to a guard position in *Posthomerica* 4.360–361 and in *Idyll 22.120*. Nonnus’ description conforms to Gardiner (1910, p. 204–205), where he explains how Greek boxers used the right (back) hand for striking and the left (lead) hand for defense, though Poliakoff (1987a, pp. 83–84) notes exceptional depictions in Greek vase painting.

<sup>143</sup>αἱεὶ δὲ ἀντίπαλοιο φυλάσσετο δύσμαχον ὄρμήν (line 511).

descriptions” Agosti (2016, pp. 661–662).

We are next treated to a rich mosaic of boxing injuries, whether potential or realized, Nonnus does not specify.<sup>144</sup> First, the punch (*πλήσσω*) down (*κατά*, probably suggesting a hammer-blow) to the brow (*όφρύς*) or the forehead (*μέτωπον*). Next, the bloodying (*αιμαξίς*) punch landed (*τύπτω*) to the *ἀρθρον* (line 513), an anatomical term which generally means ‘joint’ but can have the specialized denotations of ‘eyes’, ‘mouth’, or even ‘genitals’; Rouse (1940–1942) translates *ἀρθρον* as “face”, Frangoulis (1999) as *oreille* ‘ear’. How about a blow to the temple (*κρόταφος*) that cuts it in half (*διατυῆγω*)? Here, the verb is *τυγχάνω* ‘happen’, suggesting, as Rouse (1940–1942) has it, a “lucky blow.” We conjecture that it may suggest a haymaker—a wide-looping hook—which, if landed, indeed spells good fortune for the puncher. Next, a shot that “tear[s] away to the very center of his busy brain.”<sup>145</sup> Here, Epeius’ Iliadic taunt to ‘crush’ his opponent’s bones resurfaces in the verb *ἀράσσω* and Late Antique boxing is revealed in all of its terrible glory: What kind of a boxing punch can crush the skull and reveal the ‘innermost’ brain within? Nonnus describes boxing at its most brutal—the doom of the Æneidean bull meted out on a man—and which can be carried out only with specialized boxing gear intended for just such mayhem. But wait, there’s more! How about a ‘savage hand’ (*παλάμη τρηχεια*, line 516) stretched out (*τιταίνω*) so hard to the side of the head<sup>146</sup> that it strips (*γυμνώ*, lit. ‘strips naked’) the eyes from the adversary’s blinded (*λιπόγληνος*) countenance?<sup>147</sup> Finally, there’s a smashing (*ἀράσσω*) punch to his bloodied (*δαφοινήεις*) jaw meant to ‘strike’ or ‘expel’ (*ἐλαύνω*)<sup>148</sup> his many sharp (*ծεντέρως*)<sup>149</sup> teeth in a row (*σγμος*).<sup>150</sup>

Nonnus supplied his audience with a catalog of epic boxing’s greatest hits, each with an antecedent somewhere in the Greco-Roman literary tradition that, by Nonnus’ time, was already over a thousand years old. The laundry list seems to us a playful way for Nonnus to outdo all of his predecessors,<sup>151</sup> by including not just one punch, but all of them. However, despite the relatively late date of its composition, the *Dionysiaca* still contains no specialized lexical items like ‘jab’ or ‘hook’ to characterize blows. Instead, the poet relies on striking verbs like *ἐλαύνω*, literally as old as Homer. Throughout the epic tradition, punches are denominated based primarily on their landing sites and only occasionally based on their path of motion and origin: a punch to the temple or side of the head, often invoked, must be a hook; a punch to the forehead or nose, a straight. Strikes accompanied by the preposition *kata* are

<sup>144</sup>It is probably a list of injuries that a boxer could avoid with good defensive technique. The list lends itself to the “encyclopedic aspect” or “jeweled style” of Nonnus (Geisz 2016, pp. 173, 192).

<sup>145</sup>ἔτες μέσον ἐγκεφάλῳ νοήμονος ἄκρον ἀράζας ‘Smash in to the innermost middle of an intelligent head’ (line 515).

<sup>146</sup>One text has *βλεφάροις* ‘eyelids’ instead of *κροτάφοις* ‘temple’ (Frangoulis 1999).

<sup>147</sup>Nonnus may here be echoing Valerius Flaccus’ description of the fight between Otreus and Amycus in which the ogre “dashed out” the eyes of his opponent (*Argonautica* 2.167–168; see Section 3.3).

<sup>148</sup>In *Odyssey* 18.91–96, this is the verb used to describe Odysseus’ knockout blow of Iros. It is fitting that Nonnus uses it as the last in his list of punches.

<sup>149</sup>Why sharp teeth? Nonnus may be alluding to the possibility that boxers bit one another in the Late Antique ring. If so, on June 28, 1997, Mike Tyson may have recreated history by gnashing on Evander Holyfield’s right ear and expectorating the gruesome remnants on the ring apron during a heavyweight championship fight in Las Vegas. Tyson claimed the offense was retaliation for headbutting.

<sup>150</sup>One sense of this word, perhaps intended here by the poet, is a swathe that has been reaped. This is somewhat complicated by the use of the adjective *πολύστιχος* meaning ‘of many lines’. The most likely translation is ‘many teeth in a row’. Nonnus may be playing with another reading of *πολύστιχος* ‘prolix’, an attribute rendered comically implausible for someone whose teeth have just been knocked out.

<sup>151</sup>Throughout the *Dionysiaca*, “[T]he propriety of the past is infused with the mischief and irreverence of [Nonnus’] own time” (Bannert and Kröll 2016, p. 504).

most likely hammer blows whose vertical trajectory is made most explicit in the *Aeneid* and the Apollonine *Argonautica*. In at least one instance, Theocritus tells us the origin of the punch and its landing site, allowing us to infer the trajectory of an uppercut (see Section 2.1).

On with the fight. Melisseus rushes (*ἐπισεύνω*) Eurymedon, striking (*ἔλαννω*) him on the top (*ἄκρος*) of the chest (*στῆθος*, line 521). He (probably Eurymedon) reaches (*τιταίνω*) toward his opponent's face in vain (*μάτην*), failing in his purpose (*ἀμαρτάνω*) and striking (*τύπτω*) nothing but air. Trepidant (*τρομέω*, in some senses 'from fear') and running round and round (*περιτρέχω*), one of the boxers (again, probably Eurymedon) repays (*ἀμείβω*) his fellow with a right hand (*δεξιτερός*) reaching out (*τιταίνω*) to the hollow of his bosom (*κόλπος*, accusative). The punch lands below (*κάτω*) the nipple (lit., 'naked chest' *γυμνός μαστός*, genitive).

In the most explicit reference we have seen to a clinch in any epic boxing match, Nonnus describes the technique this way: 'the incomers came' (*ἴκανον ἐπήλυδες*) 'one against the other' (*ἄλλος ἐπ' ἄλλω*, line 525). With sparing footsteps (*ἱχνεσι φειδομένοισι*) the fighters slip (*ἀμείβω*) their feet past each other (*ποδὸς πόδα τυτθὸν*, line 526).<sup>152</sup> Unable to resist the Homeric boxing trope *par eminence*, the poet writes *χείρας ἔμιξαν* 'hand mixes with hand'.

By successive (*ἐπαστύτερος*) swinging motions (*ρίπτῃ*) the *himantes* plaited (*όμοπλεκέων*) round the surface of their hands (*ἄκροτάτην περὶ χείρα*)<sup>153</sup> made an awful (*φρικτός*), booming (*ἐπιβομβέω*), thud (*δοῦπος*, lines 527–528). Now a list of outcomes: cheeks torn asunder (*χαρασσομένης*); *himantes* stained red (*φονίσω*) and dripping with blood (*αίμαλέαις λιβάδεσσιν*); heavy sounds emanating from the jaws (*γενύων πέλε δοῦπος*); and facial swelling<sup>154</sup> into which the eyes sink deep.<sup>155</sup>

Eurymedon toils (*κάμνω*) against Melisseus' skillful cunning (*ἰδμονι τέχνη*), facing (*ἀντωπέω*) the irresistible (*ἄσχετον*) might of the sun's rays (*αὔγη*) which shine into (*καταγάζω*) his eyes. This recalls the jockeying for position between Polydeuces and Amycus (*Idyll* 22.535–536), and does not bode well for Eurymedon. Melisseus 'plays like a child' (*παιᾶν*),<sup>156</sup> perhaps taunting his opponent. With a sharp (*δέξιτέρη*) pivot (*στροφάλιγξ*), he treads lightly (*ἀείρω*) with a raised foot (*μετάρσιος ἵχνος*).<sup>157</sup> While difficult to reconstruct, this passage may suggest the quick stomping motion, sometimes accompanied by a feint, that a modern boxer may use to startle his opponent. Suddenly he strikes (*τύπτω*) the other's jaw (*γναθμός*) under

<sup>152</sup> It has been remarked that Nonnus, in his *Paraphrase*, "pays particular attention to Christ's feet, which might be related to the popular cult of Jesus' footprints" (Agosti 2016, p. 652). The careful description of footwork in this passage, unprecedented in boxing epic (the closest is Apollonius' expression describing knee position in *Argonautica* 2.94 and emulated by Quintus in *Posthomericus* 4.347), may reveal a coded element intended to draw the attention of Nonnus' Christian audience. It may also be related to "the special meaning feet had in the Egyptian religion, a meaning resumed by Christians" (*ibid.*).

<sup>153</sup> Rouse (1940–1942) translates this expression as 'fingers', i.e., the extremities of the hands.

<sup>154</sup> This particularly difficult passage reads: ... *ἐπὶ θρωσκῷ δὲ προσώπου | εὐρυτέρου γεγάντος ἐκυμαίνοντο παρειά* "On the rising ground (*θρωσκός*) of the broad face the cheeks arose like waves (*κυμαῖνω*)" (lines 531–532, translation ours). The oblique reference to waves may hail from Homer's fish simile (*Iliad* 23.692–694) or Apollonius' ship simile (*Argonautica* 2.70–71), both used to describe some aspect of boxing (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d).

<sup>155</sup> We translate *όφθαλμοι δέ ἐκάτερθεν ἐκοιλαίνοντο προσώπου* as "The eyes hollow out (*κοιλαίνω*) the face on either side" (line 533).

<sup>156</sup> The verb may also be 'rush at' (*ἐπαίσω*), as in Frangoulis (1999). "Nonnus is very sensitive to movement and he creates a rich system of ideologically oriented oppositions, as movement vs. immobility, swiftness vs. slowness, etc., to convey also the idea of prompt belief in Jesus' words ..." (Agosti 2016, p. 652).

<sup>157</sup> Line 537 reads: *δέξιτέρη στροφάλιγγι μετάρσιον ἵχνος ἀείρων*. This may be another example of Nonnus' peculiar fascination with feet (*ut supra*).

the ear (*ὑπ' οὐατος*, line 538) right where the knockout blow is landed in the *Odyssey*.<sup>158</sup>

Suffering (*κάμνω*) and lying down on his back (*ύπτιος*) Eurymedon rolled (*αύτοκύλιστος*) around, planted firmly (*ἐρείδω*) in the dust (*κονία*, dative). Bereft of his *thymos* (*θυμολιπής*),<sup>159</sup> he was like in all points (*πανεικέλος*) to one ‘drunken with wine’ (*μεθύω*, line 540). Carrying his head to one side (*εἶχε δὲ κόρσην κεκλιμένην ἐτέρωσε*) he spat out (*ἐπτυω*) a “thick-ish” (*λεπτός παχύνω*) bloody foam (*ἄχνη*).<sup>160</sup> Seizing (*λαμβάνω*) Eurymedon, his kinsman (*σύγγονος*) Alcon conveyed (*μετάγω*) him out of the gloomy gathering (*ἐκτὸς ἀγώνος στυγνὸς*).<sup>161</sup> The astonished boxer was deprived of his reason (*ἀμερσίνος*) and weighed down (*βαρέω*) by the blow (*πληγή*, dative). Alcon, presumably, eagerly (*ἐσσύμενος*) “lifted the great Indian shield” (line 545).

## 2.7 Features of boxing in Hellenistic and Roman Greece

In this section we present features of boxing as attested in Greek texts and visual art of the Hellenistic and Roman eras. It is a challenge to describe Greek boxing during this period in consistent terms and to do so separately from developments that took place in Italy at roughly the same time. While it may be useful to separate objects based on their findspot, as we have done elsewhere, there can be no doubt that boxing cultures in Greece and Italy exerted significant mutual influence. The distinction between Roman and Greek boxing in the imperial period and during Late Antiquity seems particularly artificial, since what we style ‘gladiatorial’ (Roman) boxing was practiced in Greece at the same time Greek ‘athletic’ boxing was practiced at Rome. While we hesitate to make the distinctions too stark, we will attempt to present here features of boxing that seem particularly ‘Greek’, either because they are attested in objects of Greek provenance or because they are written about by Greek authors.

Any cultural practice will necessarily change over time and space. This is doubtless true of boxing in Hellenistic and Roman Greece. Depictions of boxing, visual and literary, provide ample evidence of different techniques and equipment but in a less-than-methodical fashion. Visual depictions do not come with captions. Words—if they were ever defined in the first place—take on new meanings and shed their old ones. This is the primary reason for the extraordinary parviscience that still surrounds Greek terms for boxing hand gear, despite considerable effort to decode the sources (Jüthner and Mehl 1962, Poliakoff 1983; 1987a, Thuillier 2019). While we do not counsel despair when it comes to the potential clarification of boxing terms in Greek, it is still imprudent to declare what a particular type of boxing glove was called or what it looked like across centuries of cultural flux. At best, we may be able to reason what type of glove is used in a particular image based on its structure or its effect on an opponent. Using a text, we may be able to do the same, if the author provided detail *quantum sufficit*. To know for sure what a Greek boxer called that glove at the time a painter rendered it, or what the glove looked like when the author conjured it up with words, may indeed lie beyond our discernment. And yet the urge to classify, categorize, and typologize

<sup>158</sup> Polydeuces strikes Amycus above the ear in the *Argonautica*.

<sup>159</sup> Frangoulis (1999) translates the adjective as *inconscious* ‘unconscious’.

<sup>160</sup> This passage is remarkably similar to Oppian *Cynegetica* 4.204, as noted by Frangoulis (1999, p. 43). In his description of an expugnate boxer (a simile for a captured lion), Oppian refers to the head lolling to one side, the thick foam of blood, and the appearance of drunkenness: *peut-être le modèle de Nonnos ici* (*ibid.*)

<sup>161</sup> The gloominess may also be attributed to Alcon, as in the translation of Frangoulis (1999), who explains that the adjective *désigne simplement la tristesse que ressent le frère du vaincu*.

the material culture of boxing remains, if for no other reason than the sheer abundance of evidence, messy and incomplete as it may be. There remains in us the hope that by considering all of this evidence, we may reach some new conclusions. In this section, we will attempt to summarize what we have learned and what we still do not know about boxing from literature and art produced in Greece (or the Greek language) from around the third century BC to around the fifth century AD. We reserve comment about boxing's characteristics in Italy and elsewhere in the Roman world for a later section of this paper.

Why did the Greeks box? We have a better answer to this question than we do for the same question as it relates to any Bronze Age people: the Greeks wrote volumes about their own values.

The primary athletic virtue, like that of the heroic warrior, was *aretē* (ἀρετή), an untranslatable term, including notions of “manly excellence,” “merit,” “achievement,” and “accomplishment.” The fact that *aretē* was so pervasive a concept in all aspects and in all eras of Greek culture does not dilute its importance in the sphere of athletics; it suggests that athletic *aretē* shared the essential qualities of the generalized notion of *aretē* and could therefore have widespread symbolic importance.

In the traditional view of Pindar, *aretē* was something obtained by nature, improved by practice, and seen through to success with the assistance of the gods, as expressed in this ode to a victor in boys' boxing: “Sharpening one who is naturally excellent [φύοντ’ ἀρετᾶ], a man [as trainer], with the guiding hand of god, can rouse him to enormous fame. (Ol. 10. 20–21)

The chief purpose of *aretē* within the social contest system was “to win fame” (κῦδος [κλέος, εὐχος] ἀρέσθαι), to obtain a measure of immortality, and to do so in accordance with the prosperity of one’s family and community. (Scanlon 2002, p. 17)

Greek athletics emerged from religious festivity and “one’s performance in [athletic events] was taken as a measure of status and honor” (Scanlon 2002, p. 12). For this reason, boxing and other competitions were “pursued with deadly seriousness and with one eye on our human relation to the divine cosmos” and the other eye on one’s opponent (Scanlon 2002, p. 12)

In his *Description of Greece* Pausanias (5.7.10) claims that Apollo beat Ares in boxing at the first Olympics (which were held either to celebrate the victory of Zeus over his father Cronos, or to set the stage for them to wrestle for supremacy). The match is not described in any detail, but it is an indication of Apollo’s dominion over boxing and boxers. That Ares is defeated in boxing by the youthful and adroit Apollo suggests that the Greeks did not necessarily conceive of boxing as a form of war, but as something connected to Apolline attributes and associations: archery, music, dance, truth, prophecy, healing, and disease, the sun, light, and poetry. What does this list have to do with boxing? Music and dance may be the Apollonian features most closely associated with pugilism. A boxer’s movements are analogous to those of a dancer and music had a strong association with boxing across ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures.

While we should be skeptical, Philostratus (*Gym.* 9) asserted that the Spartans developed boxing because they chose not to wear helmets in battle (preferring shields). Thus boxing gave them an opportunity to practice how to protect themselves from being struck in the

face, and how to endure it when such blows inevitably occurred. The Spartans, who claimed to have invented boxing, quickly abandoned it and did not take part in boxing competitions. The true origins of boxing, as we have demonstrated, are far less tractable (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022a; b).

Boxing was first listed as an Olympic event in 688 BC and a boys' version was differentiated sixty years later. The rules of boxing were ascribed to the first Olympic champion, Onomastus of Smyrna.<sup>162</sup> Hellenic boxing arguably emphasized strikes to the head; some have argued that they were not permitted to strike the body during this period of development.

Hellenic boxers were not censured if they killed their opponents in the bout, but they were usually denied victory. Slaughtering an opponent in the 'ring' was treated like accidentally killing a comrade during war, according to Athenian law (Scanlon 2002, p. 307). The killer still had to be relieved of blood guilt, an expression of catharsis perhaps helpful to the subsequent social acceptance, if not the emotional welfare, of the survivor. The boxer Kleomedes of Astypalaea killed his opponent, went mad<sup>163</sup> and then went on to kill again (Paus. 6.9.6–8).<sup>164</sup> Notably, he was censured not for the death of his antagonist Icos of Epidaurus but because of his use of a foul blow. (Unfortunately the details of the blow are not specified.)

While athletic boxing may not have assured one contestant of death, it was nevertheless gravely dangerous and the Greeks were well aware of boxing's vicissitudes. They acknowledged boxing as the 'heaviest' of the athletic contests, even more so than their *pankration*. Agathos "the Camel"<sup>165</sup> Daimon of Alexandria died at Olympia, 35 years old (Riele 1964, pp. 185–187). The Nemean champ's inscription (Scanlon 2002, p. 305) reads:

ἐνθάδε πυκτεύων ἐν τῷ σταδίῳ ἐτελεύτα,  
εὐξάμενος Ζεὺς ή στέφος ή θάνατον

Boxing here in the stadium I died,  
praying to Zeus for either the wreath or death.

What was the nature of this man's sacrifice? Did he really lose the match by dying at the hands of his opponent? Or are the wreath and death, in fact, equivalent prizes?<sup>166</sup> Agathos' inscription raises these profound questions with a great economy of few words, cleverly concealed in what appears to be a narrative statement about one man's attitude. No boxer has the right to step between the ropes without this man's conviction or his pellucid appraisal of the mystery that boxing represents. “‘The wreath or death’ was more than a hyperbolic boast” in the cultus of Greek boxing (Scanlon 2002, p. ii). Indeed, it is the omnipresence of

<sup>162</sup> Boxing was more developed as a rule-governed practice in Asia Minor at the time of its introduction to the Olympics; this may be inferred reasonably from the fact that its thesmothete was Onomastus of Smyrna (Thuillier 1985, p. 268). Onomastus is discussed in more detail below in comments on Philostratus.

<sup>163</sup> Savica et al. (2017) speculate that Kleomedes suffered from *dementia pugilistica* rather than some other form of psychological or neurological trauma.

<sup>164</sup> The introduction of the cruel *cæstus* in Roman ‘gladiatorial’ boxing (Section 3.5) must have increased the body count considerably, but we are aware of no contemporaneous mention of the mortality rate or its social impacts in Italy.

<sup>165</sup> The nickname may have suggested strength, endurance, or heaviness.

<sup>166</sup> To kill a man in the ring may be to experience an agonizing draw, as suggested, for example, by the remarkable life of Ray “Boom-Boom” Mancini after he beat his opponent to death under the lights of Caesars Palace in 1982 (Kriegel 2013).

death that made (and makes) boxing a powerful cultic activity, one that has outlasted (and will outlast) the greatest civilizations.

Prizes are of considerable importance throughout the history of boxing; they are nearly ubiquitous in its iconography and appear frequently in literary attestations, as well. In all boxing competitions of the funereal type, such prizes are offered: precious vessels, livestock, and a shield are among the guerdons of epic pugilism.<sup>167</sup> With regard to other traditional athletic events, the prizes for the ‘heavy’ events of boxing, wrestling, and *pankration* became increasingly valuable during the Roman era. This was arguably a function of the growing prestige of combat sport (Scanlon 2002, p. 56).

After AD 37, contestants were no longer allowed to enter both boxing and the *pankration*.<sup>168</sup> The winner of both events was previously known as the ‘Successor of Heracles’. Perhaps this was to avoid immoderation (can there be too much of fighting?) or perhaps “officials simply wished to avoid too many ‘sweeps’ by specialized heavy athletes in these events” (Scanlon 2002, p. 52).

Perhaps surprisingly, there are few attestations of boxing matches where the victor gets the girl.<sup>169</sup> According to a tale told by Pausanias (6.6.9–10), Euthymus of Lokroi, who boxed victorious at the Olympics, fell in love with an Italian maiden from Temessa. To win her, however, he first had to fight the local ghost. In life, the spirit had been a comrade of Odysseus; in death he haunted the locals and demanded a local virgin be sacrificed to him as his wife each year. Euthymus succeeded in getting the girl after the ghost simply fled, unwilling to meet him in combat. “The hero or athlete who has successfully demonstrated his excellence is a most suitable candidate for husband” (Scanlon 2002, p. 226) (cf. Plato, *Rep.*, 468c, in which it is recommended that a victorious warrior receive the beloved of his choice.).

In *Heroicus* (p. 678), Philostratus the Athenian explains that a boxer named Plutarch consulted the cult hero Protesilaus about how to win an upcoming match. Puzzlingly, he was instructed to pray to Achelous, the chief river god. During the fight, when Plutarch was exhausted from thirst, a storm erupted over the stadium, engorging the fleece (*κώδια*, diminutive of *κώδιον*) on his forearms (*πήχυς*)<sup>170</sup> with water, which he drank, winning the match and revealing the meaning of the oracle’s advice. The *κώδια* mentioned here is probably equivalent to the sheepskin (*vellus*) that absorbs Capaneus’ blood in the *Thebaid* (Section 3.4.2). It was likely used “as a sweatband or as a protective cover for the forearm, and would have served as a convenient sponge for the boxer Plutarch” (Scanlon 1986, p. iii). By the age of Philostratus the Athenian, boxers routinely wore a kind of boxing gauntlet that covered a good deal of the arm, and was notable for its lanuginous cuff.

Philostratus (*Gym.* 34) expounds at length on physical desiderata for boxers:

The boxer should have large hands and well-built forearms, and upper arms which are not lacking in vigor and strong shoulders and a high neck. Thick wrists give a heavier punch; those that are less thick are flexible and punch with ease. Let him also be supported by well-built hips, for the forward projection of the hands drags the body downwards, unless it is supported on firm hips.

<sup>167</sup>In the Valerian *Argonautica* (4.216–217), Amycus wickedly offers death as the *donum* in his boxing matches, suggesting that ‘gladiatorial’ boxing had already captivated the author’s imagination.

<sup>168</sup>According to Philostratus, *pankration* was imperfect wrestling combined with imperfect boxing (*Gym.* 11).

<sup>169</sup>For a Near Eastern example, see the Marriage of Martu in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022b).

<sup>170</sup>... περὶ τοῖς πήχεσι κώδια ...

I think that those who have bulky calves that are not well suited to any of the disciplines, but least of all to boxing. For these athletes will be slow to kick against the shins of their adversaries, and easily kicked in turn. The boxer should have calves that are straight and well-proportioned, while the thighs should be well distanced and separated from each other. For the shape of the boxer is more suited to attack if his thighs do not come together.<sup>171</sup> The best kind of stomach for a boxer is slim; for these athletes are light and have good breathing. Nevertheless there is some advantage in the stomach for a boxer, for a stomach of this kind can ward off blows against the face by sticking out in a way that impedes the forward motion of the punching opponent.

Later (*Gym.* 36), he expands on size, assigning a relative disadvantage to small stature for a boxer: “They are hit from above by their opponents and have to raise themselves up in the air in a comical fashion whenever they themselves throw punches.” From these passages we can extract the somatotype of the classical Greek and Roman boxer:

- big hands
- well-built forearms
- an upper arm that did not lack vigor
- strong shoulders
- high neck
- strong wrists giving a harder blow
- well built hips
- strong but not voluminous calves (kicks slow and easily kicked back)
- thighs well apart and apart separated
- thin belly (*ἀθληταῖς*: lighter, better respiration)
- of average height or taller

This is the most extensive physical description of the boxing physique that has survived from the ancient world; compare it to the *Boxer at Rest*, *q.v.* and the many illustrations included here and in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022d). It would not be unwarranted to extrapolate from Philostratus’ prose description that the chief boxers of the Greek world, such as Onomastus, would have resembled this ideal.

Blood, gore, sweat, and bruises (the telluric heart of boxing) were ever-prized in pugilism, even among the Greeks. One anonymous poet whose work is now found in the *Greek Anthology* (12.123) wrote:

When Menecharmus, Anticles’ son, won the boxing match [*πυγμῇ νικήσαντα*]  
 I crowned [*στεφανώω*] him with ten soft fillets,  
 And thrice I kissed [*φιλέω*] him all red [*φύρω*] with much blood,  
 But the blood was sweeter [*μελιχρός*] to me than myrrh [*σμύρνα*]<sup>172</sup>

To argue that the Greeks were too sensitive or civilized to revel in the blood-and-guts of the ring is to deny their own textual history. The Greeks were fascinated by the physical deconstruction of individual boxers. If they laughed at a boxer’s cauliflower ear or his twisted

<sup>171</sup>As boxing was conducted in the nude, this seems anatomically appropriate.

<sup>172</sup>Translated by Scanlon (2002, p. 218).

nose, perhaps they thought it was better for him to die, gloriously, in the ring. One author mocked a boxer named Stratophon (*Greek Anthology*, II.77): “[A]fter boxing for four hours, [you] have become not only unrecognizable to dogs but to the city” (Paton 1918, p. iii). Hellenistic artists, at least, seem to have been equally amused by the disfigurement that accompanied a boxing career. The terracotta statue of a boxer shown in Figure 2 is one example of a Greek boxer manifesting cauliflower ear (*ώτοκλαδίας*). The deformity is represented in a variety of other statues of boxers, including little-known works like a grotesque terracotta head housed at the Bergama Museum in Izmir, Turkey (Inv. A 3472); and the celebrated *Boxer at Rest* found at Rome in the late nineteenth century (Section 3.5). According to one critic, “mangled ears” became a hallmark of boxers as depicted in statuary of the Roman imperial period (König 2005, p. iii).

In discussing boxing handgear among the Greeks, we draw on an extensive literature. Before the invention of the well-known Roman *cæstus* (Section 3.5), the Greeks engaged in a good deal of experimentation with boxing gauntlets or *himantes*, the earliest forms of which are mentioned in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022d).

Philostratus cites the development of the hand covering from a band wrapping the four fingers with a strap, to a cowhide “sharp, projecting boxing glove” (*πυκτικὸν δέξιν καὶ προεμβάλλοντα*) (*Gym* 10). Lee (1997) attributes a three-stage evolution of (Greek) boxing gloves to (Jüthner and Mehl 1962). This includes:

1. Soft thongs, simple leather straps, *himantes meilichai* (literally, the sweet, mild, or gentle straps)
2. padded inner-glove or sleeve with leather wrapping, which had arisen by at latest 324 BC (Jüthner called these the *sphairai*).
3. Worn by the bronze boxer at Terme (Section 3.5), these are the *himantes oxeis δέξις* or ‘sharp thongs’: thick rings of leather encircled the fingers, but not the thumb, including a knuckle pad under the rings.

The meaning of the Greek word *μύρμηκες* (*myrmēkes*) is not entirely clear.<sup>173</sup> While Poliakoff (1987a, p. 73) reasons that the term, which literally refers to (biting) ants, is the name for the ‘sharp thongs’, Jüthner and Mehl (1962) suggests that *myrmēkes* instead refers to the dumbbells featured in Alpine situla art (Section 2 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)). The most convincing iconographic representation of *myrmēkes* as ‘biting ants’ may be in the cruel *cæstus* of the Trier Mosaic (Figure 17) or the boxing mosaic from Ostia (Figure 23). While these are relatively late Roman artifacts, so is the attestation of *myrmēkes* in Pollux’ late second-century *Onomasticon*. Though a Greek term, the ‘biting ants’ are perhaps more related to what we call ‘gladiatorial’ boxing than ‘athletic boxing’ (Section 3.5).

The *himantes* were not likely understood to protect the hands of the boxer.<sup>174</sup> As evidence for this claim, they do not appear on the hands of Polydeuces<sup>175</sup> as he hits the punching bag in the Ficoroni Cista (Figure 39 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)). On the same object, he wears the *himantes* while tying Amycus to a tree (Figure 40 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus

<sup>173</sup>The term is attested in Pollux, *Onomasticon* 3.150), writing in the second century AD.

<sup>174</sup>In at least one depiction (late sixth century BC), only the wrist was bound (Archaeological Civic Museum of Bologna, No. 433) (Poliakoff 1987a, Fig. 71).

<sup>175</sup>For the identification of this figure as Polydeuces, see Williams (1945a, p. 351).

(2023)), suggesting that the artist did not intend to indicate a bare knuckle bout and was also purposeful in omitting the *himantes* for the training scene.<sup>176</sup>

*Himantes* made of pigskin were prohibited, as it was thought that they caused too much injury (*Phil. Gym.* 10). This is perhaps because pigskin is thinner than cow leather. Such a recognition suggests that Greeks recognized a threshold ‘weight’ for their boxing gloves. Did using pigskin risk damage to the wearer, his opponent, or both? Greek commentators naturally seem to focus on the damage that boxing did to the visage of the pugilists, not the injuries to their hands<sup>177</sup> Based on this, as well as the evidence from the Ficoroni Cista, it seems likely that *himantes* were intended to limit the disfigurement of the person being punched, not to protect the hands of the fighter doing the striking. Perhaps this is why later Roman innovations to the *himantes* were so appealing, since they would have performed the opposite function, to wit, disfiguring an opponent more quickly and effectively.

Based on inspection of vase paintings, Thuillier (1985, p. 259) dates the invention of the sharp thongs to 339–336 BC. As Jüthner and Mehl (1962) explained, these included a thick leather strap that encircled the knuckles. Its purpose was almost certainly offensive in nature. The epithet *oxeis* suggests that it was intended to lacerate an opponent, as was the Roman *cæstus* (derived from the verb *cædo* ‘cut’).

In an extended simile in which Plutarch (*Precepta* 32) compares public debate to a boxing match, he mentions ἐπισφάραι (*episphairai*)<sup>178</sup> ‘round muffles’ intended, he explains, to avoid “any fatal accident”, rendering the blows “soft and such as can do no great harm” (1874, p. 155). The gloves (*σφαῖρα*) were mentioned much earlier by Plato (*Laws* 8.830B) for mimicking the real distribution and reception of blows. The *episphairai* represent yet another Greek variation on the boxing glove.

According to Philostratus, writing in the third century of the Christian era, kicking (the shins) was allowed in boxing, though it is infrequently attested in visual art (Rusten and König 2014, p. 419, fn. 59). Moreover, Philostratus regarded those with bulky calves as being incapable of delivering and avoiding kicks in boxing. Kicking is also mentioned in the fourth century AD, Euseb. *Prep. evang.* 5.34 and in *Gym.* 34. In Philostratus, much hinges on the interpretation of the verb *προσβαίνω*, translated by some, including Jüthner (1909, p. 210–211) and Robinson (1955, p. 216), as ‘kick’. Others prefer to translate *προσβαίνω* as ‘advance’ or ‘lunge’ (Gardiner 1910, p. 426fn. 2) or simply ‘approach’ (Crowther 1990, p. 179). “Philostratus is stating not that the boxer kicks against the shins of his opponent, but that he takes up his stance close to the shins of the opponent” (*ibid.*).

Eusebius, who lived in the late third and early fourth centuries AD, appears to offer the clearest evidence for kicking in boxing, by employing the term *λακτίζω* in his comments critical of the honors given to athletes, including Cleomedes (whom Eusebius may have confused with Damoxenos) (Crowther 1990, p. 179–180).<sup>179</sup> Eusebius also writes that asses, especially wild ones, make good boxers, the implication being that kicks were essential in the boxing

<sup>176</sup>The Roman *cæstus*, on the other hand, was worn during shadow-boxing, as clearly indicated in the Latin *Argonautica* by Valerius Flaccus (*Argo.* i, 420): “The hero of Sparta wears thongs of bull’s hide studded with wounding lead, that to the empty airs at least he may deal his random blows, and that the Pagasean ship may ... watch his harmless sport” (trans. J. H. Mozley, 1934; p. 35).

<sup>177</sup>The injured boxer as a motif arises in black-figure vase painting but arguably reached its zenith in the Hellenistic sculpture known as the Boxer at Rest, discussed below.

<sup>178</sup>Note the vowel [o] in the original. In the boxing literature, at least, the term is generally transliterated with [a], as we have done.

<sup>179</sup>ἔκεινο δὲ εἰδέναι, δτὶ ή πυκτικὴ τῆς λακτικῆς οὐδὲν διαφέρει (*Preparatio Evangelica* 5.34.2).

‘ring’ (*Preparatio Evangelica* 5.34.7). Eusebius, though regarded as one of the most learned Christians of Late Antiquity, was perhaps “not the most reliable witness on Greek boxing” (Crowther 1990, p. 180). By including kicks, he may have been “confusing a form of Roman boxing from his own time with Greek boxing” (*ibid.*). The literary and visual evidence for kicking in Greek boxing has been thoroughly reviewed (Crowther 1990). Some images may show boxers “stepping on” their opponents “perhaps to prevent [them from] getting up” (*ibid.*, p. 177).

According to Harmon’s translation of Lucian, in his second-century *Demonax*, biting, though foul, was known to occur in boxing (Harmon 1913, p. 167). The following passage is Harmon’s translation of *Demonax* (49):

When he saw many of the athletes fighting foul and breaking the rules of the games by biting instead of boxing, he said: “No wonder the athletes of the present day are called ‘lions’ by their hangers-on!”<sup>180</sup>

Lucian uses the verb κακομαχέω ‘fight unfairly’. He refers to παγκρατιάζω ‘practice *pankratiation*’ rather than *pygmachia* or a similar term, so this passage seems to have nothing to do with boxing at all. The word for ‘bite’ is δάκνω. “Rules of the games” is (νόμος ... ἐναγώνιος).

Writing in the second century AD, Artemidorus of Ephesus included in the *Oneirokritika*, his book on the interpretation of dreams, a brief section on dreams involving the heavy sports including boxing (*On. 1.61*). Artemidorus concluded that a dream of boxing means universal harm (Harris-McCoy 2012).

To box is harmful for all. For it signifies damage to one’s honour and harm. For in fact the face becomes misshapen and blood comes forth, which is considered to be like money. But it is good only for those who make their living from blood, and by that I mean doctors, sacrificers, and cooks.<sup>181</sup>

A more sophisticated praxis of boxing has begun to emerge in the terminology used by historians and essayists as well. Unlike the relatively sparse and obscure descriptions and metaphors used in Homer, Philostratus is able to identify a specific coaching call and connect it to a strike we would recognize as heirs of the tradition:

When Glaucus of Carystus was giving way to his opponent in the boxing at Olympia, his trainer Tisias led him to victory by encouraging him to strike “the blow from the plow”. This meant a right-handed punch against his opponent; for Glaucus was so strong with that hand that he once straightened a bent plow-share in Euboea by hitting it with his right hand like a hammer. (*Gym. 20*)

A kind of training activity called σφαιρομαχία is attested as early as 394 BC in Aristomenes’ *Dionysus Asketes* (Borthwick 1964a, fn. 8). In this context, the activity is related to the athletic training of Dionysus and the reference may have been deployed to humorous effect. The activity is most likely related to punching a ball, perhaps like modern speed-bag training.<sup>182</sup>

<sup>180</sup> ἐπεὶ μέντοι πολλοὺς τῶν ἀθλητῶν ἔωρα κακομαχοῦντας καὶ παρὰ τὸν νόμον τὸν ἐναγώνιον ἀντὶ τοῦ παγκρατιάζειν δάκνοντας, Οὐκέπεικότως, ἔρη, τοὺς νῦν ἀθλητὰς οἱ παρομαρτοῦντες λέοντας καλοῦστον.

