
The Development of Boxing: The Ancient World (Classical Greece)

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Abstract

The development of boxing on the Greek mainland marked a turning point in the history of ancient pugilism. From the Late Bronze Age to the beginning of the Hellenistic era, ancient boxing emerged in a form increasingly recognizable to the modern observer. The evidentiary record, including both literary and visual depictions, permits us an increasingly pellucid vision of the practice in the Mycenæan, Archaic, and Classical eras. In this article, we address the rich resources available for studying Greek boxing into the fourth century BC and limit ourselves to artifacts discovered in Greece and Cyprus (excluding even those items produced in Greece but destined for a foreign clientele). During this period and within these geographic bounds, boxing possessed a richness and variety of form that laid the groundwork for boxing as a coherent athletic practice.

I Introduction

As we have labored to demonstrate previously (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022a; b; c), boxing was not invented by the Hellenes. By the time pugilism was introduced into the Olympic games in the early seventh century before Christ, boxing was “neither new nor specifically Greek” (Puhvel 1988, p. 30). Instead, boxing was already more than a thousand years old, during which time it had been “fully present in the Hellado-Anatolian orbit” of the mid-to-late Bronze Age (*ibid.*). This is not to say that the ancient Greeks were only casually invested in the sport. Visual depictions of and/or literary references to boxing are consistently found in mainland Greece from the eighth century BC well into the first millennium of the Christian era. Even though the Greeks by no means invented boxing, their deep cultural affinity for the practice lasted, conservatively, a thousand years.

Fast-forward almost 1500 more years to the “Fight of the Century” between Jack Dempsey and Georges Carpentier when a critic in Paris wrote a defense of boxing by referring to its deep Western roots:

What *laudator temporis acti* shall dare to pretend that boxing contests are modern inventions, degrading and unworthy of a civilization that lays claim to the beauty of antiquity?¹

Nordmann argues that, as a vestige of *la beauté antique*, boxing should be revered by educated moderns as it was by the ancient Greeks. In those days, boxing was regarded as an avenue to perfect the body and the mind. Despite this, the ancient Greeks also acknowledged, often obliquely, its potential for degradation.² Their values were tightly wound up in their boxing praxis. We see in Greek depictions of pugilism courage and strength, of course, but also the glory of the naked male body and the calculating logic of the warrior at work. Indeed, the embrace of boxing by the Greeks “owes a great deal to the new presence of Indo-European-speaking aristocratic warrior cultures” that evidently prized the deeply resonant virtues of hand-to-hand combat for educating men and boys (Puhvel 1988). Of all the ancient cultures that boxed, the Greeks leave us an account that is at once imminently erudite

¹“Quel *laudator temporis acti* osera prétendre encore que les combats de boxe sont des inventions modernes et dégénérées, indignes d'une civilisation qui se réclame de la beauté antique?” (Nordmann 1921, p. 456, translation ours).

²While we do not deny that some Hellenistic authors satirized the sport as disfiguring, their critiques were evidently unpersuasive, since boxing was practiced widely and for a long time.

and visually astonishing.³ Greek art is undoubtedly the *locus classicus* for naturalistic depictions of athletic boxing in the ancient world. Not only did the Greeks elaborate and refine the equipment and convention of boxing, they mused on its value to the individual and to society. It is in Greek depictions that we first observe boxers engaged in activities other than fighting: they wrap their fists; they hear instructions before the beginning of the bout; they sit, contemplative. The ancient Greeks are rivaled only by the early-modern English, Welsh, Scots, and Irish in their celebration of the paradoxical brutality and humanity of boxing.

Turning once more to Nordmann's classically-influenced panoply, we find a potential explanation for the Greeks' enduring commitment to pugilism:

The fine and delicate flowers of poetry and science bloom more readily in brains
that crown healthy bodies, robust and winsome.⁴

Greek *Leibeskultur* anastomatized naturally with boxing, which when practiced at its highest level, requires near perfection in limb, joint, and muscle. The glory achieved in athletics was widely celebrated. As explained to the man of twists and turns by his Phæacian host in Book 8 of the *Odyssey*, “[T]here is no greater glory for a man so long as he lives than that which he achieves by his own hands and his feet” (Murray 1919).⁵ Boxing became the *sine qua non* of athleticism, a perch that it retains among the boughs of western culture to this day—though its popularity may wax and wane.⁶ Given the comparatively rich resources available for studying boxing in the Hellenic world before the death of Alexander, we will attempt in the present article to study pugilism from the ancient Greek perspective.

2 Representations of boxing in Greek myth and legend

Elsewhere we have argued that boxing developed as a ritual practice (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022a) and remarked at length on its association with worship in the ancient Near East (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b). According to Graf (2009), “Running and boxing were not just athletic disciplines in Greece, they were the *ritual* core disciplines of archaic education” (p. 121; emphasis ours). Given its great antiquity and persistence in human society, boxing may be regarded as one of the oldest rituals still extant in Western (now global) civilization. We should not be surprised, therefore, to learn that boxing was closely linked to Greek religion, including its divinities.

Among the Olympians, the oracular god Apollo⁷ was the deity most closely associated

³As two examples only, consider the richly-detailed (Hellenistic) *Gymnasticus* of Philostratus of Athens and the magnificent bronze *Boxer at Rest* to be reviewed in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023b).

⁴“[L]es fleurs délicates et fines de la poésie et de la science naissent plus aisément dans les cerveaux qui couronnent des corps sains, robustes et beaux” (Nordmann 1921, p. 462, translation ours).

⁵οὐ μὲν γάρ μετίουν ἀλέος ἀνέρος δόρα κ' ἔγριν, ἢ δι τι ποσσὸν τε φέζῃ καὶ χερσὸν ἐξῆσιν (*Odyssey* 8.146–147).

⁶We note, for example, that boxing is routinely ranked as the “most difficult sport” by the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN), among other oracles. This by no means corresponds to contemporary boxing viewership, which is still low relative to the mid-twentieth century.

⁷While Apollo's solar association arose in the fifth century BC and has been considerably strengthened in the post-classical tradition, the earliest provinces of Apollo seem to have been far more polytropic: he is associated with oracles, music, archery, plague, healing, and youth, in addition to light (Graf 2009, pp. 151–153). One functional hypothesis for linking the sun and boxing has become apparent to us while holding our own bouts out of doors, particularly when the sun is low on the horizon. One does well in these situations to put oneself between one's adversary and the sun, effectively blinding him. For any opponent of Phœbus Apollo himself, this doleful situation would have been unavoidable.

with pugilism.⁸ Venerated particularly among the Ionians (the Greeks that inhabited the middle region of the Aegean islands and the west coast of Anatolia), Apollo is the subject of a Delian Hymn (149–152) that refers to boxing in the context of his worship:

There [at Delos] in remembrance of you they give you delight with their boxing | matches and dancing and singing, whenever they set competitions. | One would suppose them immortal and ageless forever and ever, | he who had come upon those Ionians meeting together[.]⁹

Boxing was the only combat sport cultivated by the Ionians on Delos (Graf 2009, p. 29). As with the Hittites, who evidently delighted their own divinities through pugilism (Cammarano 2014, Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b), boxing at Delos was viewed as an entertainment for the gods.¹⁰ Moreover, it was related to dancing and singing—activities that also fell squarely among Apollo’s prerogatives. Boxing and music had gone hand in hand since at least the third millennium in Mesopotamia (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b) and continued to do so in Etruria and Lucania well into the first millennium before Christ (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023a). It has been noted that dancing and singing in honor of a god are uniquely ephemeral acts of devotion (Graf 2009, p. 17). Unlike clearly defined and consistently executed rituals, a boxing match can never be repeated step by step or blow for blow.¹¹ Much like ecstatic dance or incantation, boxing must always be *ex tempore*. In this regard, boxing bouts pattern with acts of dancing and singing to constitute unique votive offerings intended for Apollo.

In the Delian hymn, boxing is associated with ἀθανάτους καὶ ἀγήρως the ‘ageless quality’ of its participants, presumably invigorated by pugilistic activity. There are, of course, strong associations between adolescent boys and the eternally youthful Apollo. It has been noted by at least one critic, however, that Athena acted as a more consistent protector of the ephebes than her divine sibling (*ibid.*, p. 13). After all, Apollo was frequently responsible for the sudden death of young men, e.g., the six sons of Niobe. It is perhaps the cold lethality of Apollo that draws him closest to the boxing ring. In a match between two young men, only one can be Apollo’s protégé: the youthful god is just as implicated in the victory of one as in the defeat of the other.¹² In Greek accounts, defeat in the boxing ‘ring’ is typically gruesome, even grotesque, reminding us in some respects of the devastating plague unleashed by cruel Apollo in the opening act of the *Iliad*. Apollo’s aspect as an archer is perhaps not too far removed from his aspect as a boxer. The archer stealthily fires arrows into the void between

⁸The Anatolian origins of Apollo are controversial (Graf 2009, pp. 136–137), but nonetheless find support among a variety of recent scholars, including those who associate the Greek god with the Hittite divinity *Apaliuna* (Rutherford 2020, p. 10, fn. 71). If Apollo is indeed an Anatolian god, this presents intriguing possibilities for a connection between Hittite and Greek boxing (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b). Hittite boxing was associated with mountain deities who were in turn associated with hunting; while tenuous, this may provide a link via the panurgic Apollo’s patronage of archery.

⁹οἱ δέ σε πυγμαχίη τε καὶ ὀργηθμῷ καὶ ἀιδῇ / μνησάμενοι τέρπουσιν, δτ' ἂν στήσωνται ἀγῶνα. / φαίη κ' ἀθανάτους καὶ ἀγήρως ἔμμεναι αἰεὶ, / δς τόδ' ὑπαντιάσει', δτ' Ιάσονες ἀθρόοι εἰεν. “A Homeric Hymn to Apollo.” Trans. Rodney Merrill. In Pepper, Timothy, ed. 2011. *A Californian Hymn to Homer*. Hellenic Studies Series 41. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies.

¹⁰The inhabitants of Delos were also known for their appreciation of cockfighting (Blaine 1840, p. 1206).

¹¹“[T]out combat de boxe est un pièce qui est toujours une première” (Nordmann 1921, p. 460).

¹²Though respected by Homer’s Achaeans when not entirely trusted, Apollo was decidedly in the Trojan camp. It seems to us that Paean Apollo picks sides in boxing matches, as in war.

two armies while a boxer hurls his fists into the void between two bodies. In both cases, a well-aimed strike can maim or slaughter. These are both provinces of Apollo, who “killed softly with his silver arrows” (*Iliad* 24.578).

While in all likelihood composed much later, the Hymn to Delian Apollo serves as a festal counterpoint to the brutality of boxing that is portrayed in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.¹³ According to Plutarch (*Quæs. Conv.* 724c / 8.4.4), writing in the first century of the Christian era but presumably referring to matters of greater antiquity, an epithet of Apollo was πύκτης ‘boxer’ and offerings were made to him at Delphi under that name (Poliakoff 1987, p. 82).¹⁴ Plutarch describes Apollo as φιλόνεικος ‘eager for strife’ and mentions his evocation in the Iliadic boxing match (Section 3.i.1).

A boxer was reportedly entombed in the sanctuary of Apollo Lykeios (Wolf-Apollo)¹⁵ at Argos (Graf 2009, p. 121). This was highly unusual, since graves were not normally permitted inside the city, let alone inside a god’s sanctuary. The burial of a boxer in the temple of Apollo Lykeios is an outstanding indication of the Apolline association with pugilism. A depiction of the famous Greek boxer Kreugas was also found in the temple (*Paus.* 8.40.5).

In many mythic vignettes, boxing is practiced by barbarians¹⁶ on the periphery of the (early) Greek world (e.g., Bebrycia and Phlegyas) while divine and semi-divine beings worshiped by the Greeks (Apollo and Polydeuces) are revealed as the true masters of the craft. This suggests a kind of ambivalence towards boxing: rejecting, on the one hand, its raw brutality (epitomized by barbarians like Phorbas and Amycus); while celebrating, on the other, the skill, agility, and power manifest by all successful pugilists.

Another association between boxing and the divine comes from a fragment written by the Greek poetess Corinna: “For your [Tanagra’s] sake Hermes boxed against Ares”.¹⁷ This suggests a nearly-forgotten tale in which Hermes boxed Ares to settle a dispute over a Naiad-nymph, the daughter of Æolus.¹⁸ If the match went the same way as the contest between Apollo and Ares, we assume Hermes went home happy.¹⁹ A euhemeristic approach to boxing in this myth might suggest that boxing arose from competition for females. It may even evoke a system whereby the fittest males were coupled with the worthiest females based on victory in formal boxing matches, at least in some localities (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022a).²⁰

¹³According to Burkert (1979), the Hymn to Delian Apollo may have been composed as late as 522 BC.

¹⁴Plutarch, himself a priest of Apollo at Delphi, would have been intimately aware of Apollo’s association with boxing, though he does not appear to have discussed the matter at length in any of his surviving works. The relevant passage is: κούφων δὲ καὶ βαρέων ἀγωνισμάτων ὄντων, πύκτη μὲν Ἀπόλλωνι Δελφούς, δρομαίῳ δὲ Κρῆτας ιστοροῦσι θύειν καὶ Λακεδαιμονίους. It claims that Apollo was worshiped as a boxer at Delphi and as a runner by the Cretans and the Spartans.

¹⁵Wolves were reportedly sacrificed at the sanctuary. Wild animals were uncommon sacrificial victims in Greek religion (Marcinkowski 2008, p. 47).

¹⁶The triumph of Polydeuces in the *Argonautica* has been interpreted as “a victory for skill over sheer power, youth over maturity, good over evil, Greek over barbarian” (Nelis 2001, p. 18).

¹⁷“περὶ τεοῦς Ἐρμᾶς πὼτ Ἄρεα πουκτεῖν” (fragment 666)

¹⁸Tanagra is also the name of a town in Boeotia where the inhabitants were known for their devotion to cock-fighting (Blaine 1840, p. 1206).

¹⁹John William Waterhouse’s pre-Raphaelite masterpiece *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896) gives some idea of the prize that awaited Hermes for his fistic superiority.

²⁰In an evaluation of post-Mycenaean Greek art, one critic has written of “young marriageable females” depicted in scenes of contest, like boxing: “[They] are precisely that sector of the population whose control is critical for the well being of the community, especially to the elite households of the nascent state” (Langdon 2008, pp. 226–227). Moreover, the depiction of these women on domestic pottery is a didactically astute way of reflecting “the power of the elites to exert their mastery over the household and the community” (*ibid*).

Another story about a mortal boxer straddles the threshold between myth and legend and attracted the attention of Plato, Pausanias, Pliny, and Augustine (Burkert 1983, pp. 84–93). A fighter named Damarchus (or Demænetus) of Parrhasia (or Arcadia) was said to have won the Olympic boxing competition around 400 BC (*Paus.* 6.8.2). Damarchos was changed into a wolf at the sacrifice of Zeus Lykaios (Wolf-Zeus), a secret ritual held high on a mountain slope in Arcadia. The ritual may have involved human sacrifice and cannibalism at some point in the legendary past; it was certainly geared towards the initiation of adolescent males. It is fitting, perhaps, that once transformed into an animal, Damarchus should return to humanity in the form of a boxer. The legend suggests that the brutality and potential lethality of boxing made it, by some lights, a liminal activity for humans. In addition, the close association of pugilism with male initiation rituals (boy becomes wolf, wolf becomes boxer), as hypothesized based on the material culture of the Minoans (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c), is here confirmed textually among the ancient Greeks.

The Greeks practiced boxing for so many centuries that they naturally grew curious—and likely inventive—regarding its origins. They became the first scholars of boxing, leaving us written accounts of where they thought the activity came from. Philostratus (*Gym.* 9) claimed that boxing was invented by the Spartans only to be adopted later by the Bebrycians. As we detail in Section 3.2, according to *Argonautica* 2, a legendary ruler of the Bebrycians, Amycus, was said to have engaged in a boxing match with Polydeuces, the semi-divine twin of Castor.²¹ This is a relatively late source; the *Argonautica* was written in the third century BC. Polydeuces is referred to as *πνύξ ἀγαθὸν* ‘good with his fists’, in the much older *Iliad* 3.237 and *Odyssey* 11.300. The Greeks strongly associated him with boxing, as did the Romans. We will discuss the cult of Polydeuces (whom the Romans called Pollux) in a future article on boxing in Italy (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023b).

Theseus is attributed as the legendary inventor of wrestling, boxing, and/or *pankration* (cf. the *Scholia in Pindarum, Nemean Odes v:89a–b*, which passage is variously translated by different authors).

In his *Description of Greece* Pausanias (5.7.10) claims that Apollo beat Ares in boxing at the first Olympic games (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).²² 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 acrossss ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures.

The Spartans incorporated boxing among adolescent boys into the *Gymnopaidia* festival

²¹ See the Ficoroni Cista in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023a). The Dioscuri were regarded as kings of the Spartans (Sens 1997).

²² The stephanitic games, so-called for their award of a crown rather than a prize of monetary value, included the Olympic, Nemean, Pythian, and Isthmian games. Delightfully, each awarded a characteristic crown: for the Olympic, a garland of olive branches cut from behind the temple of Zeus with a golden sickle; for the Nemean, a crown of wild celery in mourning for Opheltes; for the Pythian, a crown of laurel branches; for the Isthmian, a garland of pine leaves (Broneer 1962).

honoring Apollo Pythæus (Apollo the Python-slayer)²³ and Apollo Karneios (Ram-Apollo) (Graf 2009, pp. 116–117).²⁴ The *Gymnopaidia* also included the γυμνοπαιδική ὥρχησις, a “boy’s dance that is performed naked” (*ibid.*). Thus, singing, nude dancing, and boxing were all aspects of the Spartan adoration of Apollo.

3 The Language of *pygmachia*

3.1 Homeric

The boxing matches recounted in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* explain the proceedings of formal agonistic encounters and allow us to infer why boxing mattered to ancient people. In the *Iliad*, the game is motivated as a show of funereal reverence for a fallen comrade where prizes are offered and fighters volunteer to compete for them. In the *Odyssey*, the combatants are goaded into fighting each other for the pleasure of spectators, though both fighters have their own objectives in mind.

What, if anything, can these ancient narratives tell us about the deep-time origins of paired human combat? In the *Iliad*, the prizes are not necessary for survival (and in any case each competitor gets something). There are no females present, which rules out (direct) sexual selection. In both fights, at least one of the combatants seeks status, although the wily Odysseus arguably subverts this paradigm.²⁵ For Odysseus, defeating his rival is merely a means to gain the trust of the suitors, whom he will later defeat, as well. Engaging in paired combat to achieve status among males may be the civilized, uniquely human (or hominin?) version of gathering in a lek to court female conspecifics. The absence of females in Homer’s boxing vignettes is puzzling, however, given that competition for access to the enslaved women Briseis and Chryseis arguably drives the entire Iliadic narrative (Schadewaldt 1951). Perhaps formal combat between males, watched and adjudicated by other males, developed so that higher-status males could select the most fit lower-status males for privileged access to females under their authority (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022a).

As we point out below, the loser in the Iliadic boxing match still receives a prize and the loser in the *Odyssey* is at least offered one. In Near Eastern literature and Minoan iconography, by contrast, the vanquished is either ignored or shown in all his humiliation. While Homer does not spare us the details of Euryalos’ downfall in the *Iliad* (he spits thick clots of blood, his head hanging to one side) we are also edified to see him treated with respect and awarded his prize. Even methless Iros, who deserves little of our sympathy, is shown some respect by Odysseus after their encounter in the *Odyssey*.

We can learn a great deal about the ancient audience’s regard for boxing by closely studying Homeric texts. In what follows, we will discuss lexical choices that illuminate boxing as it was practiced in Greece (and western Anatolia) during the Iron Age and perhaps as early as the late Bronze Age—to the extent that the poem preserves traces of earlier Mycenaean culture.²⁶ However, scholars are by no means in agreement about what culture or time period

²³ Apollo’s sister Artemis and mother Leto were also honored at the *Gymnopaidia*.

²⁴ Here we find a link to Hittite boxing, which was accompanied by ram-fighting called *tarpa* (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b).

²⁵ There is a body of literature suggesting such subversion is the main purpose of Odysseus (Zieliński 2020).

²⁶ The chronology depends heavily on when the works of Homer were composed and set down in the form we have them today; estimates for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* range from 800 to as late as 630 BC. The central conflict of

is represented in the poetry of Homer. One critic insists that “the epic was not some kind of bad history. It was a poetic creation, what *some* eighth-century Greeks thought the heroic world *ought* to have been like” (Morris 1997, p. 558). Another scholar opines, “[I]t seems risky to assume that Homeric poems give a reliable, let alone comprehensive, depiction of any single historical society” (Dickinson 2006, p. 240). While currently it may be fashionable to conclude that the boxing scenes in Homer were mere fantasies of a late Iron Age mind,²⁷ we also cannot be entirely certain that they were uninformed by legend or knowledge of a more ancient, heroic past (Van Wees 1992). It has been argued that Homeric references are perhaps most appropriately connected to individual, “prosaic” features of Mycenaean society—those that were not likely “intended to attract attention” in the Homeric narrative (Dickinson 2006, p. 240).²⁸ We believe that some aspects of the Homeric boxing matches, e.g., wearing a loincloth, may be unobtrusive enough to suggest their great antiquity along these lines. Homer’s account likely offers a glimpse of boxing as it was practiced well before it became an Olympic sport in 688 BC.

3.1.1 *Iliad* 23

A boxing match between two Greek soldiers is described in 45 lines of dactylic hexameter in Book 23 of the *Iliad*. The context is a series of funeral games for the fallen warrior Patroclus. Boxing is immediately preceded by a chariot race and followed by wrestling. While funeral games were practiced widely among the Etruscans late into the first millennium (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023a), there is no evidence that the Greeks, outside of those depicted in the *Iliad*, incorporated boxing into their funerary cultus (Corrigan 1979, p. 210). We suspect that the context of combat sports among the Mycenaeans changed over time, gradually becoming disassociated from funerals in Greece while retaining this feature in Etruria, perhaps due to more archaic Mycenaean influence. It is also possible that funeral games were widely practiced by Indo-European invaders of southeastern Europe and it is their influence and/or inheritance that we observe in both Etruscan and Mycenaean practice.

The scene opens with Achilles’ offer of prizes (*ἄεθλα*) to entice potential combatants: a mule (*ἵμιονος*) for the winner and a special cup for the loser. The cup, which is called *δέπτας ἀμφικύπελλος*, is often translated as “double-cup”, or a “cup with two handles”. It is not clear if the cup is valued because of its composition (we do not learn, e.g., if it is made of some precious metal), its utility to a warrior, its ceremonial value, or something else.²⁹ It is remarkable that prizes are made available to both the winner and the loser before the bout even begins. This offers a point of comparison with earlier, Near Eastern boxing. In a Mesopotamian poem called the “Marriage of Martu,” the victor of the boxing match is offered treasure (ultimately opting for a bride instead), while the losers are noted only for

the *Iliad*, the Trojan War, was likely waged by the Mycenaean Greeks as early as 1200 years before Christ. Thus, it is hardly extreme to claim that Homer is “no guide at all” to Mycenaean civilization (Finley 1982, p. 232).

²⁷ According to (Dickinson 2020), Greek tradition “is more likely to represent how later Greeks wanted to imagine the past than to incorporate any accurate and detailed memories” (p. 158).

²⁸ A thought experiment: how might naïve twenty-first century authors reconstruct a bout from the seventeenth century? The narrative would likely be filled with anachronisms—references to contemporary rather than contemporaneous pugilism. Accordingly, our expectations for Homeric ‘history’ should not be too high, since the collapse of Mycenaean culture occurred some fifteen generations before “the process of shaping the Homeric epics into their present form” even began (Palaima 2008, p. 348).

²⁹ The value of a mule in a Bronze or Iron Age agrarian culture requires less explication.

the devastating wounds they suffer under the hero's fists (Vanstiphout 1998, Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b). As we will see, the defeated boxer in the *Iliad*, though *hors de combat* and soundly thrashed, is neither humiliated nor deprived his due. He thus leaves the scene with a kind of dignity that we do not see in "Martu" or the many depictions of recumbent, defeated boxers created by Minoan artists (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c).³⁰

In introducing the fight and calling out the fighters, Achilles refers to the one who will ultimately lose the bout by using a passive form of the verb *νικάω* 'conquer'. The eventual winner is described in a more circumlocutory, though revealing, manner. He is the one who will demonstrate *καμψονή* 'steadfastness' or 'endurance', which is said to be a gift from Apollo himself (line 661).³¹ Thus we learn that victory in boxing was understood to proceed from outlasting one's opponent even more so than beating him into unconsciousness. Though a knockout indeed ends this particular match, it seems that the ideal boxer in this culture was the one who could withstand the most punishment. We also have early evidence that Apollo was regarded as the patron of boxers. No other god is mentioned in relation to the Iliadic boxing contest.

The first to take up Achilles' challenge was Epeius,³² a man of pantagruelian proportions said to 'know boxing' (*εἰδὼς πυγμαχίης*) but relatively unskilled in warfare.³³ Here, for the first time, we encounter the word *πυγμαχία* or *pygmachia*, literally, a 'fist fight', the term of art for Greek boxing well into late antiquity.³⁴ The participial form of *οἶδα* 'know how to', which describes Epeius, suggests that *pygmachia* was a learned skill—hardly the province of mere pothouse brawlers. Epeius calls on a potential adversary with the phrase 'let him draw nearer' (*ἀσσον ἵτω*). But where was this opponent to join him, exactly? Homer provides no special word for the space sanctified by the blood of the combatants—what we call the 'ring'. Instead, the phrase *ἐξ μέσσον ἀγῶνα* 'into the midst of the assembly' is used (line 685) to describe the path of motion. The operative noun is *ἀγῶν*; its English transliteration *agon* has come to mean the contest itself. Here, however, it refers to the crowd of warriors eager to watch a bout between two of their comrades. The welter of bodies formed the boundaries circumscribing the boxers. Like a great lung, contracting and expanding, the crowd surged and withdrew, turning the 'ring' into an organic participant in the fight itself. When the men pushed forward, the boxers were compelled to strike at closer quarters and with greater vigor; when they stepped back, the fighters could separate and consider their actions more carefully.

On entering this 'ring', Epeius calls for a challenger, sanctifying the space with a solemn

³⁰Blandishments for the loser are still featured in professional boxing, thousands of years later, when fighters sign contracts with legally enforceable provisions as to the distribution of monies generated by the fight.

³¹Etymologically, the term appears to be a compound of *κατα+μονή*, suggesting someone that remains, or stays put.

³²Epeius was the son of Panopeus, who, according to Hesiod, fought his twin brother Crissus while still in the womb. It is said that Epeius built the Trojan horse under the inspiration of Athena.

³³In lines 670–671, Epeius boasts that he is the 'best' (*ἀριστος*), a term "normally reserved for elite warrior heroes," then ironically proceeds to acknowledge his shortcomings as a soldier (*μάχης ἐπιδεύομαι*) (Scanlon 2018, p. 9). He addresses this by reasoning that man "may not...prove him a man of skill in every work" (*ἐν πάντεσσιν ἔργοισι διαλμονα φῶτα γενέσθωται*). While this may make Epeius a "comic scapegoat" akin to Thersites in Book 2, his eventual victory in the boxing 'ring' allows the audience to identify with his down-to-earth claim that men cannot be skilled in all deeds (*ibid.*).

³⁴The forms *πύξ pyx* (an indeclinable adverbial form meaning 'with the fist') and *πυγμή pygmē* 'fist' are commonly associated with phrases including "boxing" or "boxer" in translation, including *Iliad* 3.237 and *Odyssey* 11.300 (Murray 1919; 1924).

vow or prayer (*εὐχομαι*) to rend (*ρήγνυμι*) the flesh and break (*ἀράσσω*) the bones of his opponent. He colorfully remarks that his adversary's closest comrades will be responsible for removing what remains of the unlucky man at the conclusion of the fight. The term he uses for these comrades (*κηδεμόνες*) is, throughout Homer, reserved for those who attend to the dead, so ‘pallbearers’ might be an apt translation in English—and more in keeping with Epeius’ outrcuidance. Epeius uses a passive participial form of the verb *δαμάζω* ‘overpower’ or perhaps ‘kill’ to describe the final state of anyone audacious enough to meet him (line 675). The lexical evidence suggests that Epeius was threatening his opponent (hyperbolically, we think) with death, not just defeat. This has implications for understanding the deep-time relationship of boxing to human sacrifice, a connection which seems likely among the Minoans and was all but certain among the Etruscans and the Classic Mayans (Corrigan 1979, Taube and Zender 2009). As we will see at the conclusion of this episode, however, death was not the preferred outcome sought in the Achæan boxing ‘ring’.

Despite these threats—or perhaps incited by them—one Euryalus³⁵ rises (*ἀνίστημι*) to the occasion. We learn that he prevailed (*νικάω*) in boxing matches at Thebes where he beat all of the locals following the death of Œdipus (a sort of *mise en abyme* suggesting the history of funerary pugilism long before the burning roof and tower of Ilium).

We then encounter another remarkable innovation—or at least first attestation. A man referred to as the “son of Tydeus” appears to serve as Euryalus’ second or cornerman.³⁶ This man, who is equated with the warrior Diomedes earlier in the epic, performs a number of important functions, psychological and physical. Psychologically, he encourages (*θαρσύνω*) Euryalus and wishes him victory (*βούλομαι νίκην*). These may be cover terms for brief cultic rites like prayer and anointing, as observed in the corner of a modern Muay Thai bout, and occasionally a western boxing match, as well. Diomedes attends (*ἀμφιπονέομαι*) to Euryalus in more practical matters, too. He clothes (*παρακαταβάλλω*) Epeius in a boxing garment, the *zōma* (*ζῷμα*),³⁷ and binds (*δίδωμι*) his hands in the ‘boxing gloves’ that will receive more attention below. The active voice of the verbs *παρακαταβάλλω* and *δίδωμι* makes it relatively clear that Diomedes dressed Euryalos and put his gloves on for him.³⁸ If the boxer performed these actions himself, we might expect the verb to appear in the middle voice instead. The loin-cloth or *zōma* that Diomedes puts on Euryalos is a truly archaic feature of the match. Greek boxing art (including early examples like the Copenhagen Kantharos, see Figure 12) almost always depicts the combatants naked but for their gauntlets and, occasionally, a *κυνοδέσμη* *kynodesmē* securing their foreskin (e.g., Figure 22). A related word is mentioned in the Iliaadic wrestling match, between Ajax and Odysseus (23.710) where the verb *ζώννυμι* is usually translated as ‘gird’. Some form of covering about the waist is typical of both Near Eastern and Minoan boxing, however, suggesting that Mycenæan (or early Greek) boxing was influenced by either or both of these cultures (Dioscurus 2022b;c).

The ‘boxing gloves’ bound to the hands of Euryalus are the famous leather straps or thongs known as *himantes* (*ἱμάντες*). The same word can also mean ‘dog leash’, ‘whip’, and

³⁵ Euryalus was one of the Argonauts, which links him to another famous boxing match, viz., one between Polydeuces and Amycus. According to Hesychius, Euryalus is also a surname of Apollo, the divine patron of boxers (Schmidt 1867, p. 655).

³⁶ No such figure is reported in Epeius’ ‘corner’.

³⁷ We will henceforth transliterate *ζῷμα* as *zōma* without providing the Greek spelling.

³⁸ The inflected forms are *παρακάβαλεν* (line 683) and *δᾶκεν* (line 684), respectively.

‘rope’, *inter alia*.³⁹ We are told on line 684 that the straps are ‘well-cut’ (ἐύτμητος). The text does not resolve for us whether the *himantes* are bound to one or both hands since the hands are not mentioned at all in this respect. However, the narrative does make explicit the material from which the *himantes* are fashioned. We are told the strips come from a ‘field-dwelling bull’ (βοῦς ἄγραυλος).⁴⁰ The significance of the adjective ἄγραυλος is unclear. While it is possible that the adjective was included merely for metrical purposes, it is more likely that the bovid’s origins were significant to ancient boxing. Even though the *himantes* are widely known, their original purpose is not altogether transparent. No explicit mention is made of how Epeius is grafted for the combat.⁴¹

As with modern boxing gloves, there seems to be no consensus view as to why hand-coverings should be used during a fistfight. This is because there seems to be no agreement on whether it is more or less injurious (and to whom) to wear such coverings on the hands. Frost (1906, p. 214) writes:

Professional pugilists seem to agree that fights [at the turn of the twentieth century] in which very light gloves are used are more severe than if bare fists were allowed: the gloves have not enough padding to make any appreciable difference, while they prevent the knuckles from swelling and deadening the blows. This must have been the case to an even greater extent when strips of leather were employed.

Accordingly, we propose three reasons for using the *himantes* in the boxing ring: (1) to protect the (hands of the) striker; (2) to protect the stricken; or (3) to injure the stricken more gravely. As with modern boxing gloves, there seems to be no consensus⁴² as to the ‘true’ purpose of the *himantes*.⁴³ We present another option for consideration: the practical utility of the *himantes* in the fight was secondary, while their primary purpose was telesmatic. They were perhaps used to bind the boxer to the animal spirit of the field-dwelling bull, βοῦς ἄγραυλος. From the bull of heaven in the Epic of Gilgameš to the *tarpa* blood sport among the Hittites, to bull-leaping among the Minoans, bulls and boxing were closely connected in the ancient world.⁴⁴ In trying to imagine why ancient men first wrapped their fists in leather

³⁹The term is specific enough that we will transliterate and use *himantes* to denote this ubiquitous piece of boxing equipment.

⁴⁰Though Homer is not explicit on this point, commentators appear to agree that the *himantes* are a product of the hide rather than, e.g., the intestines of the bull.

⁴¹An Attic neck amphora from Tell Dafana (Daphnae) in Egypt shows a boxing scene in which, arguably, only one fighter is gloved—and only on his right hand (British Museum, No. 1888,0208.102; Figure 20).

⁴²Connor (1995, p. 102) proposes that the *himantes* were “intended to strengthen hand and wrist rather than to hurt an opponent” but the evidence for this claim is doubtful.

⁴³Even option (3), increased injury, is possible with modern gloves. Reports of using the exposed laces of the glove to abrade an opponent’s face, or to twist the leather of the glove on impact in order to make the skin tear and bleed, are not uncommon in the modern sport (Thomas 1997, pp. 9–15). The case is argued repeatedly, particularly by enthusiasts of mixed martial arts, that boxing gloves facilitate more strikes and thereby more cumulative damage to an opponent in the ring. Even cosmetic damage, like a black eye or bloody nose, is not prevented by gloves. Besides distributing the force of the blow to a relatively wide surface area (at least in very modern, foam-padded gloves), there is no real consensus as to what good they do (Chadli et al. 2018). We cannot deny that boxing gloves bear some mystical power in the modern ring, as well.

⁴⁴The use of pigskin in constructing the *himantes* was explicitly forbidden (Phil. *Gym.* 10): δθεν τοὺς ιμάντας τοὺς ἀπὸ τῶν συῶν ἐκκρίνουσι τῶν σταδίων ὁδύνηρὰς ἥγοντεν τὰς ἀπ’ αὐτῶν πληγὰς καὶ δυσιάτους. A relatively late source suggests this is because it was too hazardous to fighters but we find this claim implausible. Despite being somewhat bumpier, pigskin is regarded by leather workers as more supple than bull hide, particularly after it has gotten wet and

thongs to fight each other with their fists, we must be open to all of these possibilities and continue to scour the sources for the best evidence we can obtain. Unfortunately, it seems that ancient critics themselves were only guessing at their ancestors' intentions.

Both boxers are girt in the *zōma*, as we learn from the dual form of the verb ζώνυμι (line 685). Their procession into the *agon* is marked by the verb βαίνω ‘walk’ or ‘step’.⁴⁵ The initial description of the fight seems like it has been drawn directly from a seal impression at Ugarit or a terracotta plaque in Mesopotamia. Homer tells us that fighters ‘lift their hands on high’—the same attitude struck by boxers at least a thousand years before the *Iliad* was composed—with at least one hand raised high above the head. The verb is a middle voice form of ἀνέχω ‘hold up, lift up’ and applies to the boxers’ hands. Two more evocative verbs are used, viz., πίπτω ‘fall violently upon, attack’ (active voice) and μίγνυμι ‘mix up, mingle’. The latter verb, in the passive voice, specifically describes the action of the boxers’ ‘heavy hands’ (βαρεῖται χεῖρες) and is used elsewhere to denote the mixing of different liquids. The colloquial English expression ‘mix it up’ could have no more august a predecessor, albeit a presumably non-etymological one.

The description of the fight is particularly evocative in the original Greek. It is laced with dramatic language that is still compatible with the experience of modern boxers and their audience. A ‘fearful crashing sound’ (*δεινός χρόμαδος*) emanates ‘from the jaws’ (*γενύων*) of the boxers (line 688). Murray (1924) translates this as a ‘grinding of teeth’, apparently assuming a mereological relationship between teeth and jaws. It is perhaps more likely that Homer referred simply to the pounding of fists on jaws. The thud of a punch landed flush is an unforgettable auditory sensation and one that the poet could conjure easily among listeners accustomed to watching these bouts. It is also possible that, without mouth guards (gum shields), ancient boxers were more likely to experience injuries to their jaws and that these were accompanied by dreadful, loud noises.⁴⁶

Homer also incorporates the visual and, to some extent, tactile quality of a boxing match in his description of *iδρώς* ‘sweat’. The poet says it ‘flows’ (*ῥέω*) ‘from every quarter’ (*πάντοθεν*). The source of this perspiration is regarded as the boxers’ ‘limbs’ (*ἐκ μελέων*), presumably because they were understood to be the hardest-working parts of the body during the match. However, the term *μέλος* may also be rendered more generally as ‘body part’ and thus includes the face, back, and torso, which are all diaphoretic loci in their own right. Given the boxers’ deliquescent state, we may infer that their punches occasionally slipped off the mark and that any form of orthograde wrestling or clinching (if allowed) was difficult to execute in so lubricious a company.

The poet describes the detailed sequence of only one blow⁴⁷ and it is, fittingly, that of the knockout punch. We are told that Epeius ‘lets loose’, ‘awakens’, or is otherwise ‘aroused’ (*δρυνμι*) during the course of the action. He ‘glares’ (*παπτάνω*) at his opponent. Some translators prefer to render this verb as ‘casts a searching glance’, suggesting the boxer’s mental

dried out again. The taboo on using certain materials in their construction suggests that the *bimantes* themselves had a cultic importance. Moreover, it seems that pigs, unlike bulls, were not to be associated with boxing.

⁴⁵This calls to mind the verb used in Hittite texts, when boxers ‘step’ (*tīya-*) into the act of GEŠPÚ ‘boxing’ (Cammarosano 2018, Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b).

⁴⁶A review of evidence from early modern boxing, before the introduction of the mouth guard, could be helpful in clarifying the meaning of *δεινός δὲ χρόμαδος γενύων γένετ*’ (line 688).

⁴⁷At least one commentator has inaccurately concluded that Epeius won after throwing a single punch, a misreading of the hard-fought battle that precedes the blow or perhaps a confusion with the bout described in the *Odyssey* (<https://sententiaeantiquae.com/2017/05/26/less-strength-more-skill-homeric-boxing/>).

craft at work. However, anyone who has boxed another man in earnest knows that ‘glare’ is perfectly adequate. Murray offers a somewhat ornate gloss arising, we can only imagine, from contemporaneous pugilistic vernacular: “as he peered for an opening” (*ibid.*). Epeius then strikes (*κόπτω*)⁴⁸ Euryalus on the cheek or jaw (*παρήιον*). Given the aftermath of the punch, we believe that the best translation here is indeed ‘jaw’. Laterally-directed punches to the jaw or the chin are often the cause of a failure in equilibrium and can result in devastating knockouts.

And so, for Euryalus, champion of Thebes, the lights went out. The poet seems to relish the episode’s dénouement most of all. In an instantaneous transformation, as if the sudden object of a sorcerer’s spell, the mighty Euryalus loses not just some of his strength but all of it. He can no longer stand (*ἵστημι*). His beautiful, glistening limbs (*φαιδίμα γυνία*), once the cynosure of athletic prowess, now fail him utterly (*ὑπερεῖπω*). Down he falls, and in a complicated simile that seems to evade even the most artful and erudite of interpreters, the fallen boxer writhes on the ground like a fish suffocating in air.⁴⁹ In other words, he has a seizure.⁵⁰

The somewhat adscititious piscine simile is more than a little puzzling. Translators like Murray suggest that Euryalus leaps up after being struck. However, this is an uncommon if not unencountered physical reaction to even a powerful blow in the boxing ring. It is even stranger since Euryalus’ legs had just gone limp, robbing him of any power to thrust himself upward. Perhaps the poet wished to depict Epeius delivering an uppercut so *puissant* that it lifts Euryalus off his feet.⁵¹ Despite the unlikelihood of such an event occurring in the boxing ring, it is possible that Homer believed such an event could occur, as we saw in the fanciful depiction of an uppercut at Knossos (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b). The crucial verb seems to be *ἀναπάλλω* which can be analyzed morphologically as ‘up’ (*ἀνα*) and ‘sway a missile before it is thrown’ (*πάλλω*). Other definitions include ‘oscillate’, ‘vibrate’, and ‘swing to and fro’, suggesting a horizontal path of motion. Line 694 is more consistent with a seizure on the ground, i.e., he ‘swung to and fro’ (*ἀνέπαλτ*).⁵² Fagles (1990) was tempted to use the

⁴⁸This verb can also mean ‘cut’ in Ancient Greek. In other Indo-European languages, like Old Church Slavonic *skopiti* ‘castrate’ and English *hatchet*, slicing or hewing seems to be the dominant sense.

⁴⁹Lines 692–694 read, in part: ὡς δ' θοῦ ὑπὸ φρικός Βορέω ἀναπάλλεται ιχθὺς | θίν' ἐν φυκίσεντι, μέλαν δέ ἐ κύμα κάλυψεν, | ὡς πληγεὶς ἀνέπαλτ. In his translation, Fagles (1990) puts it thus: “[A]s under the ruffling North Wind a fish goes arching up | and flops back down on a beach-break strewn with seaweed | and a dark wave blacks him out...” (p. 581).

⁵⁰A reminder of this possibility occurred in a September 2021 fight between Callum Smith and Lenin Castillo at the aptly-named Tottenham Hotspur Arena in London. The light heavyweight matchup ended when Smith dropped Castillo with a right hand to the temple. Castillo began to seize on the blue stretched canvas. Ingemar Johansson experienced a similar seizure in his 1960 rematch with Floyd Patterson after the former dealt him a left hook to the chin. Patterson reportedly cradled the supine Swede, unconscious and bleeding from the mouth, while promising him a rematch. Their next encounter occurred about a year later when Johansson was again defeated.

⁵¹This is by no means a common outcome in modern boxing. However, an anecdote has circulated claiming that George Foreman lifted his opponent, Joe Frazier, off the ground with an uppercut in their first title matchup in 1973. We find the evidence for this fairly unconvincing, having carefully reviewed the film ourselves. For example, with 18 seconds remaining in the first round, Frazier moves his right (back) foot retrograde when an uppercut is delivered to his left side, but his left (front) foot does not leave the ground under the force of the blow. In the second round, approximately one minute and ten seconds after the opening bell, Foreman lands another right uppercut and a few moments later Frazier lurches to his right; Foreman’s hands are already fairly relaxed at his own waist. The punch that causes this awkward movement is probably the one that has given rise to the dubious claim that Foreman lifted Frazier off the ground. It also effectively ended the fight.

⁵²The verb is a simple indicative where a medio-passive might be expected, further complicating the translation.

penultimate phrase θίν' ἐν φυκιόεντι, μέλαν δέ ἐ κύμα κάλυψεν to allude to unconsciousness: “a dark wave blacks him out”. Its significance may be even simpler, however. The clause is most literally translated as “a dark swelling covers him.” Perhaps this refers to the bruises appearing on Euryalus’ stricken body, an indication that the fight had dragged on for some time before the knockout punch was delivered. A final possibility is that the phrase forms a metalepsis or kenning for the recitator by appropriately matching rhythm, perhaps an instance of an unattested Homeric-style epithet used rhapsodically.

The concluding scene contains the hitherto-unprecedented moral center of the boxing match and captures, *multum in parvo*, one of the most fascinating psychological aspects of western boxing, viz., the empathy of a victor for his fallen opponent. In a gesture repeated countless times since the revival of boxing in the early modern era, Epeius shows genuine concern for Euryalus. He takes him up in his arms (*χερσὶ λαμβάνω*) and ‘straightens him out’ (*δρθώω*), perhaps attending to his crippled posture resulting from the seizure, perhaps setting him back on his feet, as Murray has it (op cit.). At this moment, Homer recommends Epeius to us as *μεγάθυμος*, which can be rendered as ‘great-hearted’, ‘high-minded’, or perhaps ‘high-spirited’. None of these glosses, however, does justice to the concept of *thymos*—a combination of passion, loyalty, rage, and lust for glory. Whatever *thymos* is, we are told that Epeius has it in abundance. Epeius may be read as struggling with his desire to brutally defeat his opponent while at the same time feeling deep compassion and loyalty to him in his fallen state. Volumes could be written on the *thymos* of boxing in the western tradition, from Epeius vs. Euryalus in the late Bronze Age to Ray Mancini vs. Duk Koo Kim in 1982.⁵³ Each boxer knows that he can only win at the bodily expense of his opponent; there is no other way. It is this terrible knowledge that binds the adversaries to one another so closely.⁵⁴

Finally, we watch as Epeius’ prophecy is fulfilled and Euryalus’ beloved comrades (*φίλοι ἔταιροι*) surround him (*ἀμφίστημι*) then ‘lead’, ‘carry’ or ‘fetch’ (*ἄγω*) him from the midst of the assembly, his feet trailing behind him (*ἐφελκομένοισι πόδεσσιν*) while he “spit[s] clots of blood” (*άιμα παχὺ πτύοντα*) (Fagles, op. cit.). According to Murray (op. cit.) Euryalus “wander[s] in his wits” or perhaps simply ‘gives no heed’ (*ἀλλοφρονέω*) to what is going on around him. His taut muscles at last relaxed and his mind rummied from the blows, Euryalus’ head lolls to the side (*κάρη βάλλονθ' ἐτέρωσε*). His fellows return to fetch the cup, now almost an afterthought.

Inventive English translations have sought to close the gap between contemporary readers and ancient epic by introducing modern boxing terminology. In so doing, they suggest conventions and techniques that are unattested in the original and may mislead. We have already mentioned that there is no ‘ring’. There is also no term for a ‘corner’ in which the fighters rest and receive assistance and advice. No specific word for ‘second’ is used, despite our conclusion that Diomedes functions as such for Euryalus. There is certainly no bell to initiate or close a round; in fact, there are no rounds and no pauses in the action. From the description of the boxer’s perspiration, we might assume that they fought for more than just a minute or two but Homer gives us scant evidence as to the duration of the battle. There

⁵³Mancini’s defeat of Kim resulted in the latter’s death. The brutality of the televised match, along with public knowledge of the outcome a few days later, pushed boxing out of the mainstream in the United States for more than a generation. Though deeply troubled by his opponent’s death, Mancini continued to box at the highest levels of the sport for ten more years.

⁵⁴One notable perversion in the modern era of boxing is the (usually fabricated) escalation of ‘bad blood’ between boxers for an audience increasingly unaware of the deep fraternal bonds that exist inside the ring.

are absolutely no terms of art for specific offensive or defensive manoeuvres like jabs, uppercuts, slips, or any type of guard. Finally, the designation of the *himantes* as boxing ‘gloves’ should be treated with caution. As we have pointed out, the structure of the *himantes* is not particularly glove-like nor is their purpose as straightforward as one might assume.

3.1.2 *Odyssey* 18

Homer’s *Odyssey* (Book 18) presents us with a different kind of boxing match.⁵⁵ In some ways this event stands as the tragicomic counterpart to the heroic bout we witnessed in the *Iliad*. Odysseus, in the guise of a beggar, is picked on by an authentic vagrant named Arnaios,⁵⁶ called Iros because he often serves as a messenger for Ithaca’s upper crust. Protective of his turf, the bombastic Iros menaces and threatens Odysseus. The men angling for a crack at Odysseus’ wife are delighted by the diverting prospect of a fist-fight between two men of such low rank; accordingly, they urge them on.⁵⁷ Of course, no one knows that the “man of twists and turns” sits before them dressed in a beggar’s weeds, about to prove himself as skilled and wily a boxer as he is a wrestler, a runner, and a warrior.