<sup>181</sup> Πικτεύειν παντὶ βλαβερόν, πρὸς γὰρ ταῖς αἰσχύναις καὶ βλάβαις σημαίνει· καὶ γὰρ ἀσχημον γίνεται τὸ πρόσωπον καὶ αἷμα ἀποκρίνεται, ὅπερ ἀργύριον εἶναι νενόμισται. ἀγαθὸν δὲ μόνοις τοῖς ἐξ αἴματος ποριζομένοις, λέγω δὲ ιατροῖς θύταις μαχείροις.

<sup>182</sup> The possibilities are still more numerous for the Romanized version of the activity, *sphaeromachia* (3.5).

Philostratus cites weightlifting, sprinting, bending metal, wrestling with animals, and swimming as being used in training boxers and other combat athletes (*Gym.* 43). In *Gym.* 48–52 he counsels athletes (*a fortiori* boxers) to abstain from sexual intercourse, overeating, and alcohol before exercise and competition. Ear-guards (ἀμφωτίδες, related to the term for a two-handled pail) are also a relatively poorly attested piece of boxing equipment.<sup>183</sup>

A light punching bag is cited in *Gym.* 57:

A punching bag should be hung up also for boxers, but all the more so for those who compete in the *pankration*. The punching bag for the boxers should be light, since the hands of boxers are to be trained only for opportune punching, but the punching bag for pankratiasts should by [sic, be] heavier and bigger  
....<sup>184</sup>

No details of the construction of a punching bag κώρυκος are provided by Philostratus. An item called κώρυκος is sometimes regarded as a leather sack hung up for punching (it also means ‘scrotum’).<sup>185</sup>

Philostratus mentions Onomastus<sup>186</sup> of Smyrna (*Gym.* 12) as the originator of the rules of Greek boxing<sup>187</sup> and four-time boxing champion at the seventh-century BC Olympics.<sup>188</sup> Their adoption is doubly notable to Philostratus because of Onomastus’ origin in Smyrna (modern Izmir in Turkey): his mastery was such that the stain of his Anatolian background was overwhelmed by his reputation for the mainland Greeks, establishing his ruleset as the Olympic standard. Unfortunately, no direct trace of these rules serves as such.

### 2.7.1 Learned etymologies of Greek combat sport

In an extended discussion with Sosicles of Coronea over the antiquity of wrestling versus other sports, Plutarch (*Quæs Conv.* 2.4) reports that Philinus etymologized wrestling as having to do with the *palaiste* ‘palm’ while boxing had to do with the *pygme* ‘fist’. While Plutarch disagreed, these folk etymologies are revealing as to how people understood the sports at some point in the long history of Greek boxing: the action of the open hands in wrestling versus the closed fists in boxing.<sup>189</sup> Plutarch goes on to conclude that wrestling is derived from a verb meaning ‘draw near together’, which makes sense to him, because, he claimed, ancient Greek boxers were not permitted to hold each other.

<sup>183</sup> References to the ἀμφωτίδες include: Plu. 2.38b, 706c, cf. Paus. *Gr. Fr.* 52., *Pollux* 2.82.

<sup>184</sup> Κώρυκος δὲ ἀνήρφω μὲν καὶ πύκταις, πολὺ δὲ μᾶλλον τοῖς ἐπὶ τὸ παγκράτιον φοιτῶσιν. ἔστω δὲ καὶ κοῦφος μὲν ὁ πυκτικός; ἐπειδὴ κωρύκου γυμνάζονται μόναι αἱ τῶν πυκτῶν χεῖρες, δὲ τῶν παγκρατιαστῶν ἐμβριθέστερος καὶ μείζων

....<sup>185</sup> References to the κώρυκος include: *Sor.* 1.49, *Antyll.* ap. *Orib.* 6.33.1, *Gym.* 57, and *Luc. Lex.* 5.

<sup>186</sup> The name bears no relation save coincidence to Pollux’ *Onomasticon*; it merely means “a name of note” in circular fashion.

<sup>187</sup> καὶ νόμους ἔγραψεν δὲ θλητῆς σύντος πυκτικούς, οἵς ἔχρωντο οἱ Ἡλεῖοι διὰ σοφίαν τοῦ πύκτου, καὶ οὐκ ἥχθοντο οἱ Ἀρκάδες, εἰ νόμους ἔγραψεν αὐτοῖς ἐναγωνίους ἐξ Ἰωνίᾳ ἤκων τῆς ἀβρᾶς.

<sup>188</sup> 688, 684, 680, and 676 BC.

<sup>189</sup> The open-hand gesture, emphasized through the exaggerated length of the extended fingers, is found in Greek vase paintings (e.g., Figure 27 in *Dioscurus* and *Dioscurus* (2022d)) as well as Etruscan tomb paintings.

### 3 Rome

The Romans “recognized the paradoxical combination of the productive and destructive in gladiatorial combat” (Feldherr 2002, p. 71). The fights were “grim but necessary” according to the Emperor Julian, who reigned in the fourth century of the Christian Era.<sup>190</sup> If we can extend the same logic to boxing, as seems appropriate given the blurred line between boxing and gladiatorial fights in Late Antiquity, then we must ask, “Necessary for what?” Watching the fights was certainly an aspect of Roman socialization (Figure 3). However, Feldherr (2002) argues for more: personal combat as a form of sacrifice should be equated with Livy’s “unendurable remedies”.<sup>191</sup> Livy argues that the young, in particular, will be moved to identify with the executed but the execution will nonetheless have salubrious effects on those same disgusted youth as they reach maturity.<sup>192</sup> Boxing is still seen as an “unendurable remedy” to a variety of problems in the modern West: these include gun violence, the father’s absence from family life, the dissolution of social bonds, and the displacement of traditional manly virtues. To know exactly which problems were solved by the version of boxing held in the grisly embrace of Rome we will undertake a thorough review of the literary and visual evidence in this section.

We agree with Deremetz (2011, p. 54), that Latin epics, in particular, are not completely reliable documents for those interested in the history of boxing. Instead, they “freely mix realities belonging to different historical strata, both Greek and Latin, and are mixed with data from the mythological imagination” (translation ours). Still, by carefully reviewing these epic stylizations of ancient boxing, we hope to infer something about boxing and boxing values in the Roman world, or at least to generate new questions worthy of inquiry in other venues.

#### 3.1 *Aeneid* 5

In Book 5 of the *Aeneid*, the eponymous hero gathers his comrades together to celebrate the *jahrzeit* of his father, Anchises, with contests that feature a “battle with gloves of raw hide” (line 69).<sup>193</sup> After eight days of sacrificing wine, blood, flesh, and flowers, athletic competitions begin on the ninth. During the prodromal sacrifices, participants are crowned with wreaths. The description of the boxing competition, which occurs after a foot race and before an archery event, is lengthy (122 lines of dactylic hexameter) and thus offers us a great deal of lexical and grammatical material to review in order to better understand how boxing was regarded by Vergil and his audience in the first century BC. At least one critic has argued that the boxing match is central to the games and thus to the *Aeneid* itself, functioning as a bridge between its two halves (Feldherr 2002).

To construct his own boxing episode, the poet appears to have drawn on at least two boxing narratives in Greek literature that we reviewed in a previous article (Dioscurus and

<sup>190</sup> σκυθρωπῶν μέν, ἀναγκαῖον δὲ ὅμως (*Or.* 4.156b–c).

<sup>191</sup> ... quibus nec uitia nostra nec remedia pati possumus peruentum est (*Liv.* 1 *pref* 9).

<sup>192</sup> *triste exemplum sed in posterum salubre iuventuti erimus* (*Liv.* 8.7.17).

<sup>193</sup> The line reads: *seu crudo fudit pugnam committere cestu*. The adjective *crudus*, here modifying the ablative plural *cestu*, is frequently translated as ‘raw’ or ‘rawhide’ (Ruden 2008) but might be just as appropriately translated as ‘bloody’, ‘bleeding’, or ‘trickling with blood’ (Fairclough and Brown 1919). Indeed, we later learn that the *cestus*,<sup>194</sup> to which blood and gore still cling, have been used previously (line 413). Line numbers in this section come from Greenough (1900) unless otherwise indicated.

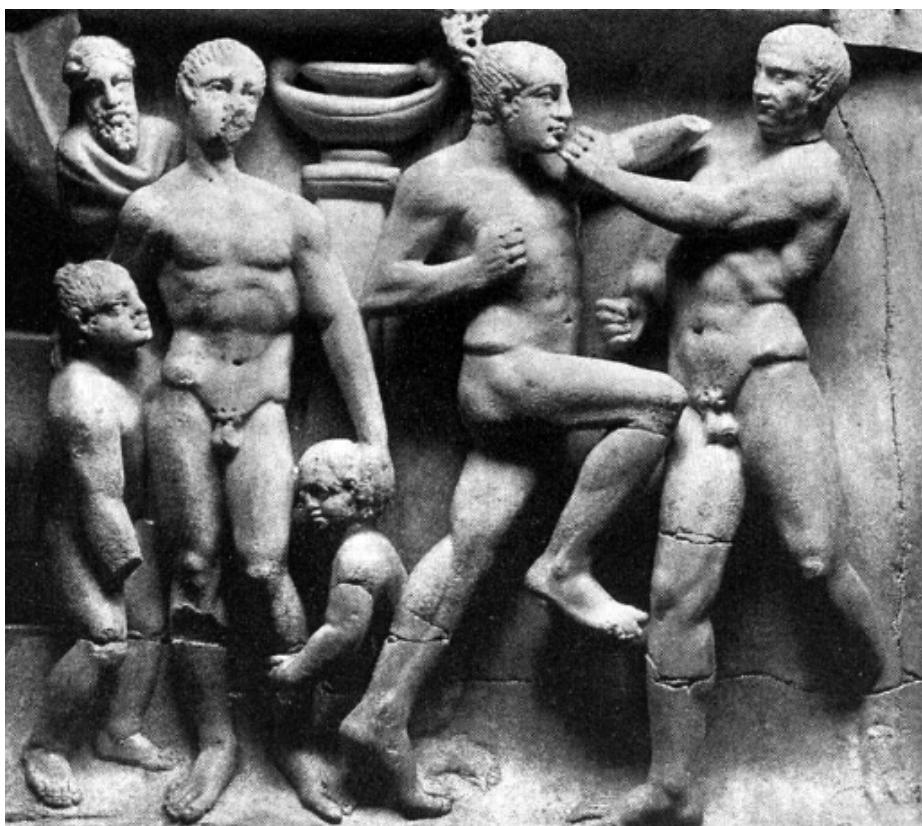


Figure 3: Fistfighting (probably pankration) with young spectators. Detail of sarcophagus, Roman, AD 450–425, Museo Torlonia, No. 478.

Dioscurus 2022d).<sup>195</sup> These are found in *Iliad* 23 and the second book of the *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes.<sup>196</sup> As in the proem to the Iliadic boxing match, Aeneas (as a substitute for Achilles) calls on fighters to volunteer or ‘be at hand’ (*adsum*) (lines 363–364). These must “have valour in their breast and a stout heart” (*virtus animusque in pectore presens*). Here, *animus* appears to function for the equally polysemous Greek *thymos*: it may also be defined as ‘the rational soul’. Fairclough and Brown (1919, p. 421) decode *animus... presens* as “the spirit of resolution that supports one in the hour of danger ... more than mere presence of mind, being active, not simply passive.” The would-be fighters’ arms must be ‘lifted up’ (*attollo*), their ‘flat hands’ or ‘palms’ (*palma*) ‘bound’ (*evincio*). The binding material is not yet mentioned in the narrative, despite the efforts of some proleptic translators.

Like his predecessor Achilles, Aeneas sets out a ‘double-prize’ (*geminus honor*), careful to provide a ‘consolation’ (*solacium*) for the defeated fighter.<sup>197</sup> The winner will receive a ‘bullock’ (*iuvencus*) while the loser gets a ‘distinguished’, probably ‘engraved’, helmet (*insignis galea*)<sup>198</sup> and sword (*ensis*). The victor’s prize bovid is decked with gold<sup>199</sup> and garlands (*velatus auro vittisque*), suggesting its cultic importance to be revealed in the narrative’s stunning denouement.

A soldier named Dares<sup>200</sup> immediately and vigorously (*cum viribus*) presents himself (*ef-fero*). We are told that he was once the sparring partner<sup>201</sup> (*solitus contendere contra*) of the Trojan prince Paris.<sup>202</sup> Dares’ record also includes a beat-down (*percello*) of Butes, a kinsman of the boxing Bebrycian king Amycus.<sup>203</sup> Vergil informs us that this bout took place in a funereal context, as well, at a match held in honor of Hector, another prince of Troy.<sup>204</sup>

In his preparations, Dares throws punches at the air (*verbero ictibus auras*) in the same

<sup>195</sup> With some exaggeration, Servius Auctus (Verg. *Æn.* 5.426) wrote of the Vergilian boxing episode, *est autem hic totus locus de Apollonio translatus* “The whole thing is copied from Apollonius” (Dunkle 2005, pp. 170–173). Hedging his bets, he also wrote of Book 5 *pars maior ex Homero sumpta est* “most of it is taken from Homer.”

<sup>196</sup> In composing *Aeneid* 5, Vergil arguably referred to *Odyssey* 8, in which the man of twists and turns participates in an athletic competition on Phaeacia (Dunkle 2005, pp. 154–155). The games include πόλεις ‘boxing’ but the activity is not described in any detail (*Odyssey* 8.103, 130, 205). Odysseus’ pugilistic encounter with Iros in *Odyssey* 18, which we review carefully in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022d), is not universally regarded as an influence on Vergil’s boxing vignette but see Nelis (2001, p. 9) for a different perspective. Another source may have been the second-century *Annals* of Ennius. However, the putative reference to boxing in this work, at funeral games established by Romulus, is fragmentary and depends on a controversial reading of *cæstibus* versus *cælestibus* (Skutsch 1985).

<sup>197</sup> According to Nelis (2001, p. 13), “Vergil’s opening scene” of the boxing match “is closely modeled” on its Iliadic predecessor.

<sup>198</sup> Helmets are one of the most common motifs to appear situated between boxers in situla art of northern Italy and the eastern Alps (Section 2 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)).

<sup>199</sup> Ruden’s translation (2008) suggests that the horns are gilded and that the bullock is beribboned (p. 101).

<sup>200</sup> The name is etymologically related to δέρω ‘beat’ and particularly the aorist passive participle δέρεται ‘the beaten (one)’ (McGowan 2002, p. 87). Vergil’s use of two different accusative forms, *Daren* and *Dareta*, arguably signals the boxer’s shifting role from bully to battered over the course of the vignette (*ibid.*).

<sup>201</sup> *solus qui Paridem solitus contendere contra* “[W]ho alone was wont to spar with Paris” (McGowan 2002, p. 81).

<sup>202</sup> Paris was regarded as an excellent athlete, perhaps even a boxer, in Roman verse, whereas Homer regarded him as “showy and effeminate” (Fairclough and Brown 1919, p. 421).

<sup>203</sup> This is the same Amycus slain by Polydeuces in a boxing match narrated in *Argonautica* 2 (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d). By referring to a Bebrycian boxer, “the Vergilian bout immediately evokes its [Apollonian] counterpart” (Nelis 2001, p. 13). In what follows, imitations of Homer and Apollonius are “almost inextricably intertwined” but ultimately “[t]here is no complete identification between Vergil’s characters and any single model, whether Homeric or [Apollonian]” (*ibid.*, pp. 14, 16).

<sup>204</sup> *ad tumulum, quo maximus occubat Hector* (line 371). The funeral games of Hector are mentioned at the conclusion of the *Iliad*, but there is no reference to a boxing match. After the barrow is constructed over Hector’s remains a banquet is given (δάινωμι) but Homer alludes to no games of any kind (24.802).

proemial show of skill boxers exhibit to the present day. Poliakoff (1985) suggests that this show of shadowboxing is not vainglory; it is, rather, a virtuous form of preparation and a “precaution” in Apollonius and Vergil, associated with Polydeuces in the former and Dares in the latter (pp. 229–230). Another commentator notes how, in a simile comparing Turnus to a bull preparing to fight (12.105–106), the animal lashes out at the air; the language used (... *ventosque lacescit | ictibus* ...) recalls the language of Dares shadowboxing in Book 5 (Leigh 2010, p. 130). Vergil emphasizes the fighter’s broad shoulders (*umerus latus*) but is reserved in describing any other anatomical features.

No one takes up the challenge immediately and the *cæstus* are mentioned for the first time inasmuch as no one else wishes to put them on (*manibus induco*). The crickets chirp for so long that Dares finally places his left hand on the bullock and claims it for his own, absent a viable challenger. In line 383, Dares remarks that none dare lend himself to the battle (*credo se pugnae*). Translators like Fairclough (1916) and Ruden (2008) agree that the spectators cheer his bravado, but the lines that follow (384–385) are ambiguous as to the crowd’s disposition: *Cuncti simul ore fremebant | Dardanide, reddique viro promissa iubebant*. The Dardans (i.e., the Trojans) howl (*fremo*) all at once, demanding (*iubeo*) that the prize (*promissa*) be given up (*reddo*, in the passive). The key to understanding this outcry lies in the translation of *viro* ‘man’. Do the Dardans demand that the prize be given up *to* the man who deserves it or *by* the man who usurps it? Inflection is of little help here, since *viro* is a syncretic form for both ablative and dative. It falls to the translator to decide which thematic role is most appropriate given the context. We believe it is more likely that the crowd is incensed that they will not get to see a fight and so they jeer Dares for his presumption. In our experience, once gathered to see two men brutalize each other in the ring, the canaglia do not regard no-shows graciously. Much less do they cheer magnanimously for someone who takes home a prize without fighting for it first.<sup>205</sup> Would an audience of battle-hardened soldiers, wound up by their leader to witness an epic battle, gladly acclaim an uncontested “victory”? Hardly. Dares is playing the heel by goading both a potential rival and the crowd—and the crowd is not having it.

Vergil then turns to a conversation between Acestes, the local Sicilian ruler, who sits next to his comrade Entellus on the grass.<sup>206</sup> Acestes chides his Sicilian companion, who we learn was once a prize-winning<sup>207</sup> boxer, trained by divine Eryx,<sup>208</sup> the son of Aphrodite.<sup>209</sup> Acestes does not disparage Dares but does wonder out loud how Entellus can let the prize walk

<sup>205</sup>In his *Posthomerica*, Quintus plays repeatedly with the tension of a potential no-contest (Section 2.5). In one case, the “bloodless victory” is awarded to Idomeneus, who is arguably too old to fight, anyway.

<sup>206</sup>Entellus later refers to Acestes as his *actor* (line 418). According to Ruden (2008) this means ‘supporter’; to Fairclough (1916), ‘patron’.

<sup>207</sup>The unspecified prizes, perhaps dried viands, could be hung within Entellus’ shelter: *spolia illa tuis pendentia tectis* (line 393).

<sup>208</sup>This made Eryx a half-brother of Æneas. Vergil tells us that Eryx was killed by Heracles in a boxing match—a mythic encounter for which we evidently have no earlier source. Servius Auctus (Verg. *Æn.* 1.570) writes that Eryx, like the Apollonian Amycus, challenged strangers to box and then murdered them.

<sup>209</sup>The celebrated temple of Venus at Eryx, in western Sicily, was described by Ælian in the late second or early third century AD (*De Natura Animalium* 10.50). Ælian wrote: τά γε μήν ιερεία ἐκάστης ἀγέλης αὐτόματα φοιτᾷ καὶ τῷ βωμῷ παρέστηκεν “And the sacrificial victims from every herd come up and stand beside the altar of their own accord” (Scholfield 1958–1959). Via Eryx, the boxing son of Aphrodite who founded the western Sicilian town in which Vergil’s boxing match takes place, the parallel to the sacrifice of the bull in *Aeneid* 5 is worthy of note. The legend of bovine self-sacrifice in the Temple of Erycian Venus may be linked to the understanding that boxers, too, “stand beside the altar [i.e., the ‘ring’] of their own accord” (*ibid.*).

away without a fight. It is a classic call to return to battle as old, at least, as the provocations of Achilles. Entellus protests that he is no coward; he is simply too old to climb back into the ‘ring’.<sup>210</sup> “If only I had the juice I used to ...” Entellus muses.<sup>211</sup> But even if that were the case, he still wouldn’t fight for prizes, he assures Acestes. Vergil thus leads the reader to wonder, what would he fight for?

The Sicilian, who it seems did protest too much, suddenly and with no explanation for his change of heart, produces the giant *cæstus* of his semi-divine master and casts (*proicio*) them into the field of play.<sup>212</sup> Significantly, the gauntlets are ‘twins’ (*geminus*) so there can be no doubt that boxing gloves were worn on both hands in the Roman ‘ring’. Though often assumed, this was made explicit by neither Homer nor Apollonius. Vergil intends that the reader gape, awestruck (*obstipesco*, line 404; *stupeo*, line 406) at the *cæstus*, which are ‘of monstrous weight’ (*immani pondere*). Unless we are to consider Entellus (or Eryx) a giant, we must assume that this impressive characteristic of the *cæstus* derives not from the size of the *cæstus* (a function of a boxer’s hand size, presumably) but from the cumulative weight of lead and iron studs sewn into the leather, so much of it that the leather is stiff (*plumbo insuto ferroque rigebant*, line 405).<sup>213</sup>

The act of casting the *cæstus* into the ‘ring’ deserves comment, as it has no antecedent to Vergil in literature or art—so far as we are aware. By throwing a representative object which belongs to him into the space consecrated for fighting, Entellus commits himself to the battle. Like signing a fight contract in the modern world, this abstraction has an even closer equivalent in the nineteenth-century, when boxing rivals pitched their hats into the ring as the ultimate token of their gameness, even when the fight had long been planned.<sup>214</sup>

Returning to the construction of the *cæstus*, the poet explains that they were constituted of ‘seven hides of oxen’ (*septem terga boum*). Given the odd number, we reckon that each gauntlet must have been composed of all seven strips. Why so long? The length of the Erycian *cæstus* suggests that it swathed the fist and forearm entirely and in multiple layers. It is not easy to determine the length of a typical Greek boxing *himas*. A low estimate for a single ox-hide thong is about two feet, based on a Panathenaic amphora where an ablated *himas* dangles from the arm of a victorious boxer (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d, Fig. 28). Another representation, from an undated vase painting, shows one strip stretched out longer than the armspan of an adult male, perhaps six feet (Walters et al. 1893–1925, Vol. 3, E 78). This means the *cæstus* described by Vergil—a series of seven ox-hide strips stitched together end to end—was between fourteen and forty-two feet long. The lower estimate comports roughly (though on the high end) with another scholar’s visual inspection of vase paintings, in which Greek *himantes* “appear to have been ten to twelve feet long” (Gardiner 1910, p. 197).<sup>215</sup> The

<sup>210</sup> *Non laudis amor, nec gloria cessit | pulsa metu; sed enim gelidus tardante senecta | sanguis habet, frigentque effetae in corpore vires* (lines 394–396).

<sup>211</sup> *Si mihi, quae quondam fuerat ...* (line 397). Entellus’ reluctance to fight mirrors that of Odysseus, who reflected on his erstwhile “sporting expertise” when demurring to take part in the Phæacian games described in *Odyssey* 8.166–85 (Nelis 2001, p. 14).

<sup>212</sup> Like Homer, who apparently had no specific lexical options for referring to a boxing ‘ring’, Vergil here uses the cohibitive term *medium* ‘midst, center, middle’ for the space in which the contest will take place. Note, however, that later in the narrative (line 456), the poet uses *equor* to refer to the space circumscribed for boxing (see below).

<sup>213</sup> An alternative possibility is that the enormous hides were wrapped around and around the fighter’s fists enough to make them gigantic, but the result would be comically unwieldy. We prefer the argument that it is the weight of the *cæstus* that makes them so remarkable.

<sup>214</sup> “The stakes were drove, the ropes were hitched | Into the ring my hat I pitched” (Masefield 1911).

<sup>215</sup> Modern cotton hand wraps for boxers can be purchased in lengths of nearly 17 feet (200 inches).

girth of a 1.5-ton ox can be reckoned at about nine feet and its length about 6.5 feet, putting the maximum length of the Erycian *cestus*—taken from the circumference of the bullock’s torso at the point of the heart—at a whopping 63 feet.<sup>216</sup>

It was perhaps a Roman innovation to develop a much longer bandage than those worn by the Greeks and it is also conceivable that it was intended to cover the arm all the way to the armpit,<sup>217</sup> as suggested in many depictions (e.g., Figure 2). Greek boxing frequently appears to depict hands so thoroughly wound in the *himantes* that no flesh is visible (e.g., the cross-hatch of fifth- and sixth-century black-figure vase painting, though highly stylized). Other depictions demonstrate that the *himantes* merely crossed the back of the hand and then wound round the wrist a few times (e.g., the sixth-century boxer on a funeral stele found at Kerameikos), leaving much of the skin exposed. A longer wrap would have afforded more surface coverage and more points of contact for potential strikes, suggesting that the forearms, elbows, and even triceps may have been used not merely to defend from but also to inflict damage on an adversary. We assume that the bits of metal were sewn into the terminal segment(s) of a composite strip. Once the strip was wound around the hand and arm, only spikes and studs at the distal end would surface atop the other layers, the prime location for inflicting laceration and other trauma.

We are told that ‘savage’ (*acer*) Eryx used these *cestus* in his boxing matches (*proelium*). It is suggested that they were bound to both his hands and arms: in bouts he was wont to lift (*fero manum*) his hands in the monstrous *cestus*, stretching out his arms (*intendere brachia*) in the ‘hard leather’ (*durus tergum*) (lines 401–403). This degree of coverage is consistent with a bandage as short as fourteen feet. It is also possible that Vergil’s reference to seven ox hides was not meant literally, but to convey the hefty character of the gloves. Alternatively, the poet may have chosen the number seven for its telesmatic associations, perhaps in reference to Apollo, the Greek patron of boxing (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d). According to Clark (1913, pp. 28–31), the number seven was connected to the cult of Apollo at Delphi and has connections to Orpheus and titanomachy. There is some evidence that Vergil was familiar with these associations. Then again, Vergil may have chosen the number seven simply because it is “uneven and sacred” (*ibid.*, p. 31).

With good reason it seems, these *cestus* are the cause of alarm (*obstipesco*) in the Dardan gathering. Vergil evidently hoped for the same reaction in his audience.<sup>218</sup> Upon seeing the *cestus*, valiant Dares is struck dumb (*stupeo*) and either objects to their usage or otherwise becomes reluctant to fight; he may even back out (*recuso*).<sup>219</sup> Great-souled<sup>220</sup> Æneas inspects the gauntlets, perhaps because he, too, is gobsmacked by them, or maybe it is his job as arbiter to ensure that they are fair for the contest. While Æneas conducts his examination, En-

<sup>216</sup><http://bairnsley.com/>, accessed September 18, 2022.

<sup>217</sup>Junkelmann (2000, p. 76) argues that a parallel development occurred with the gladiatorial *manica*: “there was a tendency for the *cestus* worn by boxers to be elongated in the course of the imperial period into something like a sleeve ...”

<sup>218</sup>There may be, in the vision of these extraordinary *cestus*, “cosmic and gigantomachic imagery” (Morgan 1998, p. 188).

<sup>219</sup>*longe recusat*: “from a distance declines”; *longe* implies “shrinking back” (Fairclough and Brown 1919, p. 423). According to one commentator, “Either Dares actually recoils many paces from the weapons and will not come near them, or metaphorically shrinks from them utterly and declines the contest” (Conington 1876). One critic notes that Dares’ sudden fear of fighting connects him to the braggart Iros in the Odyssean boxing vignette (Nelis 2001, p. 15).

<sup>220</sup>The adjective *magnanimus* is a Latin calque for Greek *megathymos*, used by Homer to describe victorious Epeius in the Iliadic boxing match.

tellus speaks up, explaining that his mentor Eryx fought Hercules on the very beach where they now stand.<sup>221</sup> The *cæstus* he wore, which lie ponderously before the gathered crowd, are stained with ancient blood and brains (of the latter, perhaps, the defeated Eryx' own, as surmised by Servius Auctus): *sanguine cernis adhuc sparsoque infecta cerebro* (line 413).<sup>222</sup>

This reference to spattered brains, while unimaginable to most modern readers, is noteworthy for precisely this reason. It is evidence for the true character of ancient boxing hidden, as it were, in plain sight. No regular blow of hide-bound fist could split open another man's skull. It is essential to recognize that boxing gloves like the *cæstus* were instruments of execution: one man—or perhaps both—would necessarily die from their injuries, and likely on the spot. Critics loath to admit<sup>223</sup> the reality of these unsettling scenarios fail to descry in boxing its relationship to human sacrifice or ritual killing.<sup>224</sup> The mute witnesses of boxing in the ancient Minoan, Etruscan, and eastern Alpine cultures make it somewhat more challenging—though not impossible—to reach the same disturbing conclusion. But when an Augustan poet refers to dried cerebral matter caked on a pair of boxing gloves, we could only delude our readers by willfully ignoring the explicitly homicidal nature of the contest.

Vergil uses the terms *cæstus* and *arma* ‘weapons, tools, implements’ when describing the material culture of boxing. We will try to understand what distinction, if any, the poet intends between these two critical words. For example, Vergil indicates that the boxing match between Hercules and Eryx involved both *cæstus* and *arma*: “What if any had seen the gloves and arms of Hercules himself ...?” (Fairclough 1916, emphasis ours).<sup>225</sup> The use of *arma*, translated here as ‘arms’ by Dryden (1697) and Fairclough (1916) but elided by Ruden (2008), suggests weapons were used as complements to the *cæstus*. This recalls the Nuragic *pugillatori* of ancient Sardinia (Section 5 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)) and foreshadows the fearsome pugilists of Late Antiquity, hands fitted with prongs as if their limbs were socketed spears (Figure 16). The generic term *arma* could be used for the implement(s) combined with the *cæstus* (e.g., in Figure 11). Unfortunately, it is not so straightforward, for in other cases the poet appears to use *arma* as a synonym for *cæstus*, for example, in referring directly to Eryx' gauntlets in line 412: *Haec germanus Eryx quondam tuus arma gerebat* “These arms your brother Eryx once wore” (Fairclough 1916).<sup>226</sup> The term *arma* is used again, most likely to refer to Dares' Trojan *cæstus* (line 418), which Entellus bids him put down (*recuso*). At next mention, Entellus again refers to the gauntlets, this time as *Troiani cæstus* (line 420). The only strong evidence for a true juxtaposition of *cæstus* and *arma* is in reference to the mythic battle between Eryx and Hercules (line 410). In other cases, *arma* is most likely a hypernym for the boxing gauntlets.

<sup>221</sup>The fight between Eryx and Hercules seems to have its source in *Argonautica* 2.783–785, in which Lycus tells of how Heracles defeated Titias, a Myrian, in a boxing match years earlier.

<sup>222</sup>In *Hercules Furens*, Seneca writes that Heracles dashed Eryx to pieces (*fracto*) with his gauntlets and that Antæus shared the same fate: *ipsius opus est cæstibus fractus suis | Eryx et Eryci iunctus Antæus Libys* (lines 481–482).

<sup>223</sup>When it comes to the cruelty of Roman spectacle, there is often a “scholarly reluctance to accept the unpalatable truth that our sources provide” (Coleman 1990, p. 63). Some scholars simply “cannot accept the brutality implicit” in Roman literature and visual art that make that same brutality abundantly clear (*ibid.*, p. 66).

<sup>224</sup>Kyle (1998) distinguishes these two “forms of homicide”: “In human sacrifice[,] societies feel that a god or its cult requires the regular offering of human life. In ritual killing ..., in reaction to circumstances ..., societies carry out the killing of humans in ritualized and sacralized ways, in hopes that the consecration of the victim to the god(s) will sanction or legitimize the violence, prevent pollution, and bring a restoration of order” (p. 36).

<sup>225</sup>*Quid, si quis cæstus ipsius et Herculis arma | vidisset ...* (lines 410–411).

<sup>226</sup>Neither does the verb *gero* offer us much help. It can mean either ‘bear’ or ‘wear’ and would work equally well with a weapon or a piece of clothing as an object.

Zarker (1972, p. 44) equates the Vergilian *herculis arma* with the well-known club of Hercules. The connection between the Herculean cudgel and the *cæstus* is rendered graphically on the opposing faces of several third-century BC Umbrian coins from Tuder (modern Todi) which bear an image of a boxing gauntlet on one side and two clubs on the other (Häberlin 1967, pl. 80, nos. 9–13). Local legend has it that Hercules defeated the fire-breathing giant Cacus at Tuder. We cannot discount the possibility that in the boxing match of Eryx and Hercules, the latter used his club while Eryx used the *cæstus*, a donnybrook perhaps memorialized in the iconography of these Umbrian coins (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Front and back of a third-century BC Umbrian coin from Tuder inscribed with the image of a right hand in a *cæstus* much like the one worn by the Boxer at Rest, with a raised strap over the knuckles. On the back of the coin two clubs appear, likely an iconographic reference to Hercules. The toponym '[T]utere' (modern Todi) is inscribed in the Neo-Etruscan alphabet, right-to-left (in the image, top-to-bottom).

Doubtless noting his rival's reluctance, perhaps even refusal, to fight if he insists on wearing the terrible Erycinian *cæstus*, Entellus offers a bargain: he will 'send back' (*remitto*) the gauntlets of Eryx if Dares in turn 'removes' (*exuo*) his Trojan gloves (lines 419–420).<sup>227</sup> Vergil provides us with no description of the Trojan gloves, but they were evidently inferior to those of Entellus in terms of their destructive potential.<sup>228</sup> Entellus "gives up his personal advantage" by proposing to have two equal pairs of gloves provided by a third party if this is agreeable to Æneas, the captain of the wandering Dardans, and to Acestes, the local magistrate (Poliakoff 1985, p. 229). Entellus wishes to make the fight even (line 419).<sup>229</sup> Then,

<sup>227</sup>The reference to a uniquely Trojan *cæstus* leaves open the possibility that Vergil recognized a variety of boxing practices in the heroic past. This may have been rooted in an understanding of historical reality. As we argue elsewhere (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b), boxing was practiced in Anatolia by the Hittites, who almost certainly had some connection to the Bronze Age inhabitants of Ilium.

<sup>228</sup>The Trojan gauntlets may have had their own cruel devices. This may explain why Entellus bargains for Dares to relinquish them.

<sup>229</sup>*æquemus pugnas. We conjecture that in boxing, as in gladiatorial fights, it was a "disgrace to be matched with an inferior" opponent. Seneca writes (Prov. 3.4): ignominiam iudicat gladiator cum inferiore componi.* 'equalize the fight'. It is not clear why *pugna* 'fight' here appears in the plural. It may be only to preserve the dactyl | nās.ē.r̄y | which, without the 's' would result in three short syllables (line 419). If not, it may be intended to suggest that Vergil's boxers saw their fight as a series of encounters, similar to modern rounds, though untimed. Only Apollonius comes close to indicating an interval between rounds, and this obliquely (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c).

in a passage reminiscent of Odysseus in the build-up to his fight with Iros (*Odyssey* 18.68–69), Entellus sheds his cloak with a dramatic flourish, revealing his “great bones and thews” (Fairclough 1916).<sup>230</sup> Next, with a father’s care, Æneas brings out gloves of equal weight and wraps both pairs of hands (lines 424–425).<sup>231</sup>

As in *Argonautica* 2, the boxers in *Aeneid* 5 appear to have some choice as to which gauntlets they will wear. It is perhaps worth pausing here to reflect on a boxing culture in which the size, shape, and potential lethality of gauntlets is determined not by a neutral arbiter, judge, fight organizer, or even divinatory rite, but by the fighter himself.<sup>232</sup> In the earlier era presented to the reader in the *Argonautica*, lots were cast to determine who wore which pair of gloves. Any two pair must therefore have differed in some regard, otherwise the casting of lots would be vacuous. In Vergil’s *Vorstellung* the gauntlets are obviously different but the fighters seem to have the option to proceed if they wish. It is Entellus, the owner of the more intimidating pair, who proposes the deal to be fitted with equal gloves. From this we infer that Entellus had the right to use whatever boxing gauntlets he brought with him to the fight, even if this put his adversary at a disadvantage. This suggests that not only were the *cæstus* personal property of a fighter, but they could be used in battle just like a personal sword or buckler, regardless of their idiosyncratic attributes and without the adjudication or approval of an official. Perhaps this *laissez-faire* attitude is precisely what resulted in the arms race of Roman boxing, with gauntlets of increasing lethality apparently developed and deployed through Late Antiquity.<sup>233</sup>

According to Poliakoff (1985), Vergil deliberately links Entellus to the noble bruiser Euryalus of the *Iliad* and to Odysseus himself in his boxing match with Iros (*Odyssey* 18). But Vergil creates a paradox by also linking Entellus to “the [Apollonine] ogre Amycus” in order to stress the theme, repeated throughout the *Aeneid*, “that the corrupting forces of anger and violence take hold easily and in unexpected places, and that responsible people must constantly labor to subdue them” (Poliakoff 1985, p. 227).