We start by examining Iros’ challenge to Odysseus. In a rodomontade that must have been just as amusing to the ancient Greeks as it is to the modern reader, Iros threatens to knock (ἐξελαύνω) the teeth out of Odysseus’ jaw like the tusks of a corn-ravaging boar.⁵⁸ In an overlap with the language of the boxing match outside the walls of Ilium, Iros commands his rival to accinge himself for their fight by putting on the *zōma* (ζώνυμο). Here, the nominal form has been incorporated into a verb.⁵⁹ This makes it clear that pugilists clad in loincloths at the funeral games of Patroclus were no fluke and that early Greeks did not box naked like their classical counterparts.⁶⁰ Donning the *zōma* seems to be a symbolic act, as well, suggesting readiness for the fight.⁶¹

Iros boasts that he will smite his rival left and right (κόπτων ἀμφοτέρησι; line 28), using the same verb the narrator employs to describe the knockout punch in the *Iliad*. However, the word *pygmachia* is not used in this episode. Instead, Iros employs the verbs μάχομαι and μάρναμαι to describe the forthcoming action (line 31).⁶² Any semantic differences between these two terms are lost on the modern reader. They are both glossed merely as ‘fight’ or

⁵⁵Boxing is referenced but not described in Book 8, lines 100–103, when the Phaeacian ruler Alcinous makes claims as to his people’s great skill in boxing. The games held during Odysseus’ visit to Phaeacia/Scheria (modern Corfu) included ‘boxing’ (πύξ, line 103) but Odysseus did not participate. After startling his hosts with a powerful throw of the discus, they declined his request to enter the other competitions, including boxing. By some lights, this episode was intended to prefigure the boxing episode of Book 18, setting up expectations for violence Odysseus later unleashes on Iros (Scanlon 2018, p. 18).

⁵⁶Derived from either ἄρνωμαι ‘get’ or ἄρνα ‘lamb’ (cf. the Haggis-prize mentioned later in the narrative), the name Arnaios is suggestive of a greedy character (Scanlon 2018, p. 15).

⁵⁷A similar phenomenon has arisen in twenty-first century America, notably expressed in the video series *Bum-fights* (2002–2006) which features homeless men fighting each other (Bunds et al. 2016). Claims that the men were instigated to fight one another have been disputed (Stahl 2018).

⁵⁸The pejorative allusion to pigs may be related to the apparent (and much later attested) prohibition of pigskin in the fabrication of Greek boxing gloves (Phil. *Gym.* 10).

⁵⁹The Iliadic *zōma* is the object of the verb παρακαταβάλλω ‘clothe’, *ut supra*.

⁶⁰Compare, for example, the verb for athletic preparation (including boxing) used by Philostratus the Elder, writing during the early Roman Empire. He explains simply that Phorbas ἀποδύω ‘strips’ (in the medio-passive) before commencing the agon (*Imagines* 2.19).

⁶¹The linguistic and cultural relevance of the *zōma* is still found in the English expression ‘gird (up) one’s loins’, though the garment is not itself mentioned.

⁶²Later, in line 52, Odysseus also uses μάχομαι.

‘battle’, though the latter may have its etymological roots in a Proto-Indo-European word meaning ‘seize’. (The stem of μάχομαι is of doubtful origin.)⁶³ Iros calls for spectators to watch (ἐπιτηγγώσκω) the main event. We find another usage of *thymos* in the description of the beggars’ escalating fury: the adverb πανθυμαδόν ‘in full *thymos*’, “in high dudgeon” describes the manner in which they become enraged at each other (δικράομαι; line 33).⁶⁴

The suitors find the beggars’ truculence a ‘delight’ or ‘rare sport’ (τερπωλή). A prominent member of the group, Antinous, calls their encounter ‘wrangling’ ἐρίζω. He refers to the fight that is brewing as χερσὶ μάχομαι. In the dative case, the plural χερσὶ (which we encounter frequently in *Iliad* 23, as well) suggests the most faithful translation of this phrase might be ‘hand-to-hand combat’. Agig, Antinous bids his friends drive the two beggars together (*συνελαύνω*) as one might crowd two fighting dogs or gamecocks into an enclosed space to watch the fur or feathers fly. This is to be done quickly (ἀλλὰ ξυνελάσσομεν ὥκα; line 39), presumably so their pugnacity does not dissipate or discharge prematurely, before a true spectacle can be made of it.

As we have come to expect in Near Eastern and Greek boxing, prizes are offered to the fighters. In the case of the *Odyssey*, these are two goat stomachs (*γαστέρες αἰγῶν*) filled with blood and fat (line 44). The man who conquers (*νικάω*) the other and shows himself mightiest (*κρείσσων*), Antinous declares, will get to choose the best one for himself (the loser, presumably, gets the gastronomic residuum). Compared to the mule and the goblet offered to the contestants in the *Iliad*, the haggis-prize of the *Odyssey* is a much humbler token of victory. Despite the humor in this, the ensuing boxing match is still deadly serious.

Before the fight begins, the crafty Odysseus interdicts any behavior on the part of the suitors that might cause him to lose the fight (lines 51–57).⁶⁵ This is the first textual evidence we have of what might be considered illicit in ancient boxing, though the focus is on the audience’s actions, not the fighters’. Intervention of the audience was perhaps a more common situation than is now possible in today’s sport boxing, given the distant and elevated position of the modern ring.⁶⁶ The operative term describing the unwanted “foul blow” is ἀτασθάλλω ‘to be insolent’ or ‘arrogant’ (Murray 1919). According to Odysseus, such a foul would allow him to be ‘overcome’ (*δαμάζω*) ‘by force’ (*ἴφι*). Terms not found in the Patroclan boxing match, *ἴφι* and *ἀτασθάλλω* may carry with them the suggestion of unacceptable behavior in *pygmaichia*. By contrasting the fair and honorable unwinding of a boxing match with ‘insolence’ and ‘force’, the poet may suggest to us that these concepts are not legible within the ethos of ancient Greek boxing. Given the violent character of boxing, it is possible that *ἴφι* had a more nuanced meaning through its association with an unwelcome practice in the ring.

The oath sworn, most-blameless Telemachus steps forward, extolling the καρδία καὶ θυμὸς ‘heart and *thymos*’ of his disguised father (line 61).⁶⁷ Once more, we see how *thymos* is an

⁶³The verb may be related to Old Armenian *mak'arim* ‘come to blows’.

⁶⁴We note here the continuing puzzle of *thymos*, a derivative of which was used to describe the benevolent actions of Epeius after defeating his rival in the ring, here attached to the quarrel of two pathetic mendicants.

⁶⁵Some read in lines 52–53 a “reasoned attempt to dissuade [Iros] from fighting” (Nelis 2001, p. 10). To us, this seems another example of Odysseus’ craft, suggesting he is too old to fight when he knows he is about to clean the other man’s clock.

⁶⁶USA Boxing rules, for example, prohibit spectators—including extra cornermen—from approaching the ring during a sanctioned fight. Similarly, audience participation is sedulously avoided during Peruvian *takanakuy*, lest it give rise to a general brawl (Tito and Tito Tica 1999).

⁶⁷Fagles (1996) renders the phrase “spine and fighting spirit” (p. 377).

operative component of the boxing match, though here it is allied with the fighter's 'heart' (*καρδία*). These are agents, Telemachus opines, that together stir (*δτρύνω*) the stranger to manly defense (*ἀγήνωρ ἀλέξασθαι*) against the overweening Iros (here reduced to the deictic *τοῦτον*). Telemachus uses the verb *θείνω* 'strike' in reference to the action of anyone who might intervene irregularly in the match. We did not encounter this verb in the Iliadic boxing match, perhaps because it also designates an action illicit in the boxing ring. Telemachus promises that anyone who strikes (*θείνω*) Odysseus in this fashion will have a fight (*μάχομαι*) on his hands. Telemachus' role in protecting the combatants from audience interference may be related to the function of the stick-wielding 'third man' ubiquitous to depictions of boxing throughout much of the ancient world, including Greece. The stick may have served a double-purpose, i.e., to discipline the fighters as well as the crowd.⁶⁸

Next, Odysseus girds himself (*ζώννυμι*) about his genitals (*περὶ μῆδεα*) in ragged garments (*ράκος*). Certain parts of his body are brought into focus and described as strong and sturdy: his thighs (*μηροί*), his shoulders (*ἄρμος*), his chest (*στήθεα*),⁶⁹ and his arms (*βραχίονες*). In these lines (67–69), Homer appears to be highlighting for us the body parts perceived to be of greatest importance to an ancient boxer. If so, his preferences align fairly well with those of the modern boxing trainer.

The goddess Athena, functioning in her role as personal guardian of the vagrant Odysseus rather than as a patroness of boxing *per se*, strengthens (*ἀλδαίνω*) his limbs. Awed by the beauty of Odysseus' body, the suitors remark especially on the well-developed muscle just above his knee (*ἐπιγονίς*)⁷⁰ and how it sings awk for his opponent. The ancient Greeks well understood the value of strong legs in building a fine boxer "from the ground up," as one might hear in a modern gym. At the sight of his glorious opponent, stripped and ready to fight, the *thymos* of Iros 'stirred badly' (*κακῶς ὠρίνετο*). Laborers (*δρηστῆρες*)—presumably servants of the suitors—then girt him (*ζώννυμι*) for the fight using force (*ἀνάγκη*). Antinous prescribes hideous punishment for the trembling Iros if he is conquered (*νικάω*) in the 'ring' by the mightier (*κρείσσων*) man. It is not a good way to start the contest.

Following the pattern from the *Iliad*, the boxing match begins in the nondescript 'midst' (*μέσος*) as the fighters raise (*ἀνέχω*) their hands. In lines 91 and 92, the poet lets us in on Odysseus' thought process: should he deal a blow (*ἔλαύνω*) so powerful that it kills his enemy or strike him (once more, *ἔλαύνω*) just hard enough to stretch him out (*τανύω*) on the ground? The verb *ἔλαύνω*, with its consequent of a fallen, prostrate adversary, is the closest we will come to a special word for 'knockout' in Homeric boxing. *ἔλαύνω* is not found in the Iliadic boxing match and is elsewhere associated with pounding metal in a forge, an apt metaphor for a sweltering boxing ring. It appears to be a rather generic term for punching in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus resolved to hit his opponent only slightly (*ἥκ*) in order to accomplish his larger purposes.⁷¹

With the fighter's hands still raised (*ἀνέχω*, this time in the middle voice), Iros threw the first punch, driving at Odysseus' right shoulder (*ἥλασε δεξιὸν δμον*). In all but the most playful of bouts, the shoulder is a curious target for a boxer. We speculate that Odysseus' shoulder was doing exactly what it would do in a modern boxing match: it was thrust forward towards

⁶⁸C.f. Herodotus 8.59, Ὅ Θεμιστόκλεες, ἐν τοῖσι ἄγωσι οἱ προέξαντα μενοι ῥαπίζονται, "Themistocles, at the games those who start before the signal are beaten with rods" (Godley 1920).

⁶⁹This form appears in the plural, suggesting the poet's awareness of the paired nature of this body part.

⁷⁰Likely the quadriceps femoris muscle.

⁷¹It is presumably on the basis of the adverb alone that Fagles (1996) translates this option as a "light jab" (p. 378).

his opponent and his chin was tucked behind it. If we are correct and it was Odysseus' right shoulder that Iros aimed for, then we can reasonably claim that Odysseus was a southpaw. In any event, a punch to the shoulder could do no damage (as the poet and audience well knew) and Odysseus took the advantage immediately while his opponent's hand was extended well beyond guard position.⁷² Odysseus threw what was most likely a hook,⁷³ probably his right; it landed on Iros' neck (*ωχήν*) just beneath his ear (*όπ' οὐατος*), crushing (*θλάω*) his bones.⁷⁴ The striking verb is once more *ἔλαυνω*. Bleeding from the mouth, down went Iros, shrieking (*μηκάομαι*) like a wounded boar. He gnashed his teeth (*ἔλαυνω*, again) and kicked (*λακτίζω*) the dirt, presumably lying on the ground. Both motions are highly suggestive of a seizure, much like the one Euryalus experienced at the end of the boxing match in the *Iliad*.

In an apparent parallel to the Iliadic bout, Odysseus attends to his fallen opponent while the suitors yield to paroxysms of laughter at Iros' expense. But Odysseus is no Epeius and his magnanimity has limits. In any event, Iros is by no means Odysseus' peer. He unceremoniously drags (*ἔλκω*) Iros by the foot through a doorway into a courtyard where he seats (*ἴζω*) him and leans (*ἀνακλίνω*) him up against a wall. Odysseus puts a staff (*σκῆπτρον*) in the braggart's hand and a leather pouch (*πήρα*) around his neck. He commands him to scare off wild swine and dogs and to cease lording it over other vagrants while “playing the beggar king,” in Fagles’ (1996) translation (*μηδὲ σύ γε ἔξινων καὶ πτωχῶν κοίρανος εἶναι*). Iros did not, in fact, receive his haggis.

Victorious Odysseus, on the other hand, was treated to the great goat stomach (*μέγας γαστήρ*), juicy with blood and fat (*ἐμπλείην κνίσης τε καὶ αἷματος*). He was saluted (*δεικνάω*) by the suitors who toasted how he had put an end to Iros' nuisance. They reiterated their threat to ship the “insatiate fellow” away to the land of King Echetus, the “maimer of men” (*βροτῶν δηλήμονα πάντων*), who would feed to the dogs his nose, ears, and testicles (Murray 1919). It is the last we hear of Iros.

There are many useful points of comparison between the boxing matches in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Now that we have commented on the language used in both—and leaving aside the possibility that lexical items were chosen for metrical purposes only—we can make a few assertions about Homer’s fighting words. The vocabulary used to describe the action is limited and, while a handful of words are used for ‘strike’ or ‘punch’, there is nothing in their respective etymologies or their usage in Homer that suggests they mean anything like ‘jab’, ‘hook’, or ‘knockout blow.’ Rather, they seem to be used interchangeably, though the poet shows a strong preference for *ἔλαυνω* in the *Odyssey* (it does not appear in the Iliadic boxing episode). Both narratives use the verb *νικάω* ‘conquer’ to reference what a successful boxer does. There are no *himantes* in the *Odyssey*, suggesting that these were indeed specialized pieces of equipment, suitable only for solemn occasions (like funeral games) and among trained boxers. Despite the lack of specialized gauntlets in the *Odyssey*, the boxers in both stories use their hands in similar ways, lifting them (*ἀνέχω*) at the beginning of the match in

⁷²From what follows we can have little doubt that Iros knew nothing of keeping his guard up after punching.

⁷³We are here in agreement with Fagles (1996, p. 378). The original verb is once again the relatively bland *ἔλαυνω*; Homer seems to have no specialized vocabulary for different types of punches, *ut supra*.

⁷⁴The poet made an astute choice in picking the mastoid process as Odysseus’ target. A pneumatized structure, the mastoid process is full of air pockets and could indeed shatter in the way Homer describes. Blunt force trauma to the this bone would also damage the middle and inner ear, resulting in a loss of equilibrium and a precipitous collapse. It is less clear whether trauma to the mastoid process would result in blood pouring from the mouth, but we are willing to accept the poet’s judgment on the matter. He had clearly seen (if not participated in) a boxing match or two.

a gesture well-known to later Greek vase painters.

The *zōma* is another highly salient, shared feature of the Homeric boxing episodes. That the low-rent boxers of the *Odyssey* wear the *zōma* (or some raggedy version thereof) suggests that the ancient Greeks strongly associated this manner of dress with boxing competition, even more so than they associated the *himantes* with boxing. Supporters appear in both narratives: Diomedes girds Euryalos and puts on his *himantes*; the laborers put on Iros' *zōma*; Odysseus and Epeius (the winners of their respective bouts) appear to take care of themselves.⁷⁵ Telemachus offers the psychological boost to Odysseus that Diomedes provides Euryalos in the *Iliad*. There is no specialized Homeric vocabulary for a 'second' or a 'corner-man'. There is no Homeric word for a boxing 'ring'; the *locus in quo* is rendered generically as the 'midst' or the 'place of assembly'. The word *pygmacchia* does not appear in Odysseus' boxing episode while other, perhaps more generic terms for fighting are included. This may suggest that *pygmacchia* was at this time a cultic rite, only associated with the *himantes*, or carried out exclusively by trained boxers.

Scholars such as Snell (1960) have argued that the Homeric conception of the body is less unitary than that of classical antiquity and modernity. Feyerabend (2010, pp. 186–188) summarizes the case thus:

The *additive treatment* of events [due to rhapsodic parataxis] becomes very clear in the case of (human) motion. ...Many of the similes assume that the parts of a complex entity have a life of their own and can be separated with ease. Geometrical man is a visible list of parts and positions; Homeric man is put together from limbs, surfaces, connections which are isolated by comparing them with inanimate objects of precisely defined shape. ...Thus the poet repeats the formal features used by the geometric and the early archaic artists. Neither seems to be aware of an 'underlying' substance that keeps the objects together and shapes their parts so that they reflect the 'higher unity' to which they belong. ¶Nor is such a 'higher unity' found in the concepts of the language. For example, there is no expression that could be used to describe the human body as a single entity. ...All we get is a puppet put together from more or less articulated parts.

Snell's views have been criticized, but in this case we find the hypothesis supported by the description of the fight scenes from the Homeric œuvre as cited above and the subsequent early Greek corpus: hands raise up high to 'mix' or 'mingle' (*μίγνυμι*); jaws make sounds; sweat flows; limbs are strengthened (*ἀλδαίνω*). The body of Odysseus is described as plural in form, consisting of a catalogue of well-formed parts. A Homeric boxer, presumably, as body-puppet inserted into a fight, thus manifests the will of the gods as much as he himself personally triumphs. We find later accounts such as the *Argonautica* to portray the outcome as more a function of skill and will than divine favor.

⁷⁵Could this be a subtle indictment of the seconds? Perhaps Homer saw them as parasitic attachments to the true champion, who inevitably won his glory alone and without aid.

3.2 Classical

3.2.1 Pindar

In his fifth-century epaenetic to Diagoras of Rhodes (*Olympian 7*), Pindar uses the term εὐθυμάχης ‘straight-fighting’ to praise the boxer’s pugilistic style (line 29). The term is a curious one. It could mirror the verb εὐθυπορέω (line 69) ‘walk straight forward’ which is used to denote Diagoras’ other virtues, like his lack of arrogance and willingness to hearken to the wisdom of his ancestors; thus, to fight without guile. It may also suggest the manner in which Diagoras fought, e.g., continually moving forward against his opponent or throwing straight punches (rather than hooks or hammer blows) but there is insufficient evidence to make a strong claim in this regard.

An allusion to an assistant or perhaps a trainer is made in Pindar’s ode to Hagesidamus (*Olympian 10*). Pindar recommends that the victorious Hagesidamus also thank ‘Ilas’ (Ἴλας, dative), just as Patroclus thanked Achilles.⁷⁶ Gildersleeve (1885) suggests that ‘Ilas’ is another name of Hylas (Ὑλας), the servant and companion of Heracles in his many adventures (p. 213). Hagesidamus, victorious in the boy’s boxing, owes some of his glory to this figure, whom Gildersleeve equates with a ‘trainer’ ἀλείπτης (lit. ‘anointer’; *ibid.*, p. 215–216). As a youth boxer, Hagesidamus would not have had a young male companion like Patroclus (or Hylas), so it would seem that Pindar exhorts the young man to thank his older mentor. On the other hand, even a princely youth in the games would have been attended by servants, making the allusion to “Ὕλας” more reasonable. Pindar seems to suggest that victorious boxers rely on others to achieve glory in the ‘ring’, but he does not specify whether these are trainers, sparring partners, or even corner men: “With the help of a god, one man can sharpen another who is born for excellence, and encourage him to tremendous achievement” (Svarlien 1991).

3.2.2 Plato and Xenophon

Living in the late fifth and fourth centuries BC, the philosopher Plato, who was reportedly a talented wrestler (perhaps eponymously so), made occasional references to boxing, wrestling, and pankration in his works. E.g., on the rules of boxing: τὸν δέ γε οἴμαι κατὰ τὴν πυκτικὴν πυκτικόν “And the rules of boxing, I suppose, make a good boxer?” (Plato, *Alcibiades* 2:145d, tr. Lamb). Elsewhere he warns boxing does in no way supersede honor: ὅτι ἔμαθεν πυκτεύειν τε καὶ παγκρατιάζειν καὶ ἐν ὅπλοις μάχεσθαι, ...οὐ τούτου ἔνεκα τοὺς φίλους δεῖ τύπτειν οὐδὲ κεντεῖν τε καὶ ἀποκτεινύναι “just because one has learnt boxing ...gives one no right to strike one’s friends” (Plato, *Gorgias* 456d, tr. Lamb). Plato occasionally has his authorial stand-in, Socrates, exclaim along the lines of a boxer: ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν, ὥσπερ πληγεὶς ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου, ἐκείμην ἀφωνος “Here I must say I was knocked out, as it were, by the argument, and lay speechless!” (*Euthydemus* 303a).

Boxing is also mentioned by Xenophon, another student of Socrates, in the *Anabasis* (4:6) as a celebratory sport engaged in by the mercenary army as they camped by the Euxine Sea (Black Sea).⁷⁷

⁷⁶πύκτας δ’ ἐν Ὀλυμπιάδι νικῶν Ἰλας φερέτω χάριν Ἀγησιδαμος ως Ἀχιλει Πάτροκλος (lines 21–23).

⁷⁷The current article, with the exception of the commentary on the *Argonautica*, closes at the end of the Classical period in 323 BC, and Hellenistic sources will be treated in a subsequent publication.

3.2.3 Argonautica

The *Argonautica* was written by Apollonius of Rhodes in the early third century BC.⁷⁸ It includes a boxing match that echoes, in some ways, the pugilistic poetry of Homer. However, the boxing vocabulary of the *Argonautica* is more diverse than Homer's and its narrative arc differs somewhat from the episodes in the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, which parallel one another.⁷⁹ Apollonius was almost certainly familiar with boxing terminology that had come into fashion among the classical Greeks who, by the time the *Argonautica* was written, had long ago professionalized the sport at Olympia.

At the inception of Book 2 we are introduced to the 'manly' (*ἀγήνορος*) and 'huge' (*ύπεροπλος*) Bebrycian King Amycus, who demanded through the institution of a 'shameful ordinance' (*ἀεικής θεσμός*) that any visitor to his realm engage him in a boxing match (lines 2–5).⁸⁰ More specifically, guests to his kingdom on the Anatolian coast of the Black Sea were required to 'try him in *pygmachia*' (*πειράω ἐστο πυγμαχίης*; lines 6–7). In the middle voice, as it appears here, the verb *πειράω* can also mean 'test one's skills'.

Upon receiving intelligence of the Argonauts' disembarkation on Bebrycian soil (the sailors were merely seeking fresh water), Amycus goes to meet them. He commands them to make their 'best (man)' (*ἄριστος*) to 'stand' (*ἱστημι*) in *pygmachia*. Amycus demands that this warrior, selected from the throng of Greeks, 'raise up' (*ἀνὰ ἀείρω*) his hands against his own 'on the spot' (*καταντόθι*) in order to 'wrangle' (*δηριάομαι*) together (line 16).⁸¹ The verb *ἀείρω* is unfamiliar to us so far; the oft-repeated Homeric term for lifting the hands in boxing was *ἀνέχω*.

The emotions that grip the boxers may be different from those we encountered in Homer. Instead of being washed in *thymos*, Amycus (or perhaps Polydeuces) is *μέγα φρονέων*, a participial form derived from the verb *φρονέω* 'be spirited or bold' (line 19).⁸² It seems this fills the role of Homeric *thymos*. Polydeuces (the object of the clause) is 'made to stand' (*ἱστημι*) by the others and submits (*ὑπείκω*) to the 'rule' (*θεσμός*) that Amycus proposes. While this may be a general reference to Amycus' demand that they box, it may also be specific term for the rule-set of *pygmachia*, which Amycus has obliquely described. Thus Polydeuces assents to meet (*ἀντιάω*) his adversary.

The poet next offers us a complex simile describing Amycus' glare: it is like that of a wounded lion singling out the hunter who struck (*τύπτω*) him.⁸³ The combatants then disrobe, but do not don the *zōma*, which had clearly fallen out of fashion in boxing contests

⁷⁸We include discussion of the *Argonautica* in this article because it was most likely written before the death of Alexander in 323 BC. It is regarded as the only surviving Hellenistic epic poem.

⁷⁹Nelis (2001, p. 9), writes that Apollonius' "skillful reworking of Homer is marked by precise verbal allusion as well as related techniques of imitation such as distribution of features of the model texts, and both variation and deliberate inversion of Homeric detail."

⁸⁰Much later in Book 2 (lines 783–785) we learn that Heracles boxed a Mysian name Titias, contending with him for a prize (*ἀθλένω*) and 'vanquished' (*ἀποκαίνυμαι*) him, 'dashing' (*ἔλαύνω*) his teeth to the ground: *ἀθλένων Τιτίην ἀπεκαίνυτο πυγμαχέοντα | καρτερόν, δε πάντεσσι μετέπρεπεν ἡθέοισιν | εἰδός τ' ἥδε βίην: χαμάδις δέ οι ἥλασ' οδόντας.* "He entered the lists with Titias in boxing and slew him, mighty Titias, who surpassed all the youths in beauty and strength; and he dashed his teeth to the ground" trans. Seaton (1912). In this text we find the verb *πυγμαχέω* 'practice boxing, be a boxer'.

⁸¹Among the many allusive elements in the subsequent narrative, "The fight between Polydeuces and Amycus is related to the confrontation between Jason and the bulls of Aeëtes and the Earthborn men" (Nelis 2001, p. 20).

⁸²"Thus [Amycus] spoke haughtily" (Cuypers 1997, p. 51). The reading is highly contextual.

⁸³One commentator notes that the simile reflects how Amycus' routine "fight with a *ξεῖνος* [guest, stranger] has now become a challenge" (Cuypers 1997, p. 55)

long ago. The fighters select a ‘pleasing piece of ground’ (*χῶρος ἑαδότος*) that presumably satisfies the requirements for a boxing ring. This is a major difference from Homeric epic. While the ring still has no specific name in the *Argonautica*, it is nonetheless selected based on its compatibility with the requirements of *pygmachia*. Indeed, the space was discovered because the men ‘looked about with a sharp, searching glance’ (*παπταῖνω*).⁸⁴

Next they made their comrades sit ‘in two’ on the beach-sand: *ἴζον ἔοντες δίχα πάντας ἐνὶ ψαμάθοισιν ἔταιρους*. According to Seaton (1912), they were arrayed “in two lines”; we find no clear indication of this arrangement, but it is plausible, since seating the spectators in pairs, for example, seems less appropriate for the context (p. 105).⁸⁵ More significant is the orderly positioning of the spectators, an innovation first attested here. The problem this level of organization resolved is foreshadowed in the *Odyssey*, where the pell-mell arrangement of spectators at the fight gave Odysseus cause to worry that one of them might interfere. Organized seating betokens the professionalization of Greek boxing in the first millennium BC and its evolution into a true spectator sport. It also severely limited the audience’s natural urge to join the fray, whether to change the outcome of the fight or to discharge their own thymotic energy.⁸⁶

The author contrasts Polydeuces and Amycus in terms of their physical features, accentuating the brute character of Amycus and the refined beauty of Polydeuces.⁸⁷ The fight between Polydeuces, as a representative of the Olympians, and Amycus, a representative of the Titans, may be a recapitulation of the ancient battle of order over chaos (Hardie 1993).⁸⁸ It is clear which pugilist met the Classical ideal of manly virtue and comeliness: the poet describes Polydeuces as a ‘heavenly star’ (*օὐράνιος ἀστήρ*; lines 40–41).⁸⁹ Nevertheless, his ‘strength’ (*ἀλκῆ*) and ‘passion’ (*μένος*) ‘rose up’ (*ἀέξω*) as if in a ‘beast of prey’ (*θήρ*). Once again, the author declines to mention *thymos* where Homer would have almost certainly included it.

Next Polydeuces ‘swings’ (*πάλλω*)⁹⁰ his hands in a motion that likely indicates shadowboxing.⁹¹ More evidence for shadowboxing comes from lines 46–47 where we learn that through this exercise Polydeuces intends to ‘prove’ (*πειράζω*) his hands are still ‘quick-moving’ (*εὐτρόχαλος*).⁹² The Son of Zeus was concerned lest his fists had been made heavy from ‘toil’

⁸⁴Intriguingly, this is the same verb used to describe how Epeius set up his knockout punch in the *Iliad*.

⁸⁵Green (2007) translates this difficult adverbial as “well apart from each other” (p. 80).

⁸⁶Male spectators at a modern boxing match are frequently observed throwing punches, presumably to mirror the action they perceive or desire to see in the ring. We believe this mimesis stems from the hormonal shifts males experience when watching other males fight. The prospect of fighting is powerful—naturally enhanced by partiality towards one of the fighters—and necessitates the presence of security guards and watchful officials even at amateur boxing matches.

⁸⁷In the poem, Amycus is explicitly related to the earth and Polydeuces, implicitly, to the sky (i.e., Zeus, his father). In this sense it is an encounter of weather god versus earth god, parallel in some ways to Hercules’ encounter with Antaeus: “The one [Amycus] seemed to be a monstrous son of baleful Typhoeus or of Earth herself, such as she brought forth aforetime, in her wrath against Zeus” (Seaton 1912, p. 105).

⁸⁸Here the author refers to the Vergilian battle between Hercules and Cacus, but the logic applies to the duel in the *Argonautica*, as well.

⁸⁹“The comparison of Amycus to Typhoeus and of Polydeuces to a shining star is relevant here also as it evokes the idea of a struggle between the forces of heaven and hell and fits into an important thematic pattern in the poem as a whole” (Nelis 2001, p. 19, fn. 78).

⁹⁰A derivative of this verb was used to describe the motion of Euryalus during his piscine seizure in the *Iliad*.

⁹¹It is routine for modern boxers to throw punches at the air in preparation for the bout just minutes away.

⁹²We find Seaton’s (1912) translation rather vague here: “He poised his hands to see if they were pliant as before...” (p. 105). Green’s (2007) translation is closer to the mark: “[H]e shadowboxed | testing whether his hands were as

(κάματος) and ‘rowing’ (εἰρεσία).

The first reference to *thymos* in this episode relates to Amycus. The king of the Bebrycians smolders from afar while glorious Polydeuces clothes himself for the agon. The *thymos* swells up (όρεχθέω) darkly within Amycus who yearns to ‘spatter’ (κεδάννυμι) Polydeuces’ (or his own?) chest with blood: οἱ ὄρεχθει | θυμὸς ἐελδομένω στηθέων ἐξ αἷμα κεδάσσαι (lines 49–50). It may be that Apollonius’ reluctance to refer to *thymos* in this vignette is suggestive of its negative, perhaps bloodthirsty, connotations at this stage in Greek literary history.

A number of seconds are named and their specific functions are described in the *Argonautica*. Amycus’ assistants are referred to as his ‘henchmen’ or ‘squires’ (θεράποντες) and, given his royal status, there is probably no special association between this term and boxing; they were merely his servants. However, we conjecture that men of high status, when they boxed, employed their manservants to assist at ringside. Their main function seems to be to lay out (τίθημι) the *himantes*, to bind them to the fighters’ hands, and to offer words of encouragement before the fight. All of these functions, but for the ceremonial presentation of the gauntlets, we also observe in Homer. Polydeuces is attended to by his comrades-in-arms. Amycus’ servant places at the feet of the two combatants a pair of ‘raw’ or ‘undressed’ (ἀγρός) *himantes*. The adjective, taken figuratively, might also mean ‘savage’ or ‘cruel’. We also learn that the *himantes* are ‘dry’ or perhaps ‘cured’ (ἀγαλέος) and ἐσκληγώτες, likely another word describing the means by which they were dried—perhaps using smoke (line 53).

Amycus appears to refer to a practice by which boxers selected their *himantes*. He presents Polydeuces with two pairs of gauntlets and magnanimously explains that it will not be necessary to cast lots (πάλον ἐγγυαλίζω) to determine who will wear which pair. This leads us to speculate that casting lots was indeed conventional in this context. Some quality of the rawhide probably accounted for the ability of the *himantes* to lacerate an opponent and Amycus’ display of good sportsmanship suggests that such properties could be manipulated in their production. While Amycus is no philoxenist, this detail suggests he could be fair-minded, as well—or perhaps it merely demonstrates his hubris. Under typical conditions, casting lots for the *himantes* assured participants of fair play. Under these conventions it would be to no one’s advantage to intentionally arrange a pair with injurious qualities, since they might wind up on the other man’s fists. Modern amateur boxing matches also require boxers to receive gloves inspected and cleaned by an official at the ‘glove table’. In the early twentieth century, the boxing gloves were unwrapped in the ring and put on the boxers’ hands just before the bout.⁹³

Amycus boasts⁹⁴ that he is able to spatter blood on the cheeks of his boxing rivals.⁹⁵ The barbarian king also styles himself an expert leather-worker, indicating how well he has cut

quick as they’d been before” (p. 80).

⁹³Ceremonial presentation of the gloves was a feature of boxing as late as the 1920s. For example, in the celebrated “Long Count Fight” between Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney (1926), the gloves were brought out in a package wrapped in a bow.

⁹⁴Each boxing narrative we have reviewed includes a braggart: Epeius in the *Iliad*, Iros in the *Odyssey*, and finally Amycus. Only in the *Iliad* is the braggart presented in a positive light, perhaps because it is exclusively in that narrative that the trash-talk accompanies victory.

⁹⁵The syntax is a tangle, with ‘blood’ in the dative case and ‘cheeks’ in the accusative. The verb translated as ‘spatter’ by both Seaton (1912) and Green (2007) is more typically glossed as ‘mix’ or ‘mingle’ (φύρω). παρηίδας is a late, accusative plural form of παρήιον ‘cheek’.

(τέμνω) the ox hides (ρινός βοῶν) for the *himantes*.⁹⁶ This presents the interesting possibility that early Greek boxers tanned animal hides by trade.⁹⁷ We can imagine two young apprentices wrapping their fists in the cuttings on the floor of a tanning house, then squaring off to settle a score, impress a nubile young lady, or just let the best man win.

Polydeuces' brother Castor, along with another Argonaut named Talaus, undertakes precisely those duties Diomodes performed for Euryalus in the *Iliad*: they 'bind' (δέω) their boy's hands with the *himantes* and (in Green's 2007 translation) "exhort him to display his prowess" (μάλα πολλὰ παρηγορέοντες ἐξ ἀλκήν). Amycus' 'seconds' are Aretus and Ornytus, who are said to perform the 'binding' (δέω) for their doomed champion.

Duly 'fitted with' (ἀρτύνω) the *himantes* and standing apart from one another (διασταδόν), the proper fight begins (line 67). From Homer we expect to see the boxers 'raise' (ἀνέχω) their 'heavy hands' (χείρες βάρεται), and in this regard we are not disappointed. We are, however, given non-Homeric information regarding the boxers' guard: their hands are positioned 'in front of' (προπάροιθε) their 'faces' (πρέθεα). However, πρέθεα may also refer to 'limbs'. If this is the proper translation of line 68, then the Hellenistic guard position may have been more open, with the arms extended and the hands in front of them, as is well represented in illustrations of early modern boxing, particularly of the bare-knuckle variety (e.g. Figure 1). The boxers 'met' (ἀντιώ), 'bearing' (φέρω) 'might' (μένος) 'to one another' (ἀλλήλοισ), or rendered more harmoniously by Green, they "set about one another with eager fury" (2007, p. 81).

We next encounter the second Apollonine simile of the boxing episode. Amycus is compared to a fierce 'wave' (κῦμα, κλύδων) crashing⁹⁸ over a ship and Polydeuces is compared to the crafty pilot who each time narrowly 'avoids' (ἀλύσκω) being struck.⁹⁹ There may be some connection here to the piscine simile in the Iliadic boxing vignette. We conjecture that the dark wave (κῦμα) in Homer represents unconsciousness driven by head trauma. Here, too, the wave crashing over Polydeuces' bark would result in his debilitation and defeat. Thus Amycus pursued (ἐπομαὶ) and menaced (φοβέω) his opponent (line 74). 'He did not suffer him to tarry' (οὐδέ μιν εἴᾳ δῆθύνειν), i.e., Amycus gave him no respite.

Yet 'unwounded' (ἀνούτατος), Polydeuces continues to demonstrate 'wisdom', 'skill', or 'craft' (μῆτις).¹⁰⁰ He 'darts' (ἀΐσσω) and 'avoids' (ἀλεέινω), most likely referring to the art of 'getting in and getting out' without getting hit. A thinking boxer, Polydeuces quickly 'figures out' (νοέω) the king's 'rough boxing (style)' (ἀπτηνής πυγμαχία), assessing his strength and weaknesses, lit., his 'inviolable power' (κάρτος ἀλατός) and his 'inferior (power)' (χερίων). Polydeuces 'stood' (ἰστημι) and with his rival 'mixed' (μίγνυμι) hands—the Homeric formulation for trading punches.

Now we reach the third periergia of the *Argonautica*'s boxing episode. Once more with

⁹⁶ Amycus had a reputation as an inventor of the *himantes*, which may be precisely why Apollonius goes to the trouble of mentioning his leather-working skill (Leigh 2010, p. 122).

⁹⁷ As a perhaps tangential comparison, African dambe boxing is said to have originated among traveling butchers.

⁹⁸ The verb κορύσσω, the action of the wave, may be translated as 'crest'. It can also mean 'furnish with a helmet', perhaps an Apollonine *jeu d'esprit* in the context of a boxing match where a helmet could come in handy.

⁹⁹ Were it not for the author's positive assessment of Polydeuces, we might conclude from the verb ἀλύσκω that he was running from a fight. However, we suspect that this is instead an oblique reference to slipping, dodging, and rolling.

¹⁰⁰ The word derives from the Indo-European root for 'measure'. Modern boxers are routinely counseled to 'measure out' their punches to determine the distance needed to strike their opponent while remaining outside the other man's 'reach'.



Figure 1: “The fundamental position”, a modern open boxing stance favored by 20th-century boxing instructor Edwin Haislett (1940, p. 4). Compare this stance with those depicted in visual media later in this article.

echoes of Homer, who apprised his listeners of the crashing sounds of jaws and teeth,¹⁰¹ Apollonius offers us a bespoke simile comparing the fighters to shipwrights (or perhaps carpenters) who ‘strike’ ($\hat{\epsilon}\lambda\acute{a}n\omega$, $\theta\acute{e}in\omega$) their blows with hammers (line 80).¹⁰² The hammers and the boxers both make ‘dull and heavy sounds’ ($\delta\hat{o}\pi\tau\pi\zeta$). The fighters’ cheeks ($\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$) and jaws ($\gamma\acute{e}nu\acute{e}\zeta$) ‘ring’, ‘resound’, or ‘crash’ ($\kappa\tau\pi\acute{e}\omega$) on being struck ‘from both sides’ ($\grave{\alpha}\mu\phi\tau\acute{e}\rho\acute{w}\theta\acute{e}\nu$). In the *Odyssey*, Iros’ teeth merely ‘struck’ ($\hat{\epsilon}\lambda\acute{a}n\omega$) each other, but in the *Argonautica* the boxers ‘gnash’ ($\beta\acute{e}\rho\chi\acute{h}\ t\acute{e}\lambda\lambda\omega$, line 83). Amycus and Polydeuces ‘wound’ ($\grave{\alpha}\acute{u}\tau\acute{a}\zeta\omega$) each other ‘successively’ ($\grave{\epsilon}\pi\iota\sigma\tau\alpha\delta\acute{o}\nu$) before ‘deadly, short-drawn breath’ ($\grave{\alpha}\acute{u}\lambda\acute{o}\acute{\o}\zeta$ $\grave{\alpha}\sigma\theta\mu\acute{\alpha}$) ‘overpowers’ ($\grave{\delta}\acute{a}\mu\acute{a}\zeta\omega$) them.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹“The phrase $\chi\rho\acute{m}\acute{a}\delta\acute{o}s$ $\gamma\acute{e}nu\acute{e}\zeta$ gave rise to discussion among ancient commentators over whether Homer is referring to the noise made by the grinding teeth of a hard-fighting boxer (the generally accepted solution) or the noise made by teeth when the jaw receives a heavy blow. Apollonius seems to describe both kinds of noises with $\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$... $\gamma\acute{e}nu\acute{e}\zeta$ $\kappa\tau\pi\acute{e}\omega$ and $\beta\acute{e}\rho\chi\acute{h}$... $\grave{\alpha}\delta\acute{o}\nu\tau\omega$. The fact that the word $\gamma\acute{e}nu\acute{e}\zeta$ is applied to the noise understood by the second explanation of the Homeric phrase suggests that this was how Apollonius understood the words $\chi\rho\acute{m}\acute{a}\delta\acute{o}s$ $\gamma\acute{e}nu\acute{e}\zeta$ ” (Nelis 2001, p. 12).

¹⁰² $\theta\acute{e}in\omega$ seems to be the verb most closely related with ‘hammers’ $\sigma\phi\acute{r}\acute{a}\iota$. One etymologist has noted the curious resemblance and possible etymological connection between ‘hammer’ and ‘sphere’ and thus an association with *sphairai*, the ball-like boxing gloves we describe elsewhere in this article (Frisk 1954–1972). The muscular body of the boxer Amucus in Theocritus’ *Idyll* 22.47 is described as being ‘ $\sigma\phi\acute{r}\acute{h}\lambda\acute{a}\t{o}\zeta$ ’, ‘forged by a hammer’, perhaps a play on words.

¹⁰³ $\grave{\delta}\acute{a}\mu\acute{a}\zeta\omega$ is found in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, where it is used to denote the activity of victorious boxers. In this passage, Apollonius has provided an effective example of how boxers must battle their own physical limitations and control their bodies, in this instance, by breathing properly.

The next few lines (86–87) refer to an interval between ‘rounds’ but it is important to point out that the boxers rest *mero motu*, with no external signal directing them to do so and with no indication that a pause is formalized in the rule set. They briefly ‘stand a little apart’ (*ἴστημι βαιὸν ἀπωθεν*), ‘wipe off’ (*ἀπομόργυνμι*) the ‘copious sweat’ (*ἰδρώς ἄλις*) from ‘between their eyes’ (*μέτωπον*) all the while ‘panting toilsome breath’ (*καματηρὸν ἀντμένα φυσιά*). Once again in each other’s sights (*συνόρουσαν ἐναντίος*) and ‘bearing a grudge’ (*κοτέω*), they ‘wrangle’ (*δηριάσματι*) like two bulls fighting for access to the same heifer. This allusion reminds us of the consistent association between boxing and bulls that we have observed in the ancient Near East, Anatolia, and Crete. It is followed by the last—and once more bovid-adjacent—Apollonine boxing simile. Amycus ‘rises on tiptoe’ (*ἐπ’ ἀκροτάτοισιν δέριω*), dropping his heavy hand in an attempt to ‘make tremble’ (*πελεμῖζω*) his rival (line 92). Green (2007) puts it thus: “rising on tiptoe... and bringing | his heavy hand slamming down on him” (p. 81). In this passage, Amycus is likened to an ‘ox butcher’ (*βουτύπος*),¹⁰⁴ a term used for the priest at the Buphonia festival.¹⁰⁵ As part of this celebration, traditionally held in late summer at Athens in honor of Zeus Polieus, bulls were driven toward an altar covered with various edible enticements. The first bull to take a nibble was ceremonially slaughtered with an axe. In Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022a) we speculate at some length regarding the ritual nature of boxing, and will do so again in a future summary of our thoughts on the meaning of boxing. Boxing and ritual slaughter have been closely connected since well before the time of the Greeks. We must credit Apollonius with being the first to draw the comparison explicitly in writing.

Ever fleet of foot, Polydeuces (surely the Sugar Ray Leonard of his age) dodges (*ἀίσσω*) the murderous blow and thereby ‘lies in ambush’ for his foe.¹⁰⁶ By moving his head to the side (*παρακλίνω*), Polydeuces ‘caught’ or ‘took up’ (*ἀναδέχομαι*) the blow from Amycus’ forearm (*πῆχυς*, accusative) on his shoulder (*ἄμος*, dative). By ‘whipping in’ (Green 2007) or ‘coming near’ (Seaton 1912) (*ἀμσίβων*, line 94)¹⁰⁷ and positioning his knee with respect to Amycus’,¹⁰⁸ Polydeuces ‘follows closely’ (*μεταίστω*) then throws a punch (*κόπτω*), landing it ‘above the ear’ (*ὑπὲρ οὐατος*) and ‘shattering’ (*βρήγνυμι*) the bones within (just as in the *Odyssey*). “And the king in agony fell upon his knees.... And his life was poured forth all at once” (Seaton 1912).¹⁰⁹ The term ‘pain of body’ (*δόδυνη*) is used to describe Amycus’ condition *in articulo mortis*. He expires amid the ecstatic cries (*ἰαχέω*) of Polydeuces’ compatriots. The original Greek indicates that it is Amycus’ *thymos* that flows out of him at the end: *τοῦ δὲ ἀθρόος ἔκχυτο θυμός* (line 97).¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ Apollonius uses the word once more, applying it to Jason when he slays Apsyrtus by the Temple of Artemis (*Argo*, 4.468), as noted by Leigh (2010, p. 128).

¹⁰⁵ The butcher simile has an unintended echo in the founding of modern Nigerian *dambe* by a butcher’s guild.

¹⁰⁶ The full clause reads *οὐδὲ ἀξαντος ὑπέστη* (line 92).

¹⁰⁷ This is probably a corrupted form of *ἀμείβω* ‘exchange’ or ‘shift’, used to describe footwork, for example, in the much later account of a boxing match in *Dionysiaca* (37.526) and apparently copied (with correction) by Quintus of Smyrna in *Posthomeric* 4.347.

¹⁰⁸ The translations for the knee position vary. According to three different translators, the knee might be ‘pressed’ against the other knee *kolenem koleno tiskna* (Jaroš 1924) or slipped ‘past’ the other knee (Seaton 1912, Green 2007). We note the preposition *παρέξ* might also mean Polydeuces positioned his knee ‘outside’ the other.

¹⁰⁹ “In the *Iliad* it is the challenger Epeius who wins, but in both the *Odyssey* and the *Argonautica* the tables are turned and it is the person challenged, Homer’s Odysseus and Apollonius’ Polydeuces, who defeats his arrogant opponent” (Nelis 2001, p. 12).

¹¹⁰ Iliadic *thymos* is often associated with the breath of life itself, particularly as it is expired from a dying warrior (4.522–524; 13.653–654), horse (16.468–469), or sacrificial animal (3.293–294).

4 Boxing in the visual arts

4.1 Mycenæan vase painting

4.1.1 Mainland Greece

There is some visual evidence that boxing was practiced on mainland Greece during the late Bronze Age, at a time when the activity is attested elsewhere in the Aegean. However, attestations of boxing on the Greek mainland at this early date are exceptionally meager, consisting of only a handful of pottery sherds, none of which represent a complete scene.¹¹¹ We will start with the firmest evidence of orthograde, unarmed combat among mainland Mycenæans before presenting some less convincing evidence.

Boxers are acknowledged as a “new” subject in the (Late) Helladic IIIB period, covering the first part of the thirteenth century BC (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, pp. 43). On the mainland, pottery from this era is associated with the Linear B script, which was used to write Mycenæan Greek. One fragment from this period (Figure 2) shows a strangely-clad figure with his left fist raised, the muscles of his bicep and forearm bulging (Archæological Museum of Mycenæ, No. 60-327). His opponent, whose nose and raised arm are visible, does not close his hand in a fist. His arm, which looks rather like that of a post-traumatic Gregor Samsa, has five branching fingers suggesting the hand is open. It is juxtaposed with the fist of the principal figure, whose hand is curled neatly into a fist. The primary combatant wears a helmet and some attire around his neck. Helmets were used by Minoan boxers, as depicted on the sixteenth-century Boxer Rhyton. We have no evidence for a gorget or ‘neck guard’ elsewhere in the world of ancient boxing, but there seems to be no other explanation for this strange piece of equipment. The fighter wears a three-banded belt at or just below the level of the chest, which is adorned with a circular shape that may indicate the nipple (curiously, another circle appears below the belt, perhaps representing his navel, though admittedly in an almost cubist distortion of perspective).

While the context of the fragment’s excavation is assuredly Helladic IIIB, the style is so “bizarre” that one critic believes it may have been produced as late as the twelfth century, during the “transitional” phase of Mycenæan art (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, p. 93). The painting’s details are unprecedented and full of puzzles awaiting resolution by comparison with other, fuller depictions—if such items ever come to light. Still, the confrontation of the figures, the angle of their arms, as well as the retrograde position of the principal combatant’s torso and his clearly identifiable fist all lead us to the conclusion that this is a depiction of boxing, albeit with some highly idiosyncratic elements.

Another fragment from this period (Figure 3) is housed at the National Archæological Museum of Athens (No. 1272). It depicts boxers during a bout, with their arms stretched out to fight. The boxer on the left is preserved from the crown of his head to his waist whereas all that appears of the boxer on the right are his fists. This seems to be a bare-knuckle match, with no indication of gauntlets signaled, e.g., via enlargement of the hands. The hands are rendered using conventions found in other Mycenæan vase paintings (cf. Figure 11) where

¹¹¹ While Homer’s epics, dating most likely to the eighth century, may describe boxing matches as they took place centuries earlier among the Mycenæan Greeks, it is also possible that they were retrofitted in some respects to include much later innovations (see Section 3.1). There is sufficient archæological evidence, *nos judice*, of boxing in Greece and Mycenæan Cyprus during the late Bronze Age that it requires no special pleading to conclude that Greeks of the early Iron Age correctly viewed pugilism as part of the heroic past.