At long last (if not for Dares and Entellus, then at least for our patient readers), the bout begins. The description of the combatants’ stance is brief but evocative: “Straightway each took his stand, poised on his toes, and, undaunted, lifted his arms high in air. Raising their heads high and drawing them far back from blows” (Fairclough 1916).<sup>234</sup> Both stand upright (*arrectus*) on their toes (*in digitos*), their forearms (*bracchium*) extended (*effero*) above (*ad superas*), in proper Homeric fashion (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d). Both men are magnificently unafraid (*interritus*) of the terrific punishment that awaits them, though their

<sup>230</sup> *magna ossa lacertosque* (line 422). Vergil pays special attention to the *lacertus* ‘upper arm’ of the boxer, recalling the polysemous Sumerian term GEŠPÚ (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b).

<sup>231</sup> *Tum satus Anchisa cæstus pater extulit equos, | et paribus palmas amborum innexuit armis.* The term *pater* indicates Æneas’ “careful superintendence of the games” (Fairclough and Brown 1919, p. 424).

<sup>232</sup> We wonder what changes to sport boxing might be occasioned by a similar inversion of responsibility. Inspected and sanitized with a bleach solution, gloves are loaned to fighters according to (modern, amateur) USA Boxing matches.

<sup>233</sup> As we note elsewhere, weaponized *cæstus* were common in the ancient Mediterranean from the Bronze Age (cf. the Minoans and the Nuragians) but the tradition seems to have been lost by the Archaic Greeks, who may have sublimated this form of violence in the softer but still injurious *himantes*. As is evident to any student of history, however, what’s old is always, eventually, new again and it was almost certain that brutal hand implements would once more find their way back into the ancient boxing ‘ring’. Nor should future observers be surprised at their return decades or centuries after this writing.

<sup>234</sup> *Constitit in digitos exemplo arrectus uterque, | brachiaque ad superas interritus extulit auras. | Abduxere retro longe capita ardua ab ictu* (lines 426–428).

heads, as a practical matter, are drawn back and away (*abduco retro longe*) from the blows (*ictus*). Even in this defensive posture, their heads are still held gallantly aloft (*capita ardua*). In a definitive allusion to Homer, the fighters mix their hands (*immisceo*), though the nominative–dative construction *manus manibus* ‘hand-to-hand’ is a splendid innovation of Vergil’s alone (line 429).<sup>235</sup> In this manner, Dares and Entellus goad each other to fight more fiercely (*pugnam lacesco*).

Entellus shows his age almost immediately, marked by difficulty breathing (*anhelitus*) and shaking knees (*genua labuant*). The boxers throw a great many futile punches into the void between their bodies *multa viri neququam inter se vulnera iactant* (line 433) as in the preliminaries of any modern boxing match. At length they redouble (*ingemino*) their efforts by attacking each other’s ‘hollow flanks’ (*cavus latus*). These are undoubtedly hooks thrown at the body.<sup>236</sup> Loud sounds (*sonitus*), presumably of punches landed, thunder from their broad chests (*pectus vastus*, ablative). The hands flew thickly (*erratque ... crebra manus*) at the ears (*auris*) and around the temples (*tempora circum*). The verb *erro*, suggesting a scrithe path of motion, may indicate that these blows missed the target: “A storm of strokes, well-meant, with fury flies | And errs about their temples, ears, and eyes” (Dryden 1697). With blows raining down on both the head and body, fighters would need to learn to defend both targets, as in the modern sport. Reference is made to a rattling (*crepito*) of wounded jaws (*vulnus male*), reminding us of gnashing teeth and shattered mandibles in Homer and Apollonius (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d). Entellus does not move his body quickly: he is heavy (*gravis*) and ‘rooted in place’ (*immotus eodem*) despite his exertion (*nitus*) (line 437). He dodges (*exo*) Dares’ punches (*telum*, lit., missile) using his body and his keen eyes (*corpus ... atque oculi vigilantes*, ablative).<sup>237</sup>

Vergil next applies a simile: Dares’ onslaught is compared to that of one who besieges (*oppugno*) a ‘lofty city’ (*celsa ... urbs*), with its ‘massive walls’ (*moles*, ablative).<sup>238</sup> Entellus is further compared to a ‘mountain stronghold’ (*montanus ... castellum*). The metaphorical battle takes place ‘at arms’ (*sub armis*), recalling the terminology used to describe the *cæstus* earlier in the poem.

The poet is aware of how much time boxers spend merely looking for the opportunity to strike, often fruitlessly. The boxer ‘draws near’ (*adeo*) to his adversary, ‘wandering’ (*pererro*) hither and thither: *nunc hos, nunc illos aditus, omnemque pererrat* (line 441). He leaps forward (*adsultibus ... urgeo*)<sup>239</sup> from time to time but the attack is always ‘of no significance’ (*inritus*).<sup>240</sup>

On lines 443–444 we are treated to a description of a punch disallowed in modern sport

<sup>235</sup>In *immisceo*, Fairclough and Brown (1919, p. 424) envision “the preliminary sparring which provokes the real encounter” later.

<sup>236</sup>*multa cavo lateri ingeminant* (line 434).

<sup>237</sup>*corpore tela modo atque oculis vigilantibus exit* (line 438). Fairclough and Brown (1919, p. 424) interpret the adverbial as “merely with his body and eyes, i.e., without changing his place.” One commentator has referred to Entellus’ style at this early stage of the fight as “turtling” a technique by which the fighter “shield[s] himself with his arms instead of dodging, and observ[es] his opponent in order to find an opening for a knockout blow” (Secci 2009, p. 38).

<sup>238</sup>The ablative of *moles* in this context is ambiguous. If it is a complement of the verb *oppugno* then it describes the manner of the attack, i.e., using great siege ramps or the like. The reading we use is also preferred by Williams (2015), *inter alia*.

<sup>239</sup>In the sense ‘press in’ or ‘confine’, *urgeo* might also suggest a kind of clinch technique.

<sup>240</sup>“Now and then he springs forward to close the gap, but in vain” (translation ours): *arte locum, et variis adsultibus inritus urguit* (line 443).

boxing: a hammer or guillotine blow (Thomas 1997, pp. 111–134). Lifting himself up (*in-surgo*), Entellus stretches out *ostendit* his right hand, but his opponent dodges (*effero*) the blow, which came from above (*ictus veniente a vertice*). As in Theocritus' *Idyll* 22, we find in the Aeneidean boxing match mention of specific hands—an innovation that post-dates Homer and Apollonius. The cultic importance of the right hand in Roman religion may play a greater role here than the dynamics of punching, but if we assume that Vergil is faithfully describing a boxing move, then striking a hammer blow with the right hand carries with it a number of interesting implications. If Entellus is right-handed,<sup>241</sup> then the tactic suggests that the boxers did not point their lead (i.e., left) shoulders towards one another. To land a hammer blow in the way described, Entellus was most likely ‘squared up’ in front of his opponent, a strategy discouraged in the modern ring because it maximizes the target area for an opponent to land his punches. Recalling the earlier description of blows striking the fighters’ chests (line 434), we may safely assume that in matches of this type, boxers confronted each other with their chests forward. From another passage, we might also conclude that the hammer blow was much sought after, since from the first moment of the fight, the boxers raised themselves on their toes *in digitos extemplo arrectus* (line 426).

Vergil describes boxing with the *cæstus* in an impressively comprehensive fashion. We learn from the *Aeneid* that the boxers strike at both the head and the body; they throw hooks as well as straight punches; they spend much time merely searching for an opening; they evade punches by moving their head and body; they jump in and out of the action; they hold their hands aloft; they stand on their toes; they throw hammer blows; and the adversaries face one another frontally instead of at an angle.<sup>242</sup> But for the last three features, the match would look very similar to a modern one in terms of its dynamics. The material in the boxing vignette, while drawing on Greek sources, nonetheless suggests the poet had a keen eye for pugilism and was aware of its distinctive rhythms.

Dares’ defensive movements also merit examination. The poet writes: *ille ictum venientem a vertice velox | prævidit, celerique elapsus corpore cessit* (lines 444–445). Thus, Dares foresees (*prævideo*) the blow as it hurtles from above (*a vertice velox*), ‘gliding away’ (*elabor*) while ‘withdrawing’ (*cessit*). The word ‘body’ (*corpus*) is here used in the ablative, suggesting the defensive move is made with Dares’ whole frame, not just his head. The two lines are alliterative, first in *v* and then in *c*, perhaps to reinforce the rapidity of the boxers’ movements. Dares’ slip was effective enough that Entellus ‘poured out’ (*effundo*) his ‘strength’ (*vis*) ‘on the air’ (*in ventum*). Off-kilter and as heavy as he was, Entellus fell even heavier.<sup>243</sup> Vergil arguably alludes here to the fall of Troy with a simile likening Entellus’ caducity to that of a great conifer on Mount Ida<sup>244</sup> (in the Troad region of western Anatolia), uprooted thanks to the persistent effort of farmers.<sup>245</sup> The cries of the crowd suggest that the fight is won (“a shout mounts to heaven”), but the poet has a reversal in mind (Fairclough 1916).<sup>246</sup>

Showing pity (*miserans*), Acestes hastens (*accurro*) to lift his friend ‘of equal age’ (*æqueævus*)

<sup>241</sup>If Entellus were left-handed then he would be striking the hammer-blow with his weaker hand, which seems less plausible to us.

<sup>242</sup>The latter may have subtle resonance in Vergil’s formulation *sto contra* (line 414).

<sup>243</sup>... et *ultra* | *ipse gravis graviterque ad terram pondere vasto | concidit* ... (lines 446–448).

<sup>244</sup>Earlier in the epic, Anchises prays for a sign that he should abandon Troy; subsequently, he witnesses a meteor fall on Mount Ida and interprets this portent as his answer.

<sup>245</sup>*ut quondam cava concidit aut Erymantho, | aut Ida in magna, radicibus eruta pinus.* (lines 448–449). Fairclough and Brown (1919, p. 425) translate *cava* as “hollow from age.”

<sup>246</sup>*Consurgunt studiis Teucri et Trinacria pubes; | it clamor caelo ...* (lines 450–451).

from the dirt (*ab humo*).<sup>247</sup> Entellus, however, is in no sorry state (*non tardatus ... neque teritus*) and he sets to beswinging Dares with an extraordinary fury (*acrior ad pugnam reddit ac vim suscitat ira*) (lines 453–454).<sup>248</sup> Vergil explains what motivates Entellus in his comeback: *pudor ... et conscientia virtus*. The former could be his desire for approval or his shame at being knocked down, the latter a “conscious valor” in the formulation of Fairclough (1916), i.e., the recognition that his *virtus* ‘manliness’ is being judged by his opponent and all those who look on. Accordingly, he drives (*ago*) ‘headfirst Dares’ (*præceps Dares*, accusative) from the ‘whole level surface’ (*aequor totus*, ablative).<sup>249</sup>

This line appears to contain the earliest specific reference to the ‘ring’ in literature: *aequor*, ‘an even, level surface’. Homeric and Apollonine references to the site of a boxing match referred to it only as the ‘midst’ of a gathering (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c). While we may take for granted the idea that the ‘field of play’ in boxing should be flat, even, and unencumbered, Vergil offers us the first literary characterization in this regard. By using the ablative expression *aequore toto*, Vergil also suggests that the area had limits that Entellus transgressed when pummeling Dares beyond them. This indicates that by the first century BC the notion of fighters confronting one another in a delimited space had been operationalized, though there is still minimal evidence of physical barriers serving as bounds.<sup>250</sup>

Vergil refers to Entellus’ right (*dextera*) and left (*sinistra*) hands as the origins of the blows (*ictus*) with which he hatters Dares.<sup>251</sup> The use of both left and right hands here is presumably intended to highlight Entellus’ two-fisted fury rather than any technical prowess. The verb associated with the activity is *ingemino* ‘repeat’ or ‘redouble’. No longer is there pause (*mora*) or rest (*requies*)—Entellus is closing in on victory. Entellus’ punches have become so many hailstones raining down on the roof of Dares’ crumpling body.<sup>252</sup>

Æneas once more fulfills his father-like role, this time by stepping in to preserve Dares from the onslaught of Entellus. He will not suffer the latter’s rage to “flame beyond bound” (Williams 1908).<sup>253</sup> Æneas puts a stop (*finem impono*) to the battle (*pugna*, dative) by snatching away (*eripio*) the weary (*fessus*)<sup>254</sup> Dares, whom he softly rebukes (*mulcens dico*) in lines 465–467:

Infelix, quæ tanta animum dementia cepit?  
Non vires alias conversaque numina sentis?  
Cede deo ...

<sup>247</sup> Entellus experiences “fall and resurrection” during the fight. This is regarded by some commentators as “the collective history of the Trojans/Romans themselves, and the plot of the *Æneid* as promised in the proem” (Feldherr 2002, p. 73).

<sup>248</sup> According to Nelis (2001, p. 18), this “is a surprising turnaround for the reader who knows the [Apollonine] model” in which a hammer blow is lowered on Amycus, who does not survive (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d). *vim suscitat ira* has been translated as “awakes violence with anger” (Fairclough and Brown 1919, p. 425). Entellus, who no longer seems to be a sympathetic character, may here be drawing from the example of his master, Eryx, who according to one commentator was seized by murderous impulses (Leigh 2010, pp. 148–149).

<sup>249</sup> *præcipitemque Daren ardens agit aequore toto* (line 456).

<sup>250</sup> The softening of a piece of ground or *skamma* with axes, accomplished prior to Greek boxing, wrestling, and pankration bouts, also suggests a circumscribed zone for fighting, as do a handful of Greek vase paintings in which some marking on the ground or a low horizontal barrier is indicated.

<sup>251</sup> *nunc dextra ingeminans ictus, nunc ille sinistra* (line 457).

<sup>252</sup> ... *quam multa grandine nimbi | culminibus crepitant, sic densis ictibus heros | creber utraque manu pulsat versatque Darea* (lines 458–460).

<sup>253</sup> *Tum pater Aeneas procedere longius iras | et saevire animis Entellum haud passus acerbis* (lines 461–462).

<sup>254</sup> Conington (1876) argues that it means “sick of fighting” in this context.

No other ancient text so movingly casts pugilism in the divine glow.<sup>255</sup> Specifically, *Æneas* highlights the numinous role of the gods who may switch allegiances from time to time but ultimately crown the victor. Dares, who has no chance of winning, is entreated to “submit to (the) god,” perhaps Entellus’s semi-divine patron, Eryx (Conington 1876) or maybe Apollo, to the extent the poet invokes the Iliadic boxing match (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d). In line 465, *Æneas* mentions the madness (*dementia*) of the ring, which can overcome even the rational soul (*animus*) and make one miserable (*infelix*), as with Dares. Line 466 is poignant and familiar to anyone who has met defeat in the ring: “Do you not sense the divine presence that has altered the contest?”<sup>256</sup>

Thus speaking, *Æneas* disrupts the fight (*proelia ... dirimo*) using his voice (*vox*, ablative); this might be translated more literally as ‘separates the combatants’.<sup>257</sup> Dares’ friends (*fidi æquales*) drag (*traho*) him back to the ship on shaking knees (*genua ægra*) all the while he vomits (*ejecto*) a gore (*cruor*) of blood mingled with his own teeth. His head tosses (*jacto*) from side to side (*utroque*). Dares’ attendants accept (*accipio*) the promised prize<sup>258</sup> of helmet and sword on his behalf. Naturally, they leave behind (*relinquo*) the bullock and a palm branch—not previously mentioned—for Entellus, the victor (line 472).

The concluding scene (lines 473–484) finds Entellus triumphant.<sup>259</sup> He strides forward, musing on his strength and what would have befallen Dares had he been permitted to keep fighting him. “Behold,” he exclaims, “What strength was mine in youth, and from what death | ye have delivered Dares” (Williams 1908).<sup>260</sup> As if pantomiming his adversary’s fore stalled doom, Entellus drops his heavy fist, still bearing the *cæstus*, between the horns of the bull,<sup>261</sup> smashing its skull<sup>262</sup> and ostensibly sacrificing it to his patron Eryx.<sup>263</sup> He then proclaims, “Victorious I now repose my art and my *cæstus*” (line 484), suggesting he will never box again.<sup>264</sup>

<sup>255</sup> By compelling Dares to yield, *Æneas* recalls Poseidon in *Iliad* 20.332–339, when the former fought Achilles. As the victor, Entellus occupies “the role of the god Hercules” (Feldherr 2002, p. 74) and *Æneas* takes on the role of Iliadic Poseidon. He is “simultaneously playing a god and revealing the workings of the divine within the spectacle” (ibid.). In the *Aeneid*, “The gods are sometimes seen as natural forces or human psychological impulses. This particular function, sometimes called ‘double motivation’, shows clearly [when] *Æneas* comforts the beaten and bleeding Dares, and saves his dignity” in lines 465–467 (West 1998, p. 314–315).

<sup>256</sup> We reflect on a tableau of the modern ring in which the referee, having delivered a standing eight-count, asks the dazed boxer: “Can you still fight?” The stricken man nods sincerely and holds his hands aloft in an earnest gesture of gameness. Then, Like Pater *Æneas*, the referee looks intently at the boxer for a moment and waves off the contest—to the disappointment of the bloodied adversaries who want nothing more than to settle it their own way.

<sup>257</sup> Though it generally means ‘battle’, there are other instances where *proelium*, in the plural, means ‘fighters’, e.g., Stat. *Th.* 1, 8.

<sup>258</sup> The term *donum* ‘gift’ is used to refer to the bullock in line 478; presumably it could have been applied equally to the *galea* and *ensis*.

<sup>259</sup> For Fairclough and Brown (1919, p. 426), *superans animis* yields “triumphant in spirit”.

<sup>260</sup> ... cognoscite, Teucri, | et mihi que fuerint iuvenali in corpore vires, | et qua servetis revocatum a morte Daretia (lines 474–476).

<sup>261</sup> The sacrifice of the bull in the *Aeneid* reminds one commentator of an episode in the *Argonautica* (1.425–431) “where Heracles kills a sacrificial bull by hitting it on the forehead ... with his club” (Nelis 2001, p. 19).

<sup>262</sup> *effractoque inlisis in ossa cerebro* (line 480). By performing this action, Entellus is comparable to Amycus in the *Argonautica*, who plays the ox-slayer to Polydeuces, but fails. “If Apollonius connected the slaying of Amycus with the transition from lawless barbarism to Jovian order, the sacrificial differences in Vergil’s text in turn civilizes his predecessor by substituting ritual for slaughter” (Feldherr 2002, p.68). In other words, Vergil “transformed Apollonius’ simile of sacrifice into real sacrifice” (ibid., p.179).

<sup>263</sup> As far as Olympians go, Eryx is most closely linked to Venus, as is Anchises, her erstwhile lover and the father of *Æneas* (Feldherr 2002, p. 73).

<sup>264</sup> *hic victor cæstus artemque repono*

Immediately after he slays the bullock and just before he hangs up his gloves for good, Entellus clarifies the relationship between boxing and sacrifice. His speech, which we do well to consider closely, is as follows (lines 483–484):

Hanc tibi, Eryx, meliorem animam pro morte Daretis  
persolvo ...

Addressing the goddess-born Eryx, Entellus states that in the sacrifice of the bull he renders (*persolvo*) a better spirit (*melior anima*) than that of Dares, or perhaps, in the formulation of Fairclough and Brown (1919, p. 426), “[I]t is better to offer a bull than the life of a man.” Williams (1908) translates it thus: “This victim due | I give thee, Eryx, more acceptable | than Dares’ death to thy benignant shade.”

The *Aeneid* is not merely a story about the past, it is a story about the past in which its characters break with their own pasts. This includes Entellus, who appears to change the trajectory of boxing from its brutal origins by choosing not to kill his opponent.<sup>265</sup> The irony, of course, is that when Vergil wrote his poem, gladiators and armed boxers were routinely killing one another in amphitheaters across the Roman world.<sup>266</sup> Does Vergil argue that boxing should be any different? Or is he suggesting that combat sports were cruel in the mythic past (Hercules vs. Eryx), then became more humane in the heroic past (Entellus vs. Dares), only to become cruel again in the poet’s own time? Perhaps Vergil recognized the cyclical nature of combat sport, oscillating between lethal violence and kayfabe over the centuries. According to one critic, the sacrifice of the bull “returns us to the beginning of the cycle,” suggesting that animal sacrifice predated human sacrifice in the ‘ring’ (Feldherr 2002, p. 69). He continues, “[T]he substitution of the bull for Dares ..., far from marking an advance over the shedding of human blood, in fact serves to reveal the ox in every boxer. ... Boxers, after all, prepare for battle by donning the hides, *terga*, of bulls” (*ibid.*).<sup>267</sup> The bull is killed “not as a sacrificial victim, but as a boxing opponent”, blurring the lines between whatever boxing represented to Vergil’s audience—including its associations with the heroic past—and religious sacrifice (Feldherr 2002, p. 69).<sup>268</sup>

<sup>265</sup> Gardiner (1910, pp. 431–432) argued that Vergil’s anachronistic placement of the Roman *cæstus* in the heroic past was intended to highlight that “heroes of the past must have excelled [the men of today] in the bloodiness of their fights and the murderous brutality of their weapons.” Poliakoff (1985, p. 229) offers a critique of this claim, arguing instead that the anachronism allows Vergil’s characters, “led by Entellus, to demonstrate their enlightenment in abandoning the savage customs they have inherited.” Another author concludes, “[Entellus] rejects the brutal and gratuitous violence of celebrated boxing matches of the heroic past” (Dunkle 2005, p. 172).

<sup>266</sup> Poliakoff (1987a) entertains the possibility that Entellus’ words are “the brutal scoff of the conqueror” (Henry 1881, p. 121) and that “the Romans were not so delicate and refined as to say, or to think, it was better to spare the human being and kill the beast” (Conington 1876, p. 377). Poliakoff notes that another critic is unwilling to choose between an interpretation in favor of either Entellus’ humanity or his brutal sarcasm (Williams 1960, pp. 135–136). Ultimately Poliakoff (1987a, p. 231) concludes that Entellus’ statement is consistent with an attitude that eschews the “promiscuous destruction of human life” and that “Vergil was sufficiently delicate and refined” to account the life of a man worthier than that of an animal.

<sup>267</sup> Kraggerud (1960) points out that the name of Dares’ victim/opponent, Butes (Βούτης), is suggestive of βοῦς ‘ox’. Moreover, according to Lycophron’s cryptic fourth-century poem *Alexandra* (regarded by Liberman (2009) as “what may be the most illegible piece of classical literature” ever written), the semi-divine Eryx was known as the ‘bull’ in the ‘inhospitable wrestling arena’ (cf. Tzetzes, *ad Lyc.* 866). Lines 866–867 from *Alexandra* read: οὐξεὶ δὲ ταύρου γυμνάδας κακοζένους | πάλης κονίστρας, δύν τε Κωλώτις τεκνοῖ.

<sup>268</sup> According to Feldherr (2002), “[T]he lines that describe the trembling cow hurled lifeless to the ground suggest the image of Entellus himself collapsing after his mistimed blow and the verb used of the fighter on that occasion

By juxtaposing the (averted) death of Dares with the real death of the bullock,<sup>269</sup> Vergil is contrasting some earlier or imagined version of boxing where the loser dies with a more humane one practiced under the watchful eye of pious Aeneas.<sup>270</sup> But is this intended to be a comment on first-century boxing at Rome? Was Vergil celebrating the victory of science over brutality, or was he subtly condemning the brutality he himself saw in contemporaneous fights? Suetonius reports that Vergil's patron, Augustus, was fond of boxing—including the Odyssean type, which took place in the alleyways of the capital.<sup>271</sup> Does the Aeneidean boxing match serve as a recommendation for how boxing matches should be conducted in a perfect world, or as a celebration of how they were (righteously) conducted in Augustan Italy? Perhaps the *cæstus*, which was clearly already known, fell out of favor briefly at the time that Vergil wrote the *Aeneid*. He seems to refer *quand même* to some virtuous, perhaps even latent, characteristic of a Roman (i.e., Trojan) man who does not need to kill his boxing opponents, even if the brutal gauntlet was in use widespread—and primed to become even more savage in the decades ahead (Section 3.5). The boxer in the *Aeneid* is both victim and sacrificant, as we observe in the changing roles of Dares, Entellus, and finally, the bullock.<sup>272</sup>

Vergil's "extensive allusions" to Apollonius allow him to draw out characterizations and ethical issues that are more complex than they are in any preceding boxing episode, Homeric or Apollonine (Poliakoff 1985, p. 229). The poet does this by assiduously linking the heel in one version with the face in the other—enough to blur the lines between who is virtuous (the Polydeuces role) and who is vicious (the Amycus role). Perhaps most remarkable in this regard is the animalistic rage of Entellus, formerly of noble stature and heroic comparison, at the conclusion of the Vergilian bout: *saevire animis ... acerbis* (line 462). Once self-effacing, he exits the 'ring' in a show of arrogance: *victor superans ... superbus* (line 473). The moral, according to Poliakoff (1987a) is clear: the Vergilian boxing match is "an emphatic rejection of uncontrolled violence" which "highlights the corrupting effects that violence works upon Entellus" (p. 231).

What of the narrative arc of the Aeneidean bout and its influence on how we understand modern boxing in the West? Vergil's account combines elements of the Iliadic and Apollonine versions but it is more dramatic than both. Vergil is more expert at playing with his reader's expectations than his predecessors. In fact, he does so in a way that has become *de rigueur* in underdog boxing cinema. Entellus is unlikely to win because of his advanced age and genuine reluctance to enter the ring. Vergil "stacks the deck" against him (Dunkle 2005, p. 171). While boastful, like Dares, Apollonius' Amycus is older than his opponent, like Entellus. But the Bebrycian's malignant nature leads the reader to correctly predict his downfall. In the case of Dares versus Entellus, it feels rather like a toss-up: Dares should

was concidit (line 448), which, as Hardie (1993, p. 52) points out, is particularly associated with the death of the sacrificial victim" (p. 69).

<sup>269</sup>It has been noted that the ox is a particularly salient substitute for man in sacrifice because the plough-ox works as man's partner in agricultural endeavor (Leigh 2010, p. 128).

<sup>270</sup>Musing on "the interpretative choice of the reader of the poem ... as a representation of the past," Feldherr (2002) remarks that "the sacrificial overtones of [the boxing match] invite discordant responses" as the reader struggles to resolve "sacrificial ambiguity", i.e., "the choice between participation and detachment" in the boxing vignette (p. 75).

<sup>271</sup>*spectauit autem studiosissime pugiles et maxime Latinos, non legitimos atque ordinarios modo, quos etiam committere cum Graecis solebat, sed et cateruarios oppidanos inter angustias uicorum pugnantis temere ac sine arte (Aug. 45.2).*

<sup>272</sup>Because each boxing match may potentially result in a fatality, it is "possible for the loser to be figured as a sacrificial victim" (Leigh 2010, p. 118).

win according to the Iliadic formula (might makes right), Entellus by the Apollonine (virtue wins the day). Ultimately, Vergil adopts the more ‘modern’ of the two scenarios, awarding the victor’s laurel to modest but powerful Entellus while casting a shadow on Entellus’ own character. The narrative still has reverberations two thousand years later in American cinema. In features like “Somebody Up There Likes Me” (1956), “Rocky” (1976), “The Champ” (1979), and “The Fighter” (2010) the down-on-his-luck fighter wins it all. This seems to be the boxing story that most resonates with modern audiences. Narratives like “Raging Bull” (1980) and “Hands of Stone” (2016) follow Vergil more closely in exploring the ways in which violence degrades the victor.

The dark thread of degradation merits closer inspection. As Leigh (2010) summarizes, “[I]f the choice of an animal over a human victim is to be applauded, the decision of Entellus to make the bull an offering to his former trainer Eryx raises questions about what Eryx himself represents. One half of the mythological tradition offers some distinctly uncomfortable answers” (p. 149). The “half” the author refers to undoubtedly includes Eryx’ chthonic role as “dealer of death” to his rivals in the ‘ring’ (*ibid.* p. 125). We find in the *Aeneid* yet more evidence for what we have referred to elsewhere as the “hyper-violence” of boxing, both ancient and modern (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022a, p. 15).<sup>273</sup> Modern boxing matches turn instantly from a show of amiability between opponents to a feud of pure, though carefully circumscribed, hostility.<sup>274</sup> Leigh (2010) points out the same “tension ... between the spirit of amity and hospitality prevalent in Vergil’s games as a whole and the murderous spirits unleashed in the course of the boxing match in particular” (p. 151). To box in the modern ring is to unleash those same animal spirits. There can be no amity between boxers when boxing. To consciously lighten the blows or deliver fewer of them is to suggest that one’s adversary is too weak to fight and, as Seneca wrote of gladiatorial combat, it is a “disgrace to be matched with an inferior [opponent].”<sup>275</sup> Moreover, it is imprudent for a boxer to “go easy” even on a flagging adversary, who can turn from lamb to lion at a moment’s notice. A stumbling fighter may even have won previous rounds and so must be beaten decisively in the here and now. When a fighter falls to the ground, that is the signal to stop the onslaught, and the only such signal apart from a referee’s intercession. In the modern ring, the referee is present to protect the boxers’ welfare while each boxer is there to inflict maximal damage on his adversary. The referee acts as the externalized conscience of whichever boxer is currently dominating his rival; the dominant fighter needs no conscience of his own. For a fighter to exercise mercy in the ring contradicts the basic premises of boxing and is, in any case, redundant. *Aeneas* as *pater pugilis*, i.e. as Entellus’ externalized conscience or the good referee, may be one of Vergil’s most enduring contributions to the ethos of Western boxing.<sup>276</sup> All in all, Vergil memorializes the longstanding essence of ritual boxing by tying in the discipline of athletic boxing, prefatory to the Roman onslaught of gladiatorial boxing.

<sup>273</sup>This includes modern boxing gloves which are, as we argue elsewhere, offensive weapons popularly misunderstood as protective devices.

<sup>274</sup>According to Poliakoff (1985, p. 231) later in Book 11 of *Aeneid*, the controlled boxing match is juxtaposed with human sacrifices (arranged by *Aeneas*) at the funeral of Pallas (line 81). Messapus offers a Roman life on the altar in 12.296 even using the familiar taunt heard in the arena, “Hoc habet” upon observing the victim’s fatal wound.

<sup>275</sup>*ignominiam iudicat gladiator cum inferiore componi* (*Prov.* 3.4).

<sup>276</sup>Deremetz (2011, p. 64) argues that *Aeneas*’ intervention in the bout may be interpreted as the *aition* of a custom well known in gladiatorial combat: the so-called ‘droit de grâce’ (instituted by Augustus, according to Suetonius) that allowed the president of the games to spare a valiant fighter when vanquished and on the point of death.

### 3.2 *Metamorphoses*

Boxing is mentioned briefly in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, written in AD 8.<sup>277</sup> The poet takes up the subject of two boxers in Book 5. They are victims of Phineus, a rival of Perseus later turned to stone by gazing at the severed head of the gorgon Medusa. The brothers, Broteas and Ammon, would have been able to withstand their murderer, we are told, "if boxing gloves were able to overcome swords." The poet seems to make a comment on the fragility of the human body, even when trained to athletic perfection, if an opponent carries a deadly weapon. To wit, don't bring boxing gloves to a sword fight:<sup>278</sup>

Hinc gemini fratres Broteasque et cæstibus Ammon  
invicti, vinci si possent cæstibus enses (lines 107–108).

### 3.3 *Argonautica* of Valerius Flaccus, 4

Dead by the dawn of the second century AD, the Flavian poet Valerius Flaccus was mourned by the rhetorician Quintilian—this, even though Valerius' work was long regarded as "imitative and inferior to Virgil and showing signs of a secondary belatedness" (Heerink and Manuwald 2014, p. 1). The *Argonautica*, Valerius' only attested work, tells the story of Jason and the other voyagers aboard the Argos. Critics have only recently begun to consider the significance of the text.

Book 4 of the Valerian *Argonautica* contains a lengthy reworking of the contest between Polydeuces (Pollux) and Amycus, known to us from the Apollonine *Argonautica* (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d) as well as the *Idylls* of Theocritus (Section 2.1). The bout belongs to Type II of the epic boxing match (the beatdown of a bully), though it mixes in funereal elements as well, most notably the theme of human sacrifice. Amycus, erstwhile sacrificer, becomes the sacrificant.

The poem is easily the most aureate of the epic boxing episodes. For example, Valerius paints a lurid image of Amycus' lair and makes of him a bloodthirsty monster. However, the boxing match itself is rather brief and provides fewer opportunities to explore the vocabulary of Roman-era pugilism than either Statius' *Thebaid* (Section 3.4.2) or Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* (Section 2.6). Still, there are a number of truly remarkable features in the Valerian boxing match that merit special mention:

- Human sacrifice is an explicit element of boxing, with victims offered to Neptune and gauntlets placed on his altar.
- Cleromantic selection of the *cæstus* is mentioned, but dispreferred.
- A multitude of ghosts are released from the underworld in order to attend the match.
- The space designated for boxing is referred to as *cavea*, suggesting an enclosure.
- The fight is won due to a rabbit punch delivered to the bowed head of one of the boxers; there is no suggestion that this blow is ignoble or illegal.

A major theme of the Valerian *Argonautica* is the civilizing mission of the sailors, including three sons of Jupiter, viz., Hercules, Castor, and Pollux. As representatives of their

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<sup>277</sup>We are grateful to Nemæus for reminding us not to overlook Ovid.

<sup>278</sup>The anecdote is also likely a Roman indictment of Greek athletics in favor of (Roman) martial prowess, a theme that is also found in the Statian boxing match.

father, they spread civilization and turn humanity from the ignave Saturnine world to the energetic world of Jove—the Iron Age (Bernstein 2014, p. 241ff.).<sup>279</sup> Cowan (2014, p. 241) writes, “Though the conquest of chaos by order can be seen as underlying most epic narratives, and is a particular feature of quest epics in which voyaging heroes civilize barbaric peoples and barbaric lands as they pass, Valerius’ *Argonautica* remains exceptional in the extent to which it exploits this motif as its central organizing principle.”

In Valerius’ work, “The mythic narrative of the Argonautic saga takes on aspects of a cultural commentary by importing key societal constructs and tensions from contemporary—that is to say, late Flavian—Rome” (Zissos 2003, p. 660). These include the “arena motif as a framing device for a number of important episodes,” including the fight between Pollux and Amycus (*ibid.*).

Sailing through the Bosporus, the Argonauts come upon the shores of Bebrycia, “a land of fertile soil and a good friend to sturdy bulls [*taurus*, line 100].”<sup>280</sup> Ancient Bebrycia has been identified with the Bay of Beicos, hence the Beykoz district of modern Istanbul (Dewing 1924, p. 470). The bull is introduced early on in the narrative, reminding the reader of the mythopoetic relation between bulls and boxing spanning millennia (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b). Zissos (2003, pp. 667–668, fn. 29) conjectures that Valerius is also having a bit of fun with his audience, remarking that the bulls are indeed friends of the Bebryces, since their master offers human sacrifice in place of the taurine variety.

As Valerius’ readers would have known from, *inter alia*, the Apollonian *Argonautica* and Theocritus’ *Idylls*, the Bebrycian king is named Amycus and dealing with him is no walk in the park. According to Cowan (2014, p. 231), Valerian villains are either tyrants or monsters. Amycus is both. Valerius tells us that the local population believes so much in Amycus’ “destiny and power divine” that they chose not to build walls or “observe ... conditions of treaties or laws.” This attachment to their doubly-primitive ruler means their own downfall is imminent.

Valerius establishes the visiting Argonauts as “culture-hero ushers of the Jovian Iron Age” pitted against “Titanic, Earth-born, Sun-spawned and Neptune-sired monsters of Saturnian primitivism” (*ibid.*). In the ensuing conflict between Pollux and the son of the earth-shaker, Valerius presents an “emblematic encounter ... in which the new overcomes the old” and chaos is supplanted by order. His audience was expected to find satisfaction in this resolution, and in the defeat of the monster. Indeed, Amycus is compared to the Odyssean cyclops Polyphemus (another spawn of the *enochthon*),<sup>281</sup> hungering for shipwrecked strangers—“grim fodder and wretched victims for [his] feasting.” Not explicitly anthropophagous, Amycus typically hurls his victims from a cliff into the sea (*aequor*, line 110).<sup>282</sup> Like Bram

<sup>279</sup>Valerius “sketch[es] a ... submerged conflict between divine brothers. Jason’s mission advances Jupiter’s side in his conflict with his brother Neptune and his father Saturn. ... Jupiter’s ambitions bring him into conflict with his brother Neptune, who is made to open his sea” to the commercial activities of humans (Bernstein 2014, p. 163). Leigh (2010, p. 127fn. 44) regards the boxing match between Pollux and Amycus as a battle between the sky and the sea: “a neat encapsulation of cultural advance.”

<sup>280</sup>Line numbers in this section come from Kramer (1913).

<sup>281</sup>According to Cowan (2014, p. 241), “Valerius self-consciously draws parallels between his monsters, ... depicting them less as individuals than as instantiations of the almost abstract ‘type’ of the monster. The clearest, and arguably least subtle, example of this is the simile comparing Amycus to Polyphemus, ... an equation of epic characters as much as of mythical figures.”

<sup>282</sup>The noun *aequor* is used by Vergil to designate the location of the boxing match—with sacrificial overtones—between Dares and Entellus. The word generally means a flat place, including a body of water.

Stoker's energumen Renfield, the solicitous Bebryces "drag captive bodies to their king."

The miserable men so disposed of are described as offerings (*sacrificus*, line 110) to Neptune, Amycus' father. Amycus prefers to sacrifice those of "finer build" (*forma ... præstans-tior*, from *presto* 'be excellent', line 111) in a more sportive fashion. These athletic types he commands to "take arms" (*arma sumo*, line 112) and 'run up against' him (*ocurro contra*) wearing the boxing gauntlets (*caestus*).<sup>283</sup> "That, for the hapless men, is the fairest doom of death": *haec miseri sors est æquissima leti* (line 113). Though anachronistic, a hint to late Flavian gladiatorial combat is strongly suggested in this line. Instead of being executed outright, prisoners of Amycus must fight him for their lives, doomed to die in a manner that, in the Roman world view, was far more equitable or perhaps even impartial (*æquus*).<sup>284</sup>

In a somber digression, Valerius presents the perspective of Neptune himself, with foreknowledge of his son's defeat in the boxing ring.<sup>285</sup> He considers the "fields [*campus*] that once rejoiced in their master's [sc., Amycus] contests [*certamen*]." Here we note that the location of boxing matches is called *campus* and the competition is designated as *certamen*, derived from *certo* 'struggle'. Given Neptune's rosy, even nostalgic, outlook on his son's butchery, Cowan (2014, pp. 243–244) reads this passage as "a glimpse at an epic written by the monstrous losers," i.e., one in which the pre-Jovian order exults in its glory days and suggests to the reader "that epic morality is relative." Neptune even laments that Amycus' mother, Melie, had not been seduced by his resurgent brother, Jupiter, instead of himself: "'Tis pity thou wast long ago carried off by me beneath the waves, and didst not rather yield to the Thunderer." Cowan (2014, p. 244) argues that Neptune's regard for Amycus' "brutal pugilism" as *virtus* "valor" (line 124) is another example of moral relativism in Valerius' epic. The sea god counsels his son that confidence (*fiducia*, line 124) in his father is misplaced and should no longer afford him any courage (*ops*, line 125) in the fight. "Now other might [*vis*, line 126] has the mastery, and the destinies of Jove, more eager to protect his own, are too strong for blood of mine." Given that he can "in aught delay thy death," Neptune admonishes Amycus to abjure a contest with any of the Argonauts: "Make lesser kings thy prey." Here Valerius uses the verb *premo*, 'to press', the same verb used to describe the action during the boxing match between Alcidamas and Capaneus (*Thebaid* 6.770). In a baleful, final flourish, Neptune looks away, "leaving his son and the ill-starred combat [*tristia ... proelia*, lines 131–132]<sup>286</sup>" and laves the Bebrycian coast "with a tide of blood" (*sanguineus ... æstus*, line 132).

Once ashore, the Argonauts are hailed as "doomed" (*perdo*, line 140) by the lone survivor of a previous expedition to Bebrycia. He warns them to flee, characterizing Bebrycia as "no friendly land" (*hospita ... terra*, lines 145–146) and assuring the Greeks that the locals are impious: ... *non hic ullos reverentia ritus | pectora ...* (lines 146–147). "This shore," he continues, "is the home of death and cruel combats" (*mors habitat saevæque hoc litore pugnae*, line 147). The stranger, named Dymas, tells them of Amycus, the local potentate who will bid them raise (*tollo*) the "dread gauntlets" (*dirus ... caestus*, line 148). He highlights Amycus' gigantic

<sup>283</sup> At least one critic understands the sacrifices to Neptune to include the boxers (Leigh 2010, p. 127fn. 44).

<sup>284</sup> Ironically, perhaps, Amycus, who is supposed to represent a primordial world of disorder and injustice, runs a fight game similar to that of the Flavian elite. Perhaps Valerius' audience could distinguish Amycus' bloodsport from their own or perhaps Valerius intended to hold up Amycus' boxing match as a mirror to the gladiatorial fights of his day. It is fairly certain that the poet saw some relation between the two, as argued by Zissos (2003).

<sup>285</sup> "Hostility to strangers, murderous intent expressed through the practice of combat sport, perverse rituals of human sacrifice: this, it seems, is how to know a son of Neptune" (Leigh 2010, p. 142).

<sup>286</sup> The form is in the plural.

stature, noting that he “strikes the clouds with overtopping head” (*vasto qui vertice nubila pulset*, line 149).<sup>287</sup>

Dymas warns the Argonauts that Amycus rages (*furo*, line 151)<sup>288</sup> against all travelers in his territory. Those whose manliness does not match Amycus’ own (*æquæ virtutis*, line 151) he “stations [constituo] like sluggish bulls [*segnis ... taurus*, line 152] at the cruel altars of the gods [*superum ... iniqua altaria*, line 152], only that he may wet his weapons in the wretches’ brains [*lavo arma cerebro*, line 153].” This passage is strongly reminiscent of the bull sacrifice at the end of the Æneidean boxing match, including the reference to cerebral matter. Given the Valerian (and Vergilian) tendency to call the boxing gauntlets *arma*, it is likely that Amycus’ sacrifice of the weaker men also involves the *cæstus*, though it would seem only Amycus wears the gauntlet during this ritual.

Beat a hasty retreat, Dymas tells the sailors. No one would dare engage (*concurro*, line 155) Amycus and, in any case, there is no pleasure (*voluptas*, line 156) in the fight.<sup>289</sup> Naturally questioning the *bona fides* of this messenger, the Argonauts interrogate him. Is he a Bebrycian or a stranger? If a stranger, “Why, then, has Amycus not shattered thy face with his gauntlet? (*et tua cur Amycus cæstu nondum obruit ora?*, line 160). The verb *obrui* means ‘to bury, overwhelm, oppress, or consign to oblivion’. The same verb is used, with *cæstus* in the ablative, in Statius’ *Achilleid* (1.190–191): ... *crudum quo Bebryca cæstu | obruent Pollux* ... “Pollux with his glove smote down the cruel Bebryx” (Mozley 1928b).

Dymas, a resident of Mariandynia, recounts how he followed an Anatolian leader named Otreus who, “in search of the enjoyment of a Phrygian bride,” was forced to stand against Amycus (*Amicum contra iussus sto*, line 165). The passage recalls the Apollonine *Argonautica* 2.778. There we learn that Otreus sought to marry the Trojan princess Hesione and, passing through Bebrycia, was summarily beaten to death by Amycus in a boxing match. Dymas “enlaced the hands” (*palmas implico*, line 165–166) of his master for that fight. He tells the Argonauts, “Scarce had Otreus drawn nigh and lifted (*levo*) his head when Amycus with lightning blow [*fulminea dextera*, line 167]<sup>290</sup> dashed out the eyes from his shattered brow [*disiecta fundo lumina*, lines 167–168].” This gory tidbit indicates the use of a cruel *cæstus*, indeed. The match between Otreus and Amycus suggests that boxing could sometimes serve as an obstacle to *gaudia nuptæ* (line 164), though this theme is hardly a prominent one in ancient boxing poetry.<sup>291</sup> For some reason, Dymas himself was “never deemed worthy [*dignatus*]” of death in the Amycian ring or at the altar of Neptune; both are suggested by the phrase *leto ... armis* (line 168).

The Argonauts listen to this ghastly tale unperturbed (*non ... formidine moti accipio*, lines 174–175) and “with unimpaired resolve” (*dura sic pergere mente*, line 175) they follow Dymas to a cave ( *spelunca*, line 177), “a grim abode that trembled with the roaring of the deep” (*infelix domus et sonitu tremibunda profundi*, line 180). A veritable treehouse of horrors<sup>292</sup>

<sup>287</sup> The verb *pulso* is elsewhere used to indicate beating (repeatedly) with a hammer, as in a boxing match.

<sup>288</sup> This verb adumbrates the boxer and anti-hero Capaneus in Statius’ later *Thebaid*.

<sup>289</sup> The reference to *voluptas* suggests that in some circumstances, at least, boxing was regarded as pleasurable—just not in a ring with Amycus (cf. *Achilleid* 2.155–156).

<sup>290</sup> The punch is specifically named as ‘right’ *dextera*.

<sup>291</sup> One exception is the poetess Corinna’s mention of a boxing match between Ares and Hermes for the love of a certain water nymph (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d).

<sup>292</sup> The cave of Amycus, described in lines 177–185, is “a horror show of corporal abuses. The venue is appropriately a *locus horridus* modeled on Cacus’ cave in Vergil (*Æneid* 8.193–197) where too the monster has decorated the entryway with severed heads” (McClellan 2019, p. 193).

(*metus*, line 180) lay at its mouth: mutilated (*truncus*) arms snatched (*rapio*, line 182) from the sockets of men whom Amycus had “sent flying” (*roto*, also ‘whirl about’ line 181). The limbs, still bound tight (*stringo*, line 182) with the boxing gauntlet (*cæstus*, ablative, line 182) were strewn about “this hideous abditory” (McClellan 2019, p. 193) with bones “foul and mouldering, and heads in a dismal row”: *ossaque tætra situ et capitum mæstissimus ordo* (line 184).<sup>293</sup>

Some of the decomposing noggins bore signs of a frontal wound (*adversus ... vulnus*, line 184) that “left nor name [*nomen*, i.e., a means of knowing] nor visage [*facies*]”. Boxing with Amycus could literally result in having one’s face ripped off. Only a savage *cæstus* could cause such mayhem. Indeed, Amycus’ holy boxing gauntlets (*arma sacra*, lines 185–186) are mentioned next, sanctified “through fear” (*metus*, ablative, line 186) and lying in honor “on the altar of his mighty sire” (*magnique aris imposta parentis*, line 186).

Some in the company are stricken by fear (*pavor*, line 188) but not plucky Pollux. “With starry countenance undismayed” (*sidereo Pollux interritus ore*, line 190) he threatens the absent monster. “I will cause this wood of thine to bear thee anon, whoever thou art, if thou have but blood and limbs withal”: ... *modo sint tibi sanguis et artus* (line 192).<sup>294</sup> Aroused by their comrade’s *cri de cœur*, the other sailors likewise call for (*exopto*) the man (*vir*) “to try the issue in valiant fight” (*decerno pugna*, ablative, line 193). They want to “challenge him face to face” (*contra ... occurrere posco*).<sup>295</sup> Valerius treats his audience to a simile comparing Pollux and his companions to a bull (*taurus*, line 196) that first tests “untried waters,” hence leading the herd (*pecus*, line 197) into the swirling eddies, their terror (*formido*, line 197) at once forgot.

At the same time, “the ruthless giant” (*sævus gigans*, line 200) strides towards to his cave in a fury (*furens*, line 204) and straightaway informs his unwelcome visitors,<sup>296</sup> “Here it is my law to raise gauntlet and arms in opposing combat”: *hic mihi lex cæstus adversaque tollere contra | bracchia ...* (lines 210–211).<sup>297</sup> According to one commentator, Amycus thus substitutes “agonism for hospitality” (Bernstein 2014, p. 167). Lamenting his unyore lack of sparring partners, Amycus notes that his “gauntlets lie idle, and the ground is cold and dry, and but few teeth bestrew it”: *iam pridem cæstus resides et frigida raris | dentibus aret humus* ... (lines 214–215). He mockingly asks, “Who will strike [*jungo*] a bargain [*fædus*, plural, line 215] with me?” Valerius toys with his audience’s expectations of an epic boxing match when Amycus goads his guests further, “To whom may I hand the prize [*donum*, line 216]? The same guerdon [*honor*, line 217] will come to all in time.” The prize, by twisted Amycian convention, is death.<sup>298</sup> They are trapped, he tells them, and he has no patience for “grovelling

<sup>293</sup>Valerius is aware “that a much darker sense of a pre-Jovian civilization might exist in the universe. ... [T]he most shocking example of such barbarity is the primitive Amycus” (Buckley 2014, p. 323).

<sup>294</sup>“His [sc. Amycus] spectacle of abuse elicits a threat of retaliatory corpse abuse from Pollux, who will take up the gauntlets against Amycus in a boxing match to the death” (McClellan 2019, p. 197). The author provides his own translation of this passage: “[W]hoever you are, I will nevertheless see to it that your trees bear *you* on account of this horrific display, provided you have blood in your limbs” (*ibid.*).

<sup>295</sup>This is the third time we have found some variant of the verb phrase *occurrere contra* in the Valerian boxing episode.

<sup>296</sup>“Amycus’ perversion of *xenia* [‘hospitality’] constitutes a violation of duties analogous to treachery” (Cowan 2014, p. 233fn. 12).

<sup>297</sup>Given our particular interest in the contrast (or lack thereof) between *cæstus* and *arma*, we note that Mozley (1928b) need not have included “and arms” in his translation of this passage because *arma* does not appear in it.

<sup>298</sup>We see in Amycus’ cruel *donum* the shadow of what we call ‘gladiatorial’ boxing, in which one of the boxers is likely to die, given the nature of the cruel *cæstus* used throughout the imperial period and Late Antiquity (Section

prayers” or “appeals to heaven.” In a final bit of blasphemy that surely sings awk, the son of Neptune bellows, “Tis elsewhere Jupiter counts for king”: *aliis rex Iuppiter oris* (line 219).

At this foul provocation, several sailors leap forward to fight but none as quickly as Pollux, who has already stripped off his clothes—at least partially (*nudus ... pectus*, ablative, line 225)—and taken his stand (*sto*). Pollux’ brother, Castor, is gripped by fear (*pavor*) and “icy chill of blood” (*gelidus ... sanguis*, line 226) recognizing this hand-to-hand fight (*pugna*, line 227) would not be like the ones back home in Greece. Valerius imagines games attended by nobility with applause (*favor*, line 228) resounding off the slopes of Taygetus and into the Spartan ring: *nec sonat Cebalium caveæ favor aut iuga nota | Taygeti ...* (lines 228–229). *Cavea* is the first word we have found in epic poetry denoting a space for boxing that suggests more than a flat piece of ground (e.g., *æquor, campus*) or a clearing in a crowd (e.g., *in medium*). The term *cavea*, which is used elsewhere to characterize an enclosure for animals,<sup>299</sup> instead calls to mind a constructed space in which the fighters torment one another. Valerius associates the *cavea* with Sparta.<sup>300</sup> The noun *cavea* may also refer to the part of the theater in which the spectators sat; if Valerius describes the cheers coming from the *cavea*, it is possible this is what he meant. However, the form used in the poem is either genitive or dative, so applause reaching the *cavea* is grammatically just as likely as applause emanating from it. Thus, we cannot rule out the possibility that Valerius imagined some form of Spartan pit fighting, as is strongly implied by *cavea*, ultimately derived from *cavus* ‘hollow’.<sup>301</sup>

Valerius writes that on Bebrycia’s “accursed” sand (*sacra harena*, line 230),<sup>302</sup> the prize (*preium*) is not “a bull or a steed with sounding hooves, but the guerdon [*premium*, line 231] is man’s life [*Manes*, line 231]<sup>303</sup> and the gate of death unbarred [*reclusa ... ianua leti*, line 231].” While the Amycian bouts take place on the shore, it is hard to miss Valerius’ double-entendre: *harena* ‘sand’, e.g., in the amphitheater, was by Valerius’ time a synecdoche for the place of combat itself.

With an ominous smile (*ora renidens*, line 234) not unfamiliar to boxers, Amycus sizes up (*lustro*) his opponent, who is “neither fierce of brow [*nec frons trux*, line 232] nor terrible in bulk [*moles tremenda*], scarce as yet showing signs of earliest manhood [*prime spargentem signa iuventæ*, line 233].” Amycus rages (*fremo*) at the youth’s audacity (*ausum*), and “in blazing fury rolls his bloodshot eyes”: *sanguineosque rotat furiis ardentibus orbes* (line 235).<sup>304</sup> Valerius compares the ogre to Typhoeus, a monstrous serpentine giant defeated by Jupiter in order to secure supremacy over the cosmos. Amycus attempts to psych out (*terreo*, line 239) his opponent using some old-fashioned trash talk (*rabidus murmur*). He blusters, “Make haste, whosoever thou art, unhappy boy [*infelix ... puer*, line 240]; no longer shall the beauty of that fair brow [*pulchra ... frons*, lines 240–241] remain to thee, nor shalt thou take back to thy mother the face she knew [*haut ... decus orave matri | nota feres*, lines 240–242].” His final threat makes it clear that their fight will be to the outrance: “Wilt thou, the choice

<sup>3.5).</sup>

<sup>299</sup>It has been translated in other contexts as ‘cage’, ‘stall’, ‘coop’, or even ‘beehive’.

<sup>300</sup>Cebalia, another name for Sparta, is so designated based on the name of an early king.

<sup>301</sup>Modern cage-fighting will perhaps one day reckon its debt to Valerius Flaccus.

<sup>302</sup>The adjective *sacer* ‘sacred’ can also mean ‘execrable’ in poetry and post-Augustan prose. While the context here suggests the pejorative (and was also chosen by Mozley), the notion that the sand was consecrated by spilled blood is also not out of the question.

<sup>303</sup>*Manes* refers to the ghost of a person, also the underworld generally.

<sup>304</sup>“Amycus’ ... madness remains unexplained and unjustified” (Antoniadis 2017, p. 168).

of cruel comrades, wilt thou die by the and of Amycus?”<sup>305</sup> Amycus “exemplifies from the very beginning ... an arrogant and furious behavior that distances him significantly from all previous boxers” in the epic tradition, “mak[ing] the reader wish to see him not only defeated, but also dead” (Antoniadis 2017, p. 164).

No more messing around now, the son of the earth-shaker “displays his huge shoulders [*ingens umerus*, line 244] and the spacious breast-bones [*spatiosa ... pectoris ossa*] and the unsightly sinews [*toris informis*, line 245]<sup>306</sup> of his terrible [*horreo*] limbs [*artus*, line 245].” As when Irus watched Odysseus drop his cloak, the Argonauts sputter at the sight. Their brief reverie is interrupted by their pugnacious host who presents Pollux with “hardened wrappings” (*durus volumen*, line 250). This novel term for the *cæstus* suggests they may have been rolled up for storage. As usual, they are made of the ‘raw’ or ‘bloody’ hide of a bull (*taurus*, ablative, line 250).<sup>307</sup> Amycus discounts the option of choosing gauntlets by cleromancy: “Seek not [*nec peto*, line 251]<sup>308</sup> the aid of chance [*sortis ops*, line 251], but put on [*induo*, line 251] what gloves [*cæstus*] thou canst.” As in the Apollonine *Argonautica*, the possibility of sortition for the *cæstus* is mentioned but it is summarily rejected. This puzzling detail leads us to wonder if the practice was recalled from distant memory or if it was a mere fiction.

As oblivious to his expiatory fate (*piaculum*) as any Titan about to be hurled headlong into Tartarus, Amycus gives his flat hands (*palma*, line 253) to his servant (*famulus*, line 254).<sup>309</sup> The servant’s task is to bind or weave (*innecto*, line 253) the (*arma*, ablative/dative), a clear indication that here, at least, *cæstus* and *arma* are synonymous.<sup>310</sup> Pollux does the same; the phrase is *dat et inde*, so it is not clear if Pollux wraps up his own hands or extends them to a comrade to do the job.

Valerius provides a timeless insight into the psychology of boxing when he writes that ferocious hatred (*odium asper*, plural) gathers to a greatness (*surgo*, line 254) in the breasts of those who were strangers only moments before (*ignotus prius*). Their minds eschaufed (*incensa mens*, line 255), the combatants hurl themselves (*fero*, line 256) “into the midst” (*in medium*, line 256). Here the poet touches on one of the abiding mysteries of personal combat. What transpires in the mind of a boxer when he realizes that only he or the stranger standing before him can leave the ring in victory? How can *odium asper* be born so quickly in the heart of man? Is it hatred, after all, or something else?

The next passage has unique implications for a theory of the psychagogic origins of boxing. In a tense silence “strung taut by suspense and hope [*votum*, ‘vow’]”, a multitude of ghosts (*umbra*)<sup>311</sup> entreat (*oro*, line 258) the lord of the underworld to grant them seats at

<sup>305</sup> ... *tunc a sociis electus iniquis? | tunc Amyci moriere manu?* ... (lines 242–243).

<sup>306</sup> The phrase may be translated ‘shapeless muscular protuberance’. Evidently, Amycus was to be respected for his bulk, not his pulchritude.

<sup>307</sup> Valerius uses no word for ‘hide’ in this passage.

<sup>308</sup> The form is first person singular, which means Amycus is talking about himself, *pace* Mozley (1928b), who renders it a command. Another manuscript appears to have *petae*. Arguably, this may be a corruption of the second person singular imperative *pete*.

<sup>309</sup> The noun, appearing in the dative form *famulis*, could be singular or plural in the masculine, plural only in the feminine.

<sup>310</sup> Perhaps intent on the possibility that Amycus and Pollux are about to wrestle, Mozley (1928b) translates *arma* as “harness”.

<sup>311</sup> Mozley (1928b) renders the noun phrases “shades of the slain” but we find no indication in the text that these are spirits of victims, e.g., of Amycus. That seems to be the sense of Mozley’s translation, there is not a great deal of evidence for it in Valerius’ original words.

this special fistfight: ... *ad merita spectacula pugnæ | emittit* ... (lines 259–260).<sup>312</sup> So many shades emerge from Tartarus and find their seats that “the mountain-tops grow black with them.” While Mozley (1928b) suggested that these phantoms were victims of Amycus’ cruelty during their mortal lives, there is little support for this interpretation in the original text. The presence of ghosts is clearly related to the Roman view of boxing as a cultic endeavor. We note the close connection between boxing and funerals in southern Italy and among the Etruscans (see Sections 3 and 4 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)), including the notion that blood must be spilt near the entrance of a tomb to the benefit of the deceased. Zissos (2003, p. 663ff) argues that the ghosts take their seats on the tops of mountains surrounding the boxing ring, suggesting the natural equivalent of a Roman amphitheater, with spectators seated in the nosebleeds, high above the action.<sup>313</sup>

“Like a hurricane [*turbo*, line 262] sweeping down from Malea’s roaring summit,”<sup>314</sup> Amycus “scarce suffers the hero to raise his head, scarce to lift [*tollo*, line 262] his arms” before his attack.<sup>315</sup> Amycus drives Pollux ‘headlong’ (*præcepſ*), encompassing (*involvo*, lit. ‘roll upon’) him in a rainstorm (*nimbus*, line 263) and torrent (*torrens*) of attack (*ago*).<sup>316</sup> The bigger man pursues (*insequor*) the smaller one “over all the ground” (*barena*, lit. ‘sand’, line 264).<sup>317</sup> Pollux is alert (*vigil*) with fear (*metus*). He turns (*redeo*, line 268) his breast and boxing gloves (*arma*, line 265) repeatedly, always “with head drawn back” (*cervix reducta*, ablative, line 266) and “ever a-tiptoe” (*in digitis*). The manner in which boxers stood on their toes is the focus of other epic poets, notably Apollonius of Rhodes (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d) and Nonnus of Panopolis (Section 2.6). Standing on tiptoe suggests that the boxer is attempting to increase his height. However, minimizing the surface area of contact between the foot and the ground in this way would be an unreliable technique in the modern boxing ring, as it leads to poor balance. We surmise that references to boxing *in digitis* or the like may indicate that the fighter attempts to land a hammer-blow from above by increasing his vertical dominance over his opponent. If, on the other hand, *in digitis* really means “on the balls of the feet” then this description fits nicely with the praxis of modern sport boxing, where boxers are encouraged to stand in this position in order to remain nimble in avoiding punches and springing back and forth at one’s adversary. Indeed, the same passage refers to the boxers lunging forward (*proicio*).

Valerius compares Pollux to a raft (*ratis*, line 269) in a restless (*trepidus*) sea (*æquor*).<sup>318</sup>

<sup>312</sup> Again, Mozley (1928b) intends to explain the presence of the ghosts by suggesting that their human forms were slaughtered by Amycus: “to view at last the well-earned retribution.” It is difficult to read ‘retribution’ into the original.

<sup>313</sup> Citing Zissos (2003), Antoniadis (2017, p. 177fn. 36) observes that Valerius “gives prominence to the gladiatorial aspects of the fight, i.e., its amphitheatrical setting and its aristocratic self-fashioning, as well as to the psychodramatic involvement of spectators.” This is no longer a ritual performance, even if nominally a sacrifice.

<sup>314</sup> Valerius refers to a peninsula and cape in the southeast of the Peloponnese, known for its lousy weather.

<sup>315</sup> It was also said of Otreus, Amycus’ prior victim, that he hardly had a chance to raise his head before Amycus swung at him. This might mean that the boxers initiated combat with bowed heads, or may refer to them rising from a seated position where, perhaps, they accoutred themselves with the *cæstus*.

<sup>316</sup> “Valerius is faithful to the message of Apollonius, who turns the battle into a *mise en abyme* of a new epic whose defining *topos* is the storm, a *topos* that shows a capacity to integrate material from ‘earlier’ epics into a new and more accomplished semionarrative model” (Deremetz 2014, p. 65).

<sup>317</sup> This is undoubtedly another reference to the Roman arena.

<sup>318</sup> Valerius referred to the boxing ‘ring’ as *campus* ‘flat plain’, just a few lines earlier (267). Reference to the ‘ring’ as *æquor* in epic poetry is not unknown, as we have mentioned earlier. Its most general sense the noun means ‘a flat surface’.

This is remarkably consistent with modern boxing terminology, in which this motion is referred to as ‘bobbing’. All the while, the son of Jupiter “warily watches the blows”: ... *Pollux sic providus ictus | servat ...* (lines 271–272).<sup>319</sup> With a skill that Valerius considers uniquely Spartan (*Œbalius*), Pollux “withdraws his head from the peril”: *dubium caput eripio* (line 272).<sup>320</sup> By doing so, he causes Amycus to pour out (*effundo*) his “urgent wrath” (*urgente ... ira*, line 273, plural) and fury (*ardor*) on the clouds (*nubes*, dative/ablative). Pollux is already winning.

Pollux rises (*insurgo*) gradually (*palauntim*) to the strike, as yet untouched (*integer*) by his already exhausted (*fessus*, line 274) opponent. He brings down (*deduco*, line 275) the *it cæstus* with “uplifted arms” (*summa manus*, plural ablative, line 275). This is another clear example of how important the hammer-blow was to ancient boxing. While Pollux waxed, Amycus waned. His limbs drooped (*æger artus*), he was covered in sweat (*sudor*), and breathed with halting (*cuncto*) and parched (*areo*) gasps: *arenti cunctantem vidit hiatu* (line 277).<sup>321</sup> Amycus is, in a word, “weary” (*defatiscor*, line 278), so much so that his own people do not recognize him.

In what appears to be a kind of break between rounds (reminiscent of Greek athletic pauses by mutual agreement), both combatants take a breath (*respiro... paulum*, line 279) and let their arms fall (*repono*). Valerius imagines another *æquor*<sup>322</sup> where Gradivus (a surname of the god Mars) revives (*refoveo*, line 281) the Lapiths<sup>323</sup> or the Pæonians while “leaning silent upon his fixed spear.”<sup>324</sup>

The interval was short (*vix*) but we are told the combatants stood (*sto*) throughout it. Once more unto the breach, they fall (*ruo*) on one another with violence, their gloves reverberating (*terga sonant*) at the reciprocal infliction (*infligo*, line 282) of blows. Quickened (*nova vis*) with “fresh bodies” (*novum corpus*) they stand erect (*surgo*, line 283). The poet gives his audience a rich psychological insight into the boxers: shame (*pudor*) motivates (*instimulo*) one (presumably Amycus), while the other (presumably Pollux) feels hope (*spes*). Amycus’ performance in the ring so far has disappointed him; he knows that he must recover and therefore presses forward out of shame for his failure to defeat his opponent any sooner. Pollux, on the other hand, is more confident (*audeo*, line 284) as he learns (*notus*) more about his enemy (*hostis*, line 284). He has hope that he will win and this provides its own positive motivation. As boxers, we recognize the singular importance of this psychological peripateia in a match, viz., the moment when it dawns on a fighter that he understands his opponent and that he is, in fact, beating him.

The muscle that parts the chest and abdomen, the *precordia* (line 285), is steaming *fumo* from punch after punch (*creber pulsus*, line 285). This image, unique to epic boxing, suggests that Valerius was a studious spectator himself and had observed such steam arise from the bodies of pugilists, presumably on chilly days in the arena or the *palaestra*.

<sup>319</sup> Antoniadis (2017, p. 175) argues that Valerius, “beside re-working epic boxing scenes, is also alluding to some basic tenets of stoic philosophy” by describing Pollux as *providus* and possessed of reasoning that “justifies even his own fear ... as a means of restraining his anger.”

<sup>320</sup> A slip.

<sup>321</sup> This line is difficult to translate. In particular, we are puzzled as to the meaning of *vidit hiatu*. Mozley (1928b) seems to interpret it as ‘gasp’, though ‘look for an opening’ is also possible—lexically, at least.

<sup>322</sup> ‘War’ is not mentioned explicitly, *pace* Mozley (1928b).

<sup>323</sup> The Lapiths were known for their role as the human side of the centauromachy, a legendary brawl at a wedding feast that pitted the Lapiths against the disorderly, drunken sagittaries.

<sup>324</sup> This attitude recalls the Hellenistic Prince, often paired with the Quirinal Boxer as a sculptural duo.

The fighters vocalize (*gemitus*)—something that is relatively uncommon to epic boxing episodes. Typically, the only sounds the boxers make emanate from their jaws as they gnash together or receive heavy blows. In a second reference to Polyphemus, Valerius creates an auditory representation of the cyclopean forge. The monster “prepares the metal for the thunderbolt [*fulmen*].”<sup>325</sup> The emphasis here is on the “clang” (*strepito*, line 288) of “stricken [*pello*, line 288] anvils” and their resemblance, presumably, to the punches the two fighters unload on each other. Pollux next “leaps forward” (*emico*, line 289) and makes ready (*paro*) his right hand in a menacing (*mino*) gesture. Distracted by this threat (“that way go the eyes”), Amycus “lunges” (*pondus*, ‘weight’, ablative) based on his (miscalculated) reckoning (*reor*) of Pollux’ next move. “With swift left” (*celeri ... sinistra*, line 291), Pollux tears (*rapio*) his opponents face or perhaps his mouth (*ora*, line 291). At this signal of dominance, Pollux’ comrades (*socius*) shout (*conclamo*) for joy (*gaudia*).

Disordered (*turbo*, line 293) and enraged (*furo*) by his opponent’s “unexpected guile” (*insperata fraus*), Amycus retreats (*refugo*, line 294) until he can thunder forth (*detono*) his wrath (*ira*).<sup>326</sup> He is also described as alarmed (*terreo*) and “conscious of his great daring” (*ingentis conscius ausi*, line 295).<sup>327</sup> The behemoth of Bebrycia is described as ‘helpless’ (*inops*, line 296) in his ferocity (*sævio*), never a good look for a boxer. Amycus heedlessly (*nullo discrimine*) “hurls himself forward” (*præcipito*).<sup>328</sup> He is “greedy for his foe” (*avidus ... viri*) when he see the Argonauts rejoicing (*ovo*) in the distance. He raises both his gauntlets (*cæstu elatus*) and casts them down (*inruo*) on both sides (*utroque*, line 298) of his adversary. Pollux “slips” (*subeo*, lit. ‘come under’) between them (*hos inter Pollux subit*, line 299) and flies (*advolo*, line 300) at his grim (*trux* opponent’s face (*ora*)).<sup>329</sup>

Valerius allows one black mark to appear on Pollux’ boxing record. Though his hope (*spes*, line 300) was presumably to drive his gauntlets into Amycus’ face, both fists (*manus*) fall (*cado*) on the other man’s chest (*in pectus*). Even the son of Jupiter does not have perfect aim. Enraged (*sævio*) at this affront, Amycus punches (*ago*) “at random” (*inconsultus*, lit. ‘unasked, not consulted’, line 302), striking nothing but air (*vacua aura*, plural). Discerning (*sentio*, line 303) that Amycus is at this point ‘wanting reason’ (*rationis egens*), Pollux makes his move: he sets his knee (*genu*) close (*jungo*)<sup>330</sup> and “presents his side” (*do ... latus*). This is strong evidence that Roman-era pugilists angled their bodies to reduce the area that an opponent could strike, a fundamental posture in modern sport boxing, as well.

Pollux pours out (*effundo*) punishment and follows (*sequor*) his opponent, preventing him from recovering his position (*revoco gradum*). He makes an uproar (*turbo*, line 305) and presses (*premo*, line 305) his opponent repeatedly (*creber*) “in his perplexity” (*anceps*, lit., ‘one who has two heads’, line 306). Pollux heaps together (*congero*) blows from above (*desuper*)

<sup>325</sup> Elsewhere in epic poetry, we have seen boxers’ hands compared to lightning.

<sup>326</sup> The Flavian Amycus, perhaps conceived by the poet in relation to Stoic theory, manifests a “self-destructive ... vulnerability to anger” (Antoniadis 2017, p. 177).

<sup>327</sup> Alcidamas, a boxer in Statius’ depiction of epic pugilism, “grew pale at [his own] success” at a certain moment during the match (*Thebaid* 6.805). Amycus’ alarm, dismay, or fear in the Valerian *Argonautica* may have a similar etiology.

<sup>328</sup> “Seneca [in *De Ira*] devotes considerable space to demonstrate that anger is by no means necessary in order to carry out virtuous deeds and exemplify one’s courage or bravery. His reference to the irrevocable effects of rage seems to be fully confirmed in Valerius’ account of the boxing match at Bebrycia. Against Amycus who is hurling himself in helpless rage ..., Pollux’ self-control and imperturbability now seem to bear Stoic connotations” (Antoniadis 2017, p. 174).

<sup>329</sup> The term *ultra*, ‘on the other side’ is used in this passage (line 299) but it is not evident in Mozley’s translation.

<sup>330</sup> We suspect this means that he brings his knee close to the knee of his adversary.

and from behind (*aversus*). In the general mayhem, it appears Amycus has turned his back on his opponent and will suffer a lethal penalty for this improvident move. The blows (*ictus*) are delivered at will (*liber*), suggesting that Amycus can no longer defend himself or offer any resistance. The giant's head is bowed (*vertex ... inclinis*, lines 307–308) and like a drum it reverberates (*sono*) “with all manner of wounds” (*vulnus*). The haughty son of Neptune “sinks beneath [cedo] the punishment [*mala*, line 308].” His temples stream (*mano*) with blood and his ears are hidden (*lateo*, line 309) in gore (*sanguineus*). At last, a heavy blow with the right hand (*dextera gravis*) loosens or releases (*solvo*, line 311) the “vital bond” (*vitalis vinculum*) the cervical joint (*cervix*). This is, evidently, a rabbit punch delivered to the back of Amycus' head. While outlawed in modern sport boxing,<sup>331</sup> this punch appears to have been perfectly acceptable in Valerius' time: The punch is thrown by the hero, after all.<sup>332</sup>

As Amycus slides (*labor*, line 311) Pollux knocks (*propello*) him to the ground. Exultant, he stands over his opponent (*super insisto*, line 312) and thunders:

...‘Pollux ego missus Amyclis  
et love natus’ ait; ‘nomen mirantibus umbris  
hoc refers: sic et memori noscere sepulchro’ (lines 312–314)

“Pollux am I, who hail from Amyclæ and am born of Jove; this name shalt thou bear down to the wondering shades; thus shall it be told of thee on thy recording tomb.” No epic boxing match is as explicitly concerned with the world of the dead as the Valerian *Argonautica*. The spirits came to watch the fisticuffs and Pollux sends Amycus back with them, insulting him further by proclaiming that even Amycus' tombstone will bear the adversary's name.