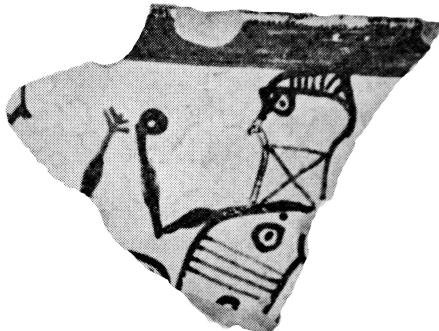


Figure 2: Fragment of a krater (?) from the Citadel House on the acropolis at Mycenæ, ca. 1300–1230 BC. The fighter is attired in unprecedented fashion: he wears a helmet, a high collar or neck guard, and a belt around his chest. His own hand is curled into a fist whereas his opponent's fingers are outstretched (Archæological Museum of Mycenæ, No. 60-327).

the fingers (as one) and the thumb are differentiated as two curved lines, one (presumably the thumb) terminating in a finial. The boxer's face is rendered in an elegant contour that indicates the nose, mouth and chin. A rosette surrounded by dots, perhaps representing the sun, fills the space above the boxers' arms. Vermeule and Karageorghis (1982) have called this piece "welcome evidence for the continuance on the Greek mainland of the old Minoan athletic vogue" (p. 93). While we agree that the fragment depicts boxers, there is little in the posture or attire of the pugilists to indicate a close relation to antecedaneous representations of boxing on Crete and the Cyclades.¹¹²

Two more pottery fragments from Mycenæ dated 1230–1200 BC may be associated with boxing but the connection is far more tenuous. In these depictions (Figure 4a–b), the solitary figure, who may be facing another boxer, raises his hand in a "commanding gesture" with the fingers pointing upward and the thumb curled towards the palm 4(a) or pointing forward 4(b) (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, p. 216). The gesture in 4(a) is remarkably similar to (much later) depictions of the open hand in Greek and Etruscan boxing (e.g., the left-hand boxer in a sixth-century black figure oinocohoe, Figure 27). We have seen an open hand—however coarsely rendered—in Mycenæan boxing, as well (Figure 2). The figure in 4(a) wears a helmet, which has precedent in both Minoan and Mycenæan representations of boxing. We are not alone in arguing that the figures represent boxers (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, p. 110). However, given the absence of an opposing figure in these fragments, there is nothing besides the hand gesture to recommend their interpretation as depictions of Mycenæan pugilism. Other interpretations, e.g., that the figures represent charioteers (*ibid.*), are certainly viable.

¹¹² There is circumstantial evidence that Minoan spectacle made a deep impression on the Mycenæans. During the thirteenth century BC, they also produced representations of bull-leaping, which, with boxing, was popular in the Minoan sphere of influence (cf. a Mycenæan pottery fragment held at National Archæological Museum of Athens, No. 2675).

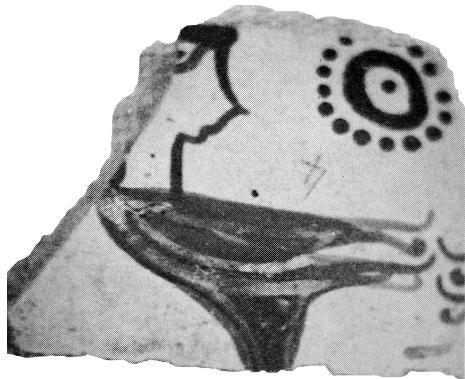


Figure 3: Mycenæan depiction of boxing from mainland Greece with solar filling ornament (National Archæological Museum of Athens, No. 1272). The arms are both extended in a manner reminiscent of a better-known krater from Cyprus now held at the British Museum (Figure 5).

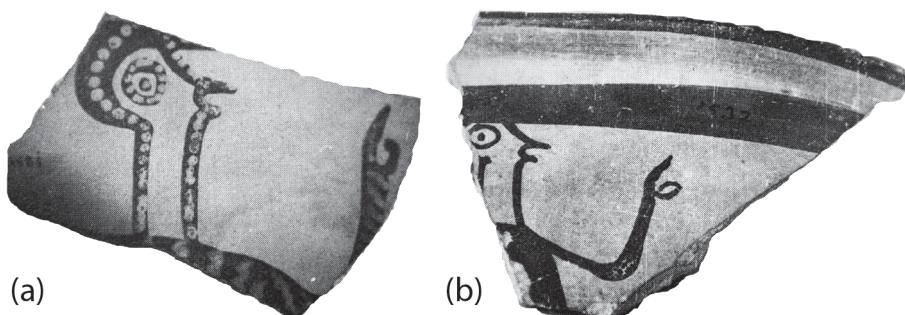


Figure 4: Two krater fragments from Mycenæ: (a) National Archæological Museum of Athens No. 2681; (b) Archæological Museum of Nafplio No. 15-37. The figure's gestures are suggestive of an open-hand gesture attested in much later illustrations of Greek and Etruscan boxing (1230–1200 BC).

4.1.2 Cyprus

Based on as few as two illustrations (Section 4.1.1), it is a tall order to argue that boxing was widely practiced by people on the Greek mainland during the late Bronze Age. There is, however, abundant and unmistakable evidence of Mycenaean boxing on Cyprus, where the activity was a popular subject of vase painting during the thirteenth century BC.¹¹³

Cyprus was settled by Mycenaeans during the same century in which pugilistic scenes began appearing on Cypriot vases. According to legend, Achaeans returning from the Trojan War were the tip of the Hellenic spear on Cyprus, where Mycenaean culture subsequently flourished. In a prime position with access to Anatolia, the Levant, and the baths of all the western stars, Cyprus was of course already populated when the Greeks arrived. The local culture mingled with theirs, no doubt drawing in considerable influence from the Near East and Anatolia. According to one historian, “[F]irm ties bound Cyprus to the Peloponnese, so that religious ideas, deities and cult were passing both ways across the Aegean before the Bronze Age had been rung out” (Dietrich 1978, p. 8). It seems likely that these diaegean transmissions included boxing. They also included the cult of Apollo, whose origins, as we have already pointed out, are likely Anatolian. The god was worshiped on Cyprus as Apollo Alasiotas, where he was represented aniconically as a pillar (*ibid.*, pp. 9–10).¹¹⁴

The best-known Cypriot boxing depictions come from two Late Helladic IIIB amphoroid kraters found at Enkomi and now held by the British Museum (Nos. 1897,0401.1287 and 1897,0401.928). The vessels are dated to the early thirteenth century BC (see Figures 5 and 6) and belong to “the period of the greatest Mycenaean expansion” emanating from the Argolid peninsula of the greater Peloponnese (Sherratt 1980, p. 175, citing Furumark). Kraters like these found on Cyprus were “a specialist product of the Argolid” on the mainland of Greece; as such, they are regarded as Mycenaean (Crouwel and Morris 2015, p. 171). This has been determined through archæometric analysis (Jones 1986) of the unique Argive clay used in their construction as well as a close stylistic study of the painting suggesting “only a small number of producers painting this material” (Crouwel and Morris 2015, p. 171). It has been speculated that Mycenaean vessels of this type were intended for male users in the context of drinking and feasting (*ibid.*, p. 172).

Influences of Minoan art are evident in the exaggeratedly narrow waists of the pugilists on both kraters. They lack some of the dynamism and much of the detail found in the older Boxer Rhyton (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c). A similar vegetal motif stands directly between the antagonists on both vessels, in the spot where prizes or representations of divinities are to be found in glyptic depictions of pugilism likely executed a few hundred years earlier across the sea in nearby Syria (Teissier 1984, Thompson 2013, Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b). The fighters are bare-headed and, from the absence of detail, presumably naked. The torso, arms, legs, and feet of the figures are brown while the face, neck, and hands are

¹¹³The Hittites laid claim to Cyprus, if only as a vassal state, from the 15th century BC. Around the time the Cypriot boxing kraters were produced, the Hittites engaged in a naval battle with the residents of the island, which they called *Alayašiya*. The possibility of cultural transmission between Cyprus and the realms of the Hittite king should not be ignored. The contemporaneous attestation of boxing in both locations may prove significant as more archæological discoveries are brought to light.

¹¹⁴Several cylinder seals from Ugarit show boxers sparring with a column between them (Schaeffer-Forrer 1983, Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b). This space was frequently reserved for the representation of a divinity in astral or animal form. The column in the Ugarit cylinders may have been a representation of Apollo’s Ugaritic predecessor/analog (probably Ršp, imported to Cyprus as Resheph), whose cult was also observed on Cyprus.



Figure 5: Body fragment of an amphoroid krater found at Enkomi Cyprus; 1300–1250 BC / Late Helladic IIIB1 (British Museum, No. 1897,0401.1287). Painted in the Pictorial style, the vessel originated on the Argolid, in Greece. The boxers appear to wear some form of boxing glove.

uncolored. The artist may have left the faces untinted to provide details of the eyes and ears. The hands, however, are not filled in, nor do they bear any detail. This contrasts with the hands of the archers (not pictured in Figure 6; British Museum, No. 1897,0401.928) that stand to the left of the boxers. The archers have three extended brown fingers. To leave the hands of the boxers blank while filling in the arms was likely intended to suggest the fighters wear some form of boxing glove. Indeed, their fists are rendered as simple ellipses, suggestive of the club-like gauntlets postulated for the ‘Boxing Boys’ of Akrotiri (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c).

In the body fragment shown in Figure 5, each boxer raises his arms up and stretches them out towards his adversary in a gesture perhaps signaling the start of the battle. In the krater pictured in Figure 6, however, the boxers both face the same direction and “make menacing gestures with their left arms, like boxers warming up for the punch” (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, p. 44). The figures lean dramatically retrograde with their arms bent so their right hand touches the small of their back. The knee of the leftmost boxer is bent curiously backwards. While the archers pictured on the same vase have smooth hair, the boxers’ hair is rendered in jagged outline to indicate curls. Each boxer’s left elbow is bent with his fist raised to his face in a gesture typical of a boxing guard, though with one hand only. Since they are clearly not fighting, this illustration may represent a dance that took place before the contest. The evidence for boxing gloves, such as it is, can be found only on the boxers’ raised, left hands; the detail of their right hands disappears into the modeling of their backs.

The other side of the vase depicts creatures which, despite heavy erosion, appear to be sphinges. For this reason, Vermeule and Karageorghis (1982) conjectured that the vase was associated with funerary rites. The “devourer of the dead” was pictured on one side and participants in funeral games (archers and boxers) were limned on the other.

Given that these depictions of late Bronze Age boxing were arguably produced on the Peloponnese then later exported to Cyprus, we are left to wonder whether they illustrate boxing praxis in Greece, on Cyprus, or even on Crete. At Hala Sultan Tekke, an archaeological site situated, like Enkomi, on the east side of Cyprus, around 2% of the pottery from the Late Helladic has been classified as of Mycenæan origin; less than 1% is considered Minoan (Mee 2008, p. 375). Settlement of Cyprus by Mycenæans has been ruled out based on other evidence. Markings characteristic of pottery manufactured on Cyprus also appear on pottery manufactured on the Argolid, suggesting that Cypriots were the ones producing their own pottery in Greece, whence it was shipped back home (*ibid.*, pp. 375–376). If this rather elaborate hypothesis is correct, then what we see on the kraters is not Mycenæan boxing at all, but Cypriot boxing likely influenced by both Levantine and Minoan models.

Another amphoroid krater from Cyprus includes boxers facing one another, with the pairs separated by large anserine birds (Figure 7). The vase is said to be painted by an artist from Aradippou, in eastern Cyprus. Long locks of hair on the boxers may have been “stimulated by some intermediate reflection of an older style...dependent on the Boxer Rhyton” (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, p. 44). The boxers are naked: the penis of the leftmost pugilist in the central pair is indicated. The stance is exaggerated in a manner similar to that of the Boxing Boys.

The other side of the vase shows boxers in a different attitude (Figure 8). They are no longer fighting nor do they appear particularly martial in their gestures. Their hands consist of a two-pronged fork representative of the fingers (as one unit) and the thumb. They sway from the hips and their hair falls back in a single, curling lock reminiscent of the Minoan

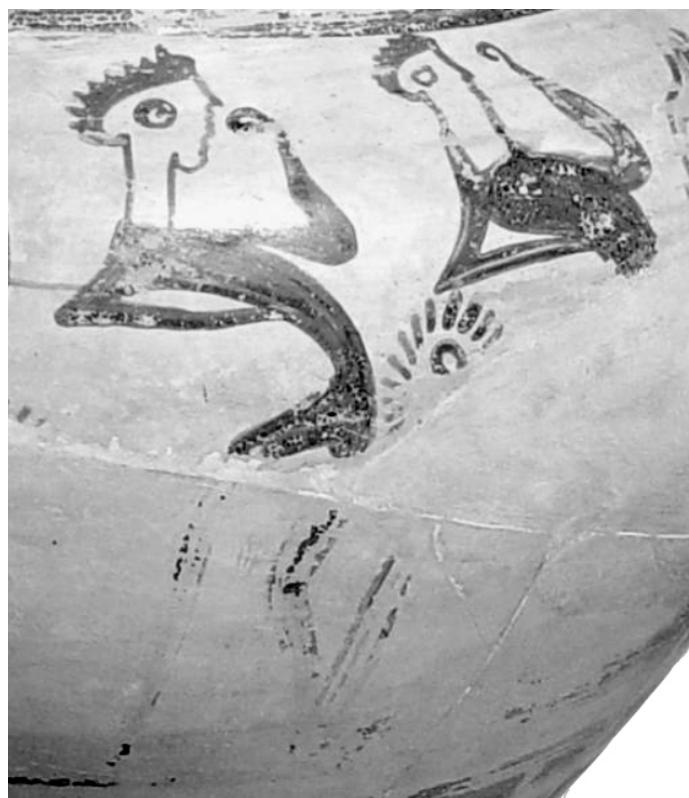


Figure 6: Detail of a Late Helladic IIIB amphoroid krater found at Enkomi, Cyprus and dated 1300–1200 BC (British Museum, No. 1897,0401.928). The figures have been identified as boxers.



Figure 7: Detail from an amphoroid Krater from eastern Cyprus with long-haired boxers (G. G. Pierides Collection, No. 35). The vase is dated between 1300 and 1230 BC.

hairstyle depicted on the Boxer Rhyton or perhaps the Boxing Boys of Akrotiri (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c).

A single figure from a pair of sparring partners is preserved on a pottery fragment found at Kition, in southeastern Cyprus (Figure 9). Dated to the first two-thirds of the thirteenth century BC, the painting contains a figure whose ‘Mycenae’ boxing stance is by now familiar to us: hips thrust forward, torso leaning back, arms forward in a defensive posture (Figures 6 and 7). According to Vermeule and Karageorghis (1982, p. 202), the fragment is housed on Cyprus, possibly at the Larnaca District Archaeological Museum (Kition Area II, No. 14/2418). The figure reminds us of mainland depictions found at Mycenae (Figure 4) though the flat-topped head and long nose are doubtless associated with another style, attested at Ugarit (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, pp. 44).¹¹⁵ In this case, however, the raised hand is more clearly rendered as a fist (an ellipse) with the thumb projecting from the side. The torso leans backwards as if to avoid an (unseen) opponent’s onslaught and the hips are rendered in a style reminiscent of both Figures 7 and 11.

In a fragment of an amphoroid krater found at Maroni (British Museum, No. 1898,1201.137), a series of “very mannered” boxers, sparring in pairs, are separated by vegetal motifs, perhaps “dejected palms” (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, p. 44). The fighters’ “legs are emphasized for length and thrust, the chests are relatively thick, the heads are held straight up, and the fists are curled” (*ibid.*) They hold one arm up and one arm down with thumbs projecting from the fist.¹¹⁶ Estimates of the vase’s date vary: the British Museum assigns it to the fourteenth century while Vermeule and Karageorghis (1982) assign it to the thirteenth. The more natural rendering of the hips, stance, and fists, with an added detail of slightly lumpy knees

¹¹⁵ A modern observer may be forgiven for seeing in this Bronze Age pugilist shadows of Matt Groening’s cartoon character Bart Simpson.

¹¹⁶ A much later (sixth-century BC) depiction of boxing on a Euboean amphora shows the thumbs extended during striking (Vatican Museum, No. MV.34976.o.o). Poliakoff (1987) reasons that the extended thumbs were intended to gouge the eyes (p. 87).

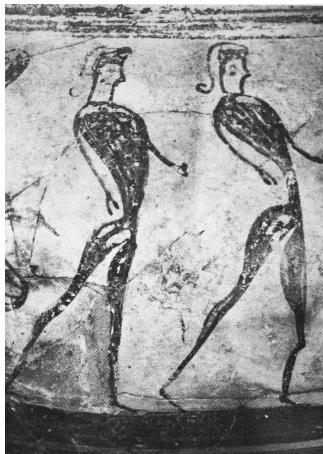


Figure 8: Detail of amphoroid krater from the G. G. Pierides Collection (see Figure 7 for the object's other side). The striding boxers sport locks of hair reminiscent of Minoan pugilists. Dated to the first two-thirds of the thirteenth century BC.

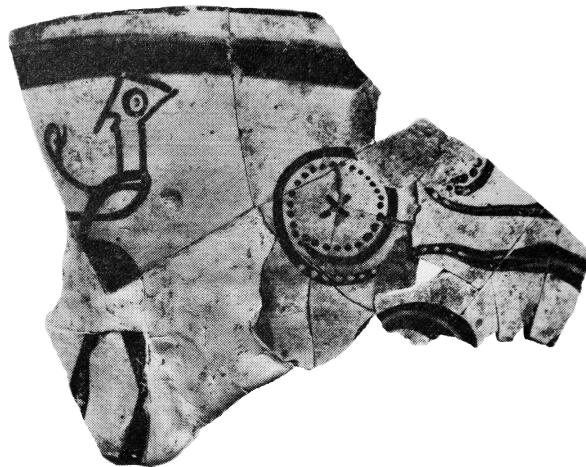


Figure 9: A fragment from a deep bowl found at Kition, in southeastern Cyprus, and dated between 1300 and 1230 BC (Kition Area II No. 14/2418). The posture assumed by the fighter is similar to that observed in other depictions from Cyprus.

differentiates it from all other styles of Mycenæan boxing art we have observed, so placing it in an earlier century does not seem too drastic a conclusion.



Figure 10: Painting from fragmentary amphoroid krater found at Maroni, on Cyprus (British Museum, No. 1898,1201.137). Pairs of boxers are visible from the shoulders to the feet; each has drawn one arm up and left the other hanging. The lowered hands are curled into fists with an extended thumb. Dated 1375–1300 BC.

Figure 11 provides detail from an amphoroid krater (Boston Museum of Fine Arts, No. 01.8044). The painting has been described as exhibiting “new grotesquerie” and “awkward details” like a creature part avian, part cetacean, as well as chariots with oval wheels (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, p. 39). By one account, the vessel came from Rhodes but it has been grouped with Cypriot pottery of the late Bronze Age, nonetheless. The figures of interest to us have been described as belt wrestlers (*ibid.*) but we find this interpretation vexed. Belt wrestling is amply attested in the ancient and modern world: the practice involves grasping the belt of one’s opponent in order to throw him. However, in every version of this sport we have encountered, including in antiquity, each wrestler wears his own belt, not a single belt that binds them together (Gordon 1950–1951). Moreover, in the painting in question, the hands do not reach for this communal belt at all. Instead, they are raised in precisely the gesture we have come to expect among Mycenæan boxers (this is acknowledged by Vermeule and Karageorghis in their description: “the arm gestures are those of sparring boxers,” p. 39). The hands are also indisputably curled into fists (we note the similar shape of the charioteers’ hands, on the same vessel, as they grasp the reins, along with the formal similarity to the hands of the boxers in Figure 3).

Thus, we are presented with a novel form of boxing, one which directly addresses the absence of a ring in the ancient world.¹¹⁷ In this form of boxing, the fighters are constrained by the belt to stay near one another and slug it out, thus obviating the need for a constrained space to contain them. A similar technique is still used by modern boxing trainers who tie the two boxer’s lead ankles together, giving them only a short distance (less than an arm’s

¹¹⁷ A ladder or a pole may have been used to restrain boxers, as depicted in two sixth-century vase paintings found in Italy, one of Attic origin. The practice is also mentioned by Pausanias and Eustathius, writing in a later era. The evidence will be reviewed in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023b).

length) to range apart from one another. The painting could represent a boxing match or a training session in which this technique is applied.¹¹⁸

4.2 Geometric vase painting

Whether boxing was introduced to the Greek mainland by Cypriots, Minoans, or both during the Bronze Age, there is scant evidence that it ever really caught on.¹¹⁹ If it did, it was not depicted robustly in visual art for several hundred years (we noted only two fragmentary vase paintings that clearly depict boxers in Section 4.1.1). After the collapse of the Mycenaean palace culture at the end of the Bronze Age, there is a gap in information about Mediterranean boxing (including the Greek mainland) that lasts approximately five centuries. After the relatively large number of vase paintings from thirteenth-century Cyprus, we find no pictorial depictions of boxing again until the eighth century BC. This lacuna is roughly coterminous with the period known traditionally as the Greek Dark Ages. During this poorly understood period, it seems that extensive famine, depopulation, dissolution of overseas trade networks, and decentralization of palace economies left few resources for artistic output.

Boxing may have continued on a smaller scale during the Dark Ages, albeit stripped of the pageantry, spectacle, and religious implications associated with it at Knossos and (probably) on Cyprus.¹²⁰ If we take fist-fighting as a kind of human primitive, then the apparent resumption of boxing in eighth century Greece is more likely indicative of increased access to artistic resources, not pugilistic ones. As in the much longer disappearance of boxing from the historical record beginning in Late Antiquity (approximately 500–1600 AD), to argue that boxing vanished entirely is to argue *ex silentio*. Any new archaeological discovery could easily subvert the claim that boxing ceased to be practiced during this period. In other words, we know nothing about the Greek Dark Ages that would limit the practice of fist fighting *a priori*. Given the thin evidence of boxing among mainland Mycenaeans, it is possible that Bronze Age people never adopted it in what we know today as Greece and that the eighth-century Geometric vases indicate the first substantial foothold boxing gained in mainland Europe.¹²¹

One line of thinking has it that in the aftermath of the Mycenaean collapse the Greeks adopted many elements of Near Eastern religion. If this is so, then it may have been during this period of great transition that boxing—as a cultic practice if not as a form of athletics—was imported from the east (Kirk 1990). However, this hypothesis has been criticized on

¹¹⁸We are reminded of portrayals of knife duels where the opposing hands of the fighters are tied to one another, leaving the knife hand only free to strike and limiting the space between the antagonists.

¹¹⁹Apollo, as we noted above, is regarded as the divine patron of boxing in Homer. Apollo is not mentioned by name among the attested divinities of Mycenaean religion (Palaima 2008, pp. 348–350). Aspects subsequently associated with Apollo, such as healing, may have been the province of the Mycenaean god *Pa-ja-wo*; a later epithet of Apollo, *Pæan*, may be etymologically related to this Mycenaean name.

¹²⁰According to one commentator, “[I]t is very dangerous to assume that ancient-seeming practices [attested in ancient Greece] must have been inherited unchanged from the B[ronze] A[ge]” (Dickinson 2006, p. 221). We agree that Mycenaean boxing, if it had ever been adopted in the first place, must have changed while Dark Age Hellenic communities were “continually coming into being, then failing” again (Dickinson 2020, p. 158). However, given the indeterminate character of boxing on the Greek mainland before the eighth century BC, this must remain speculative for now.

¹²¹The small number of mainland Mycenaean depictions could represent a Mycenaean take on Minoan boxing as seen through the eyes of travelers, for example, and were perhaps never intended as illustrations of ‘native’ pugilism. This could account for the paucity of such representations on the mainland.