A few lexical considerations from the story's dénouement are worth our attention. Pollux' hand is said to have warded off (*arceo*, line 317) Amycus from his ambition. This verb may have been associated with defensive tactics in Roman-era boxing. Poignantly, Amycus desired “youth's enduring vigour” (*vis juventæ continua*, lines 318–319) like many boxers past their prime. Outstretched (*tendo*) on the field, the son of Neptune, “that vast terror of men” (*ingens hominum pavor*, line 320) is compared to “a portion of ... Eryx” (*pars Erycis*, line 322), a reference to the semi-divine patron of the Æneidean boxing match and a formidable boxer during his life. Pollux cannot get enough (*expleo*, line 323) of the physical emblem of his victory, “the huge prostrate mass” (*moles jacentis*, line 322) lying before him. The son of Jove marvels at his opponent's body from close at hand (*comminus*, line 324).<sup>333</sup> Once more, this detail may have been taken from the Roman arena, where the victor's visible response to the corpse of his fallen opponent likely made for a compelling tableau.

Pollux' comrades “throng him” (*urgeo*, 325) and give him “emulous embraces” (*densus ... amplexus*, ablative, line 325). They carry (*ferro*) his gauntlets (*arma*) and “raise his weary arms” (*attollo palmas*, lit. hands, line 326). A version of this gesture of victory is repeated in

<sup>331</sup> Referees are alert to warn boxers who turn their backs on their opponents and to stop the action when they do so. This makes strikes to the back of a boxer's head relatively uncommon. Though a hook may still land (with considerably less force) at this site, a straight punch to the back of the head is vanishingly rare in the modern ring.

<sup>332</sup> Though the death blow is demonstrably vicious, the Valerian boxing match is nevertheless regarded as “symboliz[ing] the triumph of civilized art over brutal archaic force” (Deremetz 2014, p. 64). Has Pollux not become something of a monster in the way he defeats Amycus? Valerius' original audience presumably had no such qualms about the Tyndarean character.

<sup>333</sup> This term is used elsewhere to refer to hand-to-hand combat, line 324.

the modern ring when the referee holds up the hand of the prevailing boxer.<sup>334</sup> The myrmidons cry, “Hail, true offspring, ay, true offspring indeed of Jove [*vera Iovis... proles*, line 327]!” They continue, “Hurrah for Taygetus [i.e., Sparta], renowned for great-hearted wrestling-schools [*magnanima ... palestra*, line 328], and for the fruitful lessons (*felix labor*, line 329) of thy earliest teachers [*magister*, line 329]!” Given the context, we see no reason why *palestra* should not be translated as ‘boxing gym’ in modern English and *magister* as ‘coach’.

In the aftermath, a thin (*tenuis*, line 330) stream (*cruor*, plural) of blood flows (*eo*) down Pollux’ forehead (*frons*). Unfazed, the hero, dries (*siccō*, line 332) the wound (*vulnus*) with the back of his glove (*aversus cæstus*, ablative).<sup>335</sup> Using the same verb for plaiting (*implico*, line 334) employed earlier to describe wrapping the hands with the *cæstus*, Valerius writes that Castor entwines his brother’s head and his weapons (*arma*, line 333) with leaves of the laurel tree. While placing a garland on the head of the victor is hardly novel, we are unaware of another reference to this festive treatment of the *cæstus* itself. After a brief prayer to the goddess requesting a safe return home,<sup>336</sup> the sailors slaughter (*cædo*, 337) “with strong axe” (*valida ... bipennis*, line 337, ablative) steers (*armentum*, plural of the herd). The verb characterizing the sacrifice, *cædo*, has the same root as the boxing gauntlets, *cæstus*. Valerius must have recognized in the gauntlets instruments of laceration and cutting, as well as striking.

Having made their offering of blood, the Argonauts bathe, (*perfundo*) “in the sacred water” (*sacer ... gurges*, line 338) of a river (*amnis*, ablative, line 338) that they have appeased (*placo*, line 338), suggesting that their religious observances were directed towards a river deity. Next they lie down (*sterno*, line 339) upon the grassy ground (*gramineus humus*), perhaps to rest, perhaps in emulation of the fallen Amycus. During a sacrificial feast (*daps* line 339), they place *libum* ‘cakes’ (line 339) “upon leaves” and give the best cuts of meat (*tergum ... pecudum*) to Pollux. We note that the noun *terga* is used elsewhere to refer to the *cæstus*.

During this solemn banquet, Pollux exults (*ovo*, line 342) with joy (*letus*) at the praise (*laus*) directed towards him and at the honoring song (*carmen*) of the bard or soothsayer (*vates*, line 342). Two times he pours out (*gemono*)<sup>337</sup> a krater, presumably filled with wine, to his victorious (*victor*) father (*parens*, line 343). The celebrants turn their attention to the true winner of the boxing match, viz., Jove himself. While the purpose of these devotions, rich in detail, are not entirely clear, we speculate based on Valerius’ abundant wordplay that they are closely related to the boxing match and draw rich, anagogical parallels between the shedding of human and taurine blood; between the *cæstus* and the flesh of the living bull; between human and animal sacrifice.

Valerius’ “access to Seneca’s *De Ira* gives him a framework that is distinctly Roman, imperial and post-Vergilian” (Antoniadis 2017, p. 178). The boxing match of this *Argonautica* partakes of ritual (through Amycus’ foul intent), athletic (through Pollux’s display of ἀρετή), and gladiatorial elements, a fitting laurel for the tale of boxing in late classical antiquity.

<sup>334</sup> Boxers will occasionally hold both hands aloft unaided when introduced in their corner or shortly before a decision while standing in the center of the ring, to indicate a presentiment of victory—or a sympathetic magic in hope of it.

<sup>335</sup> The absorptive qualities of the fleece lining of the Roman *cæstus* will be more explicitly drawn out by Statius (Section 3.4.2).

<sup>336</sup> Castor prays that the “foliage” (*frons*) and the garland (*corona*, line 336) “speed over the sea.” The term *frons* ‘leafy branch’ is homonymous, at least in the nominative, with ‘forehead’, a term referenced in the immediately preceding lines. The religious significance of this prayer, and the vegetative decoration of the *cæstus* is worthy of closer inspection.

<sup>337</sup> This verb designates a repeated but non-specific action.

### 3.4 *Thebaid* 1, 6

The *Thebaid*, a brooding and at times unhinged reflection on the moral and military perils of civil war,<sup>338</sup> was composed in hexameter by the Roman poet Statius and published in the last decade of the first century AD. Though deeply influenced by both Homer and Vergil, Statius should be regarded as far “more than a second-rate or maladroit plagiarist” (Vessey 2010, p. 2).<sup>339</sup> His work lay in the penumbra of the *Aeneid* throughout antiquity but the *Thebaid* was much admired and studied during the Middle Ages when it was translated into a variety of languages and richly illustrated.

Statius’ epic contains two episodes of unarmed orthograde combat. The first, a rixation between two princes down on their luck, is arguably not boxing at all but is nonetheless amorphous enough to merit our attention. It has much in common with the boxing match in *Odyssey* 18. The second, a reconstitution of Homeric funeral boxing familiar to Statius from both the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, is unquestionably relevant to our theme. While considered derivative by some, the boxing match in *Thebaid* 6 is rendered with a realism and attention to detail likely distilled through Statius’ intimate familiarity with the arena of his day (Grimal 1994, pp. 448–454).

#### 3.4.1 Polynices vs. Tydeus, *Thebaid* 1

In Book 1 of Statius’ *Thebaid*, the exiled princes Tydeus<sup>340</sup> and Polynices<sup>341</sup> engage in a grim unarmed fight that contains some elements of boxing, though it arguably veers into the realm of Greek *pankration* as well. In other words, it is an unarmed brawl but the opponents appear to remain mostly upright. If we force a comparison between the the epic boxing matches and whatever takes place in *Thebaid* 1, then the latter most closely evokes the encounter between Odysseus and the beggar Iros in *Odyssey* 18. Indeed, both wandering princes in the *Thebaid* are homeless, so the bout in that poem is suggestive of what might have happened had Odysseus met his match in Iros. The fight between the two vagrant princes is sloppy and violent; its baseness is almost comical, were the contest not so grisly. The fight includes knees to the groin and eye-gouging, in addition to the usual mixing it up expected in an epic boxing match.<sup>342</sup> According to one commentator, “There is no obvious reason for this event; the

<sup>338</sup> One critic has called the *Thebaid*, “[A]n apocalyptic relocation of Roman epic tradition within the framework of ancient Greek civil strife” (König 2005, p. 239).

<sup>339</sup> Legras (1905), for example, dismissively (and incorrectly, *nos iudice*) describes most of the Thebaidic boxing match as an imitation of Vergil.

<sup>340</sup> Tydeus is the father of Diomedes, the ‘second’ to Euryalus in the Iliadic boxing match. Tydeus was also reportedly the first inexpugnate boxer of the Nemean Games (Apollodorus 3.6).

<sup>341</sup> Because the central conflict of the *Thebaid* is between the two sons of Oedipus, Polynices and Eteocles, the contest between Polynices and Tydeus is arguably “a venting of fratricidal rage on the substitute [Tydeus] who, like his brother [Eteocles], threatens to usurp his [Polynices’] place” (Bonds 1985, p. 227). Polynices, “the expression of a monstrous family,” is “[f]aced with the unnatural craving for related blood which is his inheritance” (Bonds 1985, p. 235). Fratricidal rage and its society-level embodiment, civil war, lie at the dark heart of the *Thebaid*.

<sup>342</sup> Unlike an epic boxing match, the duel between Polynices and Tydeus is “devoid of any fighter’s art” (Bonds 1985, p. 231). The fight has been described as “natural, mundane, without psychological overtones” (*ibid.*). We do not agree with the last descriptor. The savage baseness of the fight says much about the psychology of the two fighters, erstwhile noblemen of their respective kingdoms reduced to fighting like mendicants in the street. Statius’ gritty scene, with its shiftless bare-knuckle boxers, reminds us of Charles Bronson’s film “Hard Times” (1975), in which the main character’s brutal occupation belies his dignified, if mysterious, origins.

passion is irrational and sudden" (Vessey 2010, p. 95).<sup>343</sup>

Contending over "a dry place to sleep on the doorsill of the palace of Argos" (Bonds 1985, p. 225), Tydeus and Polynices are driven into a bloody rage against each other: *ambobus rabiem ... cruentam | adtulit ...* (lines 408–409).<sup>344</sup> As in the central conflict of the *Thebaid*, it is not the prize that matters so much as "the sheer urge for domination" (*ibid.*, p. 233). Polynices and Tydeus "tarry with exchange of threatening words" until their "taunts swelled [*intumesco*] their anger to the pitch [*satis*]" they stood up, bared their shoulders (*exerto umeros*), and challenged (*lacessere*) each other "to naked combat" (*nuda ... pugna*).<sup>345</sup> The reference to bared shoulders (line 413) is most likely a reminiscence of the scene in *Odyssey* 18 in which Odysseus casts off his cloak to reveal his massive deltoid muscles. Given that it is the only part of the body that is explicitly bared during the boxing, we might infer that the combatants were stripped only to the waist, though the phrase *nuda pugna* (line 414) may be tautological. It is likely consistent with the late Roman *imaginaire* of how two ancient Greek nobles might have duked it out *al fresco*. The "Theban" (Polynices) is "taller ... with long stride [*gradus procerus*] and similarly (long) limbs [*membra simulque*]." Though possessed of a bold spirit (*virtus*), Tydeus has the smaller frame (line 417).

The two princes throw punches (*ictus*) 'in close', 'repeatedly' or 'thick' (*creber*) at each other's 'hollow temples' (*cavus temporis*), suggesting hooks or haymakers. However, the blows are described as "showers of darts [*telus*]" or "Rhipæan hail [*grando*]," perhaps indicating straight paths of motion, vertical and horizontal. Line 420 ...*flexoque genu vacua ilia fundunt* suggests they "pound" (*fundo*, lit., 'pour out') on each other in the "unprotected loins" (*vacua ilia*) with their bent knees (Shackleton Bailey 2004).

Statius then draws a provocative analogy between the fighters and ceremonial competitors, gathered at the end of a "lustral term" to honor Jupiter, the Thunderer, with their agon (lines 421–426). Their mothers are excluded from the place of combat, waiting for their sons to carry home the prizes:

Even as when his lustral terms return to the Pisæan Thunderer and the dust warms [*ardeo*] with the crude sweat [*crudus sudor*] of men—but yonder the discord of the crowd [*caveæ dissensus*] spurs on [*concito*] the tender youths [*ephebus*] and their excluded mothers wait for the prizes [*præmium*] (Shackleton Bailey 2004).

Just as lively (*alacer*) as such striplings, though inspired by hate (*odium*) instead of any desire for athletic glory (*cupido laudis*), the princes attack (*incurro*) each other. There is no audience, there are no "excluded mothers," there is no significant prize—just a bloody fight between two vagrants.<sup>346</sup>

Then things gets ugly. "The sharp nails probe [*scrutor*, line 426] far into their faces and force their way into the yielding eyes." Surprisingly, the poet explains, the two bruisers had

<sup>343</sup>Another critic has observed that it is "easy to see the fight as arising from the madness of Polynices" (Lovatt 2001, p. 109fn. 16).

<sup>344</sup>Line numbers and translations in this section come from Mozley (1928a) unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>345</sup>Some prefer *unda* 'wave, billow' to *nuda*—an orthographic tangle, no doubt—but this is almost certainly a corruption, given the context.

<sup>346</sup>Bonds (1985) explains that the climactic battle between the brothers Polynices and Eteocles takes place in front of a large gathering and with a more substantial prize at stake, viz., the kingdom of Thebes. The proemial bout between Polynices and Tydeus foreshadows and contrasts with it, he argues.

“swords girt [*accingo*, line 428] to their sides” the whole time. Perhaps the poet conceived of this battle as a simulacrum to a combat sport, hence the allusion to ceremonial games. How common was it for men of Statius’ time to engage each other in such a bloody combat without drawing even those swords they had at their disposal? Perhaps it was a tradition stretching back at least to Suetonius’ account of boxing *sine arte* in the backstreets of Rome during the first century (*Aug.* 45.2).

The Argive king, Adrastus, awoken by the boys’ “clamor and the fierce panting groans deep-heaved [...] *pectore ab alto | stridentes gemitus* ...,” lines 431–432],” stumbles from his bed to the site of their agon. There he beholds “a sight terrible to tell, faces torn [*lacero*] and cheeks disfigured [*putreo*] with streaming blood [*sanguineus ... imber*, line 438].”<sup>347</sup> Adrastus interrogates this “fury [*furor*]”<sup>348</sup> and the “implacable desire [*implacabilis ardor*] to let your hate [*odium*] disturb [*exturbo*] the tranquil silence of the night.” The king seems more disconcerted by the fact that the fight is taking place at night than that it is taking place at all: “Has then the day so little room ...?” Next he asks, “[W]hat may be your quarrel [*iurgium*, line 444]? Mean of soul ye cannot be—such anger [*ira*] proves it—even through bloodshed [*effundo ... crux*, line 446] the noble signs of proud race show clear.”<sup>349</sup>

There are no explicit tokens of pronograde combat in the fight between Polynices and Tydeus: no reference to grappling on the ground; no grasping, seizing, choking or throwing.<sup>350</sup> The formal differences between this fight and the one between Iros and Odysseus are the lack of a loincloth (the Thebaidic combatants are most likely naked), the bent-knee strikes to the “unprotected loins,” and the eye-gouging. We believe that Statius had in mind a kind of Roman boxing that is not adequately described in texts, but is amply attested in figurative art and which his audience would have recognized: the boxing match with sharp projections on the *cæstus* (cf. Figures 18, 19, 11, among others). Statius seems to allude to at least one function of these projections—removing the eyes—but makes it clear that it is the nails of the hand (*unca manus*, line 427) that do the dirty work in *Thebaid* 1.<sup>351</sup> Statius highlights the vulnerability of the eyes in unarmed combat, something that generations of fighters (including gloved boxers) seem to intuit naturally (Thomas 1997) and upon which the Romans appear to have capitalized.<sup>352</sup>

Their *mauvais quart d'heure* concluded, the two princes are eventually reconciled and married to the daughters of the Argive king. But their status as mere brothers-in-law cannot account for Polynices’ emotional unraveling when he attempts suicide out of grief for Tydeus’ death much later in the narrative.<sup>353</sup> The fraternal bond forged between Tydeus and Polynices is a direct outcome of their nasty fight in *Thebaid* 1. As Adrastus observes, “[The fight] that has passed is not in vain, nor were the gods elsewhere” (Shackleton Bailey 2004).<sup>354</sup>

<sup>347</sup> *lacera ora putresque | sanguineo videt imbre genas* (lines 437–438).

<sup>348</sup> Vessey (2010, p. 96) equates *furor* with “the insatiable madness of beasts.”

<sup>349</sup> ... *quae iurgia?* nam vos | haud humiles tanta *ira docet, generisque superbi | magna per effusum clarescunt signa cruentem* (lines 444–446).

<sup>350</sup> Polynices is represented as a lion, Tydeus as a boar, in an oracle in which Apollo predicts Adrastus’ future sons-in-law (lines 395–397). These animal representations do not, *nos iudice*, make either a boxing or wrestling scenario any more likely.

<sup>351</sup> Eye-gouging was a common technique in North American “rough and tumble” dueling through at least the nineteenth century (Gorn 1985).

<sup>352</sup> Vessey (2010, p. 95) has remarked that the reference to eye-gouging also “points back at once to Oedipus” and is “generically linked to [his] turbulent passions.”

<sup>353</sup> Polynices’ attempted suicide is prevented by his father-in-law (9.76–81).

<sup>354</sup> non *haec incassum divisque absentibus acta* (line 471).

The old king goes on to prophesy that their wrath [*ira*] will turn to strong friendship [*amor*]. The fact that devoted brothers may be born in an unarmed match like this one is mirrored and rendered ironic when Polynices and his biological brother Eteocles succeed in killing one another in an (armed) fight at the conclusion of the poem.

### 3.4.2 Capaneus vs. Alcidamas, *Thebaid* 6

In Book 6 of Statius' *Thebaid*, we encounter nearly one hundred lines in dactylic hexameter dedicated to a boxing match (6.729–825)<sup>355</sup> Thuillier (1996) has argued for the influence of contemporary “sporting reality” on Statius’ presentation of athletic competition, including boxing; he notes that Statius’ epic is “imprinted” by first-century athletic practice (p. 167).<sup>356</sup> Having reviewed many examples of epic boxing, we have a good idea of what to expect. Yet some details still surprise:

- The nudity of at least one of the boxers is strongly suggested.
- Pollux is the divine patron/trainer of one of the boxers.
- Something akin to a face-off occurs before the action starts.
- Slipping is described as quickly and nimbly ‘nodding’ the head.
- The boxers wear sheepskin or fleece on their arms.
- The interval between rounds seems to start and end with a signal.
- The boxing ‘ring’ is designated as *arvum* ‘ploughed land’.
- The fight ends preemptively, leaving one fighter denying his own victory and threatening his rival with morthdeed.

While the Argive army is delayed at Nemea, a local child named Opheltes dies, struck by the tail of a gigantic and apparently clumsy serpent that protects the sanctuary of Nemean Jupiter: *occidis extremæ destrictus verbere caudæ | ignaro serpente puer ...* (lines 5.538–539).<sup>357</sup> The child, who was the son of the priest Lycurgus, is buried “in an elaborate ceremony that serves as the founding moment of the Nemean games” (McNelis 2007, p. 91).<sup>358</sup> These games, described in *Thebaid* 6, include a boxing match in the tradition of the *Iliad*.

Capaneus and Alcidamas are among the last in a long series of contestants to enter the boxing ‘ring’ of epic poetry. Capaneus looms large in the *Thebaid* and other ancient sources as a character notorious for his procacity.<sup>359</sup> Capaneus seems a variation on the theme of Amycus; his description suggests a giant and his final, doomed-from-the-beginning showdown with Jupiter in Book 10 suggests a titan (Franchet d’Espèrey 1999, p. 198–203). A contemptuous blasphemer of the gods, including supernal Jupiter, Capaneus meets his end in a

<sup>355</sup>Line numbers and translations from the *Thebaid* in this section come from Mozley (1928a) unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>356</sup>On peut donc penser que Stace était très proche de cet univers sportif, qu'il a pu être amené à suivre de près des compétitions et que ces circonstances ont finalement laissé leur empreinte sur une épopee que était à priori très éloignée de l'Urbs du ier siècle.

<sup>357</sup>There may be here a connection to the Pythian Games, celebrated in honor of Apollo’s “cosmogonic victory” over Python (McNelis 2007, p. 94).

<sup>358</sup>If the Iliadic funeral games were, as one critic supposes, intended to exemplify the “enduring friendship” of Achilles and Patroclus and Achilles’ “resolved anger,” the Thebaic celebration fails in this regard: The brothers Eteocles and Polynices still kill one another, despite the presence of the games in Statius’ narrative (McNelis 2007, p. 157).

<sup>359</sup>According to Æschylus, Capaneus carried a shield embossed with the figure of an unarmored man withstanding fire, bearing a torch, with the inscribed vow, “I will burn the city.”

Jovian fulmination (10.295).<sup>360</sup> Before that event, however, Statius' audience gets to see him box.

Pugilism at funeral games requires a master of ceremonies. In the *Thebaid*, this role is filled by King Adrastus, the separator of princely boxers in Book 1. Just like his earliest literary forerunner, Achilles, the son of Talaus announces the boxing, which he describes sparingly as the ‘work of wrath’ (*opus... animis*).<sup>361</sup> He calls for men to raise (*tollo*) the dangerous *cæstus* (*infestus cæstus*, plural) in close or ‘hand-to-hand’ combat (*comminus*). He further remarks that the manliness (*virtus*) boxing requires is close to the kind required for warfare (*bellum et ferrum*, line 730). The juxtaposition of war and boxing—the martial and athletic—is arguably a theme of great importance to Statius and his Late Antique audience.

A megalith of a man (*immanis cerni immanisque*, line 731), Capaneus first agrees (*consto*) to put on (*induo*) the *cæstus*, which are described as ‘coverings of raw hide’ (*tegmina cruda boum*) made black with lead (*nigrantia plumbo*, lines 732–733). This is presumably Statius’ way of telegraphing that pieces of lead were stitched into the straps, as made more explicit in *Aeneid* 5.405. However, the reference is generic enough that it may mean that lead, perhaps in strips, provided an extra layer. Such devices are pictured, for example, in a number of Gallo-Roman mosaics depicting Dares, Entellus, and the Bull (Figures 24, 9), described by Budrovich (2011).

According to one commentator, “Capaneus enters with the express intention of killing” (Vessey 2010, p. 222). This is exhibited by the giant’s demand that he fight an Aonian (i.e., Theban)<sup>362</sup> adversary, someone he could lawfully murder (*fas demitto leto*). As an Argive (line 732), Capaneus could avoid blood guilt by boxing (to the death) a member of a different tribe; his *virtus* would remain in tact so long as it “were not stained with kindred blood”: *nec mea crudelis civili sanguine virtus* (line 737).<sup>363</sup> According to one commentator, Capaneus “wants to drag the games into the arena of war,” which is arguably Statius’ intention, as well (Lovatt 2001, p. iii).

The crowd is “aghast” (*obtipesco*), in fact stricken with fear (*fecitque silentia terror*, line 738) by the hulk baying for an opponent to meet him at the scratch.<sup>364</sup> At last a heleth named Alcidamas leaps forward (*prosilio*) from among the naked Spartans (*nuda de plebe Laconum*), a phrase suggesting Alcidamas, too, finds himself in the buff. We learn that Alcidamas was tutored in boxing by none other than Pollux, that semi-divine galactico of pugilism known

<sup>360</sup>“Capaneus is best likened to legendary rebels against Jupiter, symbols of a chaotic force now tamed by celestial power” (Vessey 2010, p. 223). There is a “hint of his future” in Statius’ reference on lines 751–752 to the boxers’ *fulmineas... manus* (*ibid.*, p. 222).

<sup>361</sup>The noun *animus* is here in the plural, suggesting the provocative variant ‘work of souls’. Both Mozley (1928a) and Lesuer (1991) translate *animus* here as ‘courage’.

<sup>362</sup>Given Statius’ general interest in the theme of civil war, it is perhaps not surprising that Capaneus demands a Theban opponent so that conflict between countrymen may be averted (lines 735–737). His eventual opponent, a Spartan, was allied with the Argives against Thebes but still represented a heritage distinct from that of Capaneus.

<sup>363</sup>The adjective *crudelis* (line 737) is obelized by Garrod (1904) perhaps because ‘cruel’, ‘fierce’ and ‘severe’ do not match what translators of the era, including Mozley (1928a), believed Statius meant. Vessey (2010, p. 210) argues that the line should read: *ne mea crudescat civili sanguine virtus* ‘lest my *virtus* grow violent with an ally’s blood’. Another possibility is that Statius meant *crudus* ‘raw’, ‘bloody’, ‘bleeding’ but used *crudelis* for metrical purposes.

<sup>364</sup>Legras (1905, p. 88) notes that the initiation of the fight is similar across Homer, Vergil, and Statius. As in the *Iliad*, one contestant issues an orgulous challenge that inspires a terrified silence in the crowd. According to Legras, Capaneus is *plus insolent encore* than Iliadic Epeius (*ibid.*). Lovatt (2005, p. 141) aptly summarizes the proem to nearly all the epic boxing matches: “[A] champion issues a challenge in supreme confidence, and expectations are aroused.”

to the Greeks as Polydeuces. Moreover, he was raised in ‘holy gymnasia’ (*sacras ... palestras*, line 742), i.e., those associated with the divine twins. Pollux placed (*pono*) the hands of Alcidamas, teaching him to assume the correct gestures and throw punches the right way. He “molded” (*fingo*, lit. ‘form by instruction’ also, ‘adorn’, e.g., with the *cæstus*) his arms. Much later in the epic, when Alcidamas dies, we learn that he was in fact “the first on whom Pollux fastened [*ligo*] the *cæstus*.<sup>365</sup> Pollux urged (*suadeo*) his charge in love (*amor*) of the “sport” (*materia*, lit. ‘material’). A more modern reading, exemplified by the translation of Shackleton Bailey (2004, fn. 82) surmises that *materia* refers to Alcidamas’ own body and thus makes him the object of the god’s lust.<sup>366</sup> Pollux appears to have sparred with Alcidamas, i.e., ‘putting (him) in close combat’ (*loco comminus*) with him. In these sparring sessions, Pollux admires how his student is “caught up in like mood [viz., wrath]” (*simili stantem miratus in ira*, line 745), suggesting Alcidamas is learning to box with all the cunning and aggression of his teacher. After their exercises, they embrace in the state of undress common to ancient boxers.<sup>367</sup>

Lovatt (2005, p. 157) claims that the “passage emphasizes the erotics of pedagogy, reading boxing as lovemaking.” However, modern boxers frequently embrace after sparring, particularly after a hard-fought match; they do so with warm-heartedness (cf. *exsulto*, line 746) rather than amorous intent towards their opponent. Naturally, this embrace takes place with the fighters clothed (or unclothed) as they were during the bout.<sup>368</sup> As we have demonstrated elsewhere (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d), in almost every ancient example, boxers wear only a loincloth or nothing at all. Statius’ reference to a bare-chested embrace may simply highlight the author’s knowledge of boxers’ ‘exultant’ behavior in greeting one another after a match when they still happen to be stripped of clothing. To sexualize the post-fight greeting in Statius seems to us unnecessary and may tell us more about a modern audience than ancient boxers.<sup>369</sup> Nor are we alone in our opinion—regarding line 744, Lesuer (1991, p. 151, n. 60) prefers glossing *materia* as *matière de son art* (sc., boxing) instead of his sparring partner’s body, stating, “It seems preferable to us because boxing is the exercise in which Pollux excels” (translation ours).<sup>370</sup>

As noted by Vessey (2010, pp. 222–223), Capaneus sneers (*rideo*) at his rival, the story’s *jeune premier*.<sup>371</sup> The same verb is used to describe how Alcidamas’ comrades regard Capaneus at the end of the boxing match (line 825). Finally, *rideo* characterizes how Jupiter looks on the marauding Capaneus as he scales the heights of heaven in a blasphemous rage (10.907). “It is as if Capaneus wants competitors more worthy of his attention... His desire to win is so great that he seeks an impossible competition” (Lovatt 2001, p. 113). “Capaneus’ madness in the games” is “inspired by his desire for more than victory, his desire to go beyond the

<sup>365</sup>... *primis quem cæstibus ipse ligarat* | Tyndarides ... (10.500–501).

<sup>366</sup>While plausible in the context of classical *paiēdia*, such a (Roman) attitude stands in contrast to the Greek ethic as propounded by Philostratus in *Gymnasticus*, wherein he abjures any overlap of sexual interest with athletic excellence (*Gym.* 45, 48) (Reid 2016, pp. 79–80).

<sup>367</sup>Line 746 reads: *sustulit exsultans nudumque in pectora pressit* “Exultant Pollux lifted him naked against his chest” (translation ours).

<sup>368</sup>Modern boxers, usually professionals participating in fights with a large audience, will occasionally return to their corners before the announcement of a victor to don a t-shirt or baseball cap emblazoned with the logos of their sponsors. Their reasons for clothing themselves immediately at the conclusion of the fighting have little to do with modesty and much more to do with the economics of modern (professional) sport boxing.

<sup>369</sup>We are unaware of a similarly charged commentary on the post-fight kiss in the *Posthomerica*.

<sup>370</sup>*nous paraît préférable du fait que la boxe est l'exercice où Pollux excelle.*

<sup>371</sup>The relevant passage is ... *rideoque vocantem* | *ut miserans* ... (lines 747–748).

normal context and achieve glory greater than manhood, forever to push out the boundaries of his world, to re-make his reality” (*ibid.*, p. 115). Capaneus even demands another adversary (*posco alium*, line 748) before, at last, he and Alcidamas are forced to oppose one another (*tandemque coactus resto*). Statius offers a curious detail: Capaneus’ “languid neck swells” due to the ‘incitement’ (*stimulus*, dative/ablative) of being set before his rival.<sup>372</sup> We imagine this scene depicting something like a modern face-off in boxing, when two fighters stare intently at each other at the center of the ring while they are given final instructions before the bell. They naturally puff out their chests, stand taller, etc., in an attempt to look more menacing. Whether the tumescence of Capaneus’ neck was effected *mero motu* remains a mystery.

The fighters are “poised at their full height” (*alte suspensi corpora*, line 750) on the soles of their feet (*planta*, dative/ablative)<sup>373</sup> and lift up (*erigo*) their lightning-fast (*fulmineus*) hands. They remain at a distance from one another behind their weapons, viz., the *cæstus*: (... *procul ora recessu | armorum ...*, line 751–752).<sup>374</sup> They watch each other closely (*tueor ... in speculis*) and each forms a barrier against the blows of his opponent: Literally, they ‘frustrate’, ‘delude’, or ‘deceive’ (*eludo*) the other’s ‘entrance’ (*aditus*) to injury (*vulnus*, line 752). The fight will be characterized, in the words of one commentator, “by a structure of sudden narrative reversals” (Lovatt 2005, p. 141).

Statius compares the fighters in lines 753–759. The “alarmingly brutish” Capaneus is the “embodiment of brute rage” and “bestial discord” (May 2016, p. 44). In the formulation of Mozley (1928a), he is “great in broad expanse of every limb and terrible in size of bone.” Statius compares Capaneus to the giant Tityus (line 753), harking back to Theocritus, who compares Amycus to the same Stygian ogre (*Idyll* 2.94). Alcidamas, by contrast, is just a lad (*bic paulo ante puer*). Despite this, he has some quality (probably strength) of an ancient oak (*robur*) and “his youthful vigor gives promise of a mighty manhood” (*ingentes spondet tener impetus annos*, line 757). The audience, it seems, did not “wish to see [Alcidamas] defeated [*vinco*, passive] nor stained with cruel gore [*sanguini...tinguo*]”. To avert such a conclusion was the object, we are told, of their supplications (*erigo ... voto*) to divine agency. By assimilating Capaneus to Amycus and Alcidamas to Polydeuces, Statius seems to suggest the battle is another example of gigantomachy—the eternal struggle between chaos and order, the duel between the chthonic and the heavenly (Deremetz 2011, p. 58).

The boxers measure (*permetiōr*) each other with their eyes, hoping for (*spero*) the first opening (*locus*, lit., ‘place’). They fall to neither wrath (*ira*) nor blows (*ictus*) immediately: (*non protinus ira nec ictus*, line 761). Suspended in a state of mutual dread (*timor*), their fury (*furor*) is mingled (*misceo*) with deliberation (*consilium*).<sup>375</sup> Their contrary lower arms (*contrarius ... bracchium*) bend (*inclino*) by throwing (*iactus*, ablative) them, presumably against each other.<sup>376</sup> This activity, rarely seen in modern boxing, must have taken advantage of the

<sup>372</sup> *stimulis iam languida colla tumescunt* (line 749).

<sup>373</sup> Lesuer (1991) places the fighters *sur la pointe de leurs pieds*.

<sup>374</sup> Hall (1992, p. 296) argues against *armorum* as a reference to the *cæstus*: “[T]he expression is strained, ... even for Statius, and I am much drawn to the idea of replacing *armorum* with *ulnarum*, a word very well suited to represent the cradling effect of the fighters’ uplifted and extended arms.” However, we noted earlier that Vergil may have used *arma* as a term for the boxing gauntlet, e.g., at *Aeneid* 5.412, and the supremely injurious—indeed, weapon-like—nature of the Late Antique *cæstus* is also amply depicted in contemporary artwork.

<sup>375</sup> *ternus paulum timor et permixta furor | consilia ...* (lines 762–763).

<sup>376</sup> From the barest of lexical evidence in lines 763–764, ... *inclinant tantum contraria iactu | bracchia...*, Lesuer (1991) divines the verb *boxer* and Mozley (1928a) ‘spar’.

densely wrapped material covering their forearms. We can imagine, for example, strikes and feints with the front forearm intended to distract from a blow delivered by the back fist. They search one another out (*exploro*) with their *cestus*, obtunding the implements (*hebeto*) in the way they bear (*fero*) them. Mozley (1928a) discerns that the boxers “dull ... them with mere rubs” while Lesuer (1991) conjectures that they land *coups qui les émoussent* ‘strikes that blunt them’. Much specificity is derived from the generic verb *fero*. The sense seems to be that the fighters threw relatively light blows at one another, perhaps glancing off their targets and thus figuratively ‘dulling’ the sharp edges of the *cestus*. Unlike the sparring with forearms described directly before, this movement probably involves straight punches thrown from a greater distance.

Alcidamas’ training (*doceo*) is such that he sets aside (*difero*) his fury (*animus*) and “takes thought for” (*metuo*) what will come next. He prudently delays (*cuncto*)<sup>377</sup> dispersing (*dispenso*) his energy (*vis*). Capaneus, on the other hand, is “prodigal of harm” (*nocendi prodigus*) and “reckless” (*incautus*, line 768). Heedless, he tumbles forward with all his force (*ruo omnis*), both his hands ‘devouring’ (*consumo*) without order (*sine lege*) and without consequence (*irritus*) to his adversary. Epic boxing is incomplete without some form of gnathic emanation (*frendo*); Capaneus satisfies this Homeric exigency on line 769. He lifts himself up (*insurgens*), pursues (*sequor*) his rival, and presses in (*premo*, line 770), all to little avail, it would appear. “The contest may be epitomized as one between *furor* and *prudentia*, between skill and brutish frenzy” (Vessey 2010, p. 222).

Plucky and provident (*providus*), Alcidamas is alert (*vigil*), exhibiting the adroitness (*astu*) of his fatherland. Here Statius reminds his audience that the Spartans were known for their vigilance and agility in the ‘ring’. These are also attributes of Pollux/Polydeuces, himself late of Laconia, in his epic encounters with Amycus.<sup>378</sup> Sometimes Alcidamas hurls back (*reicio*) punches (*ictus*) and sometimes he is on guard (*caveo*, line 771). Occasionally he slips (*nutus*, ablative, lit. ‘nod’), quickly and flexibly (*obsequium*, ablative) moving his head, unscathed (*integer*, line 772).

Now their hands meet (*obvio*) like missiles (*telum*) shattering (*discutio*, line 773) on impact. Mozley (1928a) sees in this action the ‘parry’ familiar to a modern boxer, whereby he strikes the adversary’s hand just as it is about to connect. Statius’ metaphor of exploding missiles is particularly innovative and appropriate for the context. One of the boxers (presumably Alcidamas, based on his agility and an upcoming reference made more explicitly to Capaneus) takes a step (*insto gressu*) and pulls his face backward (*recedo*).

Capaneus (the ‘foe’ *hostis*) musters up (*confero*) unequal force (*injusta vis*, line 774). The proof (*experientia*) of his brute strength (*vigor ingenio*) is in his right hand (*dextera*, line 775). While critics seem eager to chastise Capaneus for his arrogance, perhaps they would not want to tell him so to his face. He is courageous (*audax animis*) as he enters (*intro*) Alcidamas’ guard (a noun for which there is no equivalent in the original passage). Capaneus overshadows (*obumbro*) and attacks (*adsilio*, line 777) from above, suggesting the powerful hammer

<sup>377</sup> Much can be made of the verbal form *cunctatus*, which Hall (1992) notably applies to Capaneus, not Alcidamas (line 766). “Capaneus, being more experienced, husbands his strength at the outset of the fight. Most manuscripts give *cunctatus*, but the Puteanus offers *cunctatur*, from which Bährrens elicited *cunctator* [‘one who delays’], thus generalizing about Capaneus’ style of fighting. If, however, a particular tactic was here in Statius’ mind, he might well have chosen to write *cunctanter* [‘slowly’]” (Hall 1992, p. 296). Like Polydeuces in his fight with Amycus, Alcidamas “conserves his energy with greater care” during the bout (Vessey 2010, p. 222).

<sup>378</sup> “Alcidamas is successful in his fight with Capaneus for the same reason that his *magister* Pollux was” (Vessey 2010, p. 222).

blow we have surmised elsewhere in epic boxing.

Even though the latest punch is thrown by Capaneus, Statius weaves a simile that appears to compare Alcidamas to a wave (*unda*) leaping (*salio*) headlong (*præceps*) on a menacing (*minor*) rock, arguably a reference to Capaneus.<sup>379</sup> The simile is suggestive of how Alcidamas avoids the falling blow of his rival while landing a shot of his own. However, there are no references that make it explicit who is the rock and who the wave:

Just as a mass of water hurls itself headlong [*præceps*] on a threatening rock, and falls back [*redeo*] broken [*frango*], so does he wheel round [*circumeo*] his angry foe, breaking his defence; look! he lifts<sup>380</sup> his hand and threatens a long time his face or side,<sup>381</sup> and thus by fear of his hard weapons [*rigida arma*] diverts [*avoco*, lit., ‘call away’] his guard [*caveo*, accusative participle] and cunningly [*callidus*] plants [*intersero*] a sudden [*necopinus*, lit., ‘unexpected’] blow, and marks [*designo*] the middle of his forehead with a wound [*vulnus*]; blood flows, and the warm stream [*rivus*, line 784] stains [*signo*] his temples (Mozley 1928a).

In this passage, we note the reference to the *cæstus* as ‘hard weapons’ (*rigida arma*). This may help clarify Vergil’s use of the same noun to describe the *cæstus* in the *Aeneid*. Forms of the verb *caveo* ‘be on one’s guard’ are used to suggest a basic defensive position that by Late Antiquity apparently needed no further description. The verb *intersero* literally means ‘sow in between’—perfectly suited to the context of landing a blow between another fighter’s eyes.

This blow causes Capaneus to hemorrhage, though at first he is not aware of it. He “wonders at the sudden murmur of the crowd [*agmen*]” and learns of his wound only by “draw[ing] his weary hand across his face.” The blood from his temple incarnadines the fleece (*vellus*, line 786) he is wearing on his arms. This reference to sheepskin (not “cowhide,” *pace* Mozley 1928) is congruent with visual depictions of the arm-length Roman *cæstus* which are constructed in part out of a lumpy material that reaches up almost to the shoulder (cf. Figure 2).<sup>382</sup> The use of *vellus* in this context is evidence of how Statius projected features of the late Hellenistic and Roman boxing familiar to him onto the boxing of a bygone (Greek) era represented in the *Thebaid*.

Capaneus’ reaction to discovering his own blood is anything but demure. Like a lion or tiger wounded (*indignor*) by a javelin (*iaculum*),<sup>383</sup> he drives (*ago*) Alcidamas “before him in headlong retreat [*retro*] over the whole field [*arvum*, line 788].” The location of the boxing

<sup>379</sup> Theocritus (*Idyll* 22.49) referred to Amycus’ shoulders as boulders washed in a spring (Section 2.1).

<sup>380</sup> Hall (1992) replaces *leuat* with *leua* (sc. *manu*) ‘left hand’ on line 779 and *manibus* with *dextra* ‘right hand’ on line 781. He writes, “No one who has ever watched a boxing match can fail to recognize this picture: the fighter first jabs with his left so as to distract his opponent’s attention, and then comes in suddenly with his right in the hope of a knockout” (Hall 1992, p. 297).

<sup>381</sup> Another translator approaches lines 779–782 differently, noting, “Alcidamas protects his face first” *Alcidamas protège son visage en priorité* (Lesuer 1991, p. 151, n. 6; translation ours).

<sup>382</sup> Lesuer (1991) omits any reference to the lanuginous portion of the gauntlet: *il vit des taches sur la surface du ceste*. This type of gauntlet may also be mentioned by Trebellius Pollio in the *Historia Augusta, Life of Gallienus* (8.3) where it is called *flacculis*—perhaps a misspelled version of several other proposed forms (Scanlon 1986). A clearer reference to fleece as part of a boxing glove comes from Philostratus the Athenian’s *Heroicus* (p. 668), where a boxer named Plutarch uses the κώδια ‘fleece (diminutive)’ as a sponge to soak up rainwater during a particularly exhausting match.

<sup>383</sup> The javelin in this context recalls how Nonnus referred to the offensive hand in boxing as a ‘spear’ (*λόγχη*) and may be evidence that Statius here alludes to a particularly lethal form of the *cæstus* equipped with spikes (cf. Figure 17).

match is described as an *arvum* or ‘ploughed field’. This is reminiscent of Vergil’s *æquor* but it is still hardly specific to a boxing ‘ring’. Breaking with Homer’s circumclusive ‘midst of an assembly’, Statius instead brings into focus the surface on which they contend. So vicious is the beating that Capaneus delivers, his opponent finds himself *in terga supinat* ‘reclining on his back’ (line 789).<sup>384</sup> For Statius—and presumably for boxing in his time—the lines between orthograde and pronograde combat had become blurred.

The boxer’s teeth make ‘harsh noises’ (*dentibus horrendum strido*, line 790). Is this the sound of Capaneus grinding his teeth as he exerts his fury on his adversary (Mozley 1928a)? Perhaps it is the rattle of Alcidamas’ teeth as they are knocked loose in his head. Statius restrains himself from clarifying, but the evocation of dental cacophony in boxing is as old as the *Iliad*. The aggressor swings (*roto*) his hands in repeated blows (*geminio...multiplico*). These incoming exertions simply ‘hurry on’ or ‘snatch’ (*rapio*) though the main verb seems to have no goal or object (*rapio conanima venti*). Some of the punches land (*cado*, line 792) on the *cæstus* of the adversary, a situation rendered more plausible if the poet understood the *cæstus* to extend from the hands to the shoulder, as we presume he did.

Alcidamas (“the Spartan”), with sharp movement (*motus ... acutus*) and the help of his feet (*auxilium ... pedum*, ablative), eludes (*caveo*) the thousand deaths (*mille ... mortes*) that glide (*labor*) around his hollow temples (*circum cava tempora*). Litotically, the poet persuades the reader that Alcidamas was “not unmindful of his art” (*non tamen immemor artis*, line 794). Though he fled, he kept fighting, meeting the adversary’s blows with his own: *adversus fugit et fugiens tamen ictibus obstat* (line 795). Statius’ recognition of boxing as *ars* is of particular note.

The next passage suggests something like an interval between rounds. This is not entirely without precedent: Amycus and Pollux pause, for example, in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d). They seem to do so out of exhaustion, as do the boxers in Statius.<sup>385</sup> Their strengths wane: one pursues (*premo*) slowly, and the other fails to escape (*absisto*) swiftly. Their knees give out (*deficio*) and at last they rest (*quiesco*). The adherent simile (lines 799–801) gives a suggestion—however oblique—that Late Antique boxing may have incorporated, if not an interval between rounds, then at least a goad to renew the violence:

Thus when long wandering o'er the sea [*æquor*] has wearied [*lasso*] the mariners,  
the signal [*signum*] is given from the stern and they rest their arms awhile [*pono  
parumper bracchia*]; but scarce have they taken repose [*requies*], when another  
cry [*vox*] summons [*cito*] them to the oars again (Mozley 1928a).

Statius’ thalassic *imaginaire* is more suited to the ancient boxing context than it may first appear to the casual reader. We noted earlier (Section 2.1) that Theocritus used the term *πίτυλος* to refer to a barrage of punches in *Idyll 22*. The same term was used by Euripides to characterize the motion of oars on a ship. It is also significant that Statius uses the term *æquor* as a reference to the sea, the sailors’ field of play, since Vergil employs the same term for the boxing ‘ring’ in Sicily. The voice accersing the combatants to the agon is like that of

<sup>384</sup>In a modern boxing match, such a posture would never be permitted. It is more congruent with a mixed martial arts bout, where a man may be beaten even while he lies on the ground.

<sup>385</sup>“And now both are wearied with the toil and their exhausted panting” *Et iam utrumque labor suspiriaque aegra  
fatigant* (line 796).

the coxswain calling to his rowers. In this *vox citans* we may hear the first sound reminiscent of a boxing bell and the first literary suggestion that the interstices between rounds is never sufficient to find rest.

One of the boxers, evidently Capaneus, makes a “furious dash” (*immodice venio*, line 802) for the second time. Alcidamas engages in a bit of treachery by lowering (*ruo*) his shoulder in such a way that he buries (*mergo*) it into the oncoming Capaneus, who forthwith takes a tumble on his head (*effundo ... in caput*).<sup>386</sup> As if the “ignominy” of Capaneus’ fall is not enough (Hall 1992, p. 297),<sup>387</sup> while struggling back to his feet (*assurgo*), Alcidamas—that ‘shameless boy’ (*puer improbus*)—strikes his rival again (*ictu percello*), evidence that Late Antique boxers, like modern professional wrestlers, had no interest in the neutral-corner rule. In one of Mozley’s more evocative turns of phrase, Alcidamas “himself grew pale at [his] success” (*impallesco secundo*, line 805).

The Inachians (to wit, a general ethnonym for the Greeks that could include the Argive supporters of Capaneus as well as those of the Spartan Alcidamas) raise shouts (*clamorem ... tollo*) *inconnues des rivages et des bois* (Lesuer 1991). The ethnic ambiguity of the term ‘Inachian’ leaves it unclear whether they jeer Capaneus for his fall or reprove Alcidamas for his dirty trick. Indeed, it could be both. Capaneus “struggl[es] from the ground” (*ab humo conor*, line 907), raising up his hands (*tollo manus*) and “intent on hideous deeds” in Mozley’s (1928) translation. Lesuer (1991) makes Capaneus’ intent more explicit: he is *prêt à une vengeance intolérable*. Statius is rather conservative on this point, characterizing Capaneus merely as *non toleranda parantem* ‘prepared for the intolerable’. Nor deeds, nor intents, nor vengeance are mentioned explicitly by the poet. We pause to take note of Capaneus’ gesture. Were his hands raised to deliver a deadly hammer-strike? What in his gesture may have suggested the ‘intolerable’ to the Late Antique reader? In any event, according to Lovatt (2001, p. 112), “It is the wound to Capaneus’ pride, caused by Alcidamas’ successful knock-down blow, that sends him over the edge.”

Royal Adrastus, seeing Capaneus thus eschaufed, declares him mad (*furo/furio*) and calls for the boxers’ right hands (*dextera*) to be lowered (*oppono*, line 809).<sup>388</sup> This unassuming detail, overlooked in the translations of both Mozley and Lesuer, suggests that the right hand was considered more injurious. As if to soothe the savage breast, the king calls for “the palm and the prizes” (*palma ... et præmium*) to be distributed immediately. He believes that the dread giant will not otherwise desist (*absisto*) until he breaks (*effringo*) the skull and mixes

<sup>386</sup>The labyrinthine syntax of the passage permits at least one other interpretation, though we find it much less satisfactory: *Alcidamas déjoue l'attaque et lui échappe en se précipitant à terre, la tête enfonce dans les épaules* “Alcidamas thwarts the attack and escapes it by rushing to the ground, his head buried in his shoulders” (Lesuer 1991, translation ours). Another commentator similarly argues that Alcidamas does not rush, but drops “with his head tucked into his shoulders; Capaneus goes right over the top of him, falling head first, and as he gets up, is felled *alio...ictu*. Not at all surprisingly, Mozley was troubled by *alio ictu*, which he tried vainly to defend” with the argument that Capaneus’ fall was in fact the first blow (Hall 1992, p. 297). Mozley “would have done much better to resort to one of the easiest of all emendations, *alto* for *alio*,” suggesting the blow came from above (*ibid.*). The author also suggests *expalluit* for *impalluit*. We find this unnecessary since both verbs signify the subject growing pale, though Hall’s suggestion does appear to enjoy greater lexical frequency.

<sup>387</sup>We note that a tumble during a boxing match usually results in a psychological disadvantage to the boxer who has fallen. He knows that the crowd knows he has suffered a setback, and this may force him to change his approach, perhaps improvidently, out of wounded pride.

<sup>388</sup>Adrastus cries, *ite, oro, socii, furit, ite apponite dextras | festinate furit ...* (lines 809–810). The “staccato words” and the palilogy of both *ite* and *furit* “evoke Adrastus’ alarm” (Vessey 2010, p. 222). “Adrastus highlights the madness of Capaneus, the victor, by repeating the verb” *furo* (Maugier-Sinha 2010, p. 97; translation ours).

(*misceo*) the brains of the “doomed [*moriturum*] Laconian[.]” With his talk of brittle skulls and mucilaginous cerebral matter, Statius evokes the sacrificial rooster in the Aeneidean boxing match, which meets the fate Adrastus foresees for Alcidamas. As with Vergil’s anecdote, we recall that no ordinary blow of the fist could so punish the human body: the *cæstus* all but guaranteed the lethality of Roman boxing, particularly in Statius’ era when the gauntlet had become a veritable weapon.

Executing their liege’s command, Tydeus (a quondam brawler himself) and Hippomedon bind (*restringo*) both of Capaneus’ hands (not just his right) and urge him to depart, having already conquered (*vinco*). They aver that it is indeed glorious (*pulchrum*) to spare (*vitam donare*, lit. ‘give life’) the ‘smaller ones’ (*minor*, dative). Hippomedon and Tydeus extend their appeal by calling Alcidamas one of their wartime companions (*noster et hic bellique comes*, line 817).

Having lost “his grip on sanity in the boxing” (Lovatt 2001, p. 109), the harageous Argive is having none of it (*nil frangitur heros*). Rejecting the prizes of victory—a branch (*ramus*) and a cuirass (*thoraca*)—he spews a Steliteutic at Alcidamas (lines 819–822):

Let me free! Shall I not smash in gore and clotted dust those cheeks whereby  
that eunuch-boy gained favor, and send his unsightly corpse to the tomb and  
give cause for mourning to his Cœlian masters?<sup>389</sup>

Capaneus’ parting lines suggest a deep resentment towards his adversary that seems to go beyond the realm of normal athletic competition. This is unprecedented in depictions of boxing at funeral games, though perhaps Statius read it under the surface of earlier pugilistic vignettes.<sup>390</sup> Threats of extraordinary physical harm are *de rigueur* among epic boxers, including in the *Iliad*, but elsewhere these take place before the match.<sup>391</sup> Capaneus imagines murdering his opponent after the fight has ended. Lugubrious imagery in this passage doubles the linkage between boxing and funerals: a boxer, who has fought to the death at the grave of a fallen hero, is to be carried off to his own tomb.

The episode ends on a raucous note, with the comrades of Capaneus leading him away, swollen (*tumidum*)<sup>392</sup> with rage and “protesting that he has not conquered” (*vicisse nego*, line 823). In the *Thebaid* the natural order of the boxing match has been profoundly disrupted. There can be no winner because there is no loser.<sup>393</sup> This is why Capaneus denies his own victory and continues to menace his rival.<sup>394</sup> Meanwhile, the Spartans praise (*laudo*) their

<sup>389</sup> *liceat! non has ego pulvere crasso | atque cruore genas, meruit quibus iste favorem | semivir, infodiam mittamque informe sepulcro | corpus et Cœlio donem lugere magistro?* Hall (1992, p. 298) writes, “Capaneus’ vociferation, as regularly now printed, changes tack with an abruptness difficult to register on the inner ear, shifting with one word from entreaty to blustering threat. I find myself wondering whether Statius did not settle for an easier run of words and couch the whole of Capaneus’ outburst in the form of an entreaty,” replacing *non* (line 819) with *nunc* and ending line 822 with an exclamation instead of a question mark.

<sup>390</sup> Capaneus approximates Amycus in his “animal fury and blasphemous pride” (Vessey 2010, p. 222).

<sup>391</sup> According to one commentator, in boxing Capaneus betakes himself to that “same *furor* that leads [him] into his insane battle with Jupiter in [B]ook 10, the same *furor* that destroys him ... On that occasion there is no Adrastus to save Capaneus from the consequences” of his intempestivity (Vessey 2010, p. 222).

<sup>392</sup> Perhaps Statius here recalls Capaneus’ tumescent neck during his initial face-off with Alcidamas.

<sup>393</sup> Legras (1905, p. 89) notes that it is not clear that Capaneus has won, since Alcidamas leaves the ring “safe and sound, mocking his rival’s blustering threats” *sain et sauf, se moquant des menaces fanfaronnes* (translation ours).

<sup>394</sup> According to one critic, “Victory for [Capaneus] is symbolized not just by the palm and the prize, but by the violent death and disfigurement of his opponent. He has imported the values of war into the context of the games; his desire to win has become a desire to kill; it is this that shows his madness” (Lovatt 2001, p. 112).

own Alcidamas, “the nursling [*alumnus*] of famed Taygetus,” and (nervously, perhaps) laugh off Capaneus’ threats (*minæ*).

On the matter of Capaneus’ madness, we wonder if Statius does not offer a subtle critique of Roman boxing rather than a *dementia pugilistica*. As noted above, Capaneus smeared in blood the lines between war and boxing,<sup>395</sup> but had Roman society not done the same thing, for example, by turning the Greek *himantes* into *arma*, equipping them even with spearheads by Statius’ era? According to Lovatt (2001, p. 103), the *Thebaid* “is the maddest of Roman epics” in which “the boundaries between appropriate heroic fervor and unacceptable *furor* are impossible to place securely and are often blurred.” Does a mad athlete make a good warrior, or vice versa? The Romans did not appreciate Greek athletics so much as they appreciated war (Section 3.5). So, it would seem, they transformed the former into the latter, just as Capaneus did.<sup>396</sup>

Capaneus’ approach to boxing was evidently not the only one possible in the Late Antique imagination, however. Statius himself, writing in his unfinished *Achilleid*, provides an alternative (2.155–156). In recounting the glories of his youth, Achilles mentions that, along with hurling weights and wrestling, “to scatter blows with the boxing-gloves [was] sport and rest to me” (Mozley 1928a).<sup>397</sup> The phrase from *Achilleid* 2.156, *ludus erat requiesque mibi...*, suggests a Greek ideal of recreational pugilism presumably lost in Late Antiquity and subsumed by the gore of battle. Mars had eclipsed Apollo as the genius of Roman boxing.<sup>398</sup>

### 3.5 Pugilatus

While there is a wealth of textual and visual information on boxing in Italy during the period of Roman ascendancy,<sup>399</sup> it is still vexing to perceive the conventions of and attitudes towards boxing as it was practiced at Rome over the centuries. How was it related to other native Italic (East Alpine, Etruscan, and Lucanian, cf. Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)) varieties of orthograde personal combat? How was Roman boxing related to gladiatorial spectacle? Was it associated with military training? Did it have particular meaning to Romans as their own practice, or was it always marked for its alterity, i.e., perceived as ‘Greek’? Was boxing a form of ritual killing? How did boxing handgear change in the Roman context, and why? The answers to many of these questions are still speculative. In this section we will describe Roman boxing (*pugilatus*), recognizing that it is not entirely defensible to separate the practice from either Greek athletics (Section 2) or gladiatorial spectacle (Section 3.6). As we have done elsewhere with regard to regional forms of boxing in particular time periods,

<sup>395</sup>König (2005, p. 246) notes that the games of Statius, including the boxing match, “return obsessively to the image of warfare threatening to burst open the funeral celebrations...”

<sup>396</sup>Later in the epic, Alcidamas’ death is emblematic of Roman skepticism of athletic prowess. Despite being the student of Pollux and proving successful (*specto ... felix*) in all *palestras* and in the dust of the Nemean Games (10.498–499), Alcidamas does not exactly impress in his encounter with Capaneus. When Alcidamas dies entering the gates of Thebes, it “cast[s] doubt on [his] heroism” (Cannizzaro 2020, p. 295).

<sup>397</sup>The verb that Mozley translates as ‘scatter’ is *spargo* which may also mean ‘strew’, ‘cast’, or ‘hurl’. Mozley’s “boxing-glove” is, naturally, the *cæstus*.

<sup>398</sup>Pollux, too, is reduced to a sinking star in the vault of heaven, the cynosure to which Alcidamas poignantly casts his dying gaze: “dying thou lookest toward the vault where thy master shines; straightway the god sinks with averted star” ... *nitidi moriens convexa magistri | respicis: averso pariter deus occidit astro* (10.501–502).

<sup>399</sup>According to one scholar, “Boxing (*pugilatus*) was easily the most popular form of heavy athletic contest among the Romans,” surpassing both wrestling and the *pankration* (Junkelmann 2000, p. 75).

we find it helpful to assess the evidence for distinctively Roman boxing separately, at least as a hypothetical proposition.

In our extensive review of Roman epic boxing (*ut supra*), we do not encounter a single instance of the word *pugilatus*, a derivative of *pugnus* ‘fist’. In epic poetry, circumlocutions—often revolving around the *cæstus*—are used to denominate boxing. Where does the term *pugilatus*, then, occur? Plautus includes *pugilatus* in a list of other sports (*Bacchides*, 3.3.24), written in the early second century BC. Pliny’s *Natural history* (8.83) glosses Greek ‘boxing’ as *pugilatus* in AD 77. Writing in the early third century AD, Tertullian (*Spect.*) refers to *pugilatus* along with *luctatus* ‘wrestling’ in his criticism of Roman entertainments, juxtaposing them with more Christian pursuits. The term is again used by Sidonius Apollinaris in his *Letters* (2.2, to Domitius) in the late fifth century. The term *pugil* ‘boxer’ is much more frequent in Latin texts, though it seems more limited diachronically. The term is attested from as early as Statius Cæcilius’ (lost) play, *Pugil* (ca. 150 BC) to Quintus Curtius in the first century AD. The term *spectaculum pugilum* refers to ‘combat spectacle’ (lit., ‘spectacle of boxers’) in later inscriptions found in Tunisia (Khanoussi 2006, p. 79). Elsewhere, *pugilum certamina* was used (Khanoussi 1991, p. 316).<sup>400</sup>

Of all the material features of boxing in the ancient world, the Roman *cæstus* is undeniably the most celebrated (for one example, see Figure 5). It features prominently in both Roman visual and literary culture. Despite this, the functional and formal properties of the *cæstus* are poorly understood and often overgeneralized. The visual record clearly establishes that boxing handgear throughout the Roman Empire took multiple gnarly forms, some of which seem only distantly related to the Greek *himantes* (Section 2). These are all referred to as *cæstus* in modern commentary. Roman authors seem to have had no special vocabulary for differentiating their boxing handgear and none have been invented by modern critics.

The allotropic manifestations of the Roman *cæstus* in the visual record present us with a puzzle. There is no explicit literary description of a *cæstus* equipped with prongs, for example, even though this bit of boxing tackle is widely attested in Late Antique art found throughout the empire (e.g., Figures 16, 19, 18). The Latin word for boxing handgear is derived from *cædo* ‘cut’.<sup>401</sup> If etymology is any guide, this may suggest awareness that the primary purpose of the *cæstus* was to lacerate an opponent, as reflected in epic accounts. More prosaically, the verbal derivation may simply point back to the fact that the *cæstus* was structured from strips cut from the hide of a bull.

In 2018, two second-century Roman “boxing gloves” were discovered by archaeologists at Vindolanda, a Roman fortress just south of Hadrian’s Wall in Northumberland, England (Figure 6). They have been dated to around AD 117–119 (Lobell 2018). The gloves were discovered in “a cavalryman’s barrack alongside a pile of horse gear, shoes, wooden bath clogs, gaming counters, and a nearly complete sword” (*ibid.*, p. 68). The two gloves have different structures. One is more soft and pliable; the knuckles of the fighter’s hand has left an imprint in the leather. The other is filled with straw and has a “heat-hardened” piece of leather wrapped around the edge. According to archaeologists, this “would easily draw blood if used in a slashing motion,” and thus suggests to some that one glove was used for practice and the other for fighting (*ibid.*). Given the well-attested propensity for differential gloving on the

<sup>400</sup> Boxing was “widespread in Tunisia during the Roman era” (Khanoussi 2006, p. 79), beginning, more specifically, during the Severan dynasty in the late second century AD and declining by the beginnings of the fourth (Khanoussi 1991, p. 322).

<sup>401</sup> Etymologically-related words in English include ‘scissor’, ‘excise’, and ‘decide’.

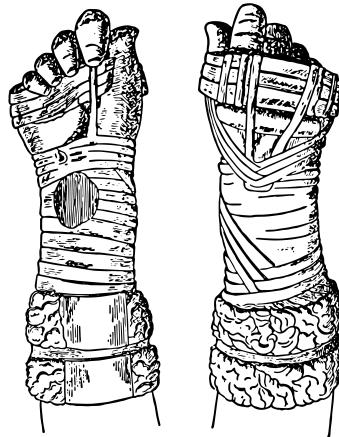


Figure 5: A modern drawing of the Roman *cestus*, presumably based on a sculptural model.

hands of a single boxer, we believe it is possible that both gloves were used simultaneously in a fight by the same pugilist. Having one injurious glove and one more innocuous is hardly uncommon in ancient representations, including the fresco of the Boxing Boys at Akrotiri (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c).

As in this most recent example, modern critics routinely attempt to assess—via the form of ancient boxing ‘gloves’—how barbaric or humane their predecessors were. We find it more helpful to consider the functional primitives of boxing and how these are expressed in its material culture.<sup>402</sup> The primary termination condition for a boxing match is the unconsciousness of one fighter. Termination conditions such as submission, referee stoppage, injury, etc. are all secondary. This is why the knockout remains the *sine qua non* of the squared circle.<sup>403</sup> Because breaking a hand or wrist is a suboptimal way of terminating a boxing match, the hands must be reinforced. (This, of course, presupposes a rule set that allows a fighter to withdraw because of a broken hand, rather than be beaten into unconsciousness all the same.) The development of the Greek *bimantes*, intended most likely to strengthen the hand against the force of its own blow, suggests that the Greeks did not wish to laureate a man merely because he had stronger bones than his adversary; he should, instead, be more skillful in his art. The binding of the hands, then, was one of the foremost æsthetic leaps in the history of boxing. With buttressed fists, the field was leveled for other skills to be demonstrated.<sup>404</sup>

<sup>402</sup>The modern predisposition for this kind of analysis, we believe, is rooted in discussions from the nineteenth-century, when modern gloves were first used. They were used to convince authorities and the viewing public that boxing was not dangerous. The same is true in the twenty-first century.

<sup>403</sup>The frequency and therefore the relevance of the KO is rapidly fading in the modern sport, however, where safety seems an almost inexorable concern.

<sup>404</sup>Put another way, at some point the fist’s susceptibility to fracture seems to have motivated the adoption of gloves to effectively “absorb and dissipate some of the punches’ energy exchanged between boxers” (Chadli et al. 2018, p. 504). The bones of the face are harder than the bones of the fist and so heavily-padded boxing gloves (along with underlying bandages, gauze, and tape wrapped around the hands) naturally lead boxers to throw the heaviest punches possible at the head of an opponent.



Figure 6: Vindolanda boxing cestus (Vindolanda Trust). Dated c. AD 117–119.

Similarly, the many faces of the Roman-era *cæstus* appeared in response to functional primitives. We believe these had to do with the perception of boxing as a sacrifice of the body, maybe even a form of ritual killing. Blood was required in and various were the means invented to procure it. The line between gauntlet and weapon became blurred. The Greeks tried the *himantes oxeis*, which tore and disfigured the face. The Lucanians, as we have seen (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023), experimented with a variety of gloving regimes, from the spiked to the claviform. Boxers in the Eastern Alps, including perhaps the Etruscans, wielded dumbbells. The purpose of all these was undoubtedly the same: to bleed an opponent dry while beating him unconscious.

The latest versions of the *cæstus* were intended not only to beat and bloody but to eviscerate. There can be no doubt that their construction was influenced heavily by gladiatorial weaponry. Was this boxing or swordplay? The question was perhaps irrelevant to spectators in the Late Antique world. Would the event be advertised as a *pugilum spectaculum* or as a gladiator fight? Perhaps it mattered little, as long as there was an effusion of blood and viscera.<sup>405</sup>

Our approach seeks to differentiate even the blunt Erycian *cæstus* pictured in Vergilian mosaics (Figures 24, 9) from the two-pronged device of later centuries (Figures 19, 18). There can be no doubt that wearing one or the other would change the nature of the combat: to club or to pierce, to slash or to strike? Fighters were certainly trained in the appropriate tactics, though no records remain. It is unfortunate that Roman authors give us only one word for all these devices<sup>406</sup> when surely the boxers and their trainers knew what they were called and how to use them. We suspect a comprehensive oral tradition maintained for generations in the *palestre* and *thermæ* of the empire.

A first-century BC coin from Smyrna (Fig 7) depicts a right hand (if the palm is down) bedecked in a device we might call a *cæstus*. Though the coin is eastern, the handgear is rather different from even the *himantes oxeis*. A thick strap wraps around the knuckles while two narrower straps cross on the back of the hand and attach at a cuff. The clearest innovation seems to be the perimetric rim around the hand, suggesting a plate may be attached on the underside. This reminds us of the Minoan boxing gauntlet, visible on the Boxer Rhyton (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c). If it is a left hand (with palm up) then the thick strap would most likely be grasped by curled fingers and the plate would ride on the back of the hand, perhaps as in Figure 13. The *cæstus* depicted on the coin, however, lacks a tooted projection. As discussed in Section 3.1, the *cæstus* appeared on coins in Central Italy (Figures 4, 8) as early as the middle of the third century (Häberlin 1967).

Turning to a mysterious literary reference, the scholiast of the *Argonautica* 2.52–53 claims that the *himantes* described by Apollonius are in fact μύρηκες, a particularly nasty form of glove introduced as early as the fourth century BC. The name of the μύρηκες probably refers to ‘ants’ but we have no description of their construction. The ‘ants’ may be construed as lumps of lead sewn into the leather (cf. the Erycian *cæstus* of Vergil). Or perhaps being struck

<sup>405</sup>Critics of modern sport boxing have noted for decades that “a return to bare knuckles, or even mitts, would make the sport safer than it is with boxing gloves” (Anonymous 4 March 1995). The ancients, by contrast appear to have done little to protect their hands. If anything, the implements in or covering the hands of boxers were likely intended to increase the spilling of blood (as we see throughout Italic and Roman boxing).

<sup>406</sup>Although we wryly note that English likewise contents itself with ‘glove’ and a handful of modifiers—although it has not seen the variety of hand coverings employed in the ancient world.



Figure 7: A first-century coin from Smyrna depicting a *cestus*. The coin has been dated to the first century BC (private collection?).

with the μύρης stung like an ant-bite.<sup>407</sup> The *caestus* has been identified by one commentator as “the closest Roman equivalent of the μύρης” (Nelis 2001, p. 14).

Another kind of glove, the *flacculis* or *flocculis*, is mentioned by “Trebellius Pollio” in his *Life of Gallienus*.<sup>408</sup> It is perhaps the Latin translation of the soft *himantes*, or a boxing glove that incorporates a sheepskin (Borthwick 1964b). The date of the work is disputed; it may have been composed as late as the fourth century AD. We believe the blood-absorbing *vellus* ‘sheepskin’ that appears in Statius’ boxing match (Section 3.4.2), is in fact a reference to the *flocculis*. The sheepskin sleeve is widely documented iconographically (e.g., Figures 2, 10). According to Junkelmann (2000, p. 80), the protection afforded by the padded sleeve allowed boxers to hold their bent arms “diagonally to shield the face or vertically to protect both the face and the top of the head. The boxer thus covered himself with his lower arm and not his fists.” The sleeve may have functioned for defense in a manner analogous to the modern boxing glove (particularly the heavier variety), which, due to its bulk, allows boxers to raise their hands to their face and cover up while throwing punches at their opponent from close range.

In *Fasti* (2,366–369), written around AD 8, Ovid describes the pastoral hours of the naked Romulus and Remus<sup>409</sup> as they disport themselves of the *caestus* (ablative plural), javelin, and heavy stones:

Romulus et frater pastoralisque iuventus  
solibus et campo corpora nuda dabant;  
cæstibus et iaculis et misso pondere saxi  
brachia per lusus experienda dabant:

The idyllic scene of boxing brothers at play suggests that the Romans did not view the *caestus* as cruel implements of unmitigated horror—at least not in all events. It also points to the strong possibility that *caestus* was the cover term for all boxing handgear in the Roman world.

<sup>407</sup>It is not necessary to think of the term μύρης as an example of gallows humor. Modern manufacturers of boxing gloves emblazon their wares with words like ‘Sting’ and ‘Venum’, presumably with no humorous intention.

<sup>408</sup>The age and authorship of the *Historia Augusta* is disputed, but it may have been written as late as the fourth century AD.

<sup>409</sup>There is a discordant note here in the overtly Greek activity of Rome’s founders.



Figure 8: Front of a third-century BC Umbrian coin from Tuder inscribed with the image of a right hand in a cæstus (compare Figure 4). The straps of the gauntlet are seen here crossing the back of the hand in an 'X' instead of a 'V'.

Extremely round gloves, perhaps made to resemble the Greek *episphairai*, are worn by boxers in a floor mosaic at the National Bardo Museum in Tunis. One boxer, with a bruised eye and contorted nose, kneels while an effusion of blood spurts from his forehead. His opponent menaces him from the right with both hands raised as if to deliver further blows from above. The gloves are yellow with black lines, resembling the bodies of bumblebees. The dark bands may indicate metal ringing the glove. A cuff extends beyond the wrist. The mosaic is Roman, from around the third century AD.

A Gallo-Roman floor mosaic (Figure 24) found at Villelaure, France, dating to around the late second century AD, depicts the battle between Dares and Entellus found in the *Aeneid* (Book 5, lines 362–484).<sup>410</sup> The boxers wear forearm-length cæstus that appear to be reinforced with metal at the knuckles.<sup>411</sup> One boxer strides forward, toward the viewer and away from his opponent. The other boxer moves away from his opponent and the viewer, while blood spurts from his forehead (J. Paul Getty Museum, 71.AH.106). A white bull kneels in the background.

A similar mosaic composition was discovered at Aix-en-Provence in the 1990s (Lavagne 1994). The image includes the sacrificed bull, here with a bloody muzzle.<sup>412</sup> The illustration of the cæstus here suggests metal bands running around the cuff and the fist, as in Figure 24. Lavagne (1994, p. 211) describes the cæstus in this mosaic as “lead plates wrapped up in leather straps” (translation ours).<sup>413</sup> Tassles on the cuffs suggest ritual and recall the sartorial ornaments of Muay Thai boxing.

Another African representation of boxing comes from a fourth-century floor mosaic found near Gafsa (Roman Capsa) in modern Tunisia (Figure 10). The boxers wear arm-

<sup>410</sup> Though this is the most well-known, four other mosaics depicting the Vergilian boxing episode have been identified (Budrovich 2011). They all come from southern France and arguably suggest enthusiasm for pugilism and other arena spectacle in that region. The floor mosaic from the Rue des Magnans is illustrated in Figure 9.

<sup>411</sup> A metal cap for the knuckles, like the one pictured in the Villelaure mosaic, is housed in the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg (no. 1997-356). Dated to the second or third century AD, object fits snugly the four fingers curled in a fist; a transverse bar inside the cap allows it to be grasped (Junkelmann 2000, p. 78).

<sup>412</sup> Persistent bull sacrifice suggests Mithraic tauroctony, but more likely the equation runs the other way: bull sacrifice was ubiquitous in the ancient world as we have seen in these articles *passim*.