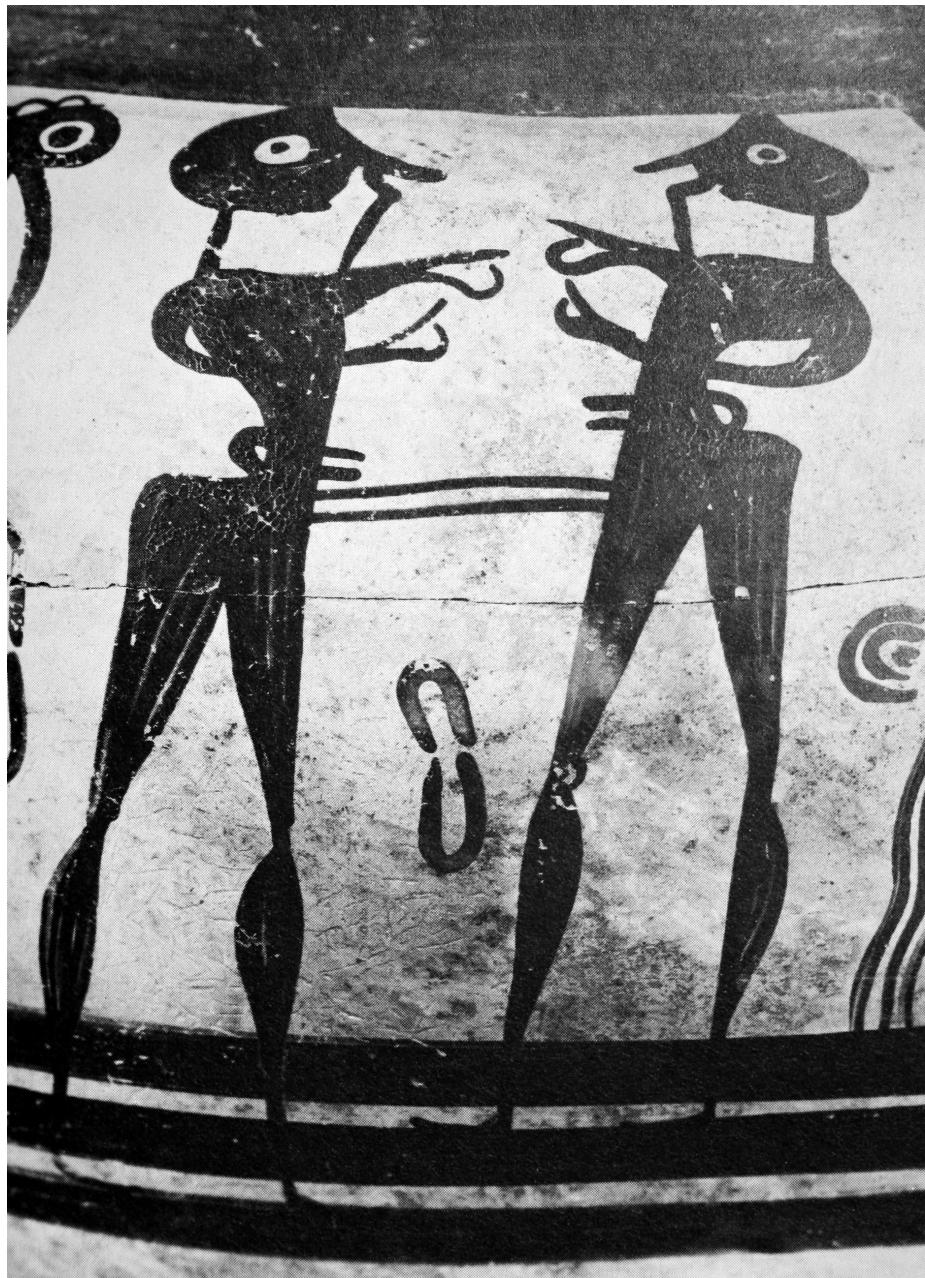


Figure 11: Detail of painting on an amphoroid krater with boxers bound at the waist and bleeding from the nose and mouth, 1350–1250 BC (Boston Museum of Fine Arts No. 01.8044).

multiple grounds, including the absence of “any ancient parallel for such a wholesale adoption of foreign religious ideas” (Dickinson 2006, p. 221). Regardless of what may or may not have happened during the Greek Dark Ages, we observe a steady increase in depictions of Hellenic boxing at their conclusion.

The Dresden kantharos (Figure 13), Louvre oenochoe (Figure 17), and the pedestaled krater (Figure 18), along with the Copenhagen kantharos (Figure 12), are among the earliest depictions of ‘Greek’ boxing after the thirteenth-century kraters found on Cyprus. Additional examples of Geometric boxing include an Argive pottery fragment held in the National Museum at Athens (Waldstein 1902, pl. 57, ii) and a fragment of unknown provenance (though most likely from mainland Greece) held at Sarajevo (Hampe 1936, Fig. 25).

It is beyond the scope of this article to present and evaluate hypotheses about the usage of each piece of pottery that includes on its face a depiction of pugilism. However, we note that the use of pottery, and decorated pottery in particular, was manifold in ancient Greek society. Boxers painted on vessels might have been associated with funerals or male initiation rituals, as there are numerous examples of vase paintings that seem interested in precisely these activities (Langdon 2008, Gadolou 2015). Pugilists might also have been included as a means of self-representation (Mikrakis 2015): boxing was likely an elite activity, as it probably had been among the Minoans. The users of these vessels had an interest in seeing the valiant activities of themselves and their sons depicted. Pottery was also used in association with heroic, ancestral, and even chthonic cults (Kourou 2015, pp. 98–100). Associations between boxing and cultic practices are of interest to us. However, we will necessarily take them up in a forthcoming article wherein we attempt to interpret the significance of boxing in western culture, ancient and modern.

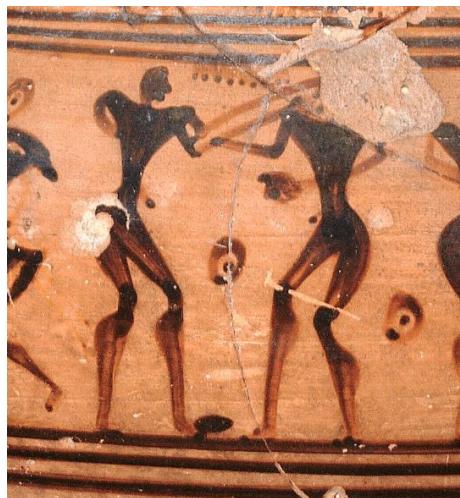


Figure 12: Detail from a Geometric kantharos housed at the National Museum of Denmark (No. 727) and dated to around 750 BC. The boxing figures are surrounded by sword fighters, dancers, and a person being torn apart by two lions. Scholars speculate that the scene represents a sports competition or a funeral ritual.

An Attic Geometric kantharos held at the National Museum of Denmark (No. 727) is dated to the eighth century, around the time some scholars believe the Homeric epics were first set down. However, the kind of boxing represented does not seem to meet the Iliadic ideal. Among dancers, sword fighters, an abducted female,¹²² and a person being torn asunder by two lions, two boxers confront each other (D'Acunto 2016, p. 214). As with Geometric figurative art more generally, details are sparse but the artist shows a keen interest in various anatomical aspects of the fighters, including their calf muscles (Figure 12). The arms of the left boxer are somewhat confused and both are unnaturally lengthened to reach the head of his opponent, where the glaze is unfortunately missing. Under one interpretation, the excessively long arms are intended to indicate the impact of the blow, which would not otherwise be identifiable, given the position of the torsos (Ahlberg-Cornell 1987, pp. 62–63). The artist most likely wished to indicate that this was indeed a fight, since less brutal (unarmed) exercises, like dancing and acrobatics, are also represented on the same kantharos.

The figure on the right has an engorged left hand with some indication of the thumb on top.¹²³ Given the smaller, more naturalistic hands of other figures on the same vessel, it is probable that the painter of the Copenhagen Kantharos intended to represent “some special pugilistic equipment,” most likely a glove, based on its shape (Ahlberg-Cornell 1987, p. 63). No such glove is evident on the same boxer's right hand, leading us to believe that the kantharos depicts a single-glove contest.¹²⁴ The boxers' phalli are represented (as on the Dresden Kantharos, see Figure 13), revealing that nudity was already a feature of Greek boxing in the Iron Age. Since this remained a characteristic of Greek boxing for another thousand years, the use of a loincloth (*zōma*) in Homeric boxing suggests that girding one's loins to box was indeed the more ancient practice, as we have argued above.¹²⁵

The Dresden Staatliche Kunstsammlungen holds an early—and distinctive—depiction of boxers on an Attic kantharos (No. 865499). The scene is electric and lively, with wavy vertical lines¹²⁶ drawing the viewer's attention to the waist-level of the figures and above. Eight-pointed astral ornaments fill the empty space above the four figures' heads. Two gigantic figures armed with swords across their hips raise one hand in the air and appear to cheer with delight, their wide-open eyes drinking in the spectacle before them.

The main event in the Dresden kantharos consists of two figures with a slight bend in their knees, triangular chests facing the viewer, heads in profile to confront one another resolutely. Their back arms are raised and crossed in a gesture familiar to us from scenes of

¹²²This interpretation is offered by Langdon (2008, pp. 197–233), who claims that, “The agonistic displays in their range of sport...recall similar exercises held at public betrothals and paralleled in tyrant histories.” This makes her interpretation of boxing on the Copenhagen kantharos close in spirit to the ancient Near Eastern “Marriage of Mardu” (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b).

¹²³This projection may also be related to the Minoan boxing glove, which consisted in some cases of a curved plate that fit over the back of the hand and projected beyond the knuckles and fingers curled into the palm (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c).

¹²⁴Unfortunately, damage to the vessel makes it impossible to determine if the boxer on the left wears one or two similar gloves—or any at all.

¹²⁵The *zōma* reappears in later Greek depictions of boxing, though we argue (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023b) that such images were rendered to suit Italic tastes. For example, a stamnos held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (No. DE RIDDER.252) shows boxers wearing loincloths. This late sixth-century vase was produced in Attica but was evidently intended for export to Etruria since it was discovered at Vulci, north of Rome.

¹²⁶One such segment is, uniquely, compartmentalized into a rectangle that floats between the boxers, in the spot where prizes and gods are also known to appear in other depictions of boxing. We cannot discount the possibility that this wavy line is set apart for its anguine association with Apollo Pythaeus.

boxing in the ancient Near East (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b). The other arm is bent at the elbow and the fist, a delicately enlarged glob, points to the waist. The raised hands take two different forms; both possessed of five projections. In one case the fingers radiate from the palm like a star, in the other they all project from one side of the arm's terminus, like a fearsome rake pointed directly at the opponent's eyes.



Figure 13: A boxing scene depicted on an eighth-century Attic kantharos (Dresden Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, No. 865499). Boxers are enantiomorphically gloved on one hand only. Dancers and a musician are depicted on the other side of the vessel.

A fragment of Argive pottery (National Archaeological Museum of Athens, no item number) shows two boxers bedeviling one another over or in front of a tripod supporting a cauldron (Figure 14). Their arms and hands are highly stylized; one looks remarkably like the tip of an asparagus stem. The confused projections from the hands may indicate fingers, the depiction of which seems to have presented a puzzle to Geometric vase painters in general, given the wide variety of attested solutions to the problem—some more appealing to the modern eye than others. Ahlberg-Cornell (1987), however, has argued that these flourishes indicate “a special piece of equipment,” by which the author presumably meant some form of gauntlet (p. 63). Indeed, a pronged boxing glove with an asparagoid sensibility is attested among Minoan figurines (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c, Fig. 4c). The crooked, unnaturally long arms of the boxer are familiar to us from another ancient Aegean source: a third-millennium marble plaque (Hood 1978, p. 94), also depicting boxers, found on Naxos (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c, Fig. 1).

What made tripods, like the one depicted on a fragmented vase painting found at the Argive Heraion (Figure 14) and the one pictured on the seal in Figure 15, such fantastic prizes, worthy of risking life and limb in the ancient boxing ‘ring’? As the means of holding a cauldron above a fire, tripods enabled people to cook food more easily. The tripod cauldron awarded as a prize may also have been filled with meat as part of the reward.¹²⁷ As we discuss elsewhere (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b), one of the earliest depictions of boxers

¹²⁷This hearkens back to the haggis-prize for the victorious boxer in *Odyssey* 18.



Figure 14: An Argive pottery fragment depicting boxers with a tripod cauldron as a prize and dated most likely to the seventh century BC. The piece was found at the Heraion of Argos (Waldstein 1902, pl. 57, No. II) and is now housed in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens (no item number).

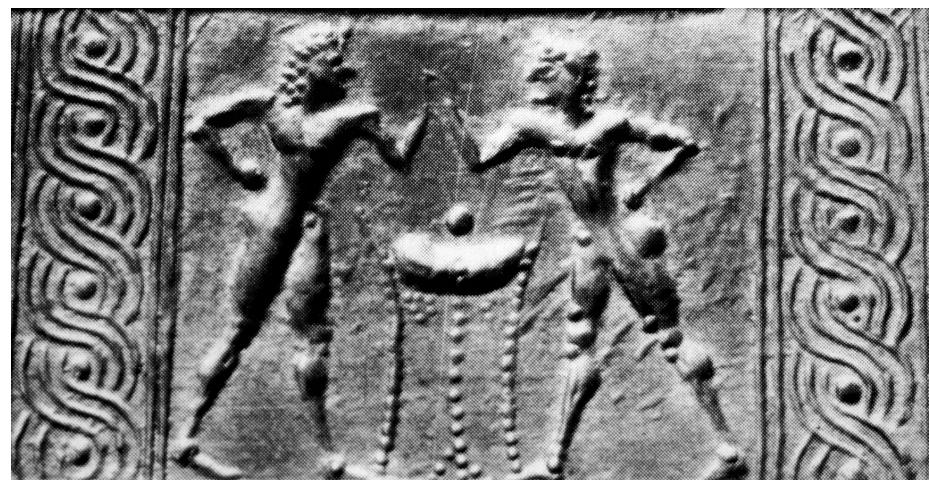


Figure 15: A seal impression depicting boxers with a tripod cauldron as a prize. Seventh century BC. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University, No. 1895.130.

was integrated into the design of a meat-hook used for fetching boiling flesh from a cauldron (Trifonov et al. 2021). According to Langdon (2008, p. 271):

With roots in Bronze Age cooking utensils and movable hearths, the bronze tripod in the Early Iron Age was transformed from practical to magnificent, becoming an object of display and ritual importance. By the end of the eighth century, it was a symbolic nexus proclaiming status, power, and political authority...[T]ripods represented both personal excellence and divine favor.

Tripods also had religious significance, as an altar for offering sacrifices. The Delphic oracle sat on a tripod, covered with a slab, while she received prophetic emanations from Apollo, the divine patron of boxing.¹²⁸ Herakles and Apollo got into a scuffle when the former tried to abscond with the same tripod in Apollo's temple at Delphi. The three-way association between Apollo, boxing, and tripods may have had cultic significance to ancient observers.



Figure 16: Fragment of a stamnos held at the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina at Sarajevo (no item number). Provenance and date unknown, most likely from mainland Greece, probably early seventh century BC.

In a fragment of a stamnos (a two-handled jar used for mixing liquids and for storage) now held at Sarajevo (Figure 16), two boxers approach one another with an elaborate, massive

¹²⁸Langdon (2008, p. 272) argues for "a special connection" between Apollo and tripod cauldrons "not only in their mantic role but also in their continuing association with competition."

tripod betwixt them. They are both gloved on the hand nearest the viewer and the fingers of the other hand are extended.¹²⁹ The boxer on the left wears a boxing glove shaped much like the Minoan gloves with “perimetric rim” observed in Minoan figurines (Rethemiotakis 2001, p. 128) and on the Boxer Rhyton (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c). The shape of the other boxer’s gauntlet is less clear and directly abuts a diamond-shaped filler ornament, which obscures the gloves leading edge. The date and provenance are unknown, but similarities in the modeling of the fingers remind us of a pedestaled krater (Figure 18) from the early seventh century BC. The boxer on the right has an exposed phallus and, while there is some damage at the relevant site, this appears to be true of the leftmost boxer, as well. An eight-pointed star floats in the midst of the cauldron, which itself takes the form of a crescent moon. The configuration is similar to an ornament that appears between boanthropic pugilists on a hematite cylinder seal, most likely from Cyprus (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b, Fig. 21).

The long legs of the boxers in the Sarajevo stamnos are echoed in those of muscular boxers that appear on an eighth-century oenochoe held at the Louvre. Originally from Thebes, the vessel has a long neck that frames the boxers, who are surrounded by the vertical wavy lines also observed on the Dresden kantharos (Figure 13). Another similarity to that piece presents itself in the apparent single-gloving of the boxers. On the Louvre oenochoe, the lowered fist, brought in front of the waist, is depicted as a significantly enlarged glob. The other hand (of the leftmost boxer only; the rightmost boxer’s raised hand is obscured by damage) is narrow and pointed. Fingers are not depicted on either hand. The boxers’ massive thighs seem to attract the painter’s attention. The heads are quite small, though there is some indication of a beard (or extremely sharp chin) on both fighters. The arms farthest from the viewer cross in the classic, symmetric gesture.

Large pedestaled kraters like the seventh-century exemplar shown from both sides in Figures 18 and 19 served as grave markers for men or boys.¹³⁰ The juxtaposition of horses and boxing in this piece reminds us of the twin dominions of Castor and Pollux, whose cult we will discuss in greater depth in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023b). The pedestaled krater, which is held at the National Archaeological Museum of Athens (No. 12896) is originally from Thebes. As in other Geometric scenes of boxing, the representation of the fingers in this piece continues to surprise. Here, they emerge from one side of a triangle (the hand) or branch twig-like from the arm. Spectators armed similarly to those on the Dresden kantharos are here shorter than the boxers, though dwarfed by their charmingly-rendered equine companions, who also appear to watch the fight.¹³¹

The boxers on the Theban pedestaled krater do not raise their hands in the symmetrical gesture familiar to us in other Geometric portrayals. Instead, they mix it up with their hands between the shoulders and waist. The armed figure to the right of one pair of boxers (Figure 19) lifts his left arm as if to encourage or cheer for the fighters. The figure to the right of the boxers in Figure 18 does something similar with his left hand. These figures may represent assistants like the “son of Tydeus” in the Iliadic boxing vignette.

¹²⁹The symmetry of the rightmost boxer’s raised hand suggests it may bear the same gauntlet noted on the Heraion fragment (Figure 14, *ut supra*).

¹³⁰A hole in the bottom of the krater indicates that it was used for this purpose: libations offered in the krater would drain through the bottom and thence, presumably, to the underworld. We have not examined this piece in person and so do not know if such a hole exists.

¹³¹Two figures to the right of the sparring pair in Figure 19 look away from the boxers, disrupting the symmetry and focal point of the scene.

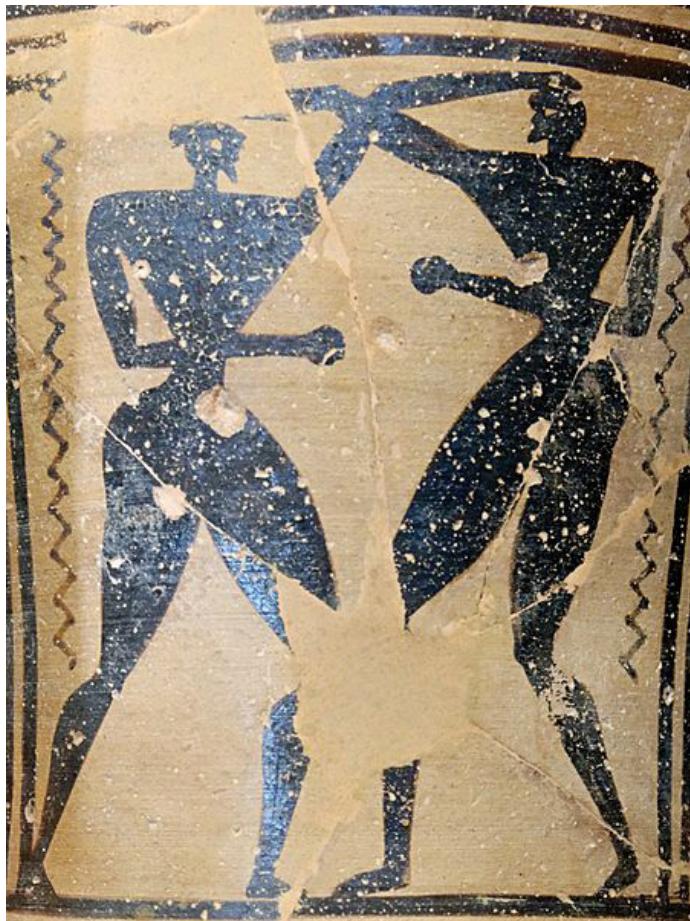


Figure 17: Boxers appear on the neck of an eighth-century *oenochoe* from Thebes housed at the Louvre (No. A568), dated 735–720 BC. As on the Dresden kantharos (Figure 13), the boxers appear to wear only one glove, which is lowered, while they strike with the open hand.



Figure 18: Boxers, flanked by armed horsemen, on a pedestaled krater from Thebes (National Archaeological Museum of Athens, No. 12896). The depiction, dated 690–670 BC, illustrates single-gloved boxing.



Figure 19: Boxers, flanked by armed horsemen, on a pedestaled krater from Thebes (National Archaeological Museum of Athens, No. 12896). This is the other side of the vessel shown in Figure 18.

In the pedestaled krater we see perhaps the clearest evidence of a boxing glove in Geometric vase painting. The lowered hands are massive and globular but not ellipsoid. Instead, a lump on the underside appears, perhaps representing the bound thumb. The glove of the rightmost boxer in Figure 18, for example, bears a notable resemblance to a modern sixteen-ounce boxing glove. It even seems that the artist has here rendered a subtle difference between the glove's cuff and the forearm.

On one side of the krater, the boxers are separated by a large prolate spheroidal object, most likely intended to represent a shield, that floats between their knees. Eight-pointed broken-legged asterisms,¹³² dotted lines, wavy lines, and stacks of chevrons fill up the empty spaces in less focal positions. The shield, horses, and swords all indicate that the boxing match on the pedestaled krater takes place in a martial context. In the seventh century, the most famous example of such an event was undoubtedly the boxing match between Epeius and Euryalus, whom we suspect are depicted here.¹³³

We summarize by posing the following questions: Where is boxing attested in eighth- and seventh-century Greece and is there any evidence that boxing was preserved in an unbroken tradition from the Bronze Age at these sites? The Dresden and Copenhagen kantharoi come from Attica, the latter likely produced by either the Burly or Rattle Workshop (Ahlberg-Cornell 1987, p. 55). The Louvre cenochoe and the pedestaled krater (No. 12896) are both from Thebes. Thus, the earliest depictions of boxing occur in a fairly small area of mainland Greece: the Attic Peninsula and the region that borders it directly to the north. It has been argued that “collapse” is too dramatic a term for what happened at the end of the Bronze Age in Athens and Attica, but ‘transformation’ is too anodyne” (Osborne 2020, p. 142). The author concludes that the Attic Peninsula faced significant “pressures brought about not directly by other humans but by factors beyond human control” (*ibid.*).

While evidence of wholesale collapse is scant in Attica, the Mycenaean palace at Thebes was clearly destroyed by fire (Magiddis 2020, p. 116).¹³⁴ Thus the Bronze Age ‘collapse’ affected two contiguous regions (where boxing later emerged) differently: while life on the Attic Peninsula “sustained continuity and achieved substantial revival with their [erstwhile] limited production and trade capacity” in the late twelfth century BC, the more complex palace economies of places like Thebes disintegrated (*ibid.*). The palace at Thebes was “partially repaired and reoccupied” but it, too, was “gradually abandoned” as the Dark Ages wore on (*ibid.*). On the Argolid, where pottery with depictions of boxing had been produced and exported (to Cyprus) during the late Bronze Age, what has been called “collapse” elsewhere in the Mediterranean is described more moderately as “radical culture change” (Mühlenbruch 2020, p. 130).

If boxing existed in Mycenaean Greece and if it was exclusively tied to the Bronze Age palace cultures, then it almost certainly disappeared with the dissolution of the palace economies and their advanced foreign trade networks. As Magiddis (2020) writes:

[I]t was the Mycenaean elite and its diagnostic elements (palatial administration

¹³²The asterisms may represent the revolving sun, in which case they may be linked to Phœbus Apollo.

¹³³The presence of armed men on the Dresden kantharos (Figure 13), along with its numerous formal similarities to the Theban pedestaled krater, lead us to wonder whether or not this earlier vessel, too, depicts the Iliadic boxing match.

¹³⁴The destruction of Thebes is even recorded in the *Iliad*, shortly preceding the Trojan War. Homer tells us that Euryalus, the defeated champion in the Iliadic boxing match, fought magnificently at Thebes before the war began, suggesting that Thebes was legendary for its pugilism.

and writing, ideology and ritual, foreign contacts and luxury goods, monumental art and megalithic architecture, representational arts and crafts) that suffered the most from the system meltdown; paradoxically, the same societal and cultural forces of transformation that caused their demise, fossilized the Mycenæan kings and warriors in the realm of a heroic past, elevated them in the sphere of myth and preserved them in collective memory (pp. 116–117).

If, on the other hand, boxing had permeated Mycenæan Greece as a folk custom more or less independently of the palatial “diagnostic elements” of Thebes, for example, then it likely survived, changing gradually over five centuries of practice as part of the “basic material culture and cultural practices” of the “remaining core of Mycenæan society” (*ibid.*, p. 117). It should be stressed, however, that there is hardly any evidence that boxing was a core element of (Bronze Age) Mycenæan society.

Modern scholars do not encourage the view that Greek society of the post-Mycenæan era consisted of “one social order, or one set of ‘human thing entanglements’, but [of] many... [T]here was neither one homogeneous society nor one homogeneous culture (Whitley 2015, pp. 122–123). Based on this thinking, we would not expect depictions of boxing to be uniform during this time period and, indeed, they were not.