<sup>413</sup> *plaquettes de plomb entourées de lanières de cuir*



Figure 9: Floor mosaic from *domus* of the Rue des Magnans, Aix-en-Provence. With plenty of blood, the mosaic synoptically depicts the fight between Dares and Entellus from Book 5 of the *Aeneid*.

length *cæstus* with blunt ends, similar to those in the Villelaure mosaic. The defensive technique is almost uncomfortably realistic: the boxer whose face we can see has awkwardly tipped his head back to avoid further blows, while blood streams from his face to the ground. An official stoops down, to the right, holding a reed and gesturing with two outstretched fingers towards the battling pair, perhaps “to separate them” (Khanoussi 2006, p. 90). The larger mosaic contains a wide variety of athletic games, including *pankration*.<sup>414</sup> One critic argues, “Clearly, the pavement mosaic is a report on a spectacle of athletic and combat games that actually took place” (Khanoussi 2006, p. 91).

Note that the boxer’s thumbs are outstretched in Figure 11. This suggests that the curved projection<sup>415</sup> was most likely held in place with a rod stretching between its two sides, grasped by the curled phalanges.<sup>416</sup> The toothed projection, which follows the line of the forearm, is attached by a cord extending to the cuff of the lambskin sleeve. Rather than securing the

<sup>414</sup>The *pankration* fighters appear to be bare-knuckle boxers. They brandish bare fists at one another without throwing kicks or otherwise displaying signs of pronograde combat, as opposed to another dueling pair that is probably wrestling. The artist had a good eye for combat: One of the wrestling figures, arched over his opponent’s back, forces him to the ground with a wide grip on the back of his head.

<sup>415</sup>Poliakoff (1987a, p. 75) refers to “horseshoe shaped gloves” and exemplifies them in images that clearly depict what we refer to here as ‘dumbbells’ (see Section 2 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)). We believe that the term ‘horseshoe’ is more aptly applied to the Roman *cæstus* seen in Figures 11 and 13; Poliakoff (op. cit, p. 78) gives a description of these later.

<sup>416</sup>This type of *cæstus* was evidently similar to the hippocrepiform or stapediform Okinawan *tekko*. Used as a form of fist-load weapon, the curved portion of the *tekko* wraps around the knuckles, though it does not shield the hand like the curved projection of the Roman *cæstus*.

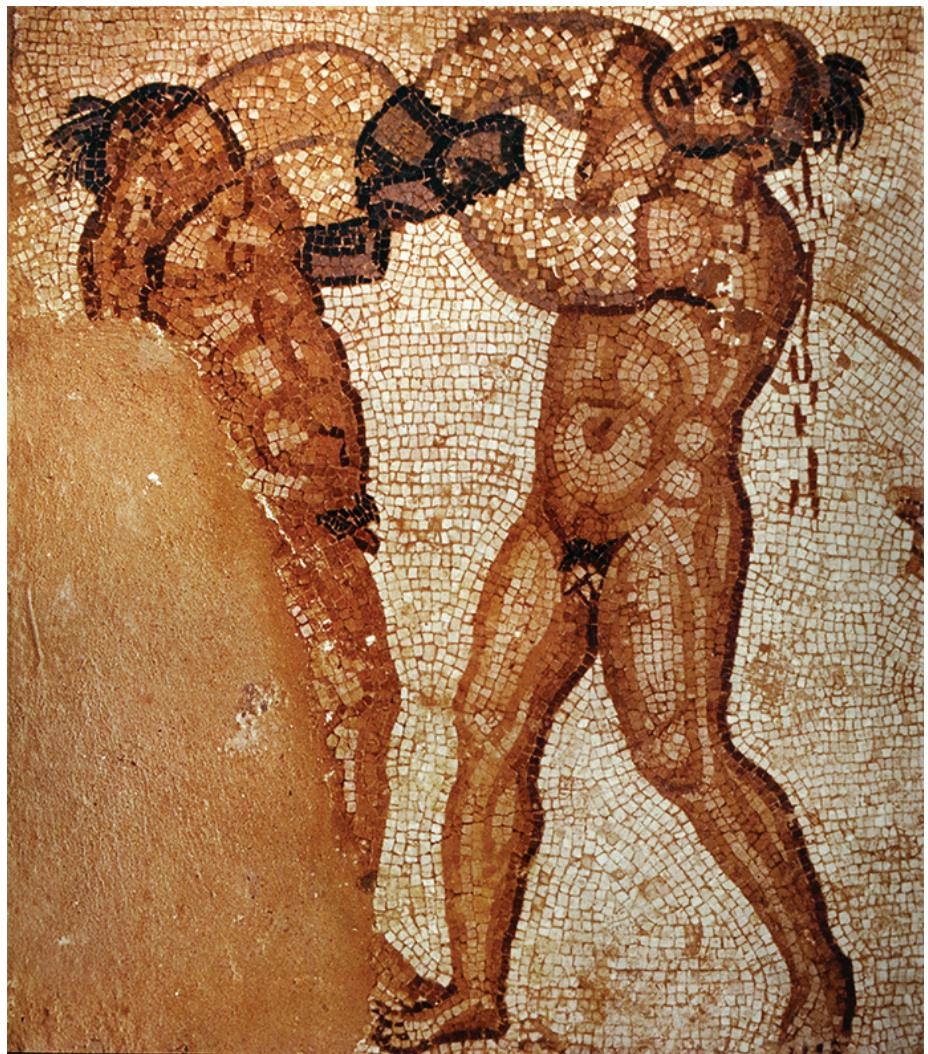


Figure 10: Boxers from floor mosaic found at Gafsa in modern Tunisia, dated to the fourth century AD.



Figure 11: Bronze half-figure of a boxer wearing a Roman *cestus* and emerging from the calyx of a flower. Note the curved projection over the knuckles (the fingers are folded beneath them, forming a fist). The projections of the forearm, which may at first glance appear to be fingers, are in fact the toothed projections visible on the *cestus* in Figure 12. Third century AD. National Museum, Athens, 7574.

projection, this cord probably anchored the sleeve to hand, preventing it from riding up during the agon. The flat and curved projections were most likely made of metal and welded to one another. The Met *cæstus* (Figure 12) illustrates how the curved projection did not extend over the back of the hand—its edge at the back of the knuckles is clear. The marble fragment of a boxer’s hand (found in a private collection in Switzerland) suggests a similar *cæstus* was constructed with an element covering the back of the hand and terminating in the toothed projection (Thuillier 2019, p. 502, Fig. 10). In this example, as well, the curved projection ends at the knuckles, suggesting it is a separate element held in the clenched fist. The element on the back of the hand appears to wrap around the thenar eminence of the thumb, suggesting that it was somehow secured there, or across the palm.

The flat, toothed projection seated on the back of the hand or knuckles was certainly an offensive weapon, but what was the purpose of the curved projection? This component may have been intended to shield the fingers from the attacks of an adversary, one who was probably accoutred in the same manner. One authority reasons that the curved projection or finger guard was most likely made of metal (Poliakoff 1987a, p. 78). If so, a boxer could easily throw a hook with the palm facing his opponent and lacerate him, leaving a bloody, meniscus-shaped wound. Indeed, if the edge of the curved projection were sharpened, the finger guard may have also served as an effective gouge, perhaps aimed at the eyes.



Figure 12: A bronze hand showing detail of a boxer’s *cæstus* (a: pronate; b: supinate). A three-pointed projection extends from the knuckles while a semi-cylindrical strip (called a “coque” by Thuillier 2019) secured by the thumb curls around the knuckles and projects perpendicular to the palm / back of the hand. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue, Accession Number 2001.129. Roman, 1st to 2nd century AD. Public domain images. A similar object is found in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Accession Number 1972.900.

A second or early third-century AD mosaic from Patras, in Greece (Dunbabin 2015), presents us with a view of the Met *cæstus* in action (Figures 14, 15). The semi-cylindrical protection is clearly visible, as are the pointed projections. The sleeve, doubtless influenced by the gladiatorial *manica*, reaches up over the biceps and the observer can see evidence of the laces holding it in place. The offensive fighter in each pair stretches his arms out and up, standing on tiptoe (a posture suggested frequently in epic accounts of boxing). An attack to the body seems almost comically possible in this stance. Perhaps it is true, as has often been

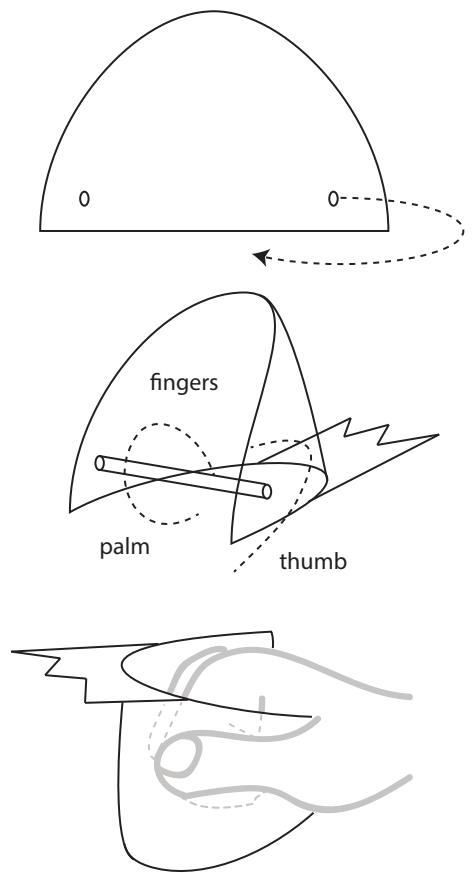


Figure 13: Schematic reconstruction of the Roman *cestus* illustrated in Figures 11 and 12. The flat, toothed projection was undoubtedly an offensive weapon; it was attached by a cord (not shown here) to the sleeve (Figure 12). The curved, semi-circular plate most likely served to protect the fingers from blows delivered by an antagonist wearing a similar gauntlet. If sharpened, it might also have served as an effective gouge.

repeated, that only blows to the head were allowed (Junkelmann 2000).

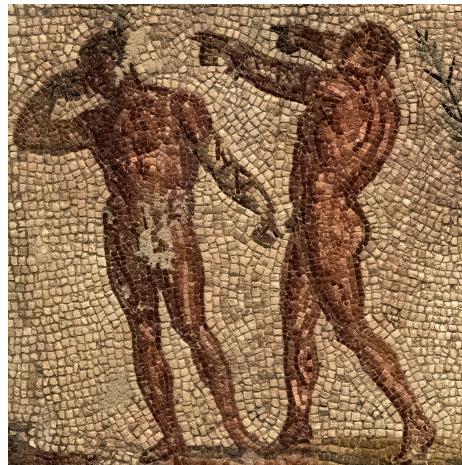


Figure 14: Detail of mosaic from Patras, Greece (second or third century AD), Patras Archæological Museum.

At the Baths of Caracalla, sculptural idealization (associated with the “glorification of the young male body”) is juxtaposed with “very different contemporary references to the life of the *palaestra* in the athlete mosaics” (DeLaine 1997, pp. 78–79). The decoration was “designed to emphasize the palatial and almost heavenly splendor of the Baths and to allow the ordinary mortal to experience, however fleetingly and vicariously, the life of the rich and powerful” (DeLaine 1997, p. 84). The boxer depicted in Figure 16 was found on the floor of the west exhedra (Room 13w) attached to the west *palaestra* of the Baths. He is entirely naked with a partially erect or infibulated penis. He wears laced *cæstus* that reach up to his biceps; they terminate in two short spikes on the inner edge of the fist. He wears his hair in a *cirrus*.

Figure 17 illustrates a fragment of a mosaic floor (AD 300–350) found at Trier, in Germany. It depicts two naked boxers wearing spiked gauntlets. The spikes, which project from the knuckles of the index finger and auricularis, appear capable of producing devastating injury.<sup>417</sup> They were presumably held in place with a bar inside the *cæstus*, barely visible in the left hand of the boxer on the left. Each fighter has blood on his abdomen and legs. Boxing gloves with a similar form have been discovered on a relief from Vareilles, in central France, dated to the second half of the first century AD (Thuillier 2019, p. 502).

A pronged boxing glove is also visible on the left hand of the left-hand figure in a boxing scene from the second-century bath house of the Villa Selene, about three hours’ walk along the coast from Lepcis Magna in Libya. In the mosaic (Figure 18), a triumphant boxer extends his left *cæstus* across the right shoulder of his antagonist, whose downcast expression suggests his imminent defeat. The prongs of the winner’s *cæstus* are visible in front of the downcast boxer’s shoulder. Prongs are also faintly visible in the loser’s *cæstus* as it crosses his chest. Compared to other depictions, blood is rather subtly portrayed—speckling the fight-

<sup>417</sup>This type of *cæstus* is also worn by boxers in a mosaic from Tusculum (Hirzel 1863, Gardiner 1910).



Figure 15: Detail of mosaic from Patras, Greece (second or third century AD), Patras Archaeological Museum.

ers' torsos and streaming from the nose and mouth of the loser. A table behind them is set with palm branches.

Boxers depicted on a second-century mosaic at the baths of Tarnaias (Massongex, Switzerland) seem to be outfitted with two different types of *cestus* (Figure 19). The fighter on the left wears blunt, hammer-like gloves while the fighter on the right wears arm-length *cestus*. The lead hand bears four spikes. The mosaic is somewhat naïve, so it is also possible they represent fingers. The boxers both wear loincloths in divergence from the Greek athletic tradition.

Boxers depicted in a third-century low relief found at Vareille, in southern France, suggest yet another variation on the *cestus* (Figures 20, 21, 22). Here the sleeve, perhaps of sheepskin, arrives at nearly the shoulder on boxers naked but for a loincloth. The portion of the gauntlet reaching up to the elbow almost appears to be articulated armor. The fingers are thick, triangular projections of which there are at most three or four. Some of the boxers hands are angled so that it appears they grasp a smooth object about the size of the palm.<sup>418</sup> We suspect these may be small weights, perhaps lumps of lead, held tightly in the fist. They would have served the same function as the East Alpine *hanteln*. The reinforced fingers of the glove would have prevented the fingers from being crushed by the extra impact of the blow. The reliefs, which are not associated with baths, evidently come from a funerary context (Thuillier 2019, p. 504).

Works of art like these evince the heuristic impulse of Roman and Romanized popu-

<sup>418</sup>Thuillier (2019, p. 498) claims that it is semi-cylindrical and relates it to the “pads” posited by (Lee 1997).



Figure 16: Image of a boxer from the Baths of Caracalla (Room 13W), Rome (fourth century). The spikes on the boxer's gauntlet are unmistakably related to projections seen on other *cæstus* from this period, notably those at Lepcis Magna and Trier (Figures 18 and 17). The entire athlete mosaic is now housed in the Vatican Museum.



Figure 17: Bleeding boxers wearing spiked gauntlets. Mosaic floor found at Trier (Augusta Treverorum), ca. AD 300–350. There can be no doubt as to the lethal quality of these *cæstus*.

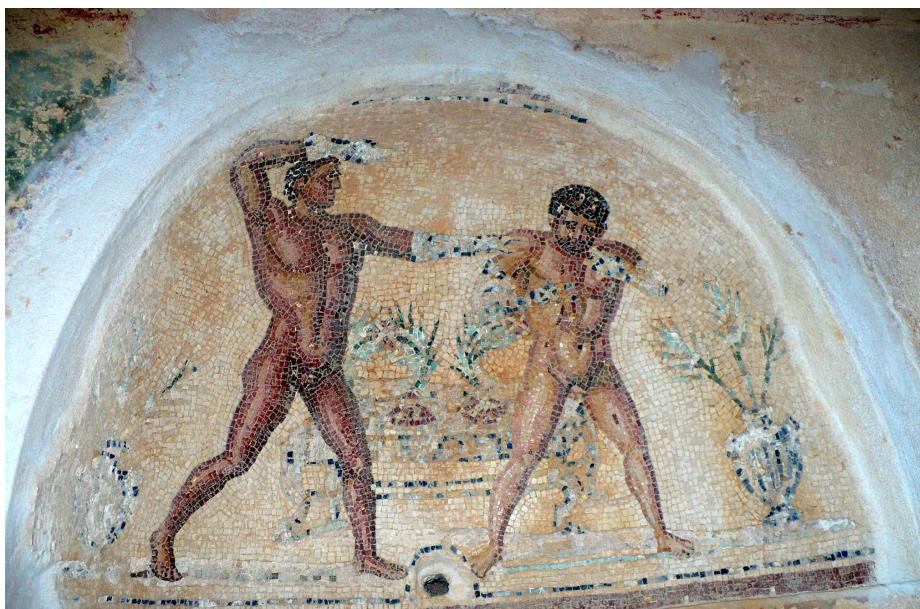


Figure 18: Boxer mosaic in Room 43 of the bath house at Villa Selene (second century AD), near Lepcis Magna, in Libya. The mosaic, which partially covers the interior of a dome, is dated to around the second century.

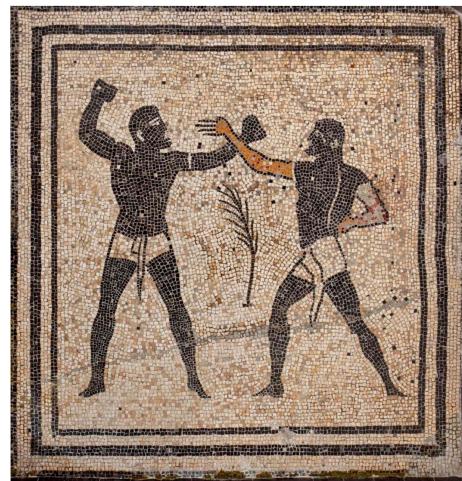


Figure 19: Second-century mosaic from the baths of Tarnaia (modern Massongex, Switzerland). The boxers wear loincloths, a departure from the Greek tradition.



Figure 20: Bearded boxer wearing a loinloth and arm-length *cæstus*, as depicted on a Gallo-Roman bas-relief at Vareilles in what was then called Gallia Narbonensis, now southern France, dated AD 200–300.



Figure 21: Boxer depicted on a Gallo-Roman bas-relief at Vareilles in what was then called Gallia Narbonensis, now southern France, dated AD 200–300.



Figure 22: Boxer depicted on a Gallo-Roman bas-relief at Vareilles in what was then called Gallia Narbonensis, now southern France, dated AD 200–300.

lations in developing new forms of pugilism, perhaps related to local fighting styles. Trier was originally inhabited by the Celtic Treveri. The situla art reviewed earlier is suggestive of pre-Roman monomachy that involved hand-implements (*hanteln*) unknown to the Greeks. Rather than assume that the Romans spontaneously developed particularly violent forms of pugilism, we argue that Etruscan and Celtic bloodsport of the first millennium was an influential substrate of what was later regarded as (Roman) *pugilatus* (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023).

Jüthner believed that the Romans developed a metal *cæstus*, based on the Greek *himantes oxeis* (ὅξεις) for gladiatorial combat.<sup>419</sup> Lee (1997) questions this, arguing instead that this curious arm-length *cæstus* (see Figure 11) was fitted with an extended glove for the fingers and an extended pad in the palm.<sup>420</sup> Lee disagrees with the arguments, espoused by many, that Roman boxing was particularly violent and that gloves were “murderous”. “The image of the bloodthirsty Roman,” he concludes, “exerts a mythical allure that can prove all too seductive” (Lee 1997, 176). “The belief that the Romans used [such] gloves ... may say more about ourselves than the Romans” (*ibid.*).

Lee’s *apologia* notwithstanding, the weight of evidence indeed suggests that in the Roman world, boxers were meant to do damage to one another in spectacular fashion, using the *cæstus*.<sup>421</sup> One question is whether the Roman version of pugilism differed significantly from that of other Bronze and Iron Age civilizations. While the curved projection in the curious *cæstus* may have been offensive and/or defensive in function, it is harder to claim that sharp projections from the knuckles were not intended for disfigurement at best and disembowelment at worst (Figures 12, 17). Pugilistically-inclined Romans were naturally familiar with the story of the great Greek boxers Damoxenos and Kreugas (Section 6 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022d)). Given the improbability of one fighter being able to disembowel his opponent in one blow using merely his fingers, a *cæstus* equipped with spikes could easily do the trick. By designing fighting gear that some critics find decadent or outlandishly brutal, perhaps the Romans were merely operationalizing and emulating the features of a legendary Greek boxing match.<sup>422</sup> One commentator notes that it is the “violation of the theatrical

<sup>419</sup>The Greek (plural) adjective ὅξεις ‘sharp’, is directly related to *oxymoron* meaning ‘sharp and dull’; and is cognate with the English noun *acid* via the Proto-Indo-European root \**b₂ek̥-*.

<sup>420</sup>It is easy to come to the same inference made by Lee based on visual inspection of such objects as a sarcophagus lid in the Museo Gregorio Profano, where the peculiar *cæstus* is visible exclusively in profile (Dunbabin 2015, Fig. 18, p. 209). However, based on our own inspection of many such artifacts where the observer is positioned at a variety of angles, we dispute the claim that the pad extends from the palm. What Lee calls a ‘pad’ is in fact a kind of finger-guard or even gouge that projects at a right angle from the knuckles. We schematize this curious type of *cæstus* in Figure 13.

<sup>421</sup>Scholars remain remarkably squeamish on the issue, unable to accept the violence that was done in the Roman boxing ‘ring’, as if it could not, by definition, compare to the carnage of the gladiatorial arena. Take, for example, the projections on the *cæstus* in mosaics like the ones at Ostia (Figure 23). Dunbabin (2014, p. 712) contradicts Bohne (2011), who believes they represent fingers, but she still concludes, “it is not clear what material is meant,” as if they might represent pipe cleaners. Junkelmann (2000, p. 78), who provides an elaborate characterization of the the Roman boxing glove, ambiguously concludes that “the murderous character of the Roman *cæstus* should, I think, not be exaggerated.” In our opinion, this is due to a lack of precision in the original sources for distinguishing the conventions of Greek and Roman boxing, coupled with the biases of generations who have focused their attention on the classical, Greek variety of the sport.

<sup>422</sup>Such a spectacle would hardly be out of place in a culture capable of staging gruesome performances like the immolation of a condemned criminal in the guise of Hercules or the self-castration of another in the guise of Attis, *inter alia* (Coleman 1990, pp. 60–63). On recounting a public reenactment of Pasiphaë’s sexual intercourse with a bull, Martial noted dryly, *accepit fabula præsa fidem* “seeing is believing” (*Lib. Spect.* 5,2). Audiences had a keen

by the actual” or the “conflation” of the fictional and real world that provides the seductive “frisson to the experience of the spectators” (Bartsch 1994, p. 51). Is this really happening, the spectator asks himself? “Body-horror and violence are inherently alluring” to spectators who “play a role in the grisly spectacle” (McClellan 2019, p. 5).

We agree with Lee, of course, that it is unfair to indict Roman boxing as particularly algolagnistic, at least compared to its antecedents. Consider the *hanteln* grasped by the boxers of the Eastern Alps (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023), the superfluity of blood depicted in Etruscan frescoes, Greek boxing stories of disembowelment and death, and the evidence suggesting that even the Minoans used a form of sharp *cæstus* in the Bronze Age (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b). In light of this evidence, why persist in claiming that the Romans degraded boxing? We offer an alternative: throughout the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean Basin, boxing was ubiquitous and focused on bloodshed. Modern boxing does not appear to share this preoccupation. However, we believe this has more to do with modern squeamishness over blood than it has to do with modern concern for the safety of boxers. Professional boxers are able to legally injure, cripple, and kill one another in almost every country.<sup>423</sup> Despite the presumed (and probably contraindicated) ‘safety’ of gloves and headgear, boxers routinely experience concussions; lacerations and other trauma to the face including damage to the ears, nose, eyes, and eye sockets; broken ribs; and injuries to the hands, wrists, and elbows. Despite all this, it has been documented that boxers routinely “forsake ... their body in order to be involved in the sport” (Matthews 2021, p. 726). While the literal offering of spilt blood appears to be minimal (at present) in modern sport boxing, the offering of a broken body is still vitally important. It is the brutality of boxing that defines it. Less visceral, violent boxing ceases to be boxing.<sup>424</sup> If Roman and Minoan boxing occupy one side on this spectrum of brutality, modern sport boxing occupies the other, with Greek boxing somewhere close to it.

The Greek emphasis on highly technical pugilism, including strong defense, would seem to produce a less spectacular show for an audience. As athletic boxing became a sort of participatory spectacle for the men engaged therein, it may have lost some of its prurient appeal to a mass audience. Gladiatorial boxing “corrected” for the technicality by explicitly reintroducing brutality. While the heavy sports in general were the most popular of the Greek athletic imports to Rome, bare-fisted pankration and wrestling were never as well represented as boxing (Dunbabin 2014, p. 711).

During the Republican period, “Greek athletes were occasionally brought into the city to perform in public spectacles. That often involved significant distortion of traditional Greek practice, for instance by presentation of Greek athletic contests in combination with gladiatorial combat” (König 2005, p. 216). This “distortion” may have been at the heart of the development of Roman *pugilatus* as something that differed considerably from Greek *pygmachia*.

interest in witnessing the “actuality of what [was] being enacted” in the fatal charades of the amphitheater (Coleman 1990, p. 67).

<sup>423</sup>Most government bans on (modern, gloved) professional boxing have been short-lived: California (1914–1924); Cuba (1961–2013); Sweden (1970–2007); Norway (1982–2016). Iceland’s 1956 ban is still in effect—the exception that proves the rule.

<sup>424</sup>Efforts to minimize the brutality of boxing will merely make it unpopular, irrelevant, and imminently replaceable. Despite the actions of sanctioning bodies which ‘own’ sport boxing, humans will never stop valuing and operationalizing the raw brutality of formalized, man-to-man aggression. The resurgence, since 2016, of legal—and frequently gruesome—bare-knuckle boxing in the United States and the United Kingdom is a noteworthy example of this pugilistic atavism.

Still, there can be no question that “the heavy athletic disciplines [sc., boxing, wrestling, and pankration] appealed much more to Roman audiences of the Empire” than other athletic pursuits (Dumbabin 2015, p. 199).

Along with hunting, riding, swimming and drilling with military weapons, boxing was “held in high esteem” as a “simple, practical, military exercise” among the Romans (Yegül 2010, p. 121). However, athletic games “in the spirit of pure competition,” were not to be found among a virtuous Roman’s activities (*ibid.*). Despite opposition, Greek athletic practice was eventually “transformed and absorbed in its new form into the recreational program of the *thermae*” or large imperial bathing complexes. Exactly what form boxing took on at the Roman baths is unclear, but it likely involved strenuous sparring with soft gauntlets intended to obtund the blows. Representations of much more lethal bouts were displayed prominently, however, as at the Baths of Neptune at Ostia (Newby 2002) (Figure 16, 19, 23). Still, boxing, as well as wrestling and *pankration*, was destined to compete with gladiatorial competition in the popular imagination, as evidenced, for example, by the permixtion of athletes and gladiators in the iconographic program of the Baths of Trajan, dedicated in AD 109 (Yegül 2010, p. 123).

In a territory as expansive as Rome’s, with local customs of vastly divergent character, it should be no wonder if boxing developed distinctively according to the region in which fighters routinely squared off with one another. In his account of Caligula’s life (*De Vita Caesarum, Caligula* 18), Suetonius tells us that the emperor greatly esteemed boxers *pugil* from Africa and Campania, presumably for their skill in the ‘ring’ (Thomson 1889).

According to Plutarch (*Marcus Cato*, 20.4), Cato the Elder taught his son how to box in approximately 200 BC.<sup>425</sup> This indicates that the Romans preserved (or invented) some relatively wholesome version of the sport that a father could teach his son. This is a rare reference to boxing taking place in an ancient domestic setting, where children are encouraged to practice the sport.<sup>426</sup> Given Cato’s objurgative attitude to Hellenization, it is possible that he taught his son a form of boxing that was native to Italy.

In the late first century AD, Tacitus fretted “that this new enthusiasm for boxing [would] distract young men from the proper activities suitable for them, namely warfare and military training,” highlighting the difference between *arma* and *cæstus* (Newby 2005, p. 40).<sup>427</sup> The idea that Greek men were debilitated by the countless hours spent in the gymnasium and the *palaestra* was also mentioned in Lucan’s *Civil War* (7.270–272). The Romans, Pliny the Younger lamented, would rather watch others fight than mix it up themselves (*Panegyric* 13.5). This storm of protest meant, of course, that boxing had in fact become popular at Rome (and perhaps too much on the spectatorial side). Writers would continue to produce the “standard Roman stereotypes about athletics—that it encourages degeneracy and pederasty, and replaces the proper training for warfare” (Newby 2005, p. 43). All the while, it is fairly clear that the Romans delighted “in athletic pursuits and spectacles” and that these even had “their place within childhood education and amusements,” as suggested in Plutarch’s history of Cato (*ibid.*, p. 42). Seneca, in *Hercules* (1123–1125), associates the *palaestra* with boxing gloves, suggesting that the Romans understood boxing to be an activity integrated with the *palaestrae*, perhaps better known as wrestling schools.

<sup>425</sup> ἀλλὰ καὶ τῇ χειρὶ πύξ πάιειν (Perrin 1914).

<sup>426</sup> Another example may be found in the fresco of the Boxing Boys at Akrotiri (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c).

<sup>427</sup> *Quid superesse, nisi ut corpora quoque nudent et cæstus adsumant easque pugnas pro militia et armis meditentur?* (*Annals* 14.20).

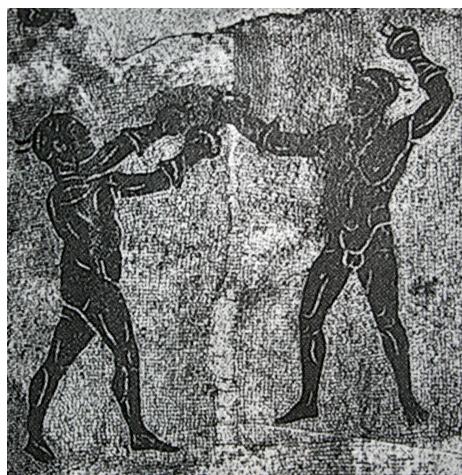


Figure 23: Detail of a mosaic featuring boxers with two-pronged *cæstus*. Ostia, Baths of Neptune, ca. AD 139.

Brown (2021, p. 450) suggests that Greeks and Romans collected and esteemed art with depictions of combat sport because these permitted ordinary citizens “to relive excitement” and “to express allegiance,” while making it possible for “sponsors to take credit.” (Budrovich 2011) There are at least five floor mosaics in southern France that depict the boxing scene from the *Aeneid*. They are all mid- to late second century AD. It is an example of a synoptic narrative in which sequential events are presented in the same image “a single visual moment with contemporary resonances” (p. 8). There is a Pompeian graffito quoting the boxing scene: “Entelle heroum” O Entellus of heroes! It might have been intended to goad a local athlete or criticize an athlete’s decline (p. 14 citing Salvatore (1982)). “[V]iewers of the boxer mosaics would have recognized associations between the religious nature of contemporary arena culture and the boxing scene’s religious overtones” (Budrovich 2011, p. 39). “The Virgilian boxer motif is striking in that it combines two mental sets that rarely occur together in Roman visual culture: the heroic past and contemporary spectacle. (Budrovich 2011, p. 48)

Attested in Statius’ *Silvae* (4 præf. 30–32) and Seneca’s *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* (80 1–2), *sphæromachia* is a poorly understood entertainment. By one interpretation, it was a kind of sham boxing. Contestants may have used the soft *sphairai* described in the *Laws* (8.830B) of Plato (Bury 1967–1968). According to one author, it was popular “for some six hundred years, at first privately in the Greek *palaistrai* and then later in Roman exhibition matches” where it serves “as at least one example of Roman taste for vigorous combat sport without bloodshed” (Scanlon 1986, p. 114). This activity may be what Pollio describes in the *Historia Augusta, Life of Gallienus* (8.3) as “not really boxing” (*non veritate pugillantes*).

The term *sphæromachia* literally means ‘ball fight’.<sup>428</sup> Thus, it conceivably required pugilists to grip spherical weights, an activity arguably descended from East Alpine boxing (Section

<sup>428</sup>One modern translator of Plato regarded *sphæromachia* (*σφαιρομαχέω*) as as a kind of hand ball contest like modern field hockey or polo (Bury 1967–1968).



Figure 24: Gallo-Roman floor mosaic (from Villelaure, France) depicting the *Aeneidean* boxing match between Entellus and Dares, along with the sacrificial bullock collapsing after a devastating blow to the head. Getty Museum, No. 71.AH.106, AD 175–200.

2 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)). This may offer an explanation for the mysterious smooth objects visible in the hands of boxers in a Gallo-Roman bas-relief (Figure 21). Spherical projections on the *cæstus* of two terracotta boxers (Figure 25) may be related as well.

Nudity in Roman boxing was not ubiquitous. According to one eminent scholar, “[T]he boxers depicted in Roman art wearing the dangerous *cæstus* are typically shown naked, following the practice of Greek, not Roman athletes. The fact that they are shown adhering to Hellenic practice strongly suggests that the Romans viewed this form of boxing as part of Greek athletics, rather than a variation on Roman arena contests, in which the gladiators wore armour and clothing” (Poliakoff 2021, p. 224). However, Roman boxers are occasionally depicted semi-nude (Figures 20, 21, 22, 25, and 19).

Mosaics portraying boxing at the Baths of Neptune at Ostia (Figure 23) function “as a prelude to the human activities nearby” (Newby 2005, p. 50). These mosaics include scenes of wrestling and weight-lifting in addition to pugilism. Such *tableaux* at the baths arguably promoted “an identification between the athletes shown on the ground and the bathers themselves” (ibid., pp. 50–51). In the second and early third centuries, at Rome, “The bathing public seems to have enjoyed the fantasy of seeing their own exercises as parallel to those of the athletic heroes of the current day, even if the competitors and victors in athletic festivals were still largely drawn from the eastern provinces” (Newby 2005, p. 273). The adoption of Greek-style festivals and training gathered gradually and reached a peak during the Severan period (193–235 AD; ibid.). “[W]hile traditional hostility to the Greek gymnasium had certainly weakened by the third century AD, the ideological values with which athletic success and education were invested in Greek culture never took root in Rome” (Newby 2005, p. 273). Roman baths integrated Greek athletics with the agrarian Italian custom of bathing in hot water, but the Romans still eyed “the Greek love for pure athletics ... with suspicion” (Yegül 2010, p. 120).

In a pair of well-preserved terracotta figures from the second or third century (British Museum, No. 1852,0401.1), the fighters’ hands are wrapped in the *cæstus* with a ball-like projection on the knuckles (Figure 25). A sharp-edged object projects forward, held in place by the curled fingers. The ball-like projection may be welded to this object.

The boxers are noteworthy, too, for the fact that they are clothed. Though bare-chested, they wear a short garment from waist to upper thigh. The garment is belted and, most remarkably, bifurcated at the legs.<sup>429</sup> If our interpretation is accurate, this is the first attested pair of boxing trunks. There is, however, no evidence that the style caught on: boxers remained naked but for their *cæstus* throughout Late Antiquity. In addition, these boxers appear to wear a codpiece beneath the garment. Unlike the drawers, which have no prior attestation in boxing so far as we are aware, a codpiece worn during a bout may date back to the Bronze Age, as suggested on the Minoan Boxer Rhyton (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c).

Remijsen (2019, pp. 62–63) explains how *palæstra*, one probable site of boxing training, functioned in the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Elites came to these locations to see and be seen, to participate in athletic competitions (particularly combat sports), and to have their

<sup>429</sup>Closer inspection of the figures may reveal signs that the garment is layered: a short kilt covered by briefs (*a subligaculum*) that draw the kilt in at the thighs, causing it to resemble truncated drawers. A *subligaculum* of this type (sans kilt) is worn, for example, by two figures identified as Astacus and Iaculator on a gladiator mosaic excavated at Torrenova in Rome and held at the Galleria Borghese (third or fourth century AD, no inventory number).



Figure 25: Terracotta figures of boxers. The fighters wear *cestus* with a ball-like projection on the knuckles and breeches that look remarkably like modern boxing trunks. First or second century BC, Italy (British Museum, No. 1852,0401.1).

children participate, as well.<sup>430</sup> The *palaestra* was not merely a wrestling school but a location where boxing and *pankration* were also practiced. The *palaestra* functioned as a space where ephebes could fight one another under adult supervision and where adults could continue their own martial praxis.<sup>431</sup>

In Book 10 of the *Thebaid*, we learn that the boxer Alcidamas was successful in *palaestras* as well as the dust of the Nemean Games (lines 498–499). The close connection between boxing and the *palaestra* is noteworthy here. Though the term is most often associated with ‘wrestling’ in English, as in Mozley (1928a), there is no other suggestion that Alcidamas was a wrestler and plenty of evidence that Statius identified him exclusively as a boxer, including this reference to the *palaestra* where boxing was routinely practiced. Dust, too, is usually associated with wrestling but here we must assume that it is also implicated in boxing.