So what did boxing look like when it fully reëmerged on mainland Greece? In nearly all Geometric depictions,¹³⁵ boxers of the new era fought with a single glove, one combatant wearing it on the left hand and the other on the right so that the boxers mirrored each other. There is insufficient detail in any of these renderings to determine whether the gauntlet worn on one hand had the structure of the Homeric *himantes*. In one case (the Sarajevo stamnos) the evidence points to a much more ancient boxing glove, the one used at Knossos in the sixteenth century BC. In Geometric depictions, the ungloved hand appears unencumbered by any gauntlet and the fingers are often extended either to make this evident or perhaps even to suggest their function in defensive manœuvres like deflecting blows, or perhaps offensive ones like grasping, raking, and clawing.

Remarkably absent from both Mycenæan and Geometric boxing scenes is the ‘third man in the ring,’ the official or trainer, armed with a stick, ubiquitous in Near Eastern depictions as well as later Greek depictions, as we shall see. The reappearance of this figure in boxing scenes of later centuries can almost certainly be attributed to the orientalization of Greek vase painting.

There is significant evidence from the Geometric vase paintings that boxers of this period fought in the nude like their much later descendants. This is perplexing, because the *zōma* ‘loincloth’ is referred to explicitly in the boxing scenes of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Yet nowhere in Geometric art do we find clear evidence of an artist’s interest in depicting this noteworthy bit of pugilistic attire. Geometric painting did not normally involve any kind of painting over the silhouette—this is an innovation of the so-called “black-figure” era (see below). However, other conventions were possible for representing clothing,¹³⁶ and none of these are used on Geometric boxing figures (who often manifest an exposed penis, in any event). Mycenæan boxers on Cyprus apparently fought naked (see Figure 7). Beyond Cyprus

¹³⁵ When single-gloving is not obvious, it is due to a lack of detail or damage to the painting. In other words, there is no clear representation of dual-gloved boxing in the Geometric period.

¹³⁶ For example, on the Theban pedestaled krater (Figure 18), the sword-bearing figures are painted with two thin strokes flaring out on each side of their body, from abdomen to hips, arguably indicating a short tunic.

we have no depiction of a Mycenæan boxer that includes the waist, so we cannot be sure if mainland pugilists of that era wore the loincloth or not. Homer insists on the *zōma* in boxing contests of the heroic age, yet we know of no illustration of such a garment in Mycenæan art. Therefore, we conjecture that the *zōma* is an element of Homer's poetry that has a truly ancient origin in Minoan civilization, the only place (besides the ancient Near East) where a loincloth is attested in boxing scenes up to that time.¹³⁷

4.3 Black- and red-figure vase painting (ca. 700–300 BC)

Beginning in the seventh century BC, Greek artisans began employing a new technique for decorating pottery. Known as “black-figure,” this style incorporates figures and ornaments that were painted with slip on the vessels before they were fired. These were sometimes highlighted by colors like white and red, painted on after firing, but figures mostly appeared in black silhouette. Details were scratched away from the slip, which sometimes resulted in jagged, angular lines. The renderings of the human figure gradually became more and more sophisticated and naturalistic until the “red-figure” technique emerged in the late sixth century. This technique, in which the negative spaces were painted with slip and details were applied with a fine brush, resulted in a heightened degree of naturalism. Perhaps freed up by their new found ability to produce finer contours, painters began experimenting with a less orthodox approach to the human form, presenting it less frequently in strict profile and even using foreshortening to capture depth in a two-dimensional form.¹³⁸ Especially in the black-figure depiction of boxers, certain manneristic tendencies (like extra-long fingers in an open-hand gesture) remained from the Geometric, but on the whole, the new techniques in vase painting give us much more leeway to take the stance, swing, and punch of the fighters at face value and thus better apprehend the kinetics of *pygmachia*.

The Classical Art Research Centre at Oxford University maintains a database of Greek pottery.¹³⁹ It contains 532 items under the subject term “boxing.” These are dated between 600 and 300 BC. While many appear to be duplicate entries and the database itself is not comprehensive, this approximates the number of post-Geometric Greek vases that are adorned with pugilistic scenes. We comment on only a few of these in order to establish *termini ante quem* for certain innovations or to examine other peculiarities.

An Attic neck amphora found at Daphnæ (Tell Dafana) on the long-lost Pelusiac branch of the Nile (British Museum, No. 1888,0208.102) shows two boxers fighting over a tripod (Figure 20). The trunks of their bodies are painted purple, but the genitals of the rightmost boxer are exposed—incised in the slip or painted in white—as are features of the chest and abdomen, including some muscles and the nipples. While the British Museum concludes that the boxers wear purple chitons, we disagree based on the incisions made in the silhouettes; these are intended to show features that would be obscured by a tunic.¹⁴⁰ Instead, we argue that the purple coloring on the body represents blood (as it does in the scene of a boar

¹³⁷ Another possibility is that the loincloth was entirely fanciful. Perhaps the poet included this element as part of the heroic *imaginaire*, with no evidence or tradition that the *zōma* was ever used in boxing at all.

¹³⁸ Techniques like foreshortening were eventually applied to late exemplars of black-figure, with sinuous white lines painted on (see the boxers' feet in Figure 32).

¹³⁹ <https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/carc/Home>, accessed August 27, 2022.

¹⁴⁰ If the boxers are indeed painted with clothed torsos, the Daphnæ amphora would be the only such depiction we have encountered in the ancient record.

hunt in the upper register of the same vase).¹⁴¹ The fighters wear necklaces. The amphora also bears a clear representation of a stick-wielding official (though he presides over an adjacent pair of wrestlers, not the boxers). Finally, the boxer on the left appears to wear the *himantes* on his right hand: it is indicated by a strip around the wrist and another across the knuckles or palm and excluding the thumb.¹⁴² The piece is dated 580–560 BC.

By the late sixth century, the *himantes* are depicted as a white cross-hatch pattern incised across the fists, sometimes with a cuff or bracelet at the wrist. This can be seen in a black-figure skyphos discovered at Corinth, held at the Louvre (No. MNC-332), and executed between 550 and 525 BC. The skyphos shows two naked boxers, one charging his opponent from the left, the other fleeing to the right while holding up his right hand with fingers extended in what may be a gesture of defense (Figure 21). Two streams of blood are ejected from the nose of the boxer in flight; the word *πυκτα* appears between them, surely a morphological variant of *πυκτεύω* ‘box’ or ‘spar’. With black-figure painting like the Louvre skyphos we see the earliest depictions of boxers whose genitals are illustrated within the silhouette of their bodies, viz., against their inner thigh. In Geometric art, unless the penis projected beyond the outline of the thigh (as it does, e.g., in the Theban pedestaled krater, Figure 18), it was necessarily subsumed in the silhouette. Thus, by the sixth century BC, we have unambiguous indications that Greek boxers did *not* wear the *zōma* referred to in Homer.¹⁴³ A red-figure tondo shows two nude boxers, including one wearing a *κυνοδέσμη*, with *himantes* indicated as cuffs along the wrists (Figure 22). Another depiction shows a boxer wrapping his hands ahead of his match, presumably examining the bindings (Figure 23). A wonderful red-figure kylix shows boxers preparing for their *agon* as others fight (Figure 24).

Depictions of Greek boxing often include clothed figures, probably trainers, judges, or other officials, standing near the boxers. Another figure is sometimes illustrated, as well. This figure holds extra *himantes* and sometimes what appear to be the garments of the boxers, though he is also nude (cf. a Panathenaic amphora at the Metropolitan Museum, No. 06.1021.51; and an Attic hydria at the Penn Museum, No. 51-32-1). In some cases, this may be the *ephedros*, i.e., the boxer who has received a bye and is waiting to fight the winner of the ongoing bout. One rendering of the *ephedros* attributed to the Eucharides painter has him clenching one fist and raising it to his abdomen as if to mimic the action of the boxers or perhaps to demonstrate a punch he would like to have thrown (Figure 25). In one case, Athena herself stands brandishing the admonitory reed (Figure 26).

As late as the sixth century, Greek boxers still appear to have experimented with removing the *himantes* from one hand.¹⁴⁴ This experimental attitude towards boxing gloves is a

¹⁴¹ Another example of painting over the bare chests of boxers occurs on an Athenian skyphos found at Corinth and dated 575–525 BC (Archaeological Museum of Ancient Corinth, No. CP881).

¹⁴² It is not clear whether the painter intended the viewer to see the knuckles of the hand or the palm. A natural overhand right, which may be depicted, would have the thumb on top. If the image is interpreted strictly based on the position of the thumb then we must observe the palm of the hand, perhaps being used in a defensive gesture to laterally deflect the striking right hand of the adversary.

¹⁴³ We understand that the conventions of Geometric vase painting did not normally provide for detail to be expressed within the silhouette of the human body (though this is clearly not true of animal forms, like the birds in Figure 7); this may account for the absence of the *zōma* in Geometric art. However, besides the fact that projecting penises are sometimes depicted in these boxers, it should also be noted that in Geometric low relief, where the upper thighs and hips are clearly modeled (Figures 14 and 35), there is no indication of a loincloth.

¹⁴⁴ Given evidence from Geometric painting, it may also be an archaic feature of Greek boxing with an ancestry stretching as far back as the Minoans (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c).



Figure 20: Found at Tell Dafana in Egypt, this fragmented Attic neck amphora contains either an unprecedented depiction of boxers awash in (purple) blood or (less likely, in our opinion) of boxers wearing clothing on their torsos (British Museum, No. 1888,0208.102; 580–560 BC). Note that the rightmost boxer's genitals are exposed, despite the chiton that some posit he is wearing. The boxer on the right wears the *himantes* on his right hand only.

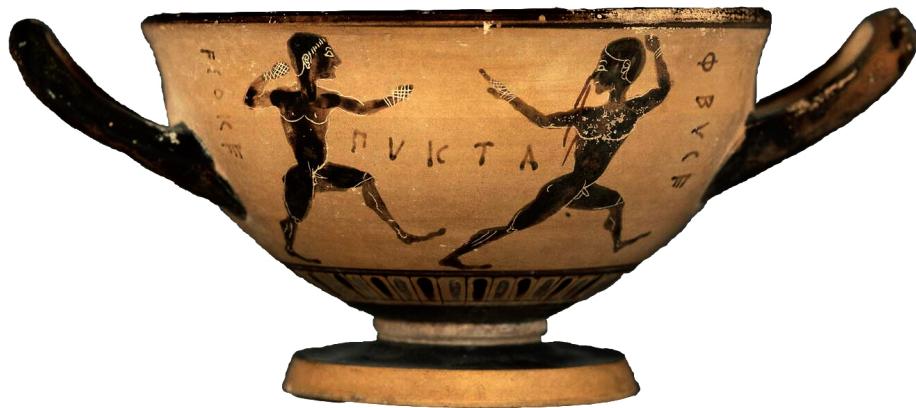


Figure 21: A sixth-century skyphos depicting two boxers, one fleeing his adversary and bleeding profusely from the nose, hand raised in a gesture of defense. The word *πυκτά*, inscribed between them, is likely a morphological variant of *πυκτεύω* ‘box’ or ‘spar’ (Louvre, No. MNC-332 / L-179; 550–525 BC).



Figure 22: Red-figure tondo in the manner of Euergides; 510–500 BC (Museo Civico Archeologico of Bologna, No. 28655).



Figure 23: Red-figure tondo in the manner of Epidromos; 520–500 BC (Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, No. C.970.35).



Figure 24: Red-figure kylix by the Triptolemos Painter; c. 490 BC (Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio, No. 1961.26).



Figure 25: Detail of an Attic black-figure amphora (National Archaeological Museum, Athens, No. 447). The *ephedros*, naked and holding *himantes* in his right hand, stands to the right of two other athletes engaged in a boxing match (note also the extended fingers of the leftmost boxer, partially visible). From Exarchos, Locris. By the Eucharides Painter, ca. 500 BC. Photo courtesy Nemeaus.



Figure 26: Black-figure panathenaic amphora from the Nikomachos series; c. 336–335 BC (British Museum, London, No. 1873,0820.371).

theme that runs through late Antiquity, until the disappearance of boxing in the West.¹⁴⁵ It is possible that the artist simply chose not to render the stylized *himantes* on the silhouette of the open hand but artists who wished to include this detail were by no means prevented from doing so by available techniques. A black-figure neck amphora dated to the second half of the sixth century and attributed to Nikosthenes demonstrates this clearly (Fitzwilliam Museum, No. GR3.1962). In this depiction, the fighter on the right holds up his left hand, fingers extended, with abundant indications of the *himantes* wrapped around his wrist, thumb, knuckles, and fingers. His right hand, similarly equipped, is balled tightly into a fist. Per one commentator, “The fingers were left free so that the boxer could clench his fist to deliver a blow, and open his hand to catch a punch. Both these attitudes of the hands—offensive and defensive—are frequently seen in the portrayal of boxing matches, and both are often displayed by a single boxer” (Miller 2004, pp. 51–52).



Figure 27: Detail of a black figure oenochoe (Cleveland Museum of Art, No. 1916.1062), dated 550–540 BC. The lack of *himantes* on the left hand of the boxer on the left suggests fights could be organized under a variety of conventions.

The appearance of *himantes* on the hands of fighters is not dispositive of pugilism, however. A sixth-century rendering attributed to the Theseus Painter (Metropolitan Museum of Art, No. 06.1021.49) shows pankratiasts (they are manifestly engaged in pronograde combat) wearing the leather thongs (Figure 28). A panathenaic amphora decorated by the Marsyas

¹⁴⁵We note that experimentation with boxing gloves continues today with the reëmergence of bare-knuckle boxing in the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as the development of “hybrid boxing” rule sets that use lightweight gloves. Despite this ferment, we are not aware of any promotion that licenses fighters to wear only one glove or a glove specially engineered to inflict greater injury.

Painter also depicts pankratiasts with their hands wrapped (National Archaeological Museum of Athens, No. 20045; 360–359 BC). On the amphora, excavated at Eretria near a gymnasium, one fighter leans over his prone opponent in a posture typical of pankration representations.

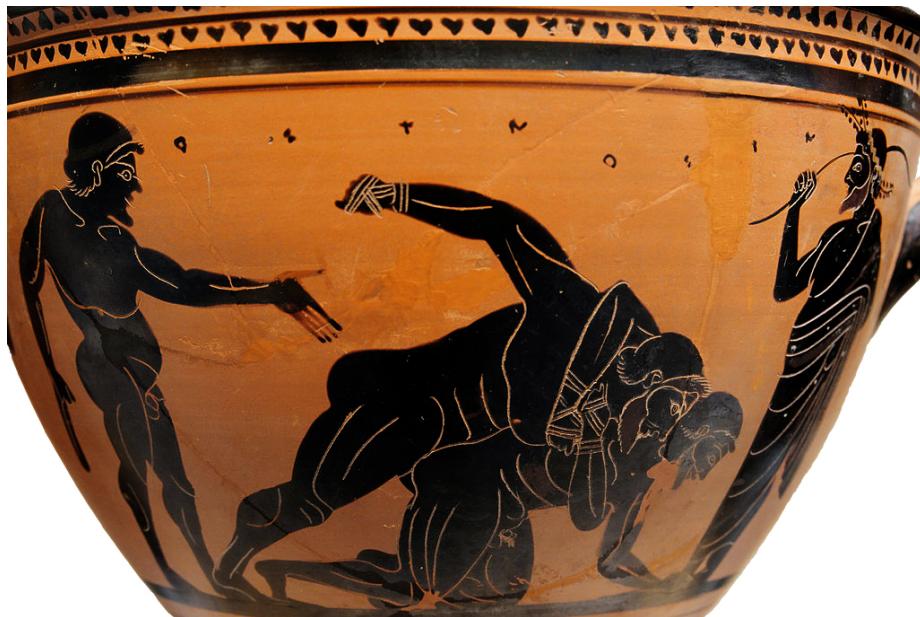


Figure 28: Pankratiasts wear the *himantes* (ἱμάντες) on an Attic black-figure skyphos (Metropolitan Museum of Art, No. 06.1021.49). The work is attributed to the Theseus Painter, ca. 500 BC.

The often observed, stick-wielding official may have been called *παιδονόμος* ‘warden’ or ‘educator’ or perhaps *κύριος* ‘lord, master’, whose right it was to ‘separate’ διαλύω the boxers (Xen. *Const. Lac.* 4.6). Another possible term for this individual is *βραβέυς* or *βραβευτής* ‘umpire’, related to the *βραβεῖον* ‘prize’. He begins to appear clearly only in the black figure period, perhaps only in the sixth century. One early depiction of this official comes from an Athenian skyphos found at Corinth (575–525 BC), where the figure holds a long thin staff and looks on at the boxers to the viewer’s right. In another depiction, an eagle appears to be flying between two boxers in a badly fragmented black figure hydria (Ashmolean Museum, Vase No. 350345; 600–550 BC). An official, a bearded ephedros, and another official stand to the right of the dueling pair. The position of the bird is reminiscent of Levantine cylinder seals discussed in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022b) and may represent a deity.

A standard depiction of boxing from this era is painted on a skyphos held at the Carlsberg Glyptothek in Copenhagen (No. 2677) and attributed to the Camel Painter (575–525 BC). The illustration contains two naked boxers surrounded by two bearded, robed men (Figure 29). Behind one of them stands another boxer, naked and outfitted with *himantes* (represented as stylized cross-hatching on the fists, with cuffs).

Around the early fifth century we begin to see evidence of a change in the iconography



Figure 29: Boxing scene from an Athenian skyphos held at the Carlsberg Glyptothek in Copenhagen (No. 2677).

and perhaps the rule-set of boxing. Vanquished boxers raise their finger indicating they have lost and, presumably, that the pummeling should cease. This is the case in a red-figure cup attributed to Epiktetos, held at the Agora Museum (No. P24110) and illustrated in Figure 30.

Some black- and red-figure paintings have been identified as depicting boxers, even though the fighters clearly do not wear *himantes*. In the case of the painting by Epiktetos (Figure 30) mentioned above, the posture of the bodies may suggest *pankration* but the fists are closed and neither fighter appears to seek a hold on his opponent. Similarly, on one leg of a Boeotian (Tanagra) claw-footed pyxis stand (Antikensammlung Berlin, No. F1727), naked black-figure athletes raise both their hands, clenched in fists, high above their heads (570–560 BC). One figure bears naturalistic detail of the thumb overlapping the fingers at a right angle. There can be no doubt from their posture that they are boxers but neither wears the *himantes*. The boys tussling with one another on a miniature red-figure wine jug or *chous*¹⁴⁶ (Boston Museum of Fine Arts, No. 95.53) are identified as boxers though they are not fitted with the gauntlets (Figure 31). Their hands are open and we cannot rule out the possibility that they represent wrestlers or *pankratiasts* frozen at a preliminary, non-grappling stage of the match.¹⁴⁷ The scene is framed by two short columns (not included in Figure 31) which may represent the boundaries of the boxing ‘ring’ or may merely have served as a conventional boundary of the scene for the vase painter.

¹⁴⁶ A small wine jug like this would have been presented to a young boy at the Anthesteria festival in Athens. As the boys grew older, the size of the wine jug did, as well. The function of the detail on the vessel was likely aspirational. Just as modern parents in the West may dress their children in printed T-shirts suggestive of sports they might one day take part in, or top a birthday cake with a toy boxing ring, parents of children in this period likely wished to encourage their young boys to emulate the older boys and men already slugging it out in the *palaistra*.

¹⁴⁷ Two pugilists with wrapped hands appear in an Athenian red-figured cup dated to the second half of the fifth century (Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire, Brussels, No. R335). Unconventionally, however, none of their hands are balled into fists though their hands are in striking position.



Figure 30: The fallen boxer signals his defeat and the end of the match by holding up his right index finger just as his opponent lands a hammer fist to his head (Agora Museum, No. P24110). Detail from a red-figure cup, 525–475 BC, attributed to Epiktetos.



Figure 31: Detail of a chous (miniature wine jug) depicting two boys who are identified as boxers, despite the fact that they wear no *himantes* and have open hands (Boston Museum of Fine Arts, No. 95.53). The item is dated to about 425 BC and is said to be from Athens.

As a subject of vase painting, boxing seems to have captured the interest of Greek artisans (or, more likely, the elites who consumed their productions) from the end of the sixth century to the beginning of the fourth century BC. While rendering of boxing scenes continued well into the third century, the number of such pieces decreased significantly.¹⁴⁸ This may also be attributed to a general decrease in artistic depictions of athletes—or even painted vases—in general. Depictions of wrestling and *pankration*, never as popular as portrayals of boxing, also peaked in the sixth and fifth centuries, then dwindled substantially by the Hellenistic era. Connor (1995) confirms that boxing was a “popular [motif] in middle to late black figure, [but] of less interest in red figure” (p. 101).

4.4 Relief sculpture

Boxing was not a popular theme of Greek sculpture before the Hellenistic era. We know of no Greek representations of boxers in the round before 325 BC and we are aware of only a few examples of early reliefs, which we review in this section.¹⁴⁹

An eighth-century bronze tripod leg from Olympia arguably presents us with the earliest sculptural depiction of boxing in Greek art (Archaeological Museum of Olympia, No. B-1730). In a clever *mis en abyme*, the principals battle over a tripod cauldron (Figure 34).¹⁵⁰ Lower on the same leg, lions fight each other. The boxers wear helmets and plumes—a remarkable parallel to the helmeted figures on the much earlier Boxer Rhyton found at Knossos.

A terracotta plaque depicting a boxing scene was found at the Heraion of Argos (Figure 35) and has been dated to the beginning of the seventh century (Waldstein 1902, pp. 52–53). Little can be discerned about the boxers. They are naked and appear to wear their hair long. Insufficient detail and/or erosion make it impossible for us to say much about their hands, e.g., whether they wear a gauntlet. The Heraion was dedicated to the goddess who oversaw marriage. We note that votive plaques depicting boxing were also found in temples in Mesopotamia, where it has been argued that they were associated with betrothals (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b).

Grave reliefs appear to have been the most common sculptural form devoted to boxing in the Classical era. Along with soldiers, athletes were the only group identified by their profession on funeral steles (Osborne 2018, p. 58). Boxers can be picked out on some of these by their *himantes* and by traces of disfigurement occasioned by a career in the ‘ring’. One such example¹⁵¹ is an Attic funerary stele (560–530 BC) housed in the Kerameikos Archaeological Museum (No. Pro54). The stele, which is fragmented, now reveals only the boxer’s face and part of his raised arm (Figure 36). Here there is abundant evidence of a carefully executed

¹⁴⁸ A back-of-the-envelope calculation using the database of Oxford’s Classical Art Research Centre suggests that the number of vases depicting pugilism decreased as much as 90% from 550 to 300 BC.

¹⁴⁹ We discuss Greek contributions to the sculptural corpus in (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023b). This will include a discussion of the well-known Boxer at Rest.

¹⁵⁰ The scene is identified by some as representing a battle between Herakles and Apollo over the tripod of the Delphic oracle. There is not much to recommend this interpretation besides the tripod, however. Boxers in other depictions fight over tripods without being identified as Apollo or Herakles (e.g., Figure 16). Moreover, tripods were common prizes in Greek athletics, *ut supra*. Finally, there is nothing about the iconography of the figures on this tripod leg to suggest they represent either son of Zeus. According to Burkert (1983, p. 121), clearly identifiable representations of this myth are not attested before the sixth century BC.

¹⁵¹ Several others are attested in Richter (1965).

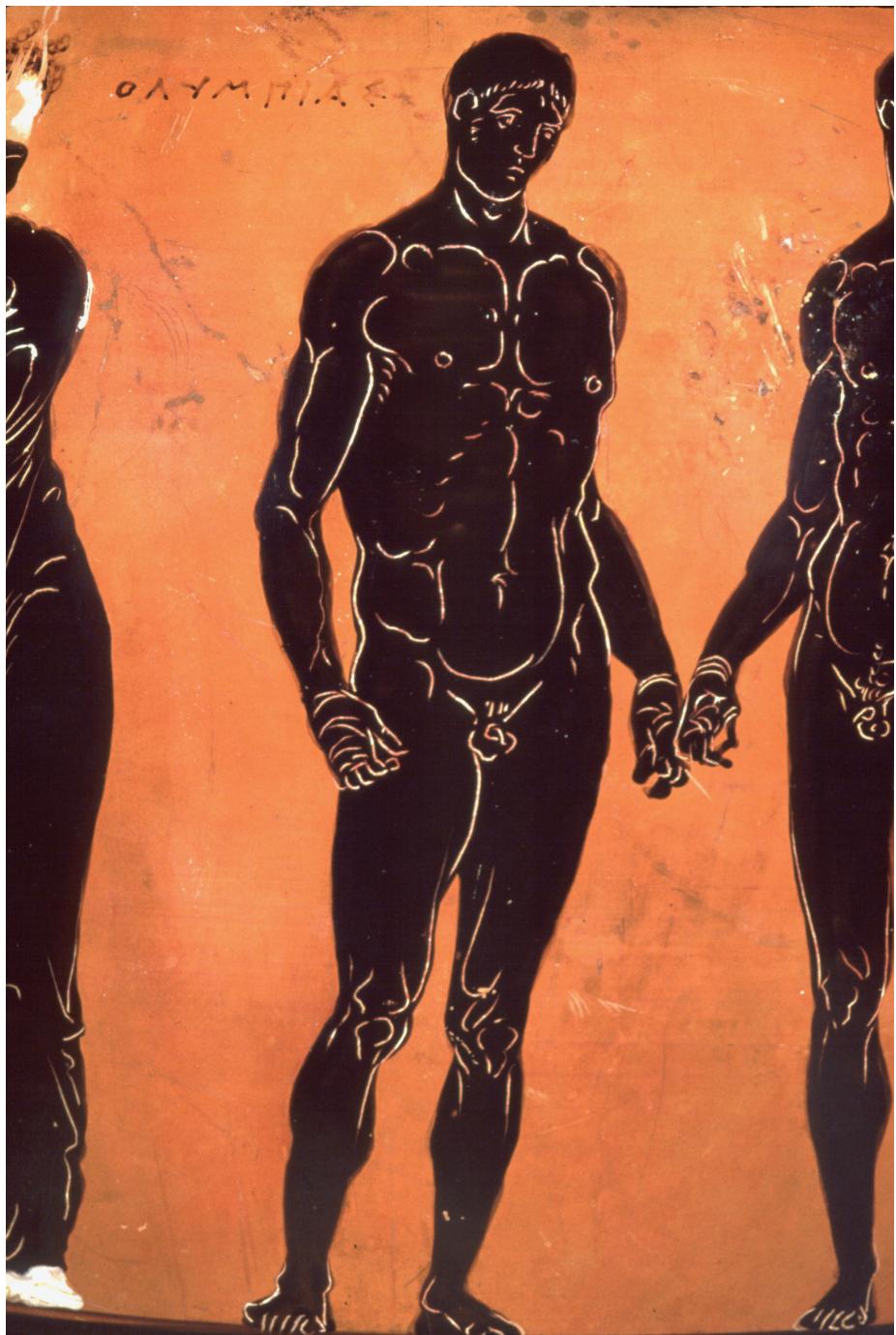


Figure 32: Detail from an Attic black-figure Panathenaic prize amphora (340–339 BC). The fighter stands next to another boxer, on the right, and an official who appears to deliver instructions. A personification of the Olympic games stands to the left (Harvard University Art Museums, No. 1925.30.124).



Figure 33: Detail of a Panathenaic prize amphora (J. Paul Getty Museum, No. 93.AE.55). Boxer crowned by winged Nike, with the *himantes* removed and dangling from the crook of his left arm (363–362 BC).



Figure 34: A low-relief boxing scene on a bronze tripod leg (Archaeological Museum of Olympia, No. B-1730), eighth century BC. The boxers appear to wear plumed helmets as on the Minoan Boxer Rhyton, produced some eight centuries earlier.



Figure 35: A terracotta plaque found at the Heraion of Argos. The figures appear to be boxing in a manner familiar to us from ancient Near Eastern depictions: one hand raised aloft, the other at chest level (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b).



Figure 36: Funerary stele depicting a boxer with raised fist (Kerameikos Archaeological Museum, No. P1054). Found in Attica and dated 560–530 BC, the figure appears to suffer from a broken nose and cauliflower ear.

himæs. The straps cross in an ‘X’ just below the wrist and a cuff fits snugly around the forearm. The gauntlet covers about one-third of the space between wrist and elbow. Critics have noted that the boxer’s nose has been broken and repeated trauma to the side of his head has resulted in auricular hematoma or cauliflower ear. Greek artisans were evidently interested in representing boxing injuries, including hemorrhage, from the sixth century onward (Figure 20, 21) and the tradition would continue well into Late Antiquity.

5 Conventions

Having reviewed literary and visual attestations of Greek boxing from the Archaic to the Classical era, we can now summarize some of the major features of the activity that can be inferred from the evidence: the gloves and the form of boxing.

5.1 Gloves

The Greeks were not the first to cover their hands in order to engage in unarmed, orthograde combat. There is some evidence that this practice was known in the ancient Near East and it was irrefutably the case among the Minoans (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b;c). It can be

challenging to determine whether a bare or covered fist is intended in Mycenæan and Archaic depictions, given the formal simplicity that was adopted in rendering the human form. For example, in a Late Bronze Age krater from Enkomi (Figure 5), the ‘glove’ is rendered as an ellipse, larger than the hands of other comparable figures (Figure 5). Close inspection does make it clear, however, that in the Archaic period, boxers typically wore only one glove—something that Homer’s poetry neither describes explicitly nor rules out. The gloved hand is substantially enlarged but still lacks the detail necessary to assess its character fully, for example, in the Dresden kantharos (Figure 13). In at least one instance, the Greek gauntlet looks similar to the Minoan glove depicted on the Boxer Rhyton (Figure 14). It is also possible that Greek boxers fought bare-knuckled as on the Tanagra pyxis stand (Antikensammlung Berlin, No. F1727).

By the sixth century, Greek vase painters rendered the *himantes* in a stylized cross-hatch pattern covering the fist and/or wrist. This was evidently a visual shorthand meant to indicate the layered wrapping of the fists in the leather thongs. By the Late Archaic and Classical eras, the *himantes* were illustrated with greater naturalism. It appears they were wrapped across the knuckles, crossing at the wrist, and were tied at a position slightly above the mid-forearm (Figure 36).

By the fourth century, the *himantes* were rendered at various stages of their use, including after removal. From one such depiction (Figure 33), we learn that the leather thong was pierced at each end and threaded with a long string, doubled over. The resulting four ends were most likely tied in some fashion to secure the *himantes*. It is possible that more than one leather strip was used on one hand, but the fastening strength conferred by one long, single strip would have made this arrangement preferable, in our opinion.¹⁵²

In some Archaic representations like the Louvre skyphos (Figure 21), the hand appears to be bound tightly as a club. This style of boxing glove has been posited for the Boxing Boys of Akrotiri and is known in contemporary African *dambe* boxing (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022c). Depictions like one on a fifth-century amphora (Figure 25) demonstrate that the fingers on a hand bound with the leather thong could still be extended, presumably to catch a blow.

The changing representation of the *himantes* does not necessarily mean that their appearance changed over time. Their depiction is also closely linked to innovations in artistic tastes and techniques. Greek artists may have grown more interested in the *himantes* as subject matter, perhaps as popular interest in boxing increased among their elite patrons. Our clearest view of the structure of the *himantes* emerges only in Hellenistic sculpture. Unfortunately, during this period we learn from textual sources that the gauntlets had already undergone modification and differentiation. For these reasons, we must be cautious in assessing the appearance of Archaic and even Classical *himantes* and in rectifying our judgments with much later literary sources that claim to typologize and explain the differences in boxing gloves. These sources, like Philostratus’ third-century AD *Gymnasticus*, were infused with their own ideology (Reid 2016), as we will explore in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023b).

In the late fifth century, Plato (*Laws*, 8.830B) described boxing gloves known as *(epi)sphairai*, which were used “to imitate as nearly as possible the fighting in the ring... so that we could

¹⁵²In modern sport boxing, the gauze bandages known as hand wraps are routinely secured with a layer of adhesive tape, but ancient boxers, who could not avail themselves of such a convenience, likely invented a variety of solutions to the problem of keeping the *himantes* secure under the stress of impact and struggle.

practice striking and the avoidance of blows as much as possible" (Sweet 1987). We are unaware of any depiction of these gloves before the Hellenistic era.¹⁵³

Practiced for centuries among the ancient Greeks, boxing probably experienced diachronic change. One of the few ways we can verify this hypothesis is to closely examine visual depictions of boxing over time. Fortunately, Greek vase painters were enthusiastic about depicting pugilism and there are many scores of examples available for study today.

It should be noted immediately that boxers are not always bilaterally 'gloved' in Greek depictions. For example, a sixth-century black-figure oenochoe (Figure 27) shows a boxing match where one fighter wears the *himantes* on both hands while his adversary wears them on his right hand only. Not only is the boxer's left (lead) hand ungloved, but his fingers are elongated and extended upward (a gesture seen in Etruscan tomb paintings, as well). An official is present, seated, to the left; and another observer stands to the right, suggesting the encounter is a legitimate boxing match and not merely a practice session. Such an image allows us to infer that different conventions were applied to boxing praxis synchronically. This is remarkably like our own day, when a variety of conventions govern the use of boxing equipment such as gloves and headgear. The asymmetry in this depiction is particularly remarkable, however. Whether the arrangement confers an advantage or disadvantage on the left-hand figure is debatable. Parrying blows was probably easier with his ungloved hand. If permitted to do so, the unilaterally-gloved boxer could grasp his opponent, assail him with fingers jabbed into his eyes, nose, or mouth, or even pull his hair. The bones of the hand, however, were subject to increased risk of injury and so it is likely that his left-hand strikes, if unbuttressed by the *himantes*, were less forceful.

In several early depictions, Greek boxers are gloved on only one hand. Three vase paintings from the seventh and eighth centuries show much simpler figures but it is still clear that the boxers are unilaterally gloved. The Geometric depiction of the hands, though certainly not naturalistic, has the advantage in several instances of showing each of the five fingers; these are represented as twig-like projections from the stem of the arm or as star-like emanations from the hand. The other hand is depicted as a ball. Though working in the simplified Geometric style, the artist seemingly intended to depict closed and gloved fists. In an eighth-century Kantharos, Geometric boxers stand chest-forward, with the ungloved hand raised and the gloved hand lowered (Figure 13). When it comes to their gloved hands, the boxers are laterally inverted images of each other, i.e., one boxer wears a glove on his left and the other wears a glove on his right.

In another eighth-century vase, this time an oenochoe, the boxers appear on the neck of the vessel (see Figure 17). Their struggle is somewhat more dynamic than the one depicted on the Dresden kantharos. The boxers' lowered hands are depicted as balls, most likely representing a boxing glove. The figure on the left throws a left at his opponent's head. His hand ends in a point, not a globe (his fingers are not expressed, however). The figure on the right also throws a punch, but damage to the object prevents us from examining the shape of the hand directly. The Louvre oenochoe thus presents a somewhat deprecated case for single-glove boxing in that only one pugilist definitively engages in it.

More convincing evidence of unilaterally gloved boxers comes from the illustration on an early seventh-century pedestalled krater (Figure 18). Here, the artist emphasizes the fin-

¹⁵³A Greco-Roman terracotta caricature of a boxer shows him wearing large round gloves (Skulpturensammlung Dresden, No. ZV803).

gers on the hands of each figure and clearly shapes one hand of each boxer into a ball. For the combatant on the right, the glove even appears to have a cuff, suggestive of the artist's intention to render the shape of the gauntlet accurately.

5.2 Form

Aside from the unique hand-coverings, can we judge from visual depictions and literary sources how early Greek boxers fought? Homer indicates that boxers raised their hands (*ἀνέχω*) and we have certainly observed visual examples of this behavior (Figs. 27 and 29). However, the visual record is hardly indicative of a single, orthodox style. We see lead hands up and back hands down (Fig. 13), both arms extended (Fig. 5), a leading open hand and a back-hand fist at waist level (Fig 16). Early depictions, in particular, were likely to communicate the idea of boxing through stylized conventions like the raised and crossed arms of the Dresden kantharos (Figure 13; compare Homeric language about 'mixing' hands). With the advent of more naturalistic portrayals in black- and red-figure, artists seem more sensitive to depicting an actual match. Still, a confused jumble of hands is not easy to capture and not every punch is thrown with precision. Some of the more awkward renderings of fighting (e.g., Figure 20) may have been closer to reality than we might at first suppose.

Was there a single convention for making a fist? Again, in the visual record we see much diversity: fists with thumbs extended (Fig. 10); thumbs held close but parallel to the fingers (Fig. 30); and thumbs closed over the fingers (Antikensammlung Berlin, No. Fr727). Perhaps some of this variation may be attributed to an absence of naturalism in depicting the closed human fist—a challenging subject to render in any medium.

Assessing the stance of Greek boxers in Geometric and black-figure vase painting is fraught with difficulty because of a general tendency to depict the human form in the 'Egyptian style', with the lower half of the body in profile and the chest and shoulders rotated towards the viewer. In the Geometric phase, it is complicated by an interest in the symmetry of the opposing forms. Still, in some cases we can detect the artist's awareness of how the body moved during a fight. For example, in the black-figure Cleveland oenochoe (Figure 27), the leftmost combatant raises his back heel and pushes off the ball of his foot, suggesting that he is turning his body to deliver the right-hand punch. Even in the relatively early Geometric Louvre oenochoe (Figure 17), the boxer on the right naturally lifts his back heel slightly to deliver a punch (this time, his right). The boxers in the Louvre skyphos (Figure 21) make much more exaggerated movements with their legs due to the (possibly comic) flight of the retreating pugilist.

Greek vase painters seemed to avoid a naturalistic depiction of the defensive guard position in which boxers hold both forearms in front of their face and close to the head, offering protection from oncoming blows. In the early Archaic, this avoidance may have been due to the technical difficulty of representing depth in this fashion. However, an accurate rendering of this form was achieved by at least the end of the sixth century BC, confirming the presence of modern defensive technique in the Greek boxing repertoire of the Late Archaic. A black figure amphora at the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire in Brussels (No. R336, dated 510–490 BC) includes a depiction of a bleeding boxer with his hands in guard position while his opponent thrusts a jab between them (Figure 37). The sophistication of the illustration is such that we can tell the blow has landed from the length and angle of the arm, despite the fact that the point of contact is occluded from the viewer by the raised arm of the stricken

fighter.

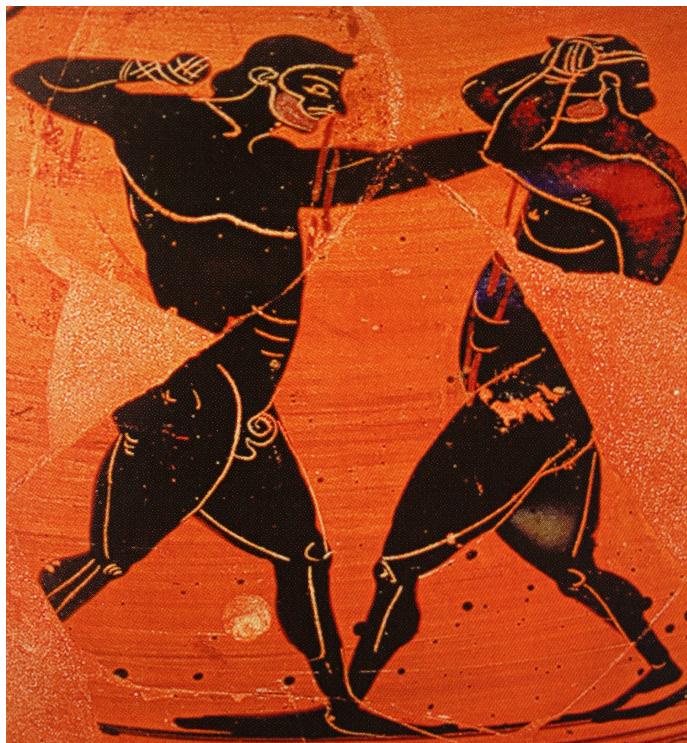


Figure 37: Detail of a black-figure amphora depicting bleeding fighters, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels (No. R336, dated 510–490 BC). The lead jab of the boxer on the left and the guard of the boxer on the right are remarkably modern.

6 Boxing history

For the first time in our study of pugilism in the ancient world, we can mention the *history* of boxing. “Greek history begins, traditionally, with athletics” (Osborne 2018, p. 53) and for some scholars, the division between history and pre-history is 776 BC, the date calculated for the first Olympic games. Accordingly, we might say that 688 BC, the year boxing was included in the Olympic games, represents the end of boxing’s long pre-history.

The history of boxing, however, was not written contemporaneously. The facts, such as they could still be remembered, were not put down until much later (at least in the form we have them today). Same as it ever was, facts are influenced by the ideologies of the times in which they are recorded. For this reason, we leave our discussion of boxing’s written history to a subsequent article on boxing in the Roman era (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023b), when the historians lived. For now, we can say that they attributed the rules of boxing to one Onomastus of Smyrna, himself an Olympic champion. According to Poliakoff (1987, p. 80), “No

description of his system has come down to us.” Speculation about Onomastus’ rules can be found in the preceding pages of the present article. Miller (2004, pp. 21–23) goes so far as to argue that any lineal descent of athletic tradition is more hagiography than archæology; he leaves a slight caveat for boxing, which evidence cited in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2022c) addresses. These rules were considered apt: τὸν δέ γε οἷμαι κατὰ τὴν πυκτικὴν πυκτικόν “And the rules of boxing, I suppose, make a good boxer?”¹⁵⁴ (Plato, *Alcibiades* 2:145d, tr. Lamb).

Olympic boxing was decidedly a combat between individuals. “One man won and everyone else lost. We hear of no one taking solace in being a runner-up” (Miller 2004, p. 19). Greek Olympic boxing saw its share of champions including the remarkable Theagenes, who won more than 1,300 fights in 22 years (equivalent to one competitive fight every two weeks during that period). The legendary Diagoras of Rhodes, victorious boxer in the Olympic, Isthmian, Nemean, and Pythian games, was celebrated not only for his own victories, but for those of his sons and grandsons. Other names of victors are preserved as well for posterity. Harkening back to the funeral games of Patroclus, “The funeral games of Patroclus [and hence boxing] celebrate life in the face of death, but more than anything else they express a basic joy of living. As the individual athlete exerts himself physically, mentally, and emotionally in the competition, a statement is made: ‘I am alive!’” (Miller 2004, p. 30).¹⁵⁵

Olympic boxing matches took place inside the stadium in a *skamma*, or wrestling pit with softened earth to allow safer falls. Matchups were determined by casting lots, with no rounds and no time limits, although after a long bout opponents could agree to exchange blows.¹⁵⁶ Pictorial evidence (e.g. Figures 24 and 26) suggests that waiting boxers were allowed to prepare and watch ongoing bouts. Strikes on fallen opponents were forbidden.¹⁵⁷

616 BC (the 41st Olympiad) serves as the *terminus ante quem* for stratification of competitive boxers into classes, albeit in terms of age rather than weight. At this time a boys’ boxing event was included in the Olympic games. We can be all but certain that civilizations, including the Minoans, Egyptians, and Mesopotamians, segregated youth from adult boxing for practical reasons wherever youth boxing was permitted. Though conclusive evidence of children boxing occurs only on Thera (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2022b), it is hard to imagine that boxing fathers did not teach their sons how to fight from an early age—or that those sons did not enthusiastically imitate their fathers.¹⁵⁸

With the commencement of the historical record, we have for the first time contemporaneous narratives of specific bouts of note (rather than literary or procedural records). One of the most celebrated accounts is the fight between Coragus and Dioxippus before Alexander (Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 17:100–101). The contest takes place between Coragus as Macedonian soldier clad in armor and Dioxippus as Greek boxer carrying only a

¹⁵⁴ A bit tautological!

¹⁵⁵ Contrast the opprobrium of Demosthenes: τοὺς δὲ τὴν πυγμὴν καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα ἀσκήσαντας πρὸς τῷ σώματι καὶ τῇ γνώμῃ διαφθείρεσθαι, “those who practice boxing and the like ruin their minds as well as their bodies” (Demosthenes 61:24, tr. DeWitt and DeWitt).

¹⁵⁶ For example, the bout of Kreugas and Damoxenus, *q.v.*.

¹⁵⁷ We can imagine that techniques such as maneuvering an opponent into the blinding sunlight and exploiting terrain obstacles would have formed the valid “dirty tricks” of that age.

¹⁵⁸ Indeed, among the ranks of Olympic boxing champions we find the name of Diagoras of Rhodes and his three sons, all of whom were boxing and *pankration* champions. Pindar memorialized Diagoras’ 464 BC victory in Olympia 7, ἀνδρα τε πὺξ ἀρετὰν εύροντα, “to the man who has found excellence as a boxer” (lit. πὺξ ‘with the fist’). Consider also Chilon the Lacedaemonian, of whom Diogenes Laertius records that he died stricken of joy upon hearing that his son had gained the prize in boxing.

club. Dioxippus deftly overcomes Coragus by κινήσας ἐκ τῆς βάσεως τὸν ἀντίπαλον ὑπέσυρε τὰ σκέλη “upset[ting] the man’s balance and [making] him lose his footing”, surely aided by his boxing skills.¹⁵⁹

Another instructive contest is the agon of Kreugas and Damoxenus. Pausanias (8:40, ll. 2–5, tr.) relates the story thus:

The Argives too gave to Kreugas after his death the crown in the Nemean games, because his opponent Damoxenus of Syracuse broke their mutual agreement. For evening drew near as they [Kreugas of Epidamnus and Damoxenus of Syracuse] were boxing, and they agreed within the hearing of witnesses, that each should in turn allow the other to deal him a blow. At that time boxers did not yet wear a sharp thong on the wrist of each hand, but still boxed with the soft gloves, binding them in the hollow of the hand, so that their fingers might be left bare. These soft gloves were thin thongs of raw ox-hide plaited together after an ancient manner.

On the occasion to which I refer Kreugas aimed his blow at the head of Damoxenus, and the latter bade Kreugas lift up his arm. On his doing so, Damoxenus with straight fingers struck his opponent under the ribs; and what with the sharpness of his nails and the force of the blow he drove his hand into the other’s inside, caught his bowels, and tore them as he pulled them out.

Kreugas expired on the spot, and the Argives expelled Damoxenus for breaking his agreement by dealing his opponent many [five, i.e., one per finger] blows instead of one.

The agreement merits a special convention. As Gardiner (1910, p. 432) has it, “when a fight had continued long without any result, the combatants sometimes agreed to exchange free hits without guarding.” The tragicomic outcome of an open-handed strike being considered five blows is unlikely to bear heavily on what was actually considered conventional in boxing praxis, given the partisan nature of the bout’s judges.

Internal evidence (the soft gloves) suggests that this contest took place during the Classical Greek period or possibly the early Hellenistic age. The transition between rule sets and the exchange of blows are suggestive of broader conventions between boxers whose bouts lasted overlong: “evening drew near”.

Finally, as much of the history of the Olympic games took place and was recorded during the Hellenistic and Roman eras, we reserve much of our commentary on Olympic boxing for our discussion of that era (Dioscurus and Dioscurus 2023b). While a roster of known Olympic champions can be drawn up (and would stretch to late antiquity), we elide such a tabulation in favor of topical analysis on what certain incidents reveal to us of ancient boxing.

7 Conclusion

Ancient Greek boxing was never characterized by ropes, rounds, point systems, or even weight categories. The first formalized rule set appears to have been adopted in 688 BC, but we can-

¹⁵⁹As described, the contest sounds more like armed *pankration* than boxing, and we include it more for Dioxippus’ personal history as a boxer than for any insight it provides into pugilistic practice.

not be certain what it included. Despite the absence of many of the formalities we consider essential to boxing today, the epic poetry of Homer and a wealth of Greek art, particularly vase paintings, suggest a variety of normative behaviors, if not rules, integrated into the praxis. At some point, boxers may have fought in a loincloth, according to Homer, but visual depictions of this are rare; we will review counterexamples, largely Etruscan, in Dioscurus and Dioscurus (2023a). Boxers typically covered at least one hand with a kind of gauntlet but early vase paintings do not render these gauntlets in enough detail to discover whether they consist of the leather-strap *himantes* of the late Archaic and Classical eras. Adjutants are attested in Homer and can be described among the figures who accompany boxers in art. Spectators, it seems, were always drawn to the fights. Prizes were awarded.

Later Greeks considered boxing, along with wrestling, a “hard” or “distressful” (*ἀλγεινός*) competition, an adjective derived from *ἄλγος* ‘pain’. Along with their Minoan predecessors, the Greeks, particularly those of the fifth and sixth centuries BC, were gripped by a passion that Juvenal might later have termed *insanabile cacoethes pugillandi*. Enthusiastic embrace of the fight game characterized the Minoan and Greek civilizations for well over a thousand years. During that time, many fundamental characteristics of boxing appear to have changed but the core characteristics of orthograde personal combat remained.

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Changelog

- ~2022.9.16 Preprint release.
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- ~2022.10.25 First public release.

- ~2022.11.15 Note on Theocritus' *Idyll* 22.47.
- ~2022.11.20 Notes on the Phæacian games, Epeius, and Iros.
- ~2022.11.27 Note on ἀμσίβων / ἀμείβων.
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