Along with the Boxing Boys of Akrotiri (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c), the Boxer at Rest<sup>432</sup> is without question the most celebrated and well-known representation of boxing from the ancient world (Figures 26, 27).<sup>433</sup> The boxer is striking and monumental, fixed as one of the most important representations of boxing, ancient or modern.

Contemporary art critic Jerry Saltz cited six features of the boxer (“brutal, brooding, beautiful, gigantic, ..., a kneaded muscular wrecked mountain”) which arrest the viewer (Saltz 2013):

- Pose, “elemental” in its settled bulk. Perhaps the face is turned to focus his attention, or perhaps “he knows it might be unbearable to meet the gaze of something almost animal-like.”
- Face, “[breathing] through his open mouth as if blood is caked in his nose.” “His deformed cauliflower ears look like globules of flesh. His eyes and face are cut and bleeding.”
- Blood, of copper inlay, and a bruise on right cheek. “Blood drips appear on his right side and arm.”
- Genitals, scarred and infibulated so that no erection or ejaculation is possible (“typical for slaves and athletes of the time”).
- Hands, “casual and changing but gentle.”
- Foresight. “A ... breach opens between his world and ours.”

To these observations we add the implied context of the figure in such a pose. The sculpture captures the moment of recovery seconds after a fight and before the accoutrements

<sup>430</sup>Junkelmann (2000, p. 76) notes that “members of the social élite who admired the ideals of Greek culture, including Greek athletics, did practice boxing and other sports, but as distinguished amateurs. To appear in public would have been degrading ...”

<sup>431</sup>An analogous institution is not evident in the modern West, since most gyms are neither particularly elitist nor do they incorporate combat sports to any considerable degree. Boxing or other martial arts gyms may be the closest analog to the ancient *palaestra*, but little social capital accrues to those who frequent them, as it did to those who practiced boxing and other combatives at the Hellenistic and Roman *palaestrae*.

<sup>432</sup>Seated Boxer, Boxer of Quirinal, Boxer of Terme, etc.

<sup>433</sup>The statue was created during the early period of Roman ascendancy in the Italic peninsula, so we review its manifold significance here. For the Terme boxer, cf. Pollitt (1986, pp. 145–147). Williams (1945b) argued that the Terme Boxer and the Terme Ruler (Pollitt 1986, pp. 72–74) represented Castor and Amycus from an original triptych once complete with a statue of Polydeuces; Theocritus’ poem would thus have drawn upon the original of these statues. More often, however, the Terme Ruler is considered to be the figure of a Hellenistic Prince, not one of the Dioscuri. The theory that casts the Seated Boxer as Amycus is not widely regarded. For example, Smith (1988, pp. 84–85) does not even mention it.

such as the *himantes* would be removed.<sup>434</sup> In keeping with the Greek practice of portraying events from daily life rather than only climactic scenes, the figure's poignant leisure impresses the viewer. A practicing boxer will appreciate the mirrored contemplation which takes place before the fight when the wraps or *himantes* are placed and which takes place after the fight during the emotional comedown. Whether flush with victory or defeat, the seated boxer stoically accepts the judgment of the ring. He bears in his flesh the illuminated scars and blemishes that the sculptor chose also to capture, and we conclude that this is no idealization or avatar of boxing, but a real man in a real moment.<sup>435</sup> His pose is relaxed yet charged, feet not yet planted, the more-muscled back than chest of a practicing boxer, in sum a seated reflection of *contrapposto*'s dynamism.

There can be no doubt that boxing at Rome, was in many ways a Greek cultural export. However, it stretches credulity to argue that Greek *pygmachia* was introduced to people on the Appenine peninsula who otherwise had no concept of fist fighting. Their native forms of personal combat must have influenced pugilism as it was practiced on Italian soil. The form of boxing that emerged was unique to Italy, and thence to the Roman world. Thus, Roman *pugilatus* had roots not only in Greece, but also in Etruria, the eastern Alps, and southern Italy (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023).<sup>436</sup>

We disagree with the notion that the Romans somehow corrupted pugilism, as is often claimed in popular accounts. The development of boxing in antiquity is typically presented to readers as a progression from the relatively wholesome to the debauched and sadistic. While there is considerable evidence of slaughter and bloodlust in Roman boxing, we have shown elsewhere that 'extreme' forms of the activity were normal long before the Romans started holding their spectacles, particularly on Crete (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c), but also in the Alps (Section 2 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)) and southern Italy (Section 4 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)). The Romans did not inherit a safe and wholesome passtime from the Greeks and then befoul it. Instead, the evidence suggests that lethal forms of orthograde personal combat (without traditional weapons like swords or clubs) most likely developed independently in the culture of the Alps and was thence drawn into the orbit of Etruria. In central Italy this boxing was incorporated into funerary ritual, perhaps due to the morbid outcome of most contests. Later influence from the Greeks seems to have positioned boxing, among the Romans, on the boundary (such as it is) between sport and ritual. Given the sanguinary nature of Etruscan and Alpine pugilism, not to mention the often overlooked violence of boxing among the Greeks, placing the burden of decadence on the Romans misses the larger point. To wit, people across cultures and time periods routinely accept, obscure, and sublimate the risks of violent injury and death so they can perpetu-

<sup>434</sup> Some have identified the boxer as pensive in defeat due to his pathos and reserve.

<sup>435</sup> Thom Jones suggests that the boxer depicted is Theogenes (Jones 1991). More likely this will always be the Unknown Boxer.

<sup>436</sup> Some may argue that boxing in these regions was also introduced by the Greeks. The current archaeological record does not permit a simple solution to this question. We have argued that boxing was substantively different from Greek *pygmachia* in Italy and the eastern Alps—both in its equipment and cultural context—before the period of Roman ascendancy but not necessarily before Greek influence was felt (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023). To approach this latter issue, the Lucanian example may be instructive: How long would it take for a native group to adapt and apply a foreign practice like boxing to a cultural practice as important (and presumably conservative) as funerary ritual? We find it unlikely that the inclusion of Greek boxing in Italic funerals would have occurred quickly, if at all, and instead argue that boxing in Italy and the Eastern Alps pre-dated the Greeks. It may be possible to determine when Greek influence on Italic boxing became preponderant by examining (orientalizing) Etruscan depictions of pugilism, but we do not believe Greek boxing is represented in Lucanian depictions.



Figure 26: Bust of The Boxer at Rest. Note the inlaid copper details of blood.



Figure 27: The Boxer at Rest. Now housed at the Museo Nazionale Romano–Palazzo Massimo alle Terme in Rome. 330–50 BC.

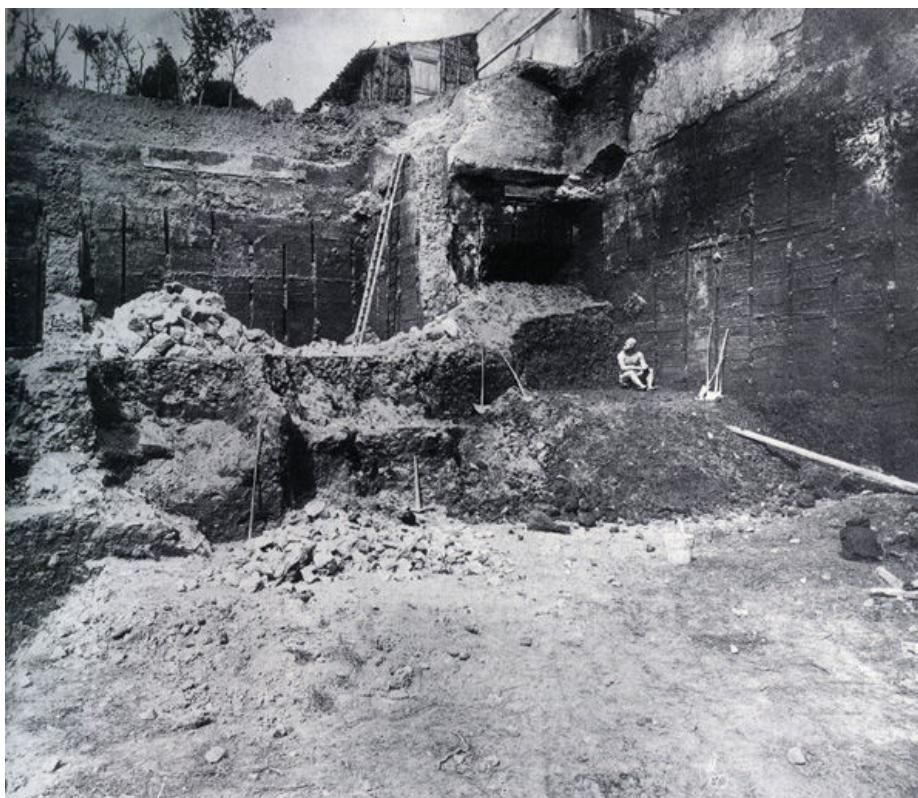


Figure 28: The Boxer at Rest. The bronze as it was discovered on the slopes of the Quirinal Hill in 1885.

ate the values inherent to ritualized personal orthograde and pronograde combat, including pugilism.

From a sympathetic contemporary perspective, the Romans merely have the misfortune of being the first culture to capture the life-and-death struggle of pugilism copiously and in vivid detail, in both art and literature. In other words, moderns judge them more harshly than their pugilistic predecessors because they left better written descriptions and far more excruciating images than their predecessors. That said, the Roman interest in the spectacular was fueled by the resources of empire to enable promoters and audiences to indulge exotic tastes in fighters (e.g., dwarves, which appear to have become something of an obsession at Rome) and innovations to the structure of the *cæstus* (though evidence from the Iron Age Alpine culture gives evidence for a likely predecessor). In the Roman context, the influence of gladiatorial games on pugilism cannot be discounted, either (Section 3.6).

We conclude this section with a comment on Castor and Pollux, the semi-divine twins celebrated in the *Argonautica* and the *Idylls*. Pollux, of course, is routinely associated with boxing, but was he regarded as its patron in any religious sense, or was there an athletic or gladiatorial *cultus* associated with him? The Dioscuri were perhaps originally agonistic divinities of Tyrrhenia, numinous beings whose cult was related to boxing and hippic games, the most popular pastimes of the Etruscan elite (Thuillier 1985, p. 488–489). This tradition is likely related to a similar one in Sparta, where hand-to-hand fighting and equestrianism were regarded as vital aspects of warfare (Marroni 2019, p. 69). Still, Gartrell (2021) notes “that Pollux does not appear to have been celebrated as a boxer in Rome” despite ample qualifications as detailed in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022d) as well as that of Valerius Flaccus (Section 3.3). After reviewing iconographic evidence (which rarely represents Pollux with a boxer’s traits, outside scenes depicting his tangle with Amycus) and testimonia of ancient athletic guilds (Pollux is not mentioned), the author concludes that we are “unable to say definitively whether Pollux was worshipped as a boxer in Rome or not” (Gartrell 2021, p. 134).

We have written exhaustively about the role of Pollux/Polydeuces in his fight with Amycus in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022d) as well as Sections 2.1 and 3.3 of the present paper. Pollux appears as a boxer in a few more texts. Composing his *Fabulae* around the time of Vergil, Hyginus refers to the fight between Amycus and Polydeuces (Herwagen 1535, p. 15). He writes that Amycus compels (*cogo*) anyone arriving in his kingdom to fight (*contendo*) with the *cæstus*.<sup>437</sup> Pollux did so, and killed (*interficio*) him.<sup>438</sup>

The *Orphic Argonautica*, a Greek poem written perhaps as late as the sixth century AD and translated into Latin in the eighteenth century, contains a brief rendering of the fight between Pollux and Amycus. The author refers to the ‘bitterest boxing’ (*pugilatus acerrimus*, ablative, with the deponent form of *experior* ‘put to the test’). *Robustus* Pollux killed (*conficio*) his opponent, beating (*percutio*) his head with unyielding *cæstus* (*duris cæstibus*). Pollux’ actions were ‘like lightning’ (*fulminis instar*).<sup>439</sup>

<sup>437</sup> The word is rendered *cæstis*, which does not conform to the fourth declension; it may be a corruption of the dative plural.

<sup>438</sup> ... *Amycus Neptuni | Melies filius Bebrycie rex. In huius regna qui uenerat, cæstis cogebat secum contendere, | deuictos perdebat. Hic cum Argonautas provocasset ad cæstus, Pollux cum eo contendit, & cum interfecit.*

<sup>439</sup> *Amycus Bebrycibus impiis imperitabat, qui Panomphaei Iouis legem non curans certamen hospitibus circumhabitantium hominum, quisunque ad stabula sua et stabilem domum veniret, (660) proposuerat, pugilatu acerrimo vti fecum experirentur. Hunc igitur confecit robustus Pollux, percutiens subita vi (fulminis instar) caput duris cæstibus*

### 3.6 Boxing and gladiatorial combat

Unfortunately, a full understanding of Roman gladiatorial combat remains elusive, despite intense popular interest and many generations of study. A complete review of the literature on this topic lies beyond the scope of this paper. Here, we intend only to discuss the boundary between Roman *pugilatus* and gladiatorial spectacle. Fights between armed and armored gladiators, the most recognizable form of Roman agonistics, likely arose from a complex syncretism of cultural practices related to war, dueling, and human sacrifice. The Hellenized residents of Campania (Section 4 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)), as well as their Etruscan neighbors (Section 3 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)), are implicated in the development of the gory spectacle adopted and amplified by the Romans. In the genetic sense, boxing and gladiatorial combat on the Appenine peninsula seem indissolubly linked. Even for those who argue that boxing was originally a Greek import, there can be no doubt that it was heavily influenced by gladiatorial competition over the course of Roman history.

On the origins of gladiatorial combat, Mouratidis (1996, p. 111) writes, “Scholars are still very uncomfortable with this subject and can give no real explanation ...” While ancient sources indicate that the Romans borrowed the gladiatorial games from the Etruscans, no ancient source avers that the Etruscans themselves invented them. Instead, graphic depictions of agonistic activities in different regions of Italy, from different time periods, are the primary sources of evidence in this doubtful controversy. According to some modern theories, the gladiatorial combats found their fullest pre-Roman expression in Campania, perhaps among the Samnites (Huergon 1970, p. 431). Today many scholars seem to agree that the direct precursors to Roman gladiator shows were indeed held in southern Italy, even if they did not originate there. This region remained a significant source of gladiators once the games had been adopted by the Romans.<sup>440</sup>

One theory posits that the Greeks who colonized Campania brought with them armed combat as a feature of their funeral games, though “[t]his suggestion is neither simple nor attractive” (Mouratidis 1996, p. 134).<sup>441</sup> The Etruscans, who competed and interacted with these Greeks in southern Italy, adopted and perhaps modified the practice. However, even Mouratidis admits that the cruel game of ‘Phersu’ was the Etruscan’s own terrifying practice,<sup>442</sup> and it is closely related to human sacrifice (pp. 126–128). Mouratidis (1996) points out the possibility that human sacrifice was a cultural export of Mycenæan Greece, as attested in Homer and a variety of visual depictions. The Etruscans were particularly captivated by Achilles’ sacrifice of twelve Trojan prisoners at the funeral of Patroclus which “never ceased to haunt [their] imagination” (*ibid.*, p. 132). Apart from the geographic and ethnic source of the games, Mouratidis (*ibid.*, p. 132) opines on their functional genesis, as well:

[T]hese bloody combats owe their origin to a funeral rite, an attenuation of the human sacrifice that in a number of early societies accompanied the death of important figures; for in gladiatorial fights the stronger or the abler of the contestants had a chance of survival ... [This] was regarded as a ‘progressive’

(Estienne et al. 1764, p. 97).

<sup>440</sup>Suetonius (*Caligula* 18) reports that Campania was also regarded as a source of highly skilled boxers into the first century AD (Thomson 1889).

<sup>441</sup>We suspect that this attitude is due to a traditional reluctance among classicists to descry in Greek civilization a penchant for bloodsport and ritual killing.

<sup>442</sup>Phersu appears to have involved placing a sack over a man’s head and setting a dog upon him.

form of human sacrifice because instead of immolating captives on the tomb, they were made to combat each other in fro[n]t of it...<sup>443</sup>

In Rome, “gladiatorial combat, like sacrifice, was obviously a culturally sanctioned form of violence. It was indeed related—or at any rate was understood by the Roman elite to be related—to human sacrifice, of which sources treat it as a substitute or development. It was originally associated with funeral ceremonies ... , and this association continued. Tertullian in the second century even suggests that the gladiatorial display originated in human sacrifice to the ghosts of the dead (*De Spec.* 12.1–3).” (Morgan 1998, p. 189). The important passage from Tertullian, as translated by Morgan (1998, p. 189), is as follows:

The ancients thought that by this spectacle [sc., the *munus*] they were rendering a service to the dead, after they had modified it with a more civilized form of cruelty. For at one time, since it was believed that the souls of the dead were propitiated by human blood, they used to buy prisoners-of-war or slaves of low status and sacrifice them at funerals. Later they decided to conceal their impiety behind pleasure. So those they had procured were trained—to the point of learning how to be killed—in the weapons available and to the best of their ability and were then killed on the appointed day of the funeral at the tombs.

In this way they found comfort for death in murder.<sup>444</sup>

The first gladiator matches took place at the Forum Boarium, associated with the Ara Maxima and with the fight between Hercules and Cacus (Morgan 1998, p. 187). When the gladiatorial games were first institutionalized by Augustus, the emperor seemed “to have recognized some kind of sacral dimension” in them (Morgan 1998, p. 189). They took place around the winter solstice and the vernal equinox. As for the gladiatorial *munus*, according to Morgan (1998), “there is a clear consensus in the sources that the *munus* had a ritualistic, and paradoxically life-affirming dimension for its audience” (original emphasis).

Gladiator bouts were marked by their own conventions, including some that may have been descended from earlier Italic traditions. “[A] gladiatorial fight in Livy’s day was typically preceded or opened by a distinct spectacle known as a *prolusio*. During this *prolusio*, the gladiators brandished their weapons with no intention to harm one another, performing (that is the best word for it) graceful movements, perhaps even with music and singing” (Carter 2008, p. 316). In a single combat described by Livy, one Gallic warrior even sticks out his tongue (*ibid.*, p. 313). The relationship between the gladiatorial *prolusio* and the gestures of Etruscan boxers reminiscent of dancing (Section 3 in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023)), is worthy of consideration.

There were explicitly religious overtones to the games, as one might well imagine in a recurring, public struggle between life and death. Gladiatorial games may have been related to the worship of Jupiter Latialis, the protector of the ancient Latin League, or Nemesis, the goddess who enacts retribution against those who succumb to hubris—arrogance before

<sup>443</sup>Compare, of course, the Amycus of the Valerian *Argonautica* (Section 3.3), an archetype of the barbarian at the edges of Greek civilization.

<sup>444</sup>*Officium autem mortuis hoc spectaculo facere se veteres arbitrabantur, posteaquam illud humaniore atrocitate temperaverunt. Nam olim, quoniam animas defunctorum humano sanguine propitiari creditum erat, captivos vel mali status servos mercati in exequis immolabant. Postea placuit impietatem voluptate adumbrare. Itaque quos paraverant, armis quibus tunc et qualiter poterant cruditos, tantum ut occidi discerent, mox edicto die inferiarum apud tumulos erogabant. Ita mortem homicidiis consolabantur.*

the gods (Ville 1960).<sup>445</sup> When gladiators retired, they routinely “dedicated their weapons to Hercules” (Morgan 1998, p. 187).<sup>446</sup> A literary parallel is found in the Valerian *Argonautica*, where we are told that Amycus dedicated his gory *cæstus* to his father Neptune, depositing the gauntlets (called *arma*) on an altar (Section 3.3).

What was the relation between boxing and gladiatorial combat during the Roman era? How did the two competitions coexist and interact? Presumably, when Greek athletics were first (formally) introduced to Rome in the second century BC, Greek boxing was regarded with suspicion. Athletics were later promoted by philhellenic rulers like Nero and Domitian, but “without lasting success” (Junkelmann 2000, p. 75). Gladiator shows, by contrast, were by then considered distinctly Roman and had no trouble captivating the masses.

Köhne et al. (2000, pp. 75–80) argue that Greek boxing, once imported to Rome, was made more violent to suit Roman tastes, which had already become acclimated to gladiatorial combat.<sup>447</sup> While this may account for the subsumption of athletic boxing in Late Antiquity, it does not account entirely for the development of Roman boxing in the first place. Even if all forms of boxing were introduced to Iron Age Italy by the Greeks (which we doubt), then there are still several processes of cultural mediation (Alpine, Etruscan, and Lucanian) to account for. In any event, Italy appears to have been the ultimate site of development for a different kind of boxing, which we style ‘gladiatorial’. Gladiatorial boxing, to hearken back to our tripartite division, partakes of ritual elements (sacrifice) and athletic elements (the celebration of life), but synthesizes them with entertainment.

From the iconographic record (e.g., Figures 16, 17, 19), we must infer that participation in the crudest forms of Roman boxing was likely an “indirect death penalty” in the formulation of Coleman (1990, p. 56): “[O]ffenders were condemned to performances that might offer a chance of temporary survival, depending upon skill and luck, but would in the end usually prove fatal.” This falls under Coleman’s general rubric of “fatal charades” that were popular in the Roman arena during the first two centuries of the empire.

While “[t]he slaughter of animals and criminals in the arena tends to strike moderns as sadistic,” to ancient Romans “these bloodthirsty displays were (like sacrifice) an acceptable, necessary form of killing” (Morgan 1998, p. 188). Gladiatorial boxing most likely fit into this *participation mystique*, as well. Indeed, “The arena was where Roman society dealt ... with the chaos represented by wild beasts and crime ... It was a symbol of an ordered world, the cosmos; it was the place where the civilized world confronted lawless nature” and the Romans found their own place within it (Wiedemann 1992, p. 179).<sup>448</sup> The lives of the victims bleeding out on the sand merited little, if any, consideration in the Roman mind: “The amphitheatre was where one went to witness and participate in ... the deaths of worthless and harmful persons” (Coleman 1990, p. 73). This callous disregard for life is perhaps one of the reasons the post-Enlightenment Westerner cannot resist the psychagogic magnetism of the Colosseum and the blood-bathed history it represents.

The increasingly fantastic *cæstus* of gladiatorial boxing seems related to the notion of

<sup>445</sup>Ville in fact argues that this is not the case, though there are sources to this effect. The relation to Nemesis is suggested in Æneas’ consolation to Dares regarding succumbing to the will of the gods (Section 3.1).

<sup>446</sup>For example Horace, *Ep.* 1.1.4–5, ... *Veianiūs armis | Herculis ad postem fixis latet abditus agro*.

<sup>447</sup>Junkelmann (2000, p. 76) notes, “Damage to the head and face [in boxing] meant permanent disfigurement, which again helped to deprive boxing of the macabre eroticism of the gladiatorial contest.”

<sup>448</sup>The modern westerner still finds himself in the boxing ring. While spectatorship at the fights may have diminished over the past hundred years, boxing terminology and metaphor are still broadly integrated in colloquial English.

*ludibrium*, a cruel degradation or an element of suspense. This was often added to Roman spectacles, e.g., Nero once had his victims clothed in animal skins before throwing them to dogs (Tacitus *Ann.* 15.44.4). The variation in the *cæstus* could thus be an example of Roman experimentation with *ludibrium*: which type of handgear would produce more lethal violence? The changing form of the *cæstus* must have renewed public interest in boxing, just as the development of new gladiatorial types and their constant mixing and matching whetted the public appetite for *ludi* and *munera*.<sup>449</sup>

Teyssier (2009) has argued that the weapons and armor of gladiators were early derived from the military customs of various groups conquered by the Romans (e.g., the *samnis*, *gallus* and *thraex*). Later, other gladiator ‘types’ (e.g., the *crupellarius*, *laquearius*, and *dismachērus*) were invented based on a particular weapon or style of fighting with no obvious national origin. The distinction among classes of gladiators (from a modern perspective) is sometimes referred to as ‘ethnic’ versus ‘technical’. In the same way a *gallus* or *thraex* was derived from the fighting traditions of conquered Gaul and Thrace, one might argue that the *pugil* was derived from conquered Greece. However, the *himantes* of the Greek boxer transformed into something rich and strange under Roman influence, including a sleeve reminiscent of the gladiatorial *manica* (Junkelmann 2000, p. 76). The Roman boxer was neither an ‘ethnic’ nor a ‘technical’ gladiator but a combination of the two. The primary reason for not including the *pugil* among gladiators is that he did not fight other gladiators: Boxers fought boxers whereas a *thraex* might fight a *laquearius*, *vel. simil.* The Romans must have perceived a distinction between a gladiator armed with a sword, dagger, or trident, and a *pugil* armed with a spiked glove. Though clearly a lethal weapon, the *cæstus* of the *pugil* was of a different quality than the *gladius*, perhaps because it was attached to the hand and arm.<sup>450</sup> Still, this did not prevent epic poets like Vergil from freely characterizing the the *cæstus* as *arma* (Section 3.1).

By the early Christian era, gladiatorial competition throughout the empire waned (along with boxing; see below). The Church Fathers were not fans. Augustine wrote of his friend Alypius, who attended but resolved to keep his eyes closed during the *ludi*: “He drank up unawares the very Furies, was charmed by the barbarity of the combat, and became drunk on the pleasures of blood” (*Conf.* 6.13).<sup>451</sup> So powerful was the cruel *voluptas* of the games that it could corrupt the soul of even a devout person with his eyes shut tight. It is hard to imagine Augustine had a more favorable view of gladiatorial boxing.

### 3.7 The end of boxing in the Roman world

All fires burn out at last. The life of ancient boxing was roughly coterminous with classical antiquity—a period which boxing predated by more than a thousand years (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b;c). In this section, we review some of the latest attestations of ancient

<sup>449</sup> Recent developments in western combat sports represent the same impulse, scaled down: promoters use boxing gloves of different weights and construction (cf. MMA gloves) to retain and increase spectatorship. A certain sense of novelty in the ring—a *frisson* of sanguineous expectation—is just as necessary to fill seats as it was twenty centuries ago.

<sup>450</sup> Reconstructing why the Romans did not think of the armed *pugil* as a gladiator is an exercise fraught with unknowns. We know of no ancient text in which an explicit comparison is made. Perhaps learned Roman authors could not separate gladiatorial boxing from its associations with Greek athletics, even though the Roman audience more generally perceived little, if any difference, between these forms of bloodsport.

<sup>451</sup> *hauriebat furias et nesciebat et delectabatur scdere certaminis et cruenta voluptate inebriabatur.*

boxing in the Roman world and offer explanations as to its widely-presumed disappearance from the historical record in around the fifth century AD.

As late as the third century, boxers were still celebrated for their athletic victories throughout the empire (Van Voorhis 2008). The boxers Piseas and Candidianus were memorialized with two splendid statues placed at either end of the theater stage in Aphrodisias, in Asia Minor (Newby 2005, p. 254ff.). These “honorific statues proclaim[ed] Aphrodisias’ ability to continue to produce athletic victors” well into the first millennium. Though fragmentary (all the hands are lost), the boxers’ arm-length *cæstus* can be seen reaching up towards the shoulder. The fighters wear the *cirrus vertice*, “a lock of hair high on the back of an otherwise shaven head” (*ibid.*, p. 257).<sup>452</sup> This hairstyle was frequently associated with athletes in Late Antiquity (Figure 16).<sup>453</sup> One critic has pointed out that the *cæstus* are “carefully ornamented, covered with intricate patterning which suggests idealized presentation,” perhaps suggesting an ideological removal from “the sweat and untidiness of real-life combat” (König 2005, p. 123).



Figure 29: Detail of the Privatulus vase (once exhibited at the Staatliche Münzsammlung, Munich, no inv. number; present whereabouts unknown). This scene has been interpreted as a particularly late (sixth century) depiction of Greek pankratiasts, though the date is controversial. The expressive captions are written in vulgar Latin as if shouted by the crowd.

It has been argued that the scene on the Privatulus vase (Klose and Klein 2013),<sup>454</sup> once exhibited at the Staatliche Münzsammlung in Munich but with a presently unknown location, demonstrates how public attitudes towards boxing, wrestling, and pankration had changed during Late Antiquity, emphasizing the humiliation of the loser and the acrobatic

<sup>452</sup>The iconographic record does not support a shaven head for all pugilists who wore the *cirrus*. For example, mosaics in Roman Africa indicate a variety of fighters wearing the *cirrus* along with a full head of (tightly pulled-back) hair (Khanoussi 2006).

<sup>453</sup>“[T]he *cirrus* is not an exclusive attribute of athletes, for it [also] appears on representations of slaves, dancers, mimes, hunchbacks, and other grotesques” (Bartus 2016, p. 164).

<sup>454</sup>The vase is sometimes referred to as the Kovacs vase, based on the name of its (previous?) owner.

nature of combat (Remijsen 2015). While intriguing, this view has not been widely adopted (Scanlon 2015, Dunbabin 2017).

One scene on the Privatus vase depicts the eponymous victor duking it out with his opponent (Victorinus) while the latter assumes a defensive position, covering his face with his hands. The caption, written in vulgar Latin,<sup>455</sup> includes an insult hurled by the canaille at Victorinus: CINEDE/QVIVIS/ADUC, “Get moving, catamite!”<sup>456</sup> Another vignette, perhaps depicting the climax of the bout, has the loser crouching at the feet of Privatus, raising one finger in submission. The champ, reaching out to his fallen opponent, appears to obey the magnanimous strong, who exclaim, CADVCVS/ESTDA/LIMANU “He’s down, give him a hand!” (Dunbabin 2017, p. 171). Elsewhere, we read the rather incomprehensible command OXILICERE PRIVATULUS, perhaps, “Go for it, Privatus!”<sup>457</sup> The inscription QVIS-IBIFECIT/NONPLORET “Don’t cry! You got yourself into this” accompanies a scene in which Privatus lifts Victorinus from the ground by the hair and the buttocks while drawing the loser’s fundament toward his groin.<sup>458</sup>



Figure 30: Detail of boxers from the Noheda Villa mosaic, Panel B. The mosaic, dated to the fourth century AD, was found in the ruins of a triple-apsed *triclinium* near Cuenca, Spain.

The fourth-century Noheda mosaic, discovered in central Spain, features two pairs of boxers (Valero Tévar 2013). Each figure is framed in a separate vaulted compartment but the members of each duo clearly interact with their partners. The boxers in Panel B (Figure 30) are thought to represent children or perhaps erotes because of their curly hair (Dunbabin 2017, p. 153, fn. 9). The left-hand gauntlet of the figure on the left fans out at the end, reminiscent of the Villelaure mosaic (Figure 24). The boxers in Panel E (not pictured) wear the *cirrus* hairstyle. Blood sprays from the head of one of the pugilists, and drips from his hand. The gloves of the boxers in Panel E appear to consist of strips wound around the fist. The loser’s are dark, perhaps stained with blood. Both have some indication of a thumb.

<sup>455</sup> According to (Klose and Klein 2013, p. 144), the inscriptions on the vase “are written and formulated in a vulgar-colored Latin at the level of Proto-Romanic using the sparest syntax, so that there are problems for understanding and some commentary is required” (translation ours).

<sup>456</sup> Klose and Klein (2013, p. 145) have *Weichling, wer du auch seiest, tritt [gegen ihn]* “Weakling, whoever you be, stand [against him]!”

<sup>457</sup> Scanlon (2021, p. 71) translates the caption as “I, Privatus, have been honored to be able [to win].”

<sup>458</sup> One commentator reads the image as an act of sodomy, with the hapless Victorinus in the pathic role (Scanlon 2021, p. 70).

Writing of a fourth-century statesman named Gallus,<sup>459</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus (14.7.3) notes his passion for boxing and provides one of the last contemporaneous references to the sport in the ancient world:

This also was a sign of his [sc., Gallus'] savage nature which was neither obscure nor hidden, that he delighted in cruel sports [*ludicer*]; and sometimes in the Circus, absorbed in six or seven contests [*certamen*], he exulted in the sight of boxers [*pugil*] pounding [*concido*] each other to death and drenched [*perfundo*] with blood, as if he had made some great gain (Rolfe 1935–1940).<sup>460</sup>

Ammianus uses the verb *concido* to describe the activity of the boxers (*pugil*). The verb is from the same root as *cæstus*, viz., ‘to cut’. Given that the boxers are bathed (*perfundo*) in blood, an alternative translation seems to be “cutting each other to pieces.” This is further evidence that during Late Antiquity, the boundary between athletic boxing and fighting at arms had become increasingly obnubilate in the Roman *imaginaire*.

Boxing vanished from the historical record in around the fifth century AD; traditional, Greek-style athletic competitions were by then vanishingly rare. A few artifacts depicting boxing can be dated to the mid-fourth century or perhaps the early fifth, but no later (Dunbabin 2017, p. 151). Literary references to boxing also cease, snuffed out even before the last Olympic games were held at Antioch in the sixth century.

While it is still commonly claimed that the rulers of the Christianized Roman Empire banned boxing, this narrative has been revised (Remijsen 2015, Dunbabin 2017). Theodosius the Great is often cited as the doomsayer of ancient boxing, by virtue of having banned the Olympic games in AD 392/393. However, the games apparently continued, since his grandson Theodosius II took the trouble of banning them once more in 420/435. By the fifth century, the Roman emperors lacked “the power for or interest in managing contests across the empire”; neither is it clear that the games were any longer viewed as pagan festivities by the general public (Scanlon 2015, p. 84). Rather than attributing the end of the Olympics to Christian nomothesy, a sudden revulsion towards competitive violence and athletic nudity, or the by-then unpopular pagan associations of the games, a new generation of scholars now argues that socioeconomic changes were primarily responsible for their demise. Centralization of wealth in provincial capitals and hyper-inflation deprecated local athletic circuits. Games were staged less frequently and were less accessible to potential athletes. Roman spectacle, including gladiator matches and *venationes*, had a profound impact on popular tastes. Traditional Greek athletics were gradually supplanted by performances that may look to us more like the acts of a modern circus, complete with acrobats and pantomimes. Even the arena came to be known as the ‘circus’ with time.

As if gladiatorial fights were not strong enough competition, athletic wrestling, *pankration*, and boxing were perhaps displaced by a little-understood fighting sport called *pammachon*. Originally a synonym for *pankration*, by the third century AD *pammachon* was explicitly differentiated from the Greek activity. A late fourth-century athlete named Philoumenos was victorious in *pammachon*, as well as in the classical triumvirate of fighting sports (Remijsen 2010, p. 201). In a letter dated to the same century, a less pugnacious young man named

<sup>459</sup>Constantius Gallus, designated cæsar, ruled from Antioch under the authority of the emperor Constantius II.

<sup>460</sup>*Erat autem diritatis eius hoc quoque indicium nec obscurum nec latens, quod ludicris cruentis delectabatur, et in circo sex vel septem aliquotiens deditus certaminibus, pugilum vicissim se concidentium, perfusorumque sanguine specie, ut lucratus ingentia, letabatur.*

Dios explains how, at an athletic event held in Egypt, he failed at *pankration* so decided to take up *pammachon* instead (*ibid.*). Unfortunately, very little is known about this Late Antique combat sport. Remijsen argues, without an abundance of evidence, that *pammachon* was more like modern professional wrestling, i.e., a kind of performed theatrical combat where the winners and losers were predetermined.

## 4 Conclusion

The Italic predilection for bloodletting made Greek boxing, with its focus on technique and defense, a lackluster affair to the Roman observer. The Romans transformed boxing into spectacle, eventually making of it a pastiche of Greek athletics and gladiatorial combat. They seem to have drawn on earlier models for such agonistic practice, including the bloody fights of the East Alpine boxers, the Etruscans, and the Lucanians. While Roman boxers still fought naked (a Greek trait, to be sure, though one known to pre-Roman Italy), they also wore spiked devices on their hands. Like the East Alpine *rocke*, these were intended to quickly dispatch an opponent in a fountain of blood—a feature celebrated, albeit obliquely, in Roman epic. The demise of boxing as an athletic practice in Late Antiquity was not so much a disappearance as a submersion in a far more popular and spectacular arms race that shared too many features with boxing to foster strong differentiation. Men striking each other with lightly-covered fists became men fracturing each others skulls with reinforced fists, and so forth. If the ontological boundary between these two activities is difficult for us to traduce, so, too, must it have been for the inhabitants of the Roman world.

Cato and Tacitus would have been satisfied when Roman arms finally came to supplant the ancient tradition of unarmed boxing, uninterrupted (but for the Bronze Age collapse) since the city-states of Sumer and culminating in the Greek athletic version which they found so deplorable. Vergil mingled the meanings of specific boxing handgear (i.e., the *cæstus*) and weapons (*arma*) more generally. For the *au courant*, swordplay reigned supreme, from the amphitheaters of Late Antiquity to the fencing schools of early modern Germany. It is this tradition of swords, and not of fists, that redounded to the peoples of Europe once Rome lay in ruin. Ancient pugilism awaited rediscovery in Britain—as exaptation of fencing rather than *redivivus* proper—but only after eleven centuries of stony sleep.

